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Benefits of Veterans’ Oral History on Gifted Students

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The University of Southern Mississippi

Benefits of Veterans’ Oral History on Gifted Students

by

Katelyn Watkins

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Abstract

To combat boredom and negative sentiments, all students need to be provided with engaging experiences in history. This is especially the case with gifted students. One strategy that has proven beneficial to students is oral history, which brings people who have lived through history into the classroom. Research supports the use of oral history in the classroom; however, research on the benefits of veterans’ oral histories on gifted students in particular is scarce. This study describes research on how a veteran’s oral history might benefit gifted students. Qualitative research methods consisting of case study and narrative research were used. The findings support the idea that oral histories benefit gifted students.

Key Words: history, gifted students, oral history, veterans, qualitative research, case study, narrative research
Dedication

Tommy Watkins:

Thank you for being you.

You are the perfect grandpa.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my grandfather, Tommy Watkins, for being so willing to help me with this project. While I encountered stumbling blocks along the way, you were always ready to do what was needed of you. Your support in this project only mirrors what you provide me in my daily life. I love and admire you more than words can express, and I hope whoever reads my thesis, your story, will admire you as much as I do.
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Introduction

History is a subject that students often perceive as boring. To combat this boredom, teachers sometimes employ many different strategies and techniques (Buchanan, 2015; Morris, 2008; Nava, 2011). This research studies an approach that brings people who have lived through previous eras into the classroom – an approach that alleviates boredom. Experiences with oral history provide students with an opportunity to establish connections with history and to create links between stories of the past and their own lives. Oral history is a strategy particularly useful for gifted students – students who need to be engaged and challenged on a different level than their peers (Diffily, 2002). This research explores how oral history can benefit gifted students. Particularly, I use a veteran’s oral history to explore if it may enhance student learning about our military history, a key component of our nation’s story.

Background

Research has shown that many students are often unengaged and uninterested in their history lessons (Whitman, 2004). Because of their exceptional abilities and need for challenge, gifted students especially need to be engaged (Diffily, 2002). Many strategies have been employed to keep all students interested in history, such as the use of primary documents, artifacts, and documentaries. Another technique that has proven to be especially beneficial for students is the use of oral history. Oral history goes beyond incorporating documents, objects, or videos into lessons. It brings actual people into the classroom to offer their stories and experiences firsthand (Whitman, 2004; Jenks, 2010).

Ample research has been done on the benefits of oral history at the elementary level (Hirshfield, 1991; Mutnick, 2007; Sears, 1991). In these studies, students have
interviewed members of local communities; they have heard their stories and viewed history through their eyes. In each instance, valuable benefits were reaped. Overall, students were able to make actual connections with history. Specifically, students improved the following skills: information gathering and documentation, literacy, speaking, and writing (Hirshfield, 1991; Mutnick, 2007; Sears, 1991). Literacy and speaking skills were improved because the children had to listen attentively and respond to the historians (Mutnick, 2007; Sears, 1991). Information gathering, documentation, and writing skills improved when children had to record and transcribe the experiences of the speakers (Hirshfield, 1991; Sears, 1991).

Problem Statement

As already noted, the use of oral history in the elementary classroom is a subject that has been researched. However, in most instances, the oral histories were those of local community members (Hirshfield, 1991; Mutnick, 2007; Sears, 1991); research on oral histories of veterans is difficult to find. In addition, existing oral history studies have been completed in the general education setting. While this is certainly valuable, the benefits of oral history with gifted students in particular have rarely been documented. This research addresses both of these gaps.

Research Question

RQ1: What are the benefits of a veteran’s oral history on a gifted student?

Hypothesis/Potential Findings

H/PF: A veteran’s oral history will pose numerous benefits for a gifted student. This technique will lead to student engagement, interest, and a challenging environment.

Overview of Methodology
In order to address the aforementioned gaps in research, case study and narrative methodologies were employed. A case study is a type of qualitative research that investigates a particular phenomenon within a bounded frame, or with defined boundaries and variables (Yin, 2009). This study is an intrinsic case study, because the emphasis is on the case itself (Creswell, 2013). I chose a veteran to collaborate with. On the day of the study, the veteran came prepared to interview with me about his military experience. Many of the interview questions were open-ended, and this interview was “semi-structured.” Therefore, the participant was able to lead the conversation in different directions, and follow-up questions arose. Recorded material was transcribed and coded for themes. Conclusions were made on how oral histories may benefit gifted students.
Literature Review

Many grade school students do not enjoy history/social studies. Students provide various reasons for this lack of enthusiasm, such as sentiments of boredom and uselessness. In many cases, history is taught solely through textbooks and lectures (Whitman, 2004). In general, students find this method uninteresting (Whitman, 2004). Students often view history as a product (something that has already happened and is irrelevant to today) rather than a process (something that has direct connections to the present) (Jenks, 2010). In fact, one researcher interviewed children about their attitudes toward social studies, and almost all chose other subjects, such as math or reading, as their favorite. They complemented these statements by saying that social studies is “useless” and “doesn’t apply” (Zhao, 2005, p. 218). For these reasons, students are rarely engaged in their social studies or history lessons.

