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# Diminishing Horizons: A Critical Look at History Education in America

## Abstract

Throughout the twentieth century, the structure of history education in elementary schools has shifted from a traditional, chronological structure to the expanding horizons structure. This thesis examines the philosophical underpinnings of each structure in light of a biblical view of teaching history. Emphasis is placed on historical understanding, training in historical analysis, and sense of identity. It is proposed that a chronological structure may present the child with a deeper understanding of historical events as well as a clearer view of historical principles. Additionally, it is proposed that a chronological structure may impart a more biblical view of self in light of the story of God and His people.

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A Critical Look at History Education in America

by

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B.A. Dordt College, 2003

Thesis  
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May, 2013

Diminishing Horizons:  
A Critical Look at History Education in America

by

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## Abstract

Throughout the twentieth century, the structure of history education in elementary schools has shifted from a traditional, chronological structure to the expanding horizons structure. This thesis examines the philosophical underpinnings of each structure in light of a biblical view of teaching history. Emphasis is placed on historical understanding, training in historical analysis, and sense of identity. It is proposed that a chronological structure may present the child with a deeper understanding of historical events as well as a clearer view of historical principles.

Additionally, it is proposed that a chronological structure may impart a more biblical view of self in light of the story of God and His people.

## DIMINISHING HORIZONS

The study of history is more than just a subject in school. It is the story of humanity and God's relationship with His people. "History, in other words, is not a subject. History is THE subject. It is the record of human experience, both personal and communal. It is the story of the unfolding of human achievement in every area—science, literature, art, music, and politics" (Bauer, 2009, p. 123). In fact, history is so important that it may be seen as the one subject that all others configure themselves around. "If curriculum is a skeleton, history is its backbone" (Littlejohn & Evans, 2006, p. 100).

Properly taught, history teaches the pursuit of truth and understanding; it establishes a context of human life in a particular time and place, relating art, literature, philosophy, law, architecture, language, government, economics, and social life; it portrays the great achievements and terrible disasters of the human race; it awakens youngsters to the universality of the human experience as well as to the particularities that distinguish cultures and societies from one another; it encourages the development of intelligence, civility, and sense of perspective. It endows its students with a broad knowledge of other times, other cultures, other places. It leaves its students with cultural resources on which they may draw for the rest of their lives. (Ravitch, 1989, p. 68)

Throughout the twentieth century, the chronological structure of studying history in elementary schools has been replaced with an expanding horizons structure of teaching social studies. Yet, the effectiveness of this strategy has been questioned by historians and educators alike.

In her work, *Returning History to Elementary Schools*, Crabtree (1989) posited that there is "evidence that the monolithic march from near to far in the customary expanding environments curriculum model is supported neither by developmental psychology nor by

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research in children's learning" (p. 175). Crabtree (1989) supported this idea with letters from four leading educational psychologists and professors. Philip Phenix, philosopher and Arthur I. Gates, Professor Emeritus of Teacher's College, Columbia University, stated that the idea of gradually moving from the known to the unfamiliar did an injustice to the expansive capacities of the human mind and led to boredom and sterility. Phenix saw the expanding horizons structure as a strange and overly cautious approach to teaching and noted that children are quite capable of and deeply interested in expanding their minds and imaginations much further than the curriculum allows. Joseph Adelson, director of the Psychological Clinic at the University of Michigan, also saw the structure as unfounded in any developmental research or cognitive science. He believed it to be quite vapid and the source of a great degree of boredom in students. Bruno Bettelheim, the distinguished psychoanalyst and professor of education, wrote of the uselessness of repeating to the students the realities of life that they are already well familiar with. He encouraged, instead, a sense of history and an understanding of what shaped the cultures of the past or how people have tried to make sense of the world over time. Finally, Jerome Bruner, a cognitive psychologist long recognized for his distinguished contributions to the field of instructional psychology and to the study of thinking, included in his letter a condemnation of the expanding horizons structure, stating, "Whatever we know about memory, thought, passion, or any other worthy human process tells us that it is not the known and the settled but the unknown and the unsettled that provokes the use of mind, the awakening of consciousness....Starting kids off with the familiar and then going out to the unfamiliar is altogether in violation of this deep principle of thought and of narrative" (Crabtree, 1989, p. 177). "These are stinging comments from four of education's most erudite and respected

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scholars. With one accord, all judge the expanding environments model to be the offspring of unsupported dogma, and in violation of known principles of learning.” (Crabtree, 1989, p. 177)

In addition to the critique of the expanding horizons structure as an ineffective and boring approach to what should be the fascinating subject of history, Crabtree (1989) also noted the egocentric nature of the program, calling it a ‘me-centered’ curriculum that fails to give children a sense of other times and places or appeal to their lively imaginations. In contrast, a chronological structure of teaching history seeks to “have our children come to understand that none of them is an island in this great human journey, but that we are all linked in individual and corporate responsibility for the quality of life our judgments and decisions bestow upon those who follow” (Crabtree, 1989, p. 183).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Christians in particular should give special consideration to how history curriculums line up with a biblical worldview. Of utmost importance is the understanding that God is the providential author of history and calls each of His children to recognize his or her own role in that story and to seek His will. This study will better equip schools to seek out an effective and God-honoring system for teaching history.

This thesis will examine the underlying philosophies of the expanding horizons structure of the social studies curriculum, as well as those of a chronological structure of teaching history. It will explore a biblical worldview of teaching history and compare this to each of the two structures. The works of Christian philosophers, historical and educational, will provide a basis for determining this biblical view.

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### **Research Questions**

1. What is the current state of teaching history and social studies in schools today and how has it changed over time?
2. What are the foundational philosophies behind the chronological structure and the expanding horizons structure of teaching history?
3. What are the biblical principles of teaching history and how are these addressed in each structure?
4. What implications are there for how a history curriculum should be structured in Christian schools?

