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## Teaching History Through Children's Literature: An Integrated Approach for the Fifth Grade Classroom

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TEACHING HISTORY THROUGH CHILDREN'S LITERATURE:  
AN INTEGRATED APPROACH FOR THE FIFTH GRADE CLASSROOM

by

Tamara Gayle Crook

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

DEPARTMENT HONORS

in

Elementary Education

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY  
Logan, UT

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## Introduction and Purpose

During my teacher education training I have become fascinated with the idea of teaching social studies through historical novels. As a result of this fascination, I chose curriculum development pertaining to this idea as the subject of my honors project. The purpose of this project was for me to develop, teach, and evaluate an integrated unit using historical novels to teach social studies and a variety of other subjects. I selected the American Revolution as the theme of my unit.

In this paper I have included a brief overview of my review of the literature on this topic, the procedures I used in developing my unit, a description of the implementation of the unit, and an evaluation of my students' learning.

### Overview of the Literature Review

Social studies has traditionally been taught in elementary classrooms from textbooks. Recently, however, there is increased interest in teaching social studies concepts through literature (Van Middendorp & Lee, 1994). Research studies are limited in this area due to its recent emergence in the educational community. Most articles on the subject simply tell how or why literature should be used in teaching social studies (McGowan, Guzzetti, & Kowalinski, 1992; Tomasino, 1993). However, the research studies that have been conducted show numerous benefits connected with using trade books as tools for teaching social studies curriculum at all levels of public schooling (Smith, Monson, & Dobson, 1992).

In this overview, I shall focus on six general topics that are addressed in the literature on using historical novels to teach social studies.

1) Social studies textbooks are inadequate. Due to lack of depth, content omissions, and lifelessness in social studies textbooks, students tend to perceive social studies as boring, intimidating, and disconnected from their own lives (Ravitch, 1985; Tunnell & Ammon, 1993; Van Middendorp & Lee, 1994; Zarnowski & Gallagher, 1993).

2) Using historical fiction to teach social studies can solve many of the problems inherent in social studies texts. Unlike textbooks, quality historical novels make history interesting and meaningful to students by focusing in depth on certain events, and emphasizing the human aspects of history (Banks, 1992; Smith & Dobson, 1993; Tomasino, 1993; Van Middendorp & Lee, 1994).

3) Core curriculum objectives and standards in social studies, requiring both critical thinking and acquisition of knowledge, can be met through the study of historical fiction (Louie, 1993; McGowan, Guzzetti, & Kowalinski, 1992; Ravitch, 1985; Tunnell & Ammon, 1993; Van Middendorp & Lee, 1994).

4) Academic gains across the curriculum have been associated with using historical fiction to teach social studies. This strategy for teaching history facilitates academic growth in areas such as reading, vocabulary, comprehension, writing, speaking, communication, and critical thinking (McGowan,

Guzzetti, & Kowalinski, 1992; Smith, Monson, & Dobson, 1992; Tomasino, 1993).

5) Learning social studies through historical fiction has been linked to improved student attitudes toward reading, social studies, and people in general (McGowan, Guzzetti, & Kowalinski, 1992; Smith, Monson, & Dobson, 1992; Tomasino, 1993; Tunnell & Ammon, 1993; Van Middendorp & Lee, 1994).

6) Learning social studies through historical fiction seems to improve students' citizenship. Through the study of historical novels students are able to become more competent citizens, involve themselves in social issues, and gain a sense of social responsibility (Banks, 1992; McGowan, Guzzetti, & Kowalinski, 1992; Tunnell & Ammon, 1993; Van Middendorp & Lee, 1994; Zarnowski & Gallagher, 1993).

The practice of using historical novels to teach social studies is supported in the educational literature. Historical fiction appears to be a workable, positive alternative or supplement to the textbook in teaching social studies.

### Methods

#### The subjects

Twenty-eight students in a fifth grade classroom at an Elementary School in Logan, Utah were the subjects for this project. This was a homogenous group of middle- and upper-middle-class Euro-American children.

#### Procedures

Time-frame. This unit on the American Revolution occupied

eleven school days beginning on January 13, 1995 and ending on February 2, 1995. Pretesting was done prior to the introduction of the unit. The first day included an introduction to the novels and to literature study groups, and the start of a science unit on electricity. The study of historical novels continued for seven days as did the study of electricity. The following three days included the sharing of group projects and other extension activities. On the last day of the unit, the students were evaluated.