This scenario is particularly the case with gifted students. Teachers of gifted students must engage and challenge these students differently than their peers in all subjects, especially history, because gifted students often begin the school year with knowledge and mastery of the skills they are supposed to learn throughout the year (Diffily, 2002). If gifted students are not challenged in the classroom, they are likely to face many problems, such as “boredom, frustration, and decreased motivation” (Moon, 2009, p. 275). However, teachers are often unprepared to meet the needs of these gifted students. In fact, many teachers fail to apply more complex and diverse teaching strategies necessary to teach exceptional students. Therefore, they rely on the more typical, textbook-based activities (Troxclair, 2000).
Researchers offer several solutions to keep all students engaged in social studies lessons. Some scholars suggest using primary documents, as using them can lead to many benefits in the classroom. Primary documents can create a sense of connection, context, and perspective between students and history. However, teachers should be cautious when using primary documents. Bias is often present in these resources because they are so narrow in scope. Therefore, primary documents should not be used by themselves; they need to be accompanied by additional sources. In addition, because of this narrow information, both the teacher and students must have adequate background information on the historical subject being taught. Primary sources best serve as an enhancement to a more comprehensive lesson (Nava, 2011).

Another option to enhance students’ engagement in social studies classrooms is the use of actual historical artifacts. This practice can benefit students in many ways. The use of tangible objects from historical periods allows students to learn about and make connections with cultures of the past. In addition, when students examine these artifacts, they strengthen their critical thinking skills by asking and answering questions about them (Morris, 2008). However, because artifacts are a form of primary source material, they could pose some of the same issues that the use of primary sources creates. Another option is the use of documentaries. Documentaries bring history to the screen, and engage students much more than mere printed text. Documentaries also encourage empathy skills, or the ability to feel what someone else is feeling. Because students’ ideologies and beliefs are involved when working with documentaries, documentaries should not be used alone. Rather, they should be paralleled with other historical sources (Buchanan, 2015).
The three aforementioned tactics (the use of primary documents, artifacts, and documentaries) are effective ways to keep students engaged in their history lessons. All of these practices have one thing in common: They bring actual historical evidence into the lesson (through text, tangible objects, or film). None bring actual people with lived experiences into the classroom. This missing element is key to the use of oral history, and including it tends to engage students. Oral history is history that is told by mouth. The “oral” component implies that an actual historical figure must be present to share his or her stories and knowledge of the past. Many studies have been completed about the use and benefits of oral history at the elementary level (Hirshfield, 1991; Mutnick, 2007; Sears, 1991). The following paragraphs will summarize a few of these examples.

One case involving oral history in an elementary classroom occurred in the Roxborough neighborhood of Philadelphia in 1991. This neighborhood had a large population of immigrant families who had been very successful in creating an ethnically diverse, yet harmonious community. In this experience, students gathered local histories through family and friends. The students not only tapped into a rich historical resource, but also made personal and emotional connections with history. They could see how this history connected with their current lifestyles. The students were even able to improve skills such as information gathering and documentation (Hirshfield, 1991).

Another example of oral history at the elementary level occurred in Brooklyn in 2007. This time, university faculty and students worked with a local elementary school that was celebrating its centennial anniversary. Working collaboratively with community members to compose a more collective local history, students were able to learn the history of various physical buildings on campus. They even came in contact with
alumnae of the school who had graduated decades before. The project also covered the history of the community and included the immigration patterns of different groups. Overall, students learned aspects about an ethnically vibrant community. The students even improved their literacy skills (Mutnick, 2007).

A final example of oral history in an elementary school classroom occurred in the form of a senior citizens’ tea. At this event, elementary students interviewed senior citizens of their community. This experience in oral history proved valuable in many ways. The students learned much about the history of their community, and even improved their speaking and writing skills. On another note, these interactions also challenged preconceived notions the children had about the elderly (and vice versa). Finally, this experience showed how oral history goes beyond primary sources and even field trips (Sears, 1991).

The above three examples share several similarities; one of the most obvious being that in each, the oral histories being shared were by local family or neighborhood members. Each oral history consisted of stories from the schools’ respective communities. Other common oral histories are those of veterans. The following example will discuss some findings about veterans’ oral histories used in the classroom. Hagopian’s (2000) study “Voices from Vietnam: Veterans’ Oral Histories in the Classroom” brings to light both the pros and cons of the use of oral histories in the college classroom. One pro is that they allow students to see how veterans were impacted emotionally by wars. One con of oral histories is that some are edited or even fake. Hagopian writes that some veterans who claim to have served in Vietnam never actually did so, and others exaggerate their stories. It is important to keep these issues in mind
when using oral histories (Hagopian, 2000). Hagopian brings to light some positives and negatives of oral history. Unfortunately, this study has limited implications for elementary classrooms because it was done in college classrooms. Sources discussing the use of veterans’ oral histories at the elementary level are scarce.

