

# A School-Wide Effort for Learning History via a Time Capsule

C. Glennon Rowell, M. Gail Hickey, Kendall Gecsei, and Stacy Klein

**The time is early fall of 2004.** For thousands of elementary school students throughout the country, routines for beginning a new school year are similar. Students are getting to know their teachers and anticipating the activities ahead in subjects from reading to social studies. They are getting acquainted with new content area books and materials and new media center library books. And across the nation, students are catching up with classmates they have not seen during the summer months and getting acquainted with new classmates.

For the 370 students in kindergarten through fifth grade at Ridgedale Elementary School in Knoxville, Tennessee, there is a special buzz in the air that makes this school year unique. Students are busy writing down the reasons they love Ridgedale Elementary. They are contemplating the most memorable events they have experienced at Ridgedale. Meanwhile, teachers, in grade-level meetings, are pondering what messages they would like to pass on to those who will be teaching 50 years from now (in 2055), in the new building that the school will move into the following year. Teachers are also reflecting on changes that have taken place in teaching during the past 50 years.

Parents who are leaders in Ridgedale Elementary's Parent-Teachers Association (PTA) are culling through historical accounts of Ridgedale's past in newspaper clippings, minutes of the many meetings held during the school's history, and accounts of interactions with

the 10 principals who have served the school since its opening in 1954.

The current principal is puzzling over what she should say in a letter that expresses her thoughts about the uniqueness of Ridgedale and the challenges of moving to a larger, more modern, school building. In addition, the principal and her staff are strategically planning how best to make the move while carrying on with the all-important task of providing the best instruction possible during the 2004–2005 school year. Students' learning must go forward even as the community prepared for the future big change. The staff and students are considering what memorabilia best depict what Ridgedale Elementary School has stood for and for which it should be remembered during its 50 years of existence in its present building. Is it a picture of the school's mascot that welcomes students as they walk through the entrance each morning? Is it a banner with the school's colors? Is it a collection

of "memory books" that have been created by students through the years?

As in any school-wide project, interest grows daily; the entire school population is focused on one event—closing down the older building and moving to a newer one. And in this context, in the fall of 2004, students, teachers, administrators, and staff respond to a unique call to develop a time capsule that (1) gives a history of Ridgedale Elementary School (1954–2005) and (2) reflects the uniqueness of 50 years of education in a building now outgrown for the communities it serves.

One of the authors of this paper (Rowell) worked with 15 pre-service teachers in a yearlong elementary school internship with an accompanying methodology course that included social studies. These interns, placed in three other schools and Ridgedale, were asked to complete the following assignment designed to help them focus on instruction that targeted individuals and families as makers of history:

Time lines and time capsules are in Chapter 6 of Hickey's *Bringing History Home*. Read this chapter carefully, but then go back to pages 14 and 15 in Chapter 1 ("Family History"), where time lines for a week in school or an



These pictures illustrate materials packaged for Ridgedale Elementary School's Time Capsule.

individual student's young life to date are explained. Select an appropriate approach to using a time line with students in the class where you are interning and have the students develop a time line. Relate the use of a time line to how history can be viewed when teaching your students, after they have done the time-line assignment above. Create a time-line assignment or lesson on a segment of history from another part of the regular social studies curriculum (Here students may work with a partner or in small groups). Write a report of both the initial teaching of a time line and the one done in the extended segment of the social studies curriculum for your grade.

Two of the pre-service interns at Ridgedale Elementary School asked to create or make a time capsule for the new school in lieu of the time-line assignment, because the year was especially unique in the history of the school. These interns had already spoken to the school's principal and their respective mentoring teachers and received enthusiastic endorsements. Since it was early in the school year, the two interns had almost eight months to complete the project.

After obtaining permission to develop a time capsule for the school, the two interns sent out letters to various individuals and groups, explaining plans for the time capsule and how they could help with the project. A letter was written to the teachers requesting a time that a survey could be administered

to students in their respective classes. The survey would ask each student to identify favorites such as books, movies, subjects in school, and television shows. The last question on the survey would call for the student's favorite memory of the current year in school. Students were also invited to write an essay on "Why I Love Ridgedale Elementary School."

Students at Ridgedale were told that their contributions would be placed in the time capsule so that when the capsule was opened 50 years from now at the new building site (renamed Amherst Elementary School because of its location on Amherst Road), students could read about the thoughts of the last group of students to attend Ridgedale Elementary. There was an overwhelming response, sparking the special buzz in the air that set the beginning of this school year apart from other school years.