Using literature. The events, attitudes, and people of the Revolutionary War were studied through literature and related extension activities.

The backbone of this unit was the students' engagement in literature study groups. In groups, the students studied historical novels that deal with the American revolution. The novels used were Day of Glory, Felicity Learns a Lesson, The Secret Soldier, and George Washington's Socks.

Additional literature about the Revolutionary War supplemented the historical novels. This literature included picture books that look at the war from different perspectives, The Declaration of Independence, poetry written about people of the revolutionary time period, biographies of prominent revolutionary leaders, and non-fictional books about dress, language, and life styles of people during the American revolution.

Integrating the curriculum. Historical fiction was the

jumping off point from which much of the curriculum was taught. The spelling unit during the first week of Revolutionary War study was entirely based on the Revolution. Students did a lot of writing in different formats. In science, they studied electricity, in conjunction with Benjamin Franklin, and how it has changed communication, war, and lifestyles since the time of the American Revolution. Art projects stemmed directly from the unit, and students listened to music written during that time period.

Math was not integrated in the unit because many of the students change classrooms for math.

#### Evaluation Instruments

Children's learning was assessed using four different evaluation instruments. These are detailed below.

Word association test. A word association pre-post test was given before and after the unit to assess what the students knew about major topics of the Revolution. Fifteen names or events of the Revolution were written above a space of about two inches in which students wrote what they knew or understood about that topic. This method was used to assess the students general conceptual understanding of the topic, and how much this understanding increased throughout the unit. (See Appendix).

Attitude inventory. A pre-post attitude inventory was used to assess how students felt about social studies, history, reading, and other subjects before and after the integrated unit (McKenna & Kear, 1990). The purpose of this inventory was to



show whether or not teaching this unit in a literature based, integrated manner helped to promote positive attitudes towards social studies and reading in the classroom. (See Appendix).

Open ended survey. An open ended survey given at the end of the unit assessed how children felt about the unit as a whole. Students were asked what they liked about the unit, what they would suggest to improve it, and what they learned. These three questions were spaced evenly on a single page, giving the students plenty of room to write.

Classroom products. Student writing samples, projects, presentations, and journals varied greatly in style and kind, including everything from poetry and news reports to murals and models. All served to show students' gains in historical knowledge and understanding of concepts. The primary function of these instruments was to assess whether or not students personalized the Revolution by placing themselves in it and relating it to their own lives.

### Implementation

This section of the paper describes what happened in the classroom during the implementation of the unit. This description of the project is organized by subject for the sake of continuity. A brief summary is given below of how reading, social studies, science, music, art, and the final project were connected to the central theme of the American Revolution.

### Reading

Literature study groups provided the foundation for this

unit. The twenty-eight students were divided into seven groups of four. George Washington's Socks was studied by four groups. Each of the other three novels, The Secret Soldier, Day of Glory, and Felicity Learns a Lesson were studied by only one group.

Specific reading assignments were given to each group on a daily basis. Students filled out "bookmarks" as they read. These bookmarks were sheets of paper folded in quarters to make a small booklet on which they wrote questions they had about what they were reading, connections they were making between the novel and their own lives or history, responses to the literature, and favorite parts of the novel. Students kept these bookmarks in their novels so they could write in them as they read. Each literature study session began with students sharing what they had written in their bookmarks with their group.

Group activities provided a variety of learning experiences involving creative dramatics, communication, and many of the language arts, particularly writing. One of the activities the students engaged in was a "character meeting." Each student in a group pretended to be a character in his or her novel. Characters that the students used had to have differing viewpoints. As these characters, the students talked to each other about their feelings, and about why they believed and acted the way they did. After the character meeting, each student wrote a journal entry as his or her character. One group was reading Day of Glory, and had been saddened by their night's reading of the first fight in the battle of Lexington and

Concord. A girl who played the wife of a man killed on the Lexington Green spoke passionately to the student who portrayed a general in the British army telling him of the agony his people had caused her.

Other activities included plot sequencing and summarizing, identifying conflicts and taking sides, realizing the cause and effect relationship between events in a novel, differentiating between fact and opinion in history and historical fiction, and discussing what was learned from the book and whether or not it was enjoyable.