Oral history poses benefits for all elementary students, one of the most important being that it keeps students engaged. Because of the aforementioned reasons, gifted students often need this engagement more. Gifted students should be allowed to play a role in constructing new knowledge, rather than simply regurgitating facts (Jones & Hébert, 2012). Gifted students need to be challenged to use higher-order thinking skills “to learn advanced content . . . and develop more complex products” (Diffily, 2002, p. 40). Oral history is a means through which gifted students could construct new knowledge, use higher-order thinking skills, learn advanced content, and develop complex products.

Overall, the aforementioned sources express the benefits of oral history in elementary social studies classrooms. However, sources about the use of veterans’ oral histories on this level are scarce; even more rare is research on how these oral histories benefit gifted students. This work 1) builds on published material by documenting the strategies that benefit students in history classes (primary documents, artifacts, documentaries, and oral history), and 2) fills a needed space in the literature by describing new research on how the oral history of a veteran could benefit gifted students. The following section will detail how I conducted a case study that analyzes how the use of veterans’ oral histories can benefit gifted students.

Methodology
In order to research the benefits of oral history on gifted students, I combined components of case study and narrative research. First, I will discuss both types of research individually, and then I will describe how I combined the two. Yin (2009) provides a twofold definition of case study. He writes:

1. A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. 2. The case study inquiry copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion, and as another result benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis. (p. 18)

In other words, case study includes investigations that are distinctive and triangulated. Creswell (2013) offers another definition by saying the following:

Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports) and reports a case description and case-based themes. (p. 73)

In essence, a case study is a type of qualitative research that investigates a particular phenomenon within a bounded frame, or with defined boundaries and variables. Case studies are useful in answering “how” and “why” questions (Yin, 2009).
There are three forms of case studies: instrumental, collective, and intrinsic case studies. Instrumental case studies focus on a single bound case that represents an issue chosen by the researcher, and collective case studies involve multiple cases. This particular case study is an intrinsic one, which means that its emphasis is on the case itself (Creswell, 2013). Because the researcher (myself) and the veteran are unique (due to their individual backgrounds and experiences), the case is inherently unique as well.

As previously mentioned, the core aspect of case study is the “bound frame” – the specific context in which the study resides. In his book, Creswell (2013) provides an example of case study. His study researches the way people on a university campus react to a student gunman. In that case, the bound frame is the particular university and gunman incident the university students experienced. The boundaries of this oral history study are detailed below:

First, I chose a war veteran to participate in the study, and then I interviewed him. I served as both the interviewer and the researcher. I, a college student, provided a valuable point of view for this study because I was a gifted student throughout my time in grade school. History is a love of mine, but because of my giftedness, I often did not feel challenged or engaged in many of my lessons. I chose a veteran of the Vietnam War since this war is recent enough that many veterans are still alive and available to share their stories. My grandfather is a Vietnam veteran, and because I have frequent and reliable access to speak with him, I chose to interview him.

According to Creswell, narrative research can manifest itself in many varieties and forms. Essentially, this type of research focuses on stories. Specifically, “it begins with experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals” (Creswell, 2013, p.
To conduct narrative research, the researcher first chooses one or more individuals to study, collects their stories, and then reports these stories in a chronological or meaningful way. According to Creswell (2013), researchers in many fields of study practice narrative research, particularly history.

There are several types of narrative research. For the purposes of this study, I used oral history, which Creswell (2013) says consists of “gathering personal reflections of events and their causes and effects from one individual or several individuals” (p. 55). Essentially, I gathered the story of the aforementioned Vietnam veteran, particularly focusing on his military experience. After the encounter, I then wrote about the benefits of the oral history experience. Benefits to me, the gifted student, were expected to include how this interaction brought history to life and helped form connections to history. To confirm the accuracy of my data, I showed the notes from the interview to the veteran.

In short, this study combines aspects of both case study and narrative research. Essentially, the narrative research exists within the bounds of the case study. Overall, I conducted a case study to see if and how oral history may benefit gifted students.
Results

The following narrative summarizes the information from my interview with my grandfather, a Vietnam veteran:

Introduction

Tommy Reese Watkins entered life center stage. Born on April 2, 1950 (right in the middle of a century), he found his place almost in the middle of eleven siblings. While he was born in simpler times, in a simple place (Pearl River County, Mississippi), his story unfolded to be one of family, freedom, and faith.