### Students' Roles in the Time Capsule

Perceiving themselves as a part of history was new to many students as they began in earnest writing their essays on why they loved Ridgedale Elementary School. (Figure 1 is a representative essay by an upper elementary school student. Figure 2 highlights the work of two primary-grade students.) Students also eagerly gave suggestions in several of the classrooms and to the two interns about what should go into the time capsule. Photographs, school emblems, yearbooks, and the school flag were just a few of the items that students suggested to their teachers or to the two interns. Students especially liked helping decide which scrapbooks of old

photographs to place in the time capsule. Items that were eventually placed in the time capsule are listed below:

- a 2004-2005 yearbook of Ridgedale Elementary School
- a PTA scrapbook containing minutes of meetings, photographs, and newspaper stories from 1958, 1964, 1975, 1980, 1995, and 2000.
- a Reading Book Record from 1978, telling about books students were reading most and how students were encouraged to read
- three newspaper articles about the new school
- a file containing past newspaper clippings
- a 2004-2005 school-wide photograph
- a flag of the current school, Ridgedale
- a list of past awards given to students
- old photographs, some in scrapbooks
- *Time for Kids* magazine for current events
- a Ridgedale Elementary School bumper sticker
- a shaker depicting the school's colors

By writing essays about their school and being able to suggest what artifacts should be placed in the time capsule, students observed how history embraces

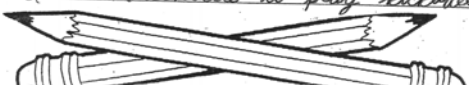
Name Michelle M. Miller 5-2-05

Why I Love Ridgedale

Ridgedale is a great school. My favorite part about Ridgedale would probably be the FEMALE teachers. My past and present FEMALE teachers encourage, inspire, and basically form me into who I'll be before you get your mind set to just the teachers read or about the other great stuff about Ridgedale.

Ridgedale, believe or not, has <sup>great</sup> cafeteria food! It is always hot, tasty, and cheap. Our lunch costs \$1.85. Our ice cream cost \$30. It also smells great! You can tell what were having by the tasty aroma filling the halls.

At this school, we have recess. Since our schedule is so full we only get about 15min every day. Our playground has swings, a tennis court, a baseball field, and marked place on the concrete to play kickball.



Mostly at recess we play kickball, swing, or talk in the shade.

Our lessons at Ridgedale are very fun. Social Studies, English, and Math are my favorite subjects. We have one teacher for each subject. The teachers rotate, and come to different classes. I like this schedule because you get to have every teacher so you're not just with one teacher. In Math, we switch according to your level. I am in 6<sup>th</sup> grade Math, so I have different assignments than the 5<sup>th</sup> grade class.

The teachers here are wonderful! Even the teachers that I didn't have, I like! My former teachers from kindergarten and up are Ms. Wolfe, Ms. Kyle, Ms. Cooley, Ms. Crook, Ms. Smith, Mr. Love. Also, from the other classes are Ms. Gubrough, S.S. and Ms. Hull, English.

In conclusion, I love Ridgedale! I hope you will read this in 2055 and think and remember how life was now. I am 11 now. When you read this I should be around 61 or 62. Maybe, it'll be ~~fun~~ just in case I am the President, a lawyer, or a pop star here is my signature.

Michelle M. Miller May 2, 2005  
Michelle M. Miller 5-2-05




Figure 1.

both written accounts as well as artifacts left by a group of people—in this case students of a school that spanned the years between 1954-2005.

### Teachers/Other School Associates' Roles in the Time Capsule

Teachers, by grade level, wrote a letter about the current conditions of teaching in general, and about teaching at Ridgedale, in particular. One group wrote about the national requirements embedded in the No Child Left Behind legislation and about state tests that must be given each year, contrasting both national requirements and state testing with teaching conditions 50 years ago (1955). Another group wrote about the warmth and support among teachers and staff at Ridgedale, advising teachers in 2055 to “remember the legacy passed on to you by Ridgedale,” closing with the statement to “Work hard, love your

students, give your all, keep the fun in learning, and challenge your students to do their best. Always!” One group of teachers (the kindergarten teachers) described the school day at Ridgedale in terms of starting and closing times, what students wear to school, the ratio of students to teacher, and lunch prices.