### **Definition of Terms**

In approaching a study of history education, it is necessary to establish common definitions of terms related to these ideas. The terms history and social studies are notoriously vague and broad in definition. However, for the purposes of this thesis, the following definitions will be used as a common starting position.

*History:* Though the term history certainly includes a plethora of human activity, for the purposes of this study, the term history will refer to a study of the past, a chronological record of human events and cultures.

*Social Studies:* For the purpose of this study, the term social studies will be drawn from the definition of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), the largest association in the United States devoted to social studies education. “NCSS defines social studies as ‘the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence.’ Within the school program, social studies provides coordinated, systematic study drawing upon such disciplines as anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, history, law, philosophy,

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political science, psychology, religion, and sociology, as well as appropriate content from the humanities, mathematics, and natural sciences” (National Council for the Social Studies, 2012).

*Expanding horizons:* An important aspect of the current method of teaching social studies is the “expanding horizons” system. It has been known by many other names, including “expanding environments,” “expanding communities,” “widening horizons,” “expanding interests,” or “widening interests.” For the purposes of this study, the method of teaching history or social studies using yearly topics beginning with self and expanding outwards in concentric circles to family, community, city, state, nation, and continent will be referred to as “expanding horizons.”

*Chronological method:* The chronological method will be used to mean a history curriculum organized according to a chronological timeline, one in which students are taught about historical events in the order in which they occurred.

*Worldview:* Wolters (2005) definition of worldview as “the comprehensive framework of one’s basic beliefs about things” (p. 2) will serve as an encompassing definition for this study.

## **Literature Review**

The teaching of history plays a significant role in educating students and preparing them to take their place in the world. It provides them with perspective and context in which to place the great ideas and thinkers of the past. C.S. Lewis (2001) posited that we need an intimate knowledge of the past, not because it is inherently good, but because it gives us “something to set against the present, to remind us that the basic assumptions have been quite different in different periods and that much which seems certain to the uneducated is merely temporary fashion” (Lewis, 2001, p. 59). Lewis (2001) gave the example of a man who has lived in many

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places, and is not easily fooled by local errors of his native village. Similarly, “the scholar has lived in many times and is therefore in some degree immune from the great cataract of nonsense that pours from the press and the microphone of his own age” (pp. 58-59).

Juan Luis Vives (1492-1540) was a Spanish scholar and advocate of school instruction in history in the sixteenth century. He was a contemporary and friend of Erasmus and Sir Thomas More, teacher at Oxford, and author of many books. He is now recognized as one of the greatest thinkers of the sixteenth century. On the subject of history, Vives believed, “History teaches us whence we came, whither we are going, and what we ought to do while we are going” (Johnson, 1932, p. 23). He considered history the most excellent of all studies. “Where there is history, children have transferred to them the advantages of old men; where history is absent, old men are as children” (Johnson, 1932, p. 21).

### **The Evolution and Current State of Teaching History and Social Studies**

The most prevalent structure currently used to teach elementary school social studies is the expanding horizons structure. “It is referred to by a variety of names....The basic idea is that the child’s understanding grows like a set of widening concentric circles and that the child should study social life based on the presumed sequence of conceptual development” (LeRiche, 1987, p. 139).

In order to better understand the philosophical roots of the expanding horizons structure, we must look at its history and rise in the educational realm. Throughout the twentieth century, the study of history has slowly been displaced by that of social studies. Before 1913, courses in social studies were virtually unknown. “In that year, a committee of educationists issued a report on the reorganization of the secondary curriculum that placed history into the new field of social studies” (Ravitch, 2003, p. 17). This group of educationists was led by Thomas Jesse Jones, a

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prominent reformer and social worker. He was at the forefront of a progressive movement that saw academics as important for those who were college-bound, but unnecessary for those entering the trades. Jones was a strong believer in the utilitarian studies, such as industrial or trade education. Like many educational theorists of his day, Jones believed that education was only valid if it proved useful for the student's future life. Jones' utilitarian ideals were based on a progressive movement in education led by John Dewey.

In his book *Democracy and Education*, Dewey (1916) asserted that when approaching the wide range of possible material available to teach, the criterion that should be used to determine what is included should be that of social worth. He saw this as especially true in the social sciences, which he considered so important that all other areas of study should be organized around them (Dewey, 1958). Because he considered what he called "natural" education superior to "formal" education, Dewey believed all subject matter should be related to a student's social life. In the social studies, this meant that history and geography began to serve not as central, but rather as merely enrichment to a student's personal life (Dewey, 1916). Dewey's influence can be seen in the expanding horizons method of teaching social studies, beginning with self and moving outward, always seeing the material taught in light of how it relates back to the students and their lives.

The proposal by Thomas Jesse Jones was also influenced greatly by a German theory of education proposed by Johann Friedrich Herbart. American doctoral students Charles and Frank McMurry, along with Charles DeGarmo, studied the pedagogy of Herbartian theory in Germany and brought it back with them to the United States in 1889. They began to publish books and articles on Herbart's theories of apperception, concentration circles, and culture epochs. Apperception referred to the idea that new information learned by the student must always attach

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to similar information already in their minds. “Moving from the known to the unknown, concentration centers supplied the notion of focusing the work of an entire school year on a single, general topic. Culture epochs determined what topics those should be” (LeRiche, 1987, p. 141). Culture epochs claimed that children develop through stages similar to those of their cultures, that is, from simple to complex. Jones used these ideas to present a social studies curriculum based on McMurry’s ideas of using self, home, and community as the topics for early social studies instruction.

The report which introduced the “social studies” was eventually included in the Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education, which was published in 1918 by the National Education Association. This document has long been considered the most influential document in education in America. In keeping with the progressive ideal of making education socially useful, the report rejected any studies or courses that did not contribute directly to the ultimate goal of training students to become good citizens and responsible members of society (Ravitch, 1989, p. 61). It stated that the goal of education was good citizenship and socialization, reflecting Dewey’s influence. The report equated education with a democracy, which “should develop in each individual the knowledge, interests, ideals, habits, and powers whereby he will find his place and use that place to shape both himself and society toward ever nobler ends” (Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education, 1918, p. 9).

