

Middle school history curriculum has wide appeal

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FOR MORE THAN FOUR YEARS, curriculum writers in the Talent Development Middle School program have been building a better history course. By fall they expect to be finished—with enough lessons to fill two years of middle-school classes in American history from the country’s beginning to the present.

The writers at Johns Hopkins Center for Social Organization of Schools are using Joy Hakim’s 10-book *History of US* as the foundation and structure of their course, adding extensive teacher and student materials to make the non-traditional history books more useful in the classroom. Begun in 1998 with a pilot in three Philadelphia middle schools, the history project continues to expand. Now published and distributed by Oxford Press, the Hopkins-produced “teaching guides and resource books” are being used not only in eight Talent Development Middle Schools in Philadelphia and elsewhere, but also in hundreds of other classrooms. Oxford Press is the publisher of Hakim’s series, which was released in 1994.

“The thing about the history project that’s been so interesting is we have had this huge audience that we had not anticipated,” said curriculum writer Maria Garriott. Written for use in seventh and eighth grades in Talent Development schools, the lessons are being used from fifth through eighth grades by schools and home schoolers, as well.

“They are used across the nation,” said Jane Walker, sales and marketing manager for the *History of US* at Oxford Press. “The lessons are certainly an asset to the program; they do well,” she added.

The audience is likely to grow even more next fall. PBS is planning to air a 16-part television series based on the Hakim books, and the Hopkins team has written teacher materials to accompany it.

For each of Hakim’s books, the Hopkins project has created a large red binder of approximately 25 lessons, plus five review lessons and five assessments. Introductory materials for each lesson include a briefly stated theme, an overview for the teacher, appropriate vocabulary, a resource list for students and teachers, and the skill and content standards contained in each lesson.

The lessons feature lively student-centered activities. For instance, students may be asked to conduct a mock trial for John Brown, perform a historical rap, or keep the journal of an ordinary person from another era by, first, reading about that person and then trying to adopt his or her identity during the unit.

“The curriculum was designed with both teachers and students in mind,” said Garriott.

“We provide an overview for those teachers who may need more background information on specific historic events.... To engage students and lead them to higher-order thinking, the curriculum features fast-paced cooperative learning,” she added.

“We continue to make it as rigorous and rich as we can,” added Susan Dangel, who heads the

curriculum-writing project and created the lessons' format.

The lessons are fast-paced with several different segments. For instance, a focus activity introduces the lesson and often includes predictive activities, such as brainstorming or interpreting a photograph or anecdote. That is followed by a short teaching activity that might include vocabulary work or partner reading. The bulk of the lesson— about 30 minutes typically—is devoted to student activities, usually carried out in teams. Then there is a brief “reflection and review” to sum up the main theme or concept and to offer students an opportunity to think and talk about what they have experienced.

“We aim for academically challenging, standards-based materials in every classroom, every day. We’re not dumbing down,” said Garriott. “We’re using things proven by research to work.”

Talent Development is a whole-school reform developed by at the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk at Johns Hopkins and Howard Universities; it aims to improve the achievement of middle and high school students, particularly those in high-poverty areas, through organizational and instructional innovations. The Talent Development model recognizes the gifts and talents of each student and helps schools and teachers play to those strengths.

A strong, core curriculum is a key component of Talent Development. Middle school program director Douglas Mac Iver chose Hakim’s *History of US* for its crisp, narrative style and its non-textbook approach. Unfortunately, the series had few teaching suggestions or student materials.

So, the Hopkins curriculum-writing team was assembled and put to work, beginning with the ninth in the 10-book series.

“We ended up with a model and I wrote a couple of lessons and we had teachers try them,” added Dangel, a former teacher and principal who spent months talking to teachers and studying the schools for which the curriculum was designed before beginning to write.

Some of the challenges teachers and researchers faced in Talent Development schools influenced the structure and content of the curriculum. For instance, though usually including a homework assignment, the lessons do not expect students to read the Hakim texts outside of class because many TD schools have only one set of books for several sections of middle-school history. Therefore, students cannot take the texts home.

Garriott said this may be beneficial, however. Many students in TD schools are reading well below grade level. Therefore, the programmed use of the text and shared reading assignments help students who are not able readers.

This shared reading, called “Partner Read,” is only one of many strategies embedded in the history curriculum. Research-based and aimed at slow learners, these reading strategies have proven to have a much wider audience because of the realization that many middle school students have poor comprehension skills. These are attacked by other strategies, such as stating a purpose for a particular reading, by graphic organizers that help students focus on a reading, by vocabulary discussion, and by previewing texts.

The teaching materials were specifically designed for inexperienced teachers and those with little knowledge of history—two realities of underachieving urban schools. To accommodate such teachers, the lesson plans are highly detailed and include everything a teacher needs. The lesson overviews are particularly popular with teachers not trained in history, said Dangel, because they give the teachers the background and context they may lack.

“We’ve gotten a really good response from teachers,” said Garriott. “We’re seeing schools picking and choosing, using it [the curriculum] in many different ways.” This is particularly true in non-Talent Development schools for which materials are purchased from Oxford. Hakim herself

recommends the materials; these are the kinds of supplements she had hoped her publisher would have provided originally, she said.

The TD curriculum supplements the Hakim texts, particularly in the history of minority groups, such as African Americans and women. For this, it relies on primary sources and on the “ordinary folks of history,” in addition to the big names people expect to find in history books. For instance, in the introductory lesson for Book 8, students are introduced to five people who lived between 1870 and 1917. One is an immigrant seamstress who works in a shirt factory, another is a 14-year-old Georgia sharecropper and another a Pennsylvania steelworker. Students read profiles of them, based on primary sources of individuals who recorded the events of their lives and times.

In fact, the use of primary sources throughout the curriculum “kind of exploded,” Garriott said. And teachers have confirmed that these materials often capture students’ interest more than other approaches. Students, they said, enjoy examining documents, diaries and other artifacts of history—the stuff of interesting, engaging history.