### Social Studies

Each novel covered different aspects of the Revolutionary War. To tie all of these parts together, I presented three events of the Revolution to the students each day. For example, on the first day of the unit the students learned about the French and Indian War, the Stamp Act, and the Sons of Liberty. Students who were reading about these events in their novels were encouraged to share what they were learning with the whole class. I enjoyed these sessions most when the students were teaching each other the things they were learning about history. When we talked about the Victory at Trenton towards the end of the unit, some of the students in George Washington's Socks described to the class that when the Continental Army crossed the Delaware River it was freezing cold and many of the soldiers did not have shoes, so their feet were cracked and infected, and some of these people died on the way to Trenton. One girl who was reading

Felicity Learns a Lesson told how the Boston Tea Party and other events leading up to the war made it so some kids couldn't play with their friends because their dads didn't agree. When we talked about the Battles of Lexington and Concord I did not have to say a lot. The group that was reading Day of Glory detailed to the class the battle on the Lexington Green and Paul Revere's famous ride, including small incidents that captured their attention such as Revere sending his dog back home for his spurs, and his using a ladies petticoat to muffle the oars of his row boat so he could glide silently past a British warship. They also told the class how sad the battle was to them after reading of real people whose lives were drastically changed or ended in that first short confrontation of the Revolutionary war.

As the class shared what they were learning about the events and people of the Revolution, observations about the human aspects of war began to emerge. When we talked about Loyalists and Patriots, one group in particular had noticed that a character in their novel was not fighting because he felt inspired by the cause of his army. He was simply trying to keep food on his family's table back home, and he would gladly have been elsewhere. This group's observations led to a discussion of different reasons that people may have had for fighting in the war. Many of the students reading George Washington's Socks shared with the class that they were shocked toward the end of the novel when just for sport, a rebel soldier shot the Hessian who had just saved one of the main character's lives. These

students helped the class to realize that there are good, caring people and hard, unfeeling people on both sides in war.

Additional literature supplemented the novels in the study of historical content. Time was spent studying The Declaration of Independence, memorizing of some of "Paul Revere's Ride" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, preparing and performing Sybil's Ride for Independence as a reader's theatre, reading about school in 1776, learning about revolutionary word origins, and reading children's literature about the American Revolution.

### Science

I integrated science into the Revolutionary War theme by launching the exploration of electricity with Jean Fritz' biography of Benjamin Franklin. This book talks about Franklin's involvement in the war, and his fascination with electricity.

I taught the students about what electricity actually is (electrons moving in a path) and compared it to water running in pipes and cars on the freeway. Students identified things in their homes that use electricity, built circuits, tested materials for conductivity, and learned about different kinds of circuits and generators.

One afternoon I handed each group a piece of wire, a battery, a small light bulb, and some tape and told them to make the bulb light. They struggled for about ten minutes and then one group produced a lighted bulb with a triumphant yelp. Almost the whole class ran to see and touch the working circuit and figure out how to make their own work. After some time, one

group still could not make their bulb light. It touched me to watch one of my little resource students walk over to their table and say, "Here, let me show you how," and then proceed to make their circuit work. The next day one young man came to school with a homemade flashlight out of a piece of wire, a battery, a flashlight bulb, and tape.

The students used these circuits to test objects for conductivity. When they finished the objects in their buckets, students went scurrying all over the room to test different objects and record them on their charts.

We further connected electricity to the Revolution by discussing how life is different because of electricity than it was during this war, and how the war might have been different if people had electricity in 1776.

#### Music and Art

As we studied the Revolution, I played tapes of Haydn and Mozart, explaining that these composers were alive and composing in Europe during the Revolution and their music could very well have been listened to by important people in the court of King George.

As a class we talked about Paul Revere's career as an engraver and how that helped the Revolutionary cause. We looked at his engraving of the Boston Massacre in particular as it helped to spread the patriot fire. Then each student chose an event of the Revolution and made their own crayon engraving of that event. These engravings were delightful. One student

showed an aerial view of Paul Revere crossing the channel between Boston and Charlestown right under the nose of the British warship, Sommerset. Another engraving depicted the Battle of Yorktown with the city surrounded on land by Continental stick figures, and in the water by a fleet of very large French warships. These engravings were displayed in the classroom for parent/teacher conferences and were much admired.

### Final Project

A Final project, which allowed for integration of all areas of the curriculum, was produced by each group. Groups could choose to create a mural, model, or book. All three project options were used by different groups. The requirements of the project were simply that it must tell the class something about the group's literature study novel and what they learned from it about the Revolutionary War.

### Evaluation

This project was evaluated using the four instruments mentioned in the methods section of this paper. Each of these assessment tools shows positive results associated with teaching history through a literature based, integrated curriculum.