Of particular interest in the development of civic-minded students was the subject of history, or social studies. While all subjects were seen as useful in training up contributing members of society, the social studies had this as their dominant aim (Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education, 1918, p. 14). The study of information in the curriculum that is remote in bearing was condemned, and it was proposed that the social studies

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instead focus on the aspects and activities of daily life that sought the common good (Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education, 1918, p. 14).

Because most of the history that was taught was seen as holding very little social worth or immediate utility to the students' lives, it began to lose its place in curriculum. In the following decades, more courses were included that seemed socially beneficial and the time allotted for history shortened. Many schools merged courses in ancient history, European history, and English history into a single, optional course called "world history" or "Western civilization" (Ravitch, 1989).

These democratic ideals and a focus on social change led not only to a change in what was taught, but also how it was taught. The topics covered shifted to self, family, and community, mimicking the Herbartian theories of apperception, wherein all topics must relate to the child's experiences, and culture epochs, following a progression from the simple to the complex. The report of 1918 held clues to this revision of teaching social studies. "Civic education should develop in the individual those qualities whereby he will act well his part as a member of neighborhood, town or city, State, and Nation." (Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education, 1918, p. 13).

Because of the rapid urbanization of America in the early twentieth century, an increasing number of public school children lived in urban areas, yet did not possess suitable knowledge of the occupations common to their environment (Akenson, 1987). This provided a receptive educational system to the idea of a social studies curriculum that developed citizens interested in the good of society. "The apparent developmental truth, compatibility to the interests and experiences of children, and the appropriateness in light of emerging citizenship needs in an

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urban society all served to enhance the establishment of the expanding environments as the dominant curriculum framework” (Akenson, 1987, p. 165).

The expanding horizons sequence of curriculum grew quickly in popularity over the next fifty years, accounting for only 20.5% of textbooks in 1910 and 67% in the 1950s (LeRiche, 1987). “There are thirty-one states represented in the curriculum guides, including state, county, and school district guides. More curriculum guides recommended the expanding environments sequence than any other scheme over the years” (LeRiche, 1987, p. 147). Today, this trend continues nearly unchecked, with each of the most utilized social studies curriculum publishers for the elementary grades, Harcourt, Houghton Mifflin/Harcourt, and Macmillan/McGraw (American Textbook Council, 2012), following the expanding horizons sequence.

### **Foundational Philosophies of the Expanding Horizons and Chronological Structures of Teaching History**

The nation’s leading organization for social studies education is the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). Founded in 1921, the NCSS has become the largest association dedicated solely to promoting and strengthening social studies education in the United States (National Council for the Social Studies, 2012).

Though the expanding horizons method is not fully embraced by the NCSS, it remains the predominant structure for teaching social studies. It is also worth noting that the principal goals presented by the NCSS closely mirror those presented by the founders of the expanding horizons structure. Though common core standards have been established and accepted by forty-five states for mathematics and language arts, no consensus has been made on those for history or social studies curriculum (Gewertz, 2011). Therefore, standards set forth by the NCSS have been accepted as guidelines for social studies education in the United States. These standards

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include a focus on the development of competent citizens, the promotion of student-centered instruction and curriculum design, and an emphasis on teaching problem-solving skills.

The primary objective of social studies education, as put forth by the NCSS, is to give students a thorough understanding of the social sciences of civics, economics, geography, and history in order to assure readiness to become a civic-minded citizen. This, in turn, ensures the continuation of the democratic ideals of the country (National Council for the Social Studies, 2012). The training of young citizens to participate in a democratic society is an objective that is reiterated often throughout the position statements of the NCCS. This goal mimics Dewey's ideas of education as a means for the promotion of democracy and good citizenship. It is viewed as crucial by the NCSS. "Social studies must be an essential part of the elementary curriculum to provide the essential elements for continuing the democratic way of life. There may not be a more urgent need in the elementary school" (National Council for the Social Studies, 2012, p. 6).

The NCSS sees the early elementary years as the best place to begin building an understanding of these ideals. They emphasize that children can better grasp the larger ideas of civic responsibility when they begin with self and radiate outward, reflecting the expanding horizons method. The NCCS states that these global concepts are best understood on smaller, manageable scales.

A commitment to creating responsible citizens dedicated to democratic ideals of justice, equality, and freedom of thought and speech extends beyond content taught to classroom practices. The NCCS (2012) supported the idea of using the classroom as a sort of training ground for real-world learning in the participatory nature of a democracy. Teachers are encouraged to give students chances to practice citizenship by allowing them to make decisions about what they learn. "The program should involve the students in the formulation of goals, the

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selection of activities and instructional strategies, and the assessment of curricular outcomes” (National Council for the Social Studies, 2012, p. 1). The idea of a student-centric classroom reflects the initial goal of the expanding horizons structure to build the curriculum around the interests and experiences of the child. As stated in the position statements of the NCSS, “the social studies program should relate to the age, maturity, and concerns of the students. The social studies program should help students connect social studies content to their lives” (National Council for the Social Studies, 2012, p. 1). Again, “the program should emphasize pervasive and enduring social issues and connect them to the lives of the students” (National Council for the Social Studies, 2012, p. 1).

Another predominant theme in the position statements of the NCSS is the use of social studies to promote good decision-making and problem-solving skills. A shift toward a more scientific way of thinking about social issues still remains influential in the social studies curriculum (Evans, 2004). “In a world that demands independent and cooperative problem solving to address complex social, economic, ethical, and personal concerns, core social studies content is as basic for success as reading, writing, and computing” (National Council for the Social Studies, 2012, p. 1). One method for accomplishing this aim is by asking questions that promote analysis of these social issues (National Council for the Social Studies, 2012). This closely resembles Dewey’s philosophy of making content socially utilitarian and using the social studies to prepare students for their future lives. The integration of disciplines is vital to accomplishing this goal. “Powerful social studies teaching combines elements of all the disciplines as it provides opportunities for students to conduct inquiry, develop and display data, synthesize findings, and make judgments” (National Council for the Social Studies, 2012).