Early Life

Tommy’s parents were builders. His father, Lonnie Winston Watkins, built things as a carpenter, and his mother, Luvenia Carroll Watkins, built a family at home. As mentioned above, Tommy was one of eleven children, whose names are as follows: Dorothy, Glen, Cecil, Howard, Lonnie Jr., Patricia, Tommy, Diane, Wesley, Gordon, and Deborah. All the children were about two years apart from one another. As one might imagine, sizable burdens accompanied such a large family. They lived in a small three-bedroom house (one room for the parents, one for the boys, and one for the girls). For Christmas, the children would receive pants or a shirt. Their father died of a heart attack when Tommy was only around nine or ten years old. The youngest child, Deborah, was still in diapers. This death was the biggest hardship the family had to face, and everyone joined together to help provide for one another. The oldest brother, Cecil, had joined the Navy by this time, but came home on hardship discharge. The government provided a little help with social security and commodities. These commodities were things such as canned meat, powdered milk (according to Tommy – “no good”), powdered eggs, peanut
butter, oatmeal (his favorite), and grits. To offset this “no good” powdered milk, the family had a cow named Blackie and a calf named Puny. Puny was Tommy’s responsibility to milk. The two were a nice pair who earned complimentary nicknames (“Puny” and “Runt Tommy”).

But Tommy didn’t seem to focus on the burdens that his big family presented; he turned instead to the blessings. When asked what it was like having ten brothers and sisters, he said, “Good, you always had somebody to play with.” Not only did he view his siblings as a constant source of companionship, but he also looked to the older ones for leadership and guidance. In other words, he always had a teacher handy. For example, his older sister Patricia taught him how to write his name before he went to school. His older brother Glen taught him to jump off the bridge at the creek before he could swim. As frightening as this sounds, Tommy had no fear; he always trusted that his big brother would bring him back to the bank. Not only were Tommy’s siblings companions and leaders to him, they were also “question answerers.” And lastly, his siblings made sure to keep him in line by always beating him up (he added jokingly). Tommy said that having such a big family was never bad, but rather a good thing for him. It was all he knew.

To do his part providing for the family, Tommy worked basically all his life. At six years old, one of his earliest purchases was his very first bicycle. He paid a whopping fifty cents for it, earning this money by picking up tung nuts, which would be turned into oil, a popular product of the area at the time. At eleven, another job Tommy had was spending the night at Mrs. Carrie’s house. Mrs. Carrie was a widow whose two daughters already had families, so Tommy was there to keep watch over her and her home. He made up to thirty-five cents a night. His siblings would sometimes take turns spending
the night with Mrs. Carrie. However, it was Tommy’s turn the night of his brother’s wake. (Cecil passed away in a car wreck around two years after he returned home from the Navy, at the age of twenty-two.)

Although a lot of Tommy’s time was spent laboring, he certainly found time to have fun. In his free time, he could be found at the creek, either swimming, wading, or fishing with his brothers. This pastime was simple and really all they had to do, and some of his best memories were created there. Tommy will tell you that his favorite childhood memory was when he met Mary Hobgood, his future sweetheart and wife. In the fifth/sixth grade, he found out that they were meant for each other.

Speaking of his school years, Tommy attended the Industrial School of Picayune, Mississippi. One memory that stood out was from sixth grade, when Tommy attended a championship basketball game. He had no money to buy a snack, so his teacher’s husband came to the rescue and gave him fifty cents.

Seventh grade is when Tommy’s school years really got interesting. This year, he actually quit school to work for his cousin, James Alton Smith, as a laborer. His mother insisted he go back to school, so he returned to the seventh grade the following year, only to quit again. Finally, he went back a third time and completed the grade. By this time, according to Tommy, he was the smartest kid in the seventh grade. He returned to school in eighth grade the next year, but this time, he quit for good.

**Teenage Years**

In June 1966, when Tommy was sixteen years old, he joined the Merchant Marines. This was a way to provide financially for his family. He got a $250 allotment each month for his mother. She was able to accomplish much with this money, like
putting a new well down. (The old one had broken when Tommy left, and his mother was forced to carry water from a hand pump at his grandmother’s home.) Tommy left town in August, flew to Seattle, Washington, and boarded his home for the next year. His job was to work in the engine room of a ship. He worked as a “wiper” and kept the engine room clean. The ship’s job was to take a load of grain to India, because the people there were starving. After they unloaded grain, they started hauling oil for the Navy. He eventually took a test with the Coast Guard in Japan to gain the following titles on his Merchant Marines card: “Oiler, Fireman, Watertender, Ordinary Seaman, Steward’s Department.” He was able to take this test because the fireman on the ship had died. During his time at sea, he visited Navy bases in the Philippines, Japan, and Okinawa. This travel sounds rather exciting, but there really wasn’t much time for sightseeing. He also visited Saudi Arabia. Reflecting on this experience, Tommy said all he saw there was sand, but today, the skyline is filled with giant cities.