The president of the PTA wrote a history of Ridgedale’s PTA, telling about the various PTA-sponsored projects such as the provision of playground equipment, the purchase of additional books and computers for the school’s media center, and the procurement of volunteers to help in each classroom, among other projects. For the time capsule, the PTA provided a list of each of the 10 principals who had served Ridgedale and the years of each principal’s time in that role, PTA presidents and the years they served, and winners of the PTA-sponsored citizen-of-the-year award.

The current principal, who would be the last principal at the Ridgedale location and the first principal at the new, much larger school, was asked to submit a letter giving her thoughts on the transition from the old to the new building. She told about the excitement in watching the new building being constructed (about five miles away from the current school). She also enclosed a book (*What Principals Do When No One is Looking*) for the time capsule.

All written accounts by grade level were placed in booklets. Illustrations of these and other packaged materials, including the artifacts, were placed in a plastic tub used for the time capsule (see photos of materials on page 262).

### What Students Learned

The time capsule served as a catalyst for various social studies experiences during the 2004–05 school year. The time capsule preparation propelled students

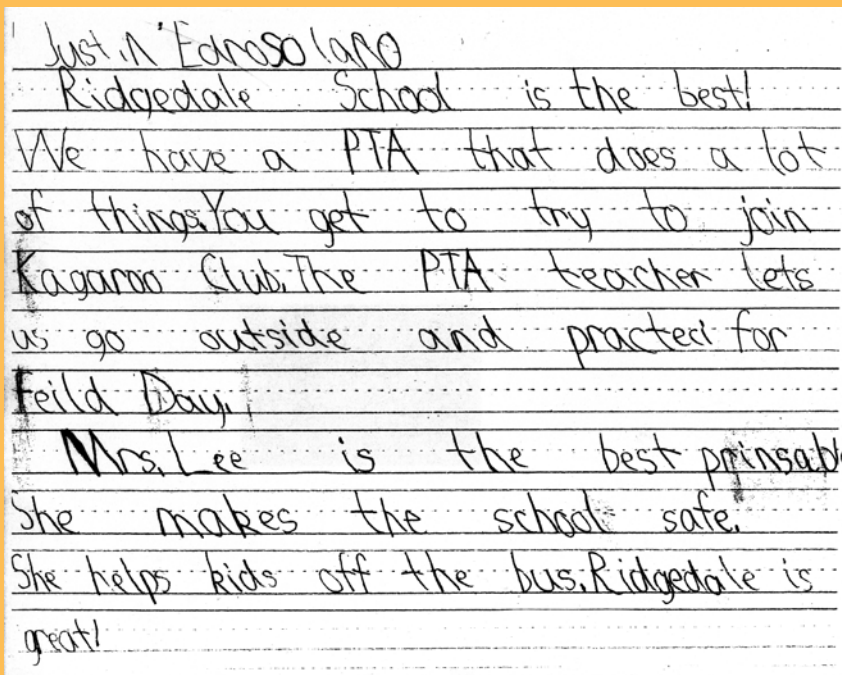
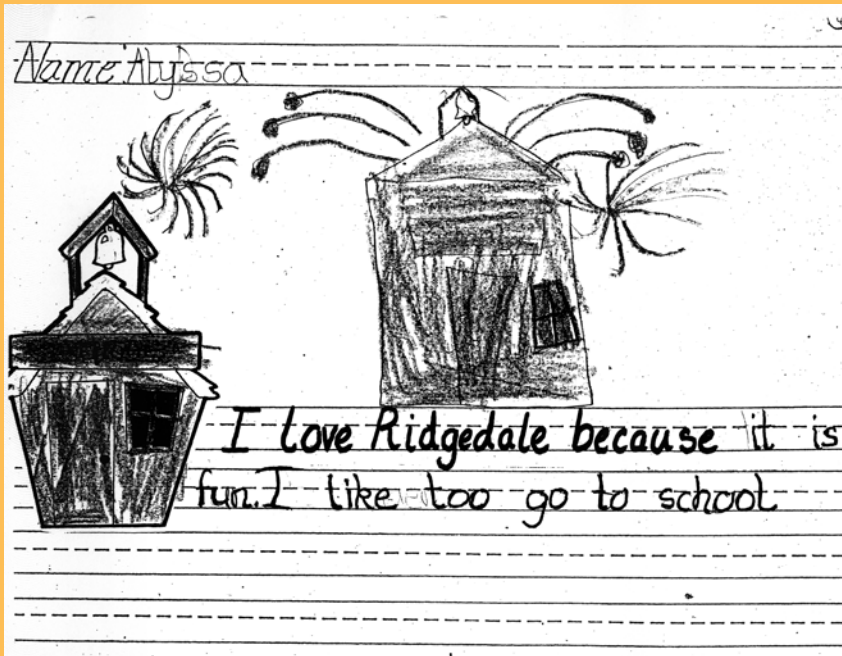