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Teaching students to think critically and make decisions also contributes to the aim of better citizenship. “The program should promote critical, creative, and ethical thinking on problems faced by citizens and leaders” (National Council for the Social Studies, 2012, p. 212). Preparing students for life as twenty-first century citizens is an over-arching goal. In order to be successful in the twenty-first century, students must learn to make decisions that will benefit the society as a whole. Emphasis is placed on the fact that this kind of thinking is not innate, but must be taught intentionally (National Council for the Social Studies, 2012)

In contrast to the philosophical tenants set forth by the proponents of social studies and those underlying the expanding horizons structure, the supporters of a traditional, chronological structure have proposed an alternative viewpoint on history education. Proponents of the chronological structure of teaching history have been seeking a shift in the history curriculums nationwide. In 1987, “the Bradley Commission on History in Schools was created in response to widespread concern over the inadequacy, both in quantity and in quality, of the history taught in American elementary and secondary classrooms.” (Bradley Commission for History in Schools, 1989, p. 7) They proposed a new curriculum that included the study of history at all age levels taught chronologically using primary sources. The Commission members argued that history provides a framework for all other subjects, that history taught chronologically using stories is naturally engaging to children, and that a chronological approach to history can provide students with a more accurate sense of self and identity in the larger picture of humanity.

The Bradley Commission noted that history provides a framework that leads to a natural integration of all other subjects. “The arts, literature, philosophy, and religion are best studied as they develop over time and in the context of societal evolution. In turn, they greatly enliven and reinforce our historical grasp of place and moment” (Bradley Commission on History in the

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Schools, 2012, p. 11). Douglas Wilson (1991), a prominent thinker in the revival of classical education in America, asserted that a major goal of the chronological method is to “help students understand what their cultural heritage is and how all areas of knowledge interrelate in the making of history” (p. 176). History becomes the subject that organizes the information of all others. It allows students to take the knowledge they have gained in literature, science, the arts, and others, and order it in its proper place (Bauer, 2009). Unless a student has these skills to organize this knowledge, he or she will cultivate a “cluttered, disorderly mind—helpless to make the fundamental connections between basic ideas, or.....to participate intelligently in the public debate over the great issues confronting his nation and his times” (Hicks, 1981, p. 132).

The chronological structure seeks to organize these ideas in the form of a sweeping narrative. “When you first introduce the elementary student to history, you must keep one central fact in mind: history is a story. The logical way to tell a story is to begin (as the King said to Alice) at the beginning and go on till you come to the end. Any story makes less sense when learned in bits and pieces” (Bauer, 2009, p. 124).

Secondly, proponents of teaching history chronologically posit that the use of historical biographies and stories in teaching history is naturally engaging to children and may more authentically connect material to students’ lives than simply studying the topics most immediate to their present situations, as proposed by the expanding horizons structure. By incorporating “enduring themes of conflict and personal choice; of sacrifice and responsibility; of power and oppression; of struggle, failure, and achievement, sometimes against overwhelming odds, these stories connect in powerful ways with these same impulses and conflicts in children’s own lives” (Crabtree, 1989, p. 177). They have the power to engage students vicariously in others’ experiences, enhancing their ability to see the world through the eyes of others and enlarging

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their ideas of lives well lived. “By helping children transcend their present moment, such studies allow them to understand that they are neither the first to confront these problems nor are they alone in making the human journey” (Crabtree, 1989, p. 177).

In contrast to the arguments made in favor of contemporary stories and topics tied directly to the students’ own experiences, Crabtree (1989) argued that stories of the distant historical past are equally as compelling and important to a child’s education. She claimed that their accessibility is not dependent upon their historical or contemporary nature, but rather on their ability to speak to the enduring truths across time. This should be the determining factor in inclusion in the curriculum. These stories can be enjoyed by students of all ages. Students in kindergarten through twelfth grade should read “lively narratives of extraordinary events and remarkable people” (Ravitch, 1989, p. 63).

There is also a focus on the use of primary sources in telling the story of history chronologically. According to Wilson (1991), history should “familiarize students with primary sources and critical historical documents” (p. 176). The Bradley Commission (2012) also emphasized using primary sources so that students can begin to think critically and rationally about historical perspectives and events. “In doing so, historical study should provide context for facts and training in critical judgment based on evidence, including original sources, and should cultivate the perspective arising from a chronological view of the past down to the present day.” (p. 12) Reed (1989) concurred that students should be widely read and taught to think critically about sources in order to differentiate evidence and fact from conjecture or opinion.

The knowledge gained from these primary sources is also essential to further learning. “Some information is so basic, so essential that all students must know it in order to make sense of new learning. Nor can students be expected to think critically about issues unless they have

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the background knowledge to support their reasoning” (Ravitch, 1989, p. 53). A comprehensive understanding of the past can also help to inform students on the present. In order to examine the present in light of the past, a thorough knowledge of the past is implied. Without it, the lessons of the past cannot help to clarify the struggles of today (Johnson, 1932).

These primary sources also contribute to another important goal of teaching history chronologically, that of creating a more accurate sense of self and identity in the story of humanity. “To develop historical empathy as opposed to present-mindedness, students should be encouraged to perceive past events and issues as they were experienced by people at the time” (Reed, 1989, p. 304). The Bradley Commission (2012) stated that a thorough study of history “can satisfy young people’s longing for a sense of identity of their time and place in the human story” (p. 11). Giving students this sense of identity stems from understanding how the past has shaped their world. The first objective for history teaching in the elementary school should be to help students to understand the significance of the past to their own lives (Reed, 1989).