Tommy had signed a contract for one year with the Merchant Marines. After this first year, he made smaller trips. The first of these was on a ship called Del Rio, owned by Delta Steamship Lines. Their destination was South America (specifically Brazil) to pick up bananas. After that, Tommy boarded another ship, called Del Sol, to take a load to Vietnam (specifically Saigon). This time Howard, his older brother, was with him. He returned to Vietnam later on a Victory Ship. (These ships were built during WWII to last one run because so many were being sunk by the enemy.) On this trip, two of his brothers, Howard and Lonnie Jr., were with him. After Vietnam, they took the Victory Ship to a place called Formosa (in Taiwan) to sell for scrap metal. They flew home from
there. This was his final trip with the Merchant Marines because Uncle Sam was waiting for him back home.

**Military Life**

Tommy had registered for the draft at eighteen and was nineteen when he was officially drafted into the military. When he returned home from serving his country with the Merchant Marines, he went to Jackson to volunteer for the Army. After Tommy filled out all the necessary paperwork, a sergeant came in the room to make sure no one wanted to “back out” that day. Something inside him made him raise his hand, and he was the only one in the entire room (of about fifty) to do so. This decision gave him two more months at home before he got the letter saying that he had been drafted. He reported to Fort Pope, Louisiana, for Basic Training and found that other local young men were there too.

Tommy was supposed to be a radio operator, but because the school became full, he had to get new orders. One day, everyone had gone to lunch except for Tommy and a Private First Class. This man asked Tommy what he wanted to do instead. Tommy asked him, “What you got?” The PFC recited things off a list: mechanic, cook, infantry, truck driver, etc. Tommy made him stop and said, “Wait a minute, I think I can handle that.” And so it was that his orders were fixed up to go to truck driving school.

Tommy completed the majority of truck driving school at the same place in Louisiana (aside from the two weeks he had to spend in Fort Hood, Texas, learning how to drive big trucks). After this, he came home for a couple weeks. On November 26, 1969, he left from New Orleans to California (for a layover), and finally made it to his destination: Vietnam.
Upon his arrival, a sergeant came to the stage to hand out orders. The first thing out of his mouth was, “I need two volunteer truck drivers for the 178th Replacement Center in Saigon.” Tommy was standing next to a boy from Oklahoma who he had gone through Basic and Advanced Individual Training with. Tommy leaned over and told his friend that he was going to raise his hand. His time in the Merchant Marines had given him an inside look at the country; he knew that Saigon was not as bad as the jungles of Vietnam. The other boy responded that he was crazy, but raised his hand too. He didn’t want either of them to be alone. Why? “When you become buddies, you stick together.”

So off the two went to Saigon. Tommy worked there for nine months at Tan Son Nhut Air Force Base. His decision to volunteer worked out well for him. The base was a good, safe place; “You had to get through the Air Force to get to us.” During the time Tommy was in Vietnam, the US was trying to get out, so they were trying to downsize. His job was supposedly given to someone in the South Vietnamese Army. Next, he was sent to Cam Ranh Bay. As soon as he got there, he was sad because he knew nothing and no one. He didn’t even know where he was going. Tommy acted out the next scene, showing its importance in his story. As he was walking down the road on the base, carrying his duffel bag (with all his possessions) with his head hung low, a Jeep pulled up beside him, and someone inside called out his name. Thousands of miles from where he’d grown up, surrounded by so many unfamiliar faces, the person calling his name was a friend from home! He asked where Tommy was going, and Tommy replied that he didn’t know – he was going up to headquarters to get his orders. The boy asked if he wanted to get in the company with him. Shocked and elated, Tommy said, “Of course, I sure
would.” He told the sergeant that he’d get him a case of steaks if he let him be in the company with his friend. It worked.

Tommy spent five months driving trucks in Cam Ranh Bay. These trucks carried everything, from ammunition to people. Although he was not in the jungles of Vietnam, he still wasn’t immune from threats. He, along with everyone else, had to go in bunkers when they heard bombs at night. He had to watch carefully for “Charlie” (the enemy) while he was driving. This was especially dangerous because many did not have on military uniforms, so they couldn’t be easily spotted.

Tommy had all kinds of adventures in Vietnam. On a small scale, the food they ate (C-rations and food from the mess halls) was rather interesting. In his free time, he played two things: cards or “chicken.” For those unfamiliar with the game, it’s one where two vehicles approaching one another try to see who can last the longest without veering out of the other’s way. Tommy decided to play this with another big truck on a tiny bridge. It didn’t quite work out though, and the two got so close that they knocked off each other’s mirrors. On a larger scale, one adventure Tommy had during his time at Cam Ranh Bay was his R&R: Rest and Recuperation, which one received after around eight or nine months of service. He went to Sydney, Australia. He said it was “different” there and was a little cooler. Tommy explored a bit (by going to the beach and swimming), but he mostly took it easy. When asked if it was hard to leave Australia and return to Vietnam, he said that it wasn’t really, because it wasn’t “home.”