### Word Association Test

The word association pre-post test was given prior to and after the unit to assess student gains in knowledge about major topics of the Revolution. The class average on the pre-test was 2.38 out of 15 and the range was from 0 to 6. The post-test average was 13.04 out of 15 and the range was from 7 to 15.

Clearly, this method of teaching history facilitates learning about major historical events and concepts.

### Attitude Inventory

The pre-post attitude inventory was given to assess whether or not teaching an historical, thematic unit with literature would improve student attitudes toward social studies and reading in the classroom. Comparing the results of the pre- and post-attitude inventories (see Table 1) indicates that the students' attitudes toward every subject noted on the inventory improved during the unit. There were students who were still not enthused about certain subjects at the end of the unit, but in every instance, the post-test class tally displays a positive shift in feeling about the subject. This information suggests that teaching in a literature based, integrated manner not only promotes positive attitudes toward social studies and reading, but every other subject integrated into the theme as well. It is interesting to me that attitudes towards math increased also, as math was not integrated into the social studies theme. Perhaps learning in such a richly connected environment stimulated a general excitement for learning which expressed itself in all subjects, even those not integrated into the theme.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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### Classroom Products

Writing samples, projects, presentations, and journals



assessed whether or not students were understanding the Revolution on a personal level.

During this unit, the students did a lot of writing. They addressed topics such as their opinions versus the author's opinion, causes and effects of events in their novels, newscasts about events of the Revolution, what they learned about the American Revolution through their novel, and what the Revolution means for them today. I read everything that the students wrote in conjunction with this unit and I learned that in many cases, the students were learning about the Revolution and connecting that learning to their own lives. It was through their writing that I realized these students understood the Revolution on a human level, not just as another group of historical facts. One student wrote, "If we didn't win we would still be ruled by England. But I think it's sad because lots of people died. I bet half the British soldiers didn't even want to be at war, but we refer to them as 'Bad Guys.' The British had families too." This response shows that this student is able to look at the war from different viewpoints. Another student's written response shows her ability to connect the Revolution with other parts of American history. She wrote, "Without the American Revolution we would not be a free country, and we would still be ruled by a king or queen. There would still be plantations with slaves because there would be no presidents and a president did a great deal to help free slaves. So blacks might still be treated with disrespect." Another student wrote, "I am glad that it was a

long time ago, or else we would have to go to war." A final sample of student writing demonstrates the ability of a fifth grader to connect history with his or her personal life. This student wrote, "Those colonists fought so hard for freedom, and sometimes today we take that freedom for granted." The writing samples from student journals and assignments show that teaching history through literature not only facilitates learning of the history, but personalizes it as well.

Student projects and presentations included everything from newscasts and books to models and murals. Students engaged in art, poetry, and dramatics as they prepared projects and presentations. The object of these assignments was for each group to share with the class what they had learned about the Revolution through the study of their novel. Many groups depicted scenes of their novels in murals or books, and these scenes clearly showed an understanding of aspects of the Revolutionary War. Others shared their knowledge in words. The group that read Day of Glory wrote several poems to illustrate historical events in their novel. One poem read,

Solomon Brown went to town,  
To fetch a piece of paper.  
He almost got caught,  
But then he did not,  
And that was a very good thing.

This group understood that Solomon had an important mission for the Patriots which the British tried to stop him from achieving. They formed their own opinion that it was a "very good thing" that he succeeded. Once again, these students were able not only

to understand what happened, but to analyze it as well.

Student writing samples, projects, presentations, and journals show that teaching social studies through a literature based, integrated unit allows students to learn content and then internalize what they are learning, making it meaningful to themselves.

#### Open-Ended Survey

The final assessment measure was an open-ended survey of the unit. This instrument was designed to give students the opportunity to evaluate this unit and the way in which it was taught. The first question asked the students what they liked about the unit. The most frequent responses were literature study groups, learning to take notes on historical events, learning about these events, and doing group projects. Some other things mentioned as favorites were engraving, electricity, having group leaders, and acting things out.

The second question asked students what they would suggest to improve the unit. I was surprised that the most frequent response by far was that the unit was great and nothing should be changed. Some of the suggestions made were to do more art, have more time for the group project, and check over notes more thoroughly as a class before the test.

The third and final question asked the students what they had learned from the unit. Many students listed events and people of the war that they had learned about, tacking "and lots more" onto the end of their lists. Others mentioned things like

how sick people got, how hard people worked for freedom, that sides weren't necessarily good and bad, that people fought for different reasons, and that the war was hard on soldiers and other people.