Promoting a clear perspective on shared humanity and cultural diversity is an important objective of the chronological structure of teaching history. In studying world history, students are able to understand that humans have related to the world in a wide variety of ways throughout time, yet their needs have been remarkably the same. “They can begin to recognize sameness and difference throughout the recorded past. They will learn as much about themselves, and how they resemble and are different from others, as they will learn about colonial Americans or the Greeks and Romans” (Reed, 1989, p. 306).

A historical perspective prevents students from harboring misconceptions about people of the past. Studying a more extensive depth of the historical story may also lead to a clearer understanding of historical principles, such as the interplay of change and continuity (Reed,

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1989). Another important principle is the idea of the accidental and its influence in shaping history. “Although much in the human adventure is the result of intentional, or at least volitional, action, students should also begin to appreciate the force of the non-rational, the irrational, the accidental, in history and human affairs” (Reed, 1989, p. 314). Studying history chronologically may reveal the true nature of these historical principles.

### **Biblical Principles for Teaching History and How They are Addressed in Each Structure**

First and foremost, history, as all subjects, should be taught through the lens of Scripture. Voskuil (1977) noted that a historian’s view of man’s past is determined by his basic faith commitment. For the Christian, the Bible is the basis of an overarching perspective on man’s origin, nature, task, and destiny. “The central focus of that perspective is God’s redemptive work through Christ, his covenantal relationship to his people through the ages. That story provides historical studies with certain basic premises” (p. 42).

One of these basic premises is that of a linear view of history, which Christian historical philosophers refer to as the biblical metanarrative. St. Augustine of Hippo proposed this view of history in his book *City of God*, which states that history is linear, rather than cyclical. In response to the pagan philosophies of the day, Augustine described a city of man in opposition to an eternal City of God. These two entities exist in the temporal reality created by God that follows the arc of the biblical metanarrative. Dooyeweerd (1996), a Reformed historical philosopher, stated that the central starting point for historians is a worldview based in the Word of God and the story of creation, fall, and redemption through Christ. Wilson (1991) argued that history should be seen in view of the biblical metanarrative and that its main purpose is to help students to see God working throughout the history of humankind.

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Though history must retain its special focus, Voskuill (1977) argued, it should also be integrated with all other subjects. “Ultimately, historical studies must tell the story of the unfolding of human culture in all its fullness, and because human life is not fragmented, each aspect has its formative influence on all the others” (p. 46). However, the special focus of history as a discipline is concerned with the role of man as a dominion-possessing steward. The Bible implies that man’s dominion is progressive, as he unfolds the potentials of creation, including the forms of his own social organizations (Voskuill, 1977). Though history deals with all areas of human life, Voskuill argued that its focus is these areas of unfolding, or opening up. He stated that historians seek to tell the story of man’s response to the cultural mandate to fill the earth and subdue it.

A biblical study of history seeks to teach the student his proper place in this unfolding. Graham (2003) stated that humanistic psychologists derive their theories from a significantly different worldview, one that does not agree with biblical teaching. One clear example of this is making the self the measure of all things. “The self is an absolute in humanistic thinking, and it is believed to be the source of truth and meaning, the only standard against one can measure values” (Graham, 2003, p. 105). As Christians, we recognize the sinful nature and its distortions. The self must not be considered the ultimate reference point. “Christ is the reference point for life” (Graham, 2003, p. 105).

A chronological structure of teaching history maintains a focus on seeing the linear view of history as a framework for all other subjects. If history deals with unfolding of human life, then every subject will be included in this unfolding process. “It follows, then, that each human activity, and each academic discipline as well, is more understandable if one knows the origin and inner dynamics of its growth” (Voskuill, 1977, p. 46). History can be used as the hooks on

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which to hang the great ideas and knowledge imbedded in each of the other subjects. Though all studies display interconnectedness, history seems to occupy a central position. “‘It is the one study,’ says Vives, ‘which either gives birth to or nourishes, develops, cultivates all arts’” (Johnson, 1932, p. 22).

Using narratives, in particular those that come from primary sources, is another significant philosophy of the chronological structure. Authentic literature and primary sources can allow students to appreciate that humans across time and place have each responded to life out of their faith commitments. This, in turn, will lead them to examine their own culture in the same way (Voskuill, 1977). “Children’s literature about times past is particularly useful for discovering fears and hopes like our own. Students cannot help but feel a sense of shared humanity that cuts across time and culture” (Reed, 1989, p. 306).

These stories are also naturally engaging to students, which falls in line with a biblical view of educating children in a way that brings them into a worship of the Creator. Stories can inspire joy and bring great delight to children. “Who indeed does not prick up his ears and arouse his mind if he hears anything told which is unusual, great, admirable, beautiful, strong; a noble deed or saying from those stories of which histories are so full” (Johnson, 1932, p. 22)?

Most importantly, the chronological structure seeks to provide students with a more accurate sense of self in relation to the historical story. “The redemption of Christ is the focal point of history and alone provides meaning in an otherwise chaotic and meaningless world” (Voskuill, 1977, p. 48). By using a linear structure, the curriculum seeks to instill this viewpoint in the students as well. The French Oratorians, the first to include formal history education in schools, emphasized the importance of understanding history in order to more clearly see ourselves as we truly are. “History is a grand mirror in which we see ourselves. . . . The secret of

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knowing and judging ourselves rightly is to see ourselves in others, and history can make us the contemporaries of all centuries in all countries" (Johnson, 1932, p. 30).

In contrast, the expanding horizons method places the child and his or her interests at the center of the curriculum. The NCSS encourages this approach, instructing teachers to “capitalize on the diversity and natural interests of their students in the world around them.” (National Council for the Social Studies, 2012, p. 2) This egocentrism does not align with the Biblical approach to teaching history. The most significant point of departure is “that man is not the autonomous head, the one from whom and to whom all things are directed; rather, man must recognize the sovereign God as his Creator and Redeemer” (Voskuill, 1977, p. 50).