Tommy completed his time in Cam Ranh Bay and was supposed to come home November 21, 1970. However, for him, home was still not in sight; he chose to extend his time. Due to his military contract, if he had come home with more than five months left
to serve, he would have had to spend those on a base in the US. On the other hand, if he had less than five months left when he returned home, he would get an “early out,” which meant that he could return home instead. After serving a little longer, Tommy went to Fort Lewis, Washington, to get discharged. He spent one night there. Finally, he was processed out and homeward bound. “Here’s what it boils down to: Life in Vietnam comes down to making it through each day to be able to come home. That’s what you thought about each and every day.”

**Returning Home**

While many veterans did not have a smooth transition upon returning home, this was not the case for Tommy. According to him, “Me and my baby was together – couldn’t be no smoother than that.” His future wife, along with the time he spent in the Merchant Marines, helped with this transition. In a sense, he was used to this way of life. “I just eased right on back in like I never left.” He didn’t let the naysayers get to him (who were unfortunately very prevalent during and after the Vietnam War). Tommy said he had a bad temper, and he didn’t want to get violent. According to him, people who said anything about veterans had to be cowards. They didn’t have a clue.

Tommy was asked how being in the military shaped his life. He said that any time in the military helps build one’s character and provides a lot of respect for life. While during his last couple of months he counted each day and wondered if he would make it to the next, he came to appreciate being an American more. It’s actually somewhat rare for him to think about his time in the military now. Instead, he chooses to focus on his family and how God has blessed them. His military experience is in the past: “I did my duty; the military called and I went. I wouldn’t trade it.”
What stands out most to him is how God’s hand was through it all. None of his circumstances could have worked out by accident. From raising his hand in Jackson (which was hard to do), to volunteering for the truck-driving job, to finding a friend (in a country so big), God was constantly guiding his steps. God even worked out things for Tommy later in life. For example, when he was headed offshore for a job, he stopped to eat at “Mary’s Restaurant.” A stranger asked him where he worked, and they found out they actually worked for the same company. The man offered Tommy a job, and he was hired as the very first welder there. Later, in a doughnut shop, he heard about another job where he would be making more money. (Tommy seemed to find lots of blessings in simple places like restaurants.)

**Final Thoughts**

Tommy holds a message for the young people of today, and wants them to know about the Vietnam War. He wants them to remember the brave soldiers who fought and died in that war. He says the military was there to help the people of South Vietnam. Not finishing what they started affected a lot of people, especially those who lost family members. He emphasized that while things didn’t turn out like they should’ve, he learned a lot through his experience. He wants to stress, “If the military calls you, you go. Do your service because you love your country. It only helps you and makes you a better person. There’s always a cost though.”

Finally, Tommy was asked if this interview and the chance to tell his story benefitted him in any way. He said yes, and the benefits he listed are of great importance. He said that whoever reads this account will get to know a little about his life. His exact
words were, “Now the family will have something to read about their grandpa. Who else has that? Who else does that? Some people wait too late.”
Themes

Several themes emerged from my grandfather’s oral history, the three most prominent being family, freedom, and faith.

Family

Family is listed as the first theme because this is where Tommy’s amazing story really began. As mentioned, Tommy was one of eleven children. When asked what it was like having that many siblings, he gave the impression that family influenced him greatly:

Having ten brothers and sisters was great; I always had somebody to play with. With older siblings, I always had someone to teach me. Patricia taught me how to write my name before I went to school. Glen let me jump off the bridge before I could swim (he would bring me back to the bank). Not only did I always have someone to play with, but I also had someone to ask questions of, and to get beat up by. It was never bad to me; it was a good thing. It was all I knew.

Although they faced some hardships, they faced them together, as a family. Even as Tommy grew older and even left the country with the Merchant Marines, he did so to provide for his family back home.

After Tommy left the Merchant Marines, joined the Army, and left the country again, family was still on his mind. One might think that all of this traveling and adventure might cause Tommy to forget those he left behind at home, but that was certainly not the case. In fact, thoughts of his family are what drove Tommy to make it through his time away from them. Tommy put it this way:

Here’s what it boils down to: Life in Vietnam comes down to making it through each day to be able to come home. That’s what you thought about each and every day.

Freedom
It is only right that I mention freedom as one of the themes that emerged from this interview. Freedom was very important for Tommy and influenced his life greatly. While in the military, Tommy was fighting along with his fellow soldiers to preserve freedom, both our country’s, as well as the South Vietnamese’. What an honorable cause Tommy was not alone in! He and his friends did everything in their power to stay together. Why? “When you become buddies, you stick together.”