Figure 2.

to hypothesize about important events and significant artifacts of their local culture and predict what future students would like to know about the old school and life itself in 2004–05. Students also learned about significant school events as the history of the school was discussed in various classrooms throughout the year. By completing a survey and writing an essay about their current school that would be passed down through history, students contributed to the making of

history for their school and their community. Students became involved in the process of change by participating in discussions about the move to a new, bigger and more modern school building that in the first year would have almost twice the number of students enrolled at Ridgedale.

### Learning History Begins Locally

The history that most interests children is the history of themselves and their

community.<sup>1</sup> Teachers who supplement textbook content with local history projects, personalize history and help young students comprehend that they are a part of history.<sup>2</sup> Through the time capsule developed at Ridgedale, students learned about their school, their community, and their history. A number of individuals and organizations recommend that students' personal sense of the past be a springboard for learning what history is and why it is important.<sup>3</sup>

The study of local history is a powerful motivational strategy, inspiring children to think differently about history and social studies. However, teachers need to help young students make the connections necessary for placing local history in meaningful contexts.<sup>4</sup> Such contexts are as important to historical understanding as contextual understanding is to reading comprehension. Simply memorizing important dates and events fails to produce historical understanding, just as simply knowing words and sounds fails to produce comprehension of what is read. Appropriately planned, local history projects help children place facts, dates, and events in a context that makes sense to them as citizens of the community.

The collection of memorabilia in the time capsule at Ridgedale Elementary School and discussions about the new school (Amherst Elementary School) helped students see history being made. The National Center for History in the Schools' Standards in Historical Thinking suggests that K-4 teachers provide learning opportunities for analyzing and comprehending history via activities that "Draw on the visual data presented in photographs, paintings, cartoons, and architectural drawings" and "Compare and contrast differing sets of ideas, values, personalities, behaviors, and institutions."<sup>5</sup> Well-planned local history projects engage young students with learning experiences and instructional strategies that build standards-based understandings and skills. And if in the process, teachers portray history as experience instead of simply facts, children learn to value the personal aspects

of history—an attitude that should help increase their abilities to make sense of the world around them.<sup>6</sup>

Interactive local history projects that include hands-on and active experiences serve to extend children's historical understanding beyond self and family.<sup>7</sup> Local history involves much more than learning about how one's community was started or taking a field trip to view a historical marker that commemorates a significant person or event. While these activities are important, the study of local history must start at a more personal level such as with an individual or an individual's family.<sup>8</sup> As students begin to learn that they have a history, events (history) of their community, their state, and the nation start to take on meaningful interpretations. This approach complements the expanding horizon curriculum model developed years ago by Hanna and found in most schools today, while also honoring the constructivist learning framework.<sup>9</sup> Since children have fewer experiences than adults, they have fewer reference points to help them comprehend the "change

aspect" of time. Organizing time information in concrete fashion, rather than linear fashion, helps children "better understand time and how it relates to the development of human events."<sup>10</sup>

Time capsules and similar "containers" of the passage of time offer instructional aids to help children understand the sequence of events, relationships among events, and how these events fit into the overall scheme of historical time. Shoe boxes, crates, egg cartons, coffee cans, oatmeal boxes, and other similar containers can be used to collect and store materials and memorabilia related to a specific event or era.

### Time Capsules in Other Contexts

While the time capsule project at Ridgedale Elementary School came about as a result of a social studies assignment that called for reading about time lines and time capsules (and teaching time lines) and the creative thinking of two very alert interns, time capsules (and time lines) can be utilized in other contexts. Institutions or establishments in the com-

munity such as businesses, governmental agencies, churches, and charitable groups, often move to new, more modern headquarters. Teachers can take advantage of such moves by asking appropriate officials at these establishments to let their students (especially students in the upper elementary school grades) help develop a time capsule that would call for (1) interviewing some of the employees who know the history of the establishment or institution, (2) collecting memorabilia of the establishment for a time capsule, (3) asking employees to write about their years at the establishment, and (4) developing time lines and graphs to show the growth of the establishment and why new headquarters are needed. The better known the establishment in the community where a school is located, the easier it will be for students to see the personal aspects of history.

