

Research Brief: Reading Like A Historian

Background: Stanford History Education Group created the Reading Like a Historian curriculum to engage students in historical inquiry. Each lesson revolves around a central historical question and features sets of primary documents modified for groups of students with diverse reading skills and abilities. This curriculum teaches students how to investigate historical questions by using disciplinary reading strategies. The Reading Like a Historian curriculum draws on the “Document-Based Lesson,” a three-step way of organizing instruction.

1. **Present background knowledge:** Teachers present students with background knowledge through mini lessons, video clips, or the textbook.
2. **Focus on primary source documents:** Students read primary source documents and then answer guiding questions or complete a graphic organizer.
3. **Discuss with the whole class:** After reading the primary source documents, the whole class discusses a central historical question. Students learn about the multiple interpretations of the documents and use evidence from the documents to support claims during these discussions.

Reading Like a Historian in SFUSD and Beyond: Led by Stanford Professor Sam Wineburg and Doctoral Candidate Abby Reisman of the Stanford History Education Group, this six-month curriculum intervention was implemented in SFUSD high schools during the 2008-2009 school year. The study was designed as a quasi-experiment with 236 eleventh grade students in five San Francisco high schools. Participating teachers received professional development and coaching both before and during the intervention. SFUSD expressed interest in district-wide implementation of the curriculum and, to this end, commissioned open-source online publication of the materials. To date there have been over 12 million downloads.

Research Findings: This study represented the first extended curriculum intervention in an urban district involving reading in a specific discipline, in this case social studies. The Reading Like a Historian curriculum constituted a radical departure from traditional textbook-driven instruction. The study measured the impact of the Reading Like a Historian Curriculum in four ways:

1. **Historical thinking**
2. **Ability to transfer historical thinking to contemporary issues**
3. **Mastery of factual knowledge**
4. **Growth in reading comprehension**

There were significant effects for all four measures. When compared to similar students in control classrooms, students in Reading Like a Historian classrooms improved in reading comprehension, historical thinking, transfer of history knowledge, and mastery of factual knowledge.

Students in classes that used the Reading Like a Historian curriculum had significant increases in measures of reading comprehension, historical thinking, transfer of history knowledge, and mastery of factual knowledge.

For more information visit <http://sheg.stanford.edu> or watch <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CnWnLNSZTag>