On another note, a different type of freedom was evident throughout the interview. This freedom was one that Tommy longed for himself. One might think that Tommy got a taste of freedom when he traveled to Australia during his rest and recuperation time. While it was certainly nice to get a break, he said it was not hard to return to Vietnam. To him, “It wasn’t home.” While Tommy served his country honorably, he was certainly ready to get home to Mississippi, especially near the end of his time in Vietnam. When freedom for him was in reach though, Tommy chose not to take it, at least not so soon. Although Tommy could have returned home after his time in Cam Ranh Bay, he chose not to. He knew that if he went home at that point (in November), he would still have to serve for a few months on a base in the United States. However, he knew that if he stayed in Vietnam just a little while longer, he could immediately return home afterwards. This is the complete freedom he longed for, and the reason he was willing to stay longer in Vietnam.

Tommy summed up his military experience and his part in fighting for freedom with this statement:

I did my duty; the military called and I went. I wouldn’t trade it. If the military calls you, you go. Do your service because you love your country. It only helps you and makes you a better person. There’s always a cost though.
Faith

Faith emerged as another theme because Tommy managed to mention his faith in nearly every answer he gave and every story he told. Even though for some time in his life he was not exactly a “faithful” person, he now talks about these experiences with faithful hindsight. Particularly, he knew that everything that happened in his life served a greater purpose for him. This included the choices he was in control of, such as when he raised his hand to signal he wanted to “back out” the day he went to Jackson to volunteer for service. It also included events he could not have orchestrated himself, such as the fateful conversation he had with the Private First Class who told him that the radio operator school was full and that he had to choose another job. Tommy responded with, “What you got?” After the PFC recited a list of jobs, Tommy made him stop and said, “Wait a minute, I think I can handle that.” He handled this and much more, including the time when he arrived at Cam Ranh Bay alone, but just so happened to meet someone from home. When asked if he would like to join the same company as this friend from home, Tommy replied, “Of course, I sure would.”

Just as Tommy was sure then that he wanted to stick with his friend, he is sure now that, throughout his life,

God’s hand was through it all. None of that could have worked out by accident. It started in Jackson when I raised my hand (which was hard to do), and continued to when I volunteered for the truck-driving job, and to when I found a friend in a country that big.

Tommy has faith now that every single thing in his life served a purpose, for both himself and for the one his faith is placed in, Jesus Christ.
Benefits

The benefits I experienced when conducting this interview and gathering my grandfather’s oral history were both numerous and profound.

First and foremost, interviewing and transcribing my grandfather’s oral history sparked in me an interest in history. Not only was I excited to conduct the interview before it even started, I became more and more interested as it went on. This spark was not only present in myself, but also in those around me observing the interview. My grandmother was with us throughout the entire interview process, and she said that she thoroughly enjoyed the experience and learned much from it.

The experience also helped me to learn the significance of historical events. In other words, it really helped me see the “so what” behind it all. These events became more than just mere historical facts; they became stories that were important, significant to the past and the present.

Once I realized the importance of the historical events my grandpa described, I was also able to connect with them. This was especially true since I interviewed a family member. Because I already had a personal connection with him, I was able to form a very immediate connection with his history. This connection helped me to visualize my grandfather’s stories, and, in a sense, I was able to place myself in the historical events he described.

One of the things I discovered through my research on oral history was that, unfortunately, many students find history boring. In particular, gifted students feel this way because they are not engaged in their history lessons. My experience participating in an oral history produced the opposite effects on me. Conducting this interview was
profoundly more engaging than the history lessons many experience through textbooks or worksheets. One of the reasons I was so engaged was that emotions were involved. My grandfather and I laughed at the funny parts of his story. We grew more somber when things got more serious. I was able to feel empathy when he discussed hard times. Another part of the interview that kept me engaged was when my grandfather acted out scenes from his life. For example, he discussed the point in his military experience when he arrived at the base at Cam Ranh Bay. He described how he was walking down the road with his head hung low, because he knew no one or nothing. Not only did he tell of this, he also showed it. He actually got up out of his chair and acted out the scene. These emotions and visuals are experiences that could never be gained through a textbook or worksheet.

Another big benefit I experienced involved the questions I asked. Obviously, before I conducted the interview, I came up with a series of questions to ask my grandfather. I wrote these questions based on what I was curious about, what I wanted to learn from the interview. Not only was I able to plan questions to ask, I was able to ask additional questions throughout the interview. This was especially helpful when I did not fully understand something and needed clarification.

Additionally, another benefit of this process is that it encouraged reflection and conversation, in both parties. During and after the interview, I was constantly reflecting on what I had learned; it was a lot to take in and process. I noticed that my grandfather was reflecting as well, especially when I asked questions such as, “How did being in the military shape your life?” and “What would you like the young people of today to know about the Vietnam War?” These questions did not require a simple recall of facts, but
deep thought and reflection. As mentioned, the interview also encouraged conversation between the interviewer and interviewee, myself and my grandfather. This conversation is what the connections and all of the other benefits stemmed from.