Students, in assisting organizations in the development of a time capsule, would gain valuable experiences not only in social studies but also in the various

*continued on page 271*



## Center for Civic Education

### WE THE PEOPLE: THE CITIZEN AND THE CONSTITUTION

**We the People** teaches the history and principles of the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights to upper elementary, middle, and high school students. This acclaimed program develops critical-thinking, problem-solving, and cooperative-learning skills. Students demonstrate knowledge of historical and contemporary issues during the culminating hearing.

### WE THE PEOPLE: PROJECT CITIZEN

Created for middle, secondary, and post-secondary students, youth groups, and adults, **Project Citizen** promotes competent and responsible participation in government. Participants learn how to monitor and influence public policy.

### FOR A FREE CATALOG CONTACT CENTER FOR CIVIC EDUCATION

800.350.4223 FAX 818.591.9330  
5145 DOUGLAS FIR ROAD, CALABASAS, CA 91302  
WWW.CIVICED.ORG



2. Nancy Carolyn Whiting, "Archaeology and Intercultural Education in the Elementary Grades: An Example from Minnesota," *Social Studies* 89 no. 6 (1998): 256.
3. Rachel Hallett, "They Dig It!" *Science and Children* 42 no. 8 (2005): 23.
4. Mary Black, "Using Archaeology to Explore Cultures of North America through Time," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 11 no. 1 (1998): 11.
5. Gail William Brown, "Teaching Archaeology," (ED440920 ERIC Digest, 2000): 2.
6. The Society for American Archaeology, www.saa.org.
7. Connie Nobles, *Adventures in Classroom Archaeology* (Baton Rouge, La.: Division of Archaeology, 1992): 10-12.
8. Nancy Hawkins, *Classroom Archaeology* (Baton Rouge, La.: Division of Archaeology, 1999): 5-6.
9. Jane McIntosh, *Archaeology: Eyewitness Book* (Dorling Kendersley, 1998): 12.
10. Hallett, 22.
11. *Poverty Point Earthworks: Evolutionary Milestones of the Americas*, Louisiana Public Broadcasting documentary, www.lpb.org/programs/povertypoint/pp\_transcript.html.
12. Greg Grambo, "Digging into Archaeology Projects," *Gifted Child Today* 19 no. 3 (1996): 12.
13. Richard Panchyk, *Archaeology for Kids: Uncovering the Mysteries of our Past*, (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2003): 30.
14. The National Association of State Archaeologists, www.uiowa.edu/~osa/nasa.
15. Grambo, 12.
16. Hallett, 23.
17. *Ibid.*, 23, 24.
18. Cathy Welsh, "Digging through History," *Gifted Child Today* 17, no. 1 (1994): 18-20, 42.
19. Alice Robinson, "Can You Dig It?" *School Library Journal* 51, no. 3 (2005): 2.
20. Hawkins, 33.
21. Panchyk, 12.
22. Grambo, 13.
23. Jared Berrett and Jennifer Bjornstead, "We're Diggin It: Setting up Your Own Archeological Dig for the Classroom," *Technology and Children*, (2005): 4, 5.
24. *Ibid.*
25. Meg Greene, *Buttons, Bones, and the Organ Grinder's Monkey: Tales of Historical Archaeology*, (North Haven, Conn.: Linnet Books, 2001): 9-12.
26. Kate Duke, *Archaeologists Dig for Clues* (New York: HarperCollins Children's Books, 1997).
27. Jackie Posner, *Magic School Bus Shows and Tells: A Book about Archaeology* (New York: Scholastic Inc, 1997).
28. Judith Cochran, *Archaeology: Digging Deeper to Learn About the Past*, (Nashville, Tenn.: Incentive Publications, Inc., 1999): 97.
29. Black, 13.

**S. KAY GANDY** is an assistant professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green. She taught elementary school for 27 years in Louisiana before moving to Kentucky four years ago. She can be reached at [kay.gandy@wku.edu](mailto:kay.gandy@wku.edu).


## TIME CAPSULE *from page 266*

language arts. Students would be called on to read about the history of the organization, to interview employees and take accurate notes, to write narratives about various aspects of the establishment, and to hold discussions on what to include in the time capsule. Just as the Ridgedale students were asked to reflect on their school and community, helping build a time capsule about a local business would call for reflection and decision making.