My assessment of the survey leads to positive conclusions about teaching history in this manner. The students enjoyed the unit, and certainly learned a lot about history on both factual and personal levels.

#### Summary

My original intent in undertaking this project was to try out my fascination with teaching social studies through historical novels and to see for myself whether or not this is an effective teaching strategy. The literature available on the subject led me to conclude that this method of teaching social studies is a workable and positive option to the traditional textbook approach. This conclusion was authenticated time and again during the teaching and evaluating of the Revolutionary War unit. For twenty-eight fifth graders at Wilson Elementary, teaching social studies through historical fiction not only facilitated gains in historical knowledge, but a positive increase in attitudes toward the social studies and school in general. Now I wholeheartedly recommend this method of teaching to instructors who dream of helping the social studies to regain their rightful place in children's eyes as one of the most captivating and important adventures of the school experience.

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## Appendix

### Word Association Test on the American Revolution

Please write down whatever comes to your mind when you think of these things:

Declaration of Independence:

Boston Tea Party:

Causes of the Revolution:

Crossing the Delaware:

Boston Massacre:

Winter at Valley Forge:

Lexington and Concord:

Benjamin Franklin:

Sons of Liberty:

Treaty of Paris:

Victory at Trenton:

George Washington:

Battle of Bunker Hill:

Tory:

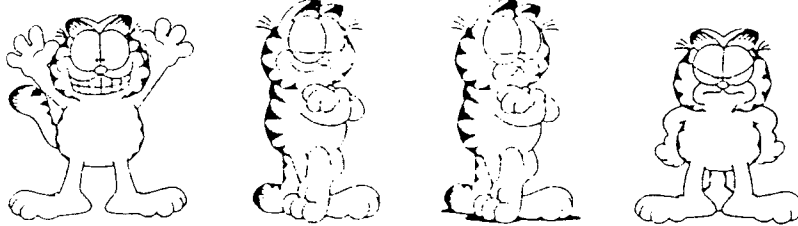
Patriot:



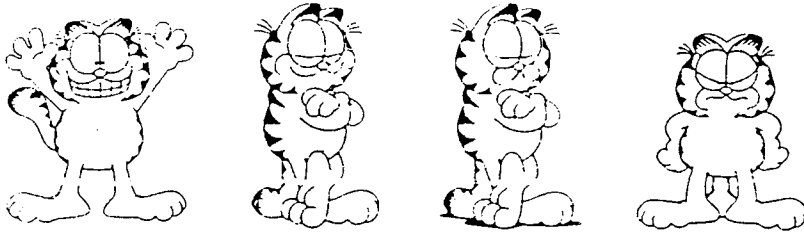
Garfield Attitude Inventory

## GARFIELD ASKS...

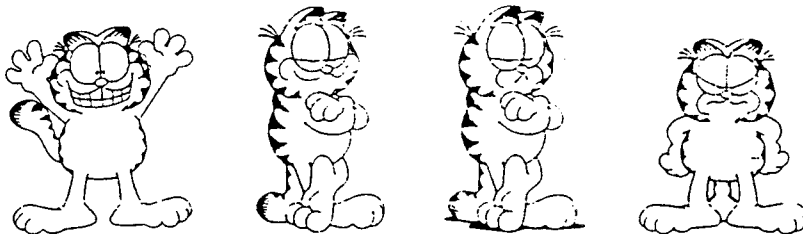
How do you feel when it is time for reading?



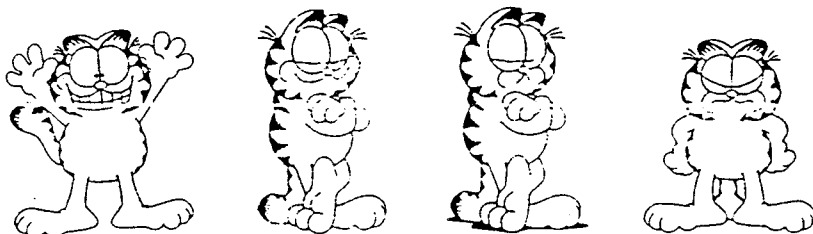
How do you feel when it is time for math?