Susan Wise Bauer, a prominent thinker in the American revival of classical education, stated the problem this way:

This intensely self-focused pattern of study encourages the student of history to relate everything he studies to himself, to measure the cultures and customs of other peoples against his own experience. And that’s exactly what classical education fights against—a self-absorbed, self-referential approach to knowledge. History learned this way makes our needs and wants the center of the human endeavor. This attitude is destructive at any time, but it is especially destructive in the present global civilization. The goal of the classical curriculum is multicultural in the true sense of the word: the student learns the proper place of his community, his state, and his country by seeing the broad sweep of history from its beginning and then fitting his own time and place into that great landscape. (Bauer, 2009, p. 125)

A second philosophical tenant of the expanding horizons structure is that of a socially utilitarian approach to teaching the social studies, in particular, one that promotes a sense of civic

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duty to one's country. "[Students] will become rational, humane, participating, effective members of a democratic society" (National Council for the Social Studies, 2012, p. 5). These effective members are defined in this way: "Competent and responsible citizens are informed and thoughtful, participate in their communities, are involved politically, and exhibit moral and civic virtues" (National Council for the Social Studies, 2012). Upholding the values set forth in the founding documents of this country is vital (National Council for the Social Studies, 2012). Yet, in contrast to this idea of loyalty to country and civic responsibility, Lewis (2001) warned us not to commit ourselves too absolutely to our nation. "He who surrenders himself without reservation to the temporal claims of a nation....is rendering to Caesar that which, of all things, belongs most emphatically to God: himself" (p. 53).

This focus on social responsibility remains prevalent and clearly exhibits the goals of the founders of the expanding horizons structure. There is particular emphasis on the facet of teaching problem-solving skills in order to better prepare students to become good citizens in a democracy. "Citizenship education is as important today as at any other time in our history" (National Council for the Social Studies, 2012, p. 1). This includes preparing students to become contributing citizens in a complex and changing world. "Our students should leave school with a clear sense of their rights and responsibilities as citizens" (National Council for the Social Studies, 2012, p. 1).

The structure also focuses on the experiences and immediate environment of the student, limiting the child's thinking to his or her own time and place. There is "a focus not on learning about the past for its own sake, but on matters most relevant to present concerns and interests of society" (Evans, 2004, p. 15). This present-minded approach to history education was also questioned by Vives. Historical studies revolve around current problems, using the past only for

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what is directly useful in the present. Taking the easiest path in using the past to explain the present is natural, but “any road that really reaches the desired end must make the past which it traverses intelligible and must, therefore, lead to what mattered *then* on the way to what matters *now*” (Johnson, 1932, pp. 134,6).

Very little reflection is given to the past, while much emphasis is placed on preparing the child for the future. This idea reflects a modern belief in progress, which Voskuill (1977) defined as “a secular notion...that later periods are themselves better than earlier ones” (p. 52). Lewis (2001) described this perspective as a belief that history is a simple, nonlinear movement from worse to better. From this perspective, “any given generation is always in all respects wiser than all previous generations...and there seems nothing improbable in the claim that the whole world was wrong until the day before yesterday and now has suddenly become right” (p. 81). Those who hold this belief refer to the idea that in the mechanical world, new models supersede the old. However, “from this they falsely infer a similar kind of supersession in such things as virtue and wisdom” (p. 82).

The expanding horizons structure also demonstrates the “inquiry method,” as explained by Voskuill (1977). He stated that the inquiry method, sometimes referred to as the “problem solving” or “discovery” method, attempts to adapt the scientific method of the natural sciences to the social sciences. It is based on the premises that “knowledge consists of generalizations based on ‘neutral’ facts, that it is possible for man to have an objective, open mind, and that the learner is able to and wants to probe and draw conclusions autonomously” (p. 54). Students are encouraged to discover the facts of an issue. “These ‘facts,’ these things which can be objectively and certainly known, will provide the learner with the possibility of making clear, rational choices about his own individual and social values” (Voskuill, 1977, p. 54).

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This inquiry method is prevalent in the position statements of the NCSS, which promotes training in skills that help students to make competent and meaningful decisions (National Council for the Social Studies, 2012). However, this approach does not match a biblical view of understanding truth. “For the way in which the inquiry approach is usually applied, the individual himself is the final point of reference; in the final analysis, it is man who is autonomous, with reason being his god” (Voskuill, 1977, p. 55). The student has the ability to choose what is right in any given situation. Therefore, he is capable of improving himself and his world. “There is no universal set of values; each person uses his reason to discover what is best” (Voskuill, 1977, p. 55).

### **Implications for How a History Curriculum Should be Structured in Christian Schools**

As Christian educators, our foremost concern in building a curriculum should be in aligning each piece with a Biblical worldview. “The Bible should be used to build a framework for informing and directing our inquiries into any subject...the Bible should be used for identifying biblical themes, concepts, and doctrines that will help develop a perspective for examining reality” (Graham, 2003, p. 14).

This perspective should also be applied to the subject of history. How one defines history determines its place in the curriculum (Voskuill, 1977). Graham (2003) brought this perspective to the question of how Christians perceive history. “Dealing with history requires that we acknowledge God’s action to bring about his own purposes, that human purpose in life and our fulfillment of God’s call are religious and are either directed toward God or away from him” (p. 192). History is a record of human response to this calling. This perspective provides us with an interpretive framework through which we can view, and do, the subject of history (Graham, 2003).

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Curricular decisions should be carefully considered because the worldviews contained within our chosen content and methods transfer to our students. Our professed beliefs may not always match our controlling beliefs, those that truly control our decision-making in day-to-day teaching and learning, and it is these controlling beliefs that are most powerful in shaping our students. Therefore, we must consider whether our curriculum truly matches our professed beliefs (Graham, 2003).

Some things to take into consideration when choosing a curriculum include its historical content, its commitment to solid historical thinking and analysis, and its ability to engage children in the past while presenting them with a true sense of identity.