Students can also develop time capsules after interviewing older members of the family, perhaps beginning with grandparents (or parents, if grandparents are not alive) and collect narratives and artifacts from "Grandma and Grandpa's younger days" down through the current generation. Students can also develop time capsules of their own lives, collecting information such as magazine cut-outs of different hairstyles over a 10- or 12-year period, pictures of their favorite athletes, pictures of pets owned, photographs of automobiles during a time-capsule period, and other memorabilia that represent a distinct period of time in the life of a student. One Indiana teacher buried her personal time capsule developed for a reunion of her 1960s graduating class and assigned her students, equipped with maps, to find it in the schoolyard. Imagination on the part of teachers can lead to any number of ideas for encouraging students to develop time capsules.<sup>11</sup>

## Conclusion

Time capsules help students understand the nature of events and the relationships of events in a segment of history. It is up to teachers to find ways to make time capsule projects meaningful to students. Teachers must help students see (1) that history is personal, (2) that history affects real people, and (3) that history is about events in students' lives as well as the lives of others. The time capsule project described in this article embraces these concepts relating to history and integrates them in an interactive, engaging learning experience. Developing time capsules can indeed put a "special buzz in the air" at

any school while teaching students the real meaning of history. 

## Notes

1. David Elkind, *The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast, Too Soon*, (Reading, Mass.: Addison Wesley, 1981).
2. M. Gail Hickey, *Personalizing Social Studies for Young Children*, Professional Development Monograph Series (Glenview, Ill.: Scott Foresman, 2001); Linda Levstik and Keith Barton, *Doing History*, 2nd ed. (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2001).
3. National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies*, Bulletin no. 89 (Washington, D.C.: National Task Force for Standards in Social Studies, 1994); National Center for History in the Schools, *National Standards for History: Exploring Children's World in Time and Space*. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994); National Center for History in the Schools, *National Standards for History*, basic edition, (1996); National Council for the Social Studies (1994), 22.
4. Karen L. Jorgensen, *History Workshop: Reconstructing the Past with Elementary Students* (Portsmouth, N. H.: Heinemann, 1993).
5. National Center for History in the Schools (1996).
6. Cynthia S. Sunal and Mary E. Haas, *Social Studies for the Elementary and Middle School Grades: A Constructivist Approach*. (Boston, Mass.: Allyn & Bacon, 2005).
7. A. T. Leigh and T. O. Reynolds, "Little Windows to the Past," *Social Education* 61, no. 1 (1997): 45-47; Jere Brophy and Janet Alleman, *Powerful Social Studies for Elementary Students* (Fort Worth, Tex.: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1996); Levstik and Barton, 2001; Dorothy Hennings, Grant Hennings and S. F. Bannich, *Today's Elementary Social Studies*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1989); Linda Levstik, "Teaching History: A Definitional and Developmental Dilemma" in *Elementary School Social Studies: Research as a Guide to Practice*, Bulletin no. 79, ed. Virginia Atwood (Washington, D.C.: National Task Force for Standards in Social Studies, 1986); D. Shemilt, Evaluation Study: Schools Council History 13-16 Project. (Edinburgh: Holmes McDougall, 1980).
8. Hickey, *Bringing History Home* (Boston, Mass.: Allyn & Bacon, 1999), 15, 29, 64.
9. See, for example, Walter C. Parker, *Social Studies in Elementary Education*, 12th ed. (Prentice Hall, 2005), and George W. Maxim, *Dynamic Social Studies for Constructivist Classrooms*, 8th ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Merrill, 2006).
10. Thomas N. Turner, "Putting Time in a Bottle—Or a Box!" *The Social Studies* (1989): 124-125.
11. Hickey, *Bringing History Home*, 81-82.

**C. GLENNON ROWELL** is a professor of theory and practice in teacher education at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. He can be reached at [crowell@utk.edu](mailto:crowell@utk.edu). **M. GAIL HICKEY** is a professor of educational studies at Indiana University-Purdue University in Fort Wayne, Indiana. She can be reached at [hickey@ipfw.edu](mailto:hickey@ipfw.edu). **KENDALL GECSEI** is a fourth grade teacher at Green Magnet Math and Science Academy in Knoxville, Tennessee. She can be reached at [kmgecsei@hotmail.com](mailto:kmgecsei@hotmail.com). **STACY KLEIN** is a second grade teacher at A. Z. Kelley Elementary School in Antioch, Tennessee. She can be reached at [stacy.klein@mmps.org](mailto:stacy.klein@mmps.org).