How do you feel when it is time for spelling

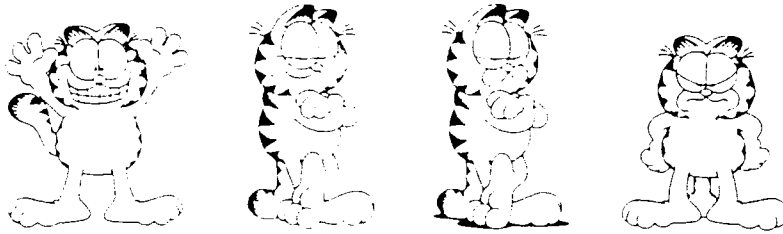


How do you feel when it is time for science and health?

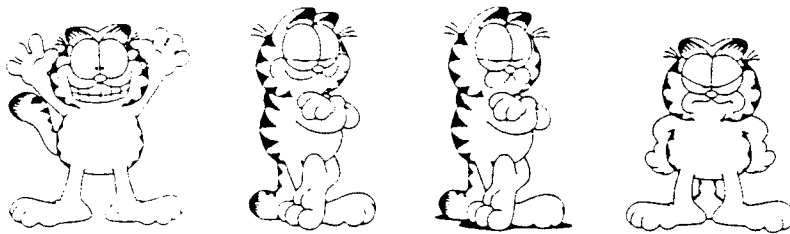


## Garfield Attitude Inventory

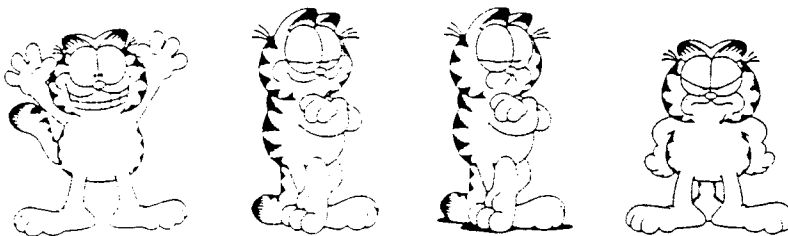
How do you feel when it is time for social studies?



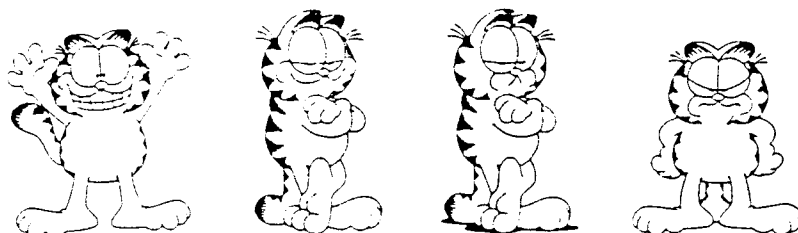
How do you feel about learning history?



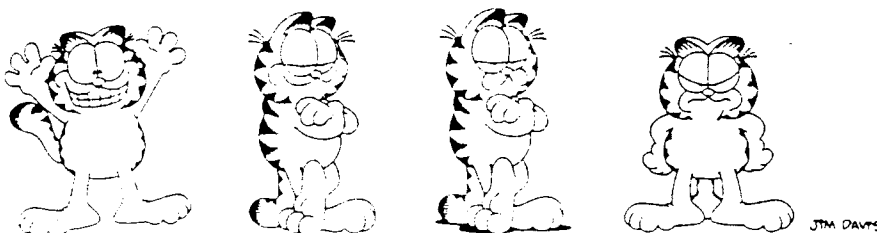
How do you feel about reading a chapter book?



How do you feel about learning from a book?



How do you feel about learning history from a book?




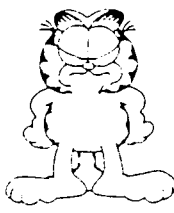


JTM DAVIS

Table 1

Results of Garfield Attitude Inventory

Numbers show how many students chose a particular Garfield figure for each question on the pre-test or the post-test as indicated by the columns.

	Pre-Test	Post-Test		Pre-Test	Post-Test		Pre-Test	Post-Test		Pre-Test	Post-Test

How do you feel when it is time for reading?	14	16	4	7	3	0	4	4
How do you feel when it is time for math?	4	5	4	11	5	6	12	5
How do you feel when it is time for spelling?	1	4	5	6	10	10	9	7
How do you feel when it is time for science and health?	2	6	3	10	6	6	14	5
How do you feel when it is time for social studies?	4	9	3	8	10	5	8	5
How do you feel about learning history?	5	14	6	7	7	2	7	3
How do you feel about reading a chapter book?	18	20	3	6	3	0	1	1
How do you feel about learning from a book?	2	8	5	9	10	3	8	8
How do you feel about learning history from a book	2	8	3	5	10	8	10	7