An understanding of the past and a clear perspective on our place in it, which allow us to make thoughtful judgments, can only come from a thorough knowledge of historical events (Reed, 1989). In order to fully understand these ideas and events, more time must be given to world history throughout the grades. In many districts, world history is studied for only one year, which is not nearly sufficient for encompassing the material. “The curricular pattern itself must be in some measure at fault, as it forces repetition of courses on the one hand and too little time for study in depth on the other” (Ravitch, 1989, pp. 64-65). A chronological history program that allows students to begin their study of world history from the beginning could provide the time needed to cover these events more in depth.

The basic knowledge gained in historical events in the elementary grades can support more accurate historical analysis as well. It is challenging for students to analyze historical events without a thorough understanding of the people, places and events involved. They must have at least a basic grasp of the main concepts of history as well as a vocabulary with which to discuss it (Bortins, 2010, p. 165). A solid history curriculum will allow students to begin to

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think like historians, using the proper methods for approaching historical analysis. In elementary grades, students should be taught to avoid sweeping generalizations and understand that historical events have multiple causes. This type of understanding can come when teachers and curriculums assist students in making connections between events and identifying cause and effect relationships (Reed, 1989).

Helping students understand historical causality is a vital and overlooked aspect of well-rounded historical thinking (Waring, 2010). One fundamental way to help students understand causality more thoroughly is through a chronological structure of teaching history. This allows students to contextualize beginnings and endings and begin to reason historically. Without a solid understanding of chronology, it is challenging for students to compare and contrast events within specific time periods, relate these events to the present, or be able to explain causality. “Chronology and causation are integral and intertwined elements in enabling students to organize their historical thinking and construct plausible historical narratives” (Waring, 2010, p. 284).

One way to help students develop skills in historical analysis is by helping them to ask the proper questions. Students should be taught to ask questions about where and why events transpired and to support their answers with evidence. They should also seek to determine if the event represents an important change in history and who the key players were. Finally, they should look for the importance of the event in the lives of those who lived at the time as well as for their own lives. “By framing these useful questions, children can benefit from prudent judgment applied to all areas of their lives, and they can enjoy thinking about history and about their own lives as part of history” (Reed, 1989, pp. 318-319).

Though a full understanding of historical thinking cannot be achieved in the elementary grades, its foundation can be laid. “Historical thinking, including causal analysis, takes many

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years to acquire, but its foundation is rightly laid in the elementary school” (Crabtree, 1989, p. 182). Crabtree (1989) recommended a historical curriculum that strikes a balance between a “rich narrative history that moves the chronology of events along in a compelling and interesting manner, and specific ‘dramatic moments’ in the narrative that the students plumb, looking for deeper meanings” (p. 183). In doing so, the continuing narrative provides the historical context in which to place significant events. It allows students to recognize choices and consequences made throughout history and encourages historical empathy, “the ability to see the world through the eyes of others and to sense what it must have been like to confront their problems without our present-day understanding of how things were eventually to turn out” (Crabtree, 1989, pp. 182-183).

Another method used to train children to think historically is the use of timelines. “Students should be helped to understand how things happen and how things change, how human intentions matter, but also how their consequences are shaped by the means of carrying them out, in a tangle of purpose and process” (Reed, 1989, p. 307). One of the easiest ways to accomplish this is to use timelines. They are a concrete expression of time that allows students to more easily visualize the sequence of events that has transpired. Creating these timelines serves “as preparation for later introduction to chronology and dates as a very, very specific way of placing things and events in sequence” (Reed, 1989, p. 307). These timelines support the idea of the flow of time, despite the child’s developmental inability to grasp specific dates. They also create a stronger connection between the child and the event. “The splendid narratives of history become more meaningful when one can identify both where and when they took place” (Bortins, 2010, p. 168).

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The concept of time is a spatial one. Though very young children cannot grasp specific dates, the spatial learning that makes their relationships meaningful is being developed. From as young as five years of age, children are able to understand causal and temporal relationships and to order events (Crabtree, 1989). By the time they reach the middle elementary years, their understanding of mathematical concepts allows them to make meaningful connections to dates and they are able to accurately place events in the order of their occurrence. Historical analysis is beginning to be developed and children can identify events in terms of antecedents and consequences, demonstrating the beginning of causal analysis (Crabtree, 1989, pp. 180-182). More importantly, allowing children to place events in a logical order helps them to appreciate a biblical view of an ordered creation, a biblical metanarrative.

One criticism of the chronological method is that children are unable to grasp the distant timelines presented and cannot, therefore, fully understand the concepts being taught. Yet the notion that young children cannot fully comprehend concepts of time and the past should not stop schools from beginning historical studies in the elementary grades (Crabtree, 1989). “Truly revealing accounts of the human story, rendered memorable for children through the organizing power of the narrative, address first things first” (Crabtree, 1989, p. 179). The ability to truly place events into time by years, decades, or centuries is not something young children are prepared to do, yet it is sufficient for them to know it happened “long ago.” “By vicariously enlarging children’s own experience and deepening their understandings of human experience in general, good and true stories furnish intellectual foundations upon which subsequent historical analysis may be built” (Crabtree, 1989, p. 179).

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Not only are children capable of beginning historical analysis such as understanding causal relationships in the elementary grades, it is essential for providing sufficient time to develop such skills.

It is important to remember that in history, as in mathematics, science, or any other field of learning, the process is developmental. Children will not approach all at once the intellectual complexity demanded by historical analysis. It is folly, however, to suggest for that reason that history should not be taught in elementary schools. Leaving all such instruction to later secondary years, when the adolescent mind has emerged ‘recognizably adult,’ would be incomprehensible in other fields of school learning. We do not defer all instruction in mathematics to the senior high school, and then rush students through textbooks of a thousand pages or more in a forced march to ‘cover’ the material for which no prior foundations or deep personal interests have been established. Only in history are such approaches seriously contemplated and applied. The unhappy results are widely evident in the displeasure high school students take when a meaningless parade of facts, dates, and hurried events is imposed upon them. (Crabtree, 1989, p. 182)

In addition, the use of story allows students to connect historical events more easily to their own lives. Phenix noted that history and literature are concrete representations of the human experience and can be used well to help the child understand the abstract ideas of historical analysis (Crabtree, 1989). These stories are also much more engaging for children than the current texts that follow the expanding horizons structure. In contrast to a thin, skills-driven curriculum, which many students and teachers find uninspiring, this approach explores the “pleasures of stories worth telling, of ideas worth pursuing, of adventures that capture and hold

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children's attention and lead them into the historical perspectives that help each find his or her place in the long sweep of human history" (Crabtree, 1989, p. 187).