Finally, my experience with oral history made me appreciate my life and its comforts and technological advances. My grandfather told stories of times that were simpler, and also tougher in many ways, than the present. He talked about times when his family had few commodities. He and his large family lived in a fairly small home, and he even had to pump water from a well. My grandfather worked hard for everything he had. Interviewing him made me see my life and its comfort and advancements in a different way. I know now that had I grown up in the same time as my grandfather, my life would not have been quite as easy. I now appreciate my life more, and I believe I will carry this appreciation with me forever.

The aforementioned benefits are the main ones I experienced through gathering and transcribing my grandfather’s oral history. Even more benefits occurred, including the ones my grandfather experienced. Many of these benefits connect and overlap. In the end, the benefits experienced were ones that would not have occurred if I had learned this history through a textbook or worksheet; they were unique to oral history.
Discussion

The original research question I posed was, “What are the benefits of a veteran’s oral history on a gifted student?” I hypothesized that “a veteran’s oral history will pose numerous benefits for a gifted student. This technique will lead to student engagement, interest, and a challenging environment.” After conducting my study and writing the results, I can certainly say that my hypothesis proved to be correct in my own case. Interviewing my grandfather and transcribing his oral history certainly posed many benefits for me, a gifted student. I experienced at least seven overarching benefits: An interest in history was sparked. I saw the significance of this history, and I formed connections with it. I was engaged. I could ask questions of my grandfather. The interview encouraged reflection and conversation. Finally, I have a newfound appreciation of life. While these broad and profound benefits are numerous, the smaller benefits that branch off from these are even more so.

I predicted that oral history would be an engaging, interesting, and challenging tactic. As mentioned above, I immediately recognized that engagement and interest were benefits of the interview. I did not use the word “challenging” when listing the benefits, but I do believe two of the benefits I experienced fall under this word. These two benefits are “reflection” and “appreciation of life.” Hearing my grandfather’s story encouraged me to reflect on his words, and even on my own life. Consequently, it made me appreciate my life more. Realizing that my grandfather’s life was tough in some ways and that mine has been so comparatively easy was certainly challenging.

Not only did my results prove my hypothesis correct, they also correlated closely with the benefits of oral history discussed in my literature review. I reviewed three cases
involving oral history at the elementary level. The benefits that occurred from these experiences ranged from making personal and emotional connections with history (Hirshfield, 1991), to challenging preconceived notions (Sears, 1991). These benefits, along with many more, are certainly ones I experienced. The fact that my benefits so closely correlate with those experienced by others validates both the literature and my own experience.

As mentioned throughout my study, the benefits of oral history at the elementary level had certainly been researched before I conducted my study. I even discussed three of these experiences in my literature review. However, none of these studies were done with veterans. Because mine specifically focuses on a veteran, it adds another layer to existing research. Additionally, the benefits I experienced when gathering and transcribing my grandfather’s oral history were even more numerous than those I found listed in the literature I reviewed. I believe this certainly shows that while veterans’ oral histories share many of the same benefits as other oral histories, they can pose wider and deeper benefits for any student, especially gifted ones.
Conclusion

In conclusion, history is a subject that many students find boring. Therefore, all students, particularly gifted ones, require tactics that keep them engaged (Diffily, 2002). Oral history, which involves people who have lived through history, is one of these tactics that has proven to be beneficial (Hirshfield, 1991; Mutnick, 2007; Sears, 1991). However, oral histories with veterans were missing from existing literature, and this research is what my study provides. To fill in this gap, I, a gifted student, gathered and transcribed the oral history of my grandfather, a Vietnam veteran. I employed components of case study and narrative research to do so. My hypothesis was proven correct: the benefits from my experience in oral history were both numerous and profound. For these reasons, experiences with veterans’ oral histories are something that should be made accessible to not just gifted students, but all students at the elementary level. It is my hope that any teacher who reads this research is convinced of these benefits. I know that as a future educator, I will certainly use my findings and veterans’ oral histories in my curriculum. This way, students can have a more direct look at the military chapter of our nation’s story.

Limitations

This study possesses limitations, the main one being how limited its scope is. I was the only gifted student to participate, and my grandfather was the only veteran to provide his oral history. To add both breadth and depth to this study, I could have researched the benefits of veterans’ oral histories on several gifted students, rather than just myself. Additionally, although I was a gifted student throughout my time in elementary school, the study would have been a bit more direct and applicable had I
gathered the benefits on actual elementary students. Finally, I could have gathered and transcribed the oral histories of several veterans, rather than just my grandfather’s. Adding these aforementioned components would have led to a study that would be not quite as limited. These components and this theoretically broader study were what I first intended to explore. However, due to unforeseen and uncontrollable circumstances, plans were altered. My intended study, however, can be completed in the future.

Future Directions

To take this study to the next level, researchers can employ case study methodology. The researcher could choose both a gifted teacher and one or more veterans to collaborate with. On the day of the study, the veteran/s