A true sense of identity and place in history should be a significant consideration when choosing a history curriculum. Martin Luther referred to history as a mirror in which we discover our real selves (Johnson, 1932). Phenix noted that one of the virtues of teaching history chronologically is its ability to vicariously provide "a sense of personal involvement in exemplary lives and significant events, and to supply an appreciation of values and vision of greatness, all this within the context of moving narrative and dramatic appeal" (Crabtree, 1989, p. 177).

The overarching goals of training up students to think in a godly way about history will not be achieved in elementary school, but its foundations can be laid with a solid history program, one that inspires lifelong learning and develops in the child a growing wisdom (Crabtree, 1989). We as Christians must also seek a history curriculum presents a view of God's hand in control of history and the student in proper relation to God and his plan. All of these concerns must be addressed by the thoughtful and intentional Christian school when deciding upon a history curriculum. If they do so, they can significantly contribute to the students' understanding not only of history, but also of themselves and their God.

### **Discussion and Implications**

The implications of this thesis are both immediately applicable to individual classrooms and worthy of consideration for the current methods of teaching history across the United States. Teachers should take into consideration not only the content of what they teach, but also the rationale for choosing topics and methodology. In choosing a history curriculum, schools should reflect on the worldview implications of various systems. Publishers could take a closer look at

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the rationale behind the expanding horizons curriculum and its validity. At each level, deeper thought should be given to what content is taught as well as which underlying philosophies are being imparted.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, many schools have set aside the teaching of history chronologically in favor of a social studies curriculum taught using the expanding horizons structure. Yet, organizing a history or social studies curriculum using a chronological structure may lead to a deeper and more meaningful understanding of important historical themes. It may also contribute to a more accurate and biblical worldview of history and the role of self in the historical story.

The expanding horizons structure has had critics from its inception. Many leading cognitive psychologists agree that it has very little support in developmental research. “Indeed, there is good reason to believe that it dwells unnecessarily on what the child already knows or does not need to go to school to learn” (Ravitch, 1989, p. 62).

Though many leaders in the social studies field would agree that the expanding horizons structure is insufficient, the ideals set out by the National Center for the Social Studies as well as the topics covered by major social studies elementary textbook publishers suggest that the thinking behind the expanding horizons method is still highly influential. “The analysis of curricular content in social studies [is] a great beginning, but the problem with content analysis is that even though the content may be changed, unless the form also changes, the tacit messages contained within remain the same” (LeRiche, 1987, p. 138).

Children taught in concentric circles radiating outward from themselves are given a distorted view not only of how God has ordained history, but of their own role in history as well. As Christians, we believe that God has established time in a set order, with a specific beginning,

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middle, and end. This is sometimes referred to as the biblical metanarrative. In presenting history as centered on a child's position in time and place, students are given not only a distorted view of how history is ordered but also of their relationship to the historical story.

In addition, the NCSS position statement reveals that the focus of the social studies at the elementary level is still very much on the civic responsibility of the child and the role he or she will play in the democracy and society (National Council for the Social Studies, 2012). Though an understanding of democracy is a very important thing, it is a very myopic view of what the scope of history truly is. An elementary program of history that teaches only what has transpired since the founding of America instills not only a distorted view of history, but also a national egocentrism. "American history ought to be kept in perspective: the history curriculum covers seventy centuries; America occupies only five of them" (Bauer, 2009, p. 124).

In contrast to this egocentric worldview, teaching history chronologically seeks to instill in the child a solid understanding not only of how events have transpired throughout time, but also of where one fits into that picture. One is not the center, but rather a part of the line. Though one certainly has the power to influence and even change history, it does not revolve around any single person aside from Christ.

Christian educators should be concerned not only with the child's view of himself in relation to others and to history, but also in relation to a providential God. A meaningful and chronological study of history can reveal God to students in a powerful way. A biblical worldview acknowledges that God has used history as a part of his general revelation of himself. If this is true, then "there is much theology to be learned in the analysis of historical events . . . and a student's faith can deepen greatly as he comes to perceive God's hand of providence through the course of human events" (Littlejohn & Evans, 2006, p. 101).

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Furthermore, a chronological view of history differs from the expanding horizons method in its principal objectives. While social studies curriculums seek to develop good citizens and social activists, the goal of teaching history chronologically stems from a search for truth. “To use a trite expression, it is after all ‘his story,’ and there is to be seen in the flow of human history an unfolding of truth, goodness, and beauty” (Littlejohn & Evans, 2006, p. 101). A view of history that constantly seeks the hand of God through stories of people and events throughout time presents a clear view of the faithfulness of God. It also necessitates taking one’s eyes off of oneself and even one’s own culture in order to do so. This in itself demonstrates a more true and biblical worldview.

### **Limitations**

The critique of the expanding horizons structure of teaching social studies is one that has been voiced since its inception in the early twentieth century. Yet despite the persistent arguments against this structure and very little support for it today, elementary school textbook companies continue to publish texts that follow it. Though revisions have been called for and national thinking is shifting towards a more traditional history education, no true alternatives have arisen. Therefore, this study has relied heavily on those thinkers who have implemented a chronological study of history in the elementary grades, specifically the thinkers of the American revival of a classical model of education. Additionally, there has been no consensus nationally of aims or standards of social studies education. No national studies have been conducted to compare the effectiveness of the teaching of history chronologically with that of the expanding horizons structure, so much of this thesis is theoretical and philosophical in nature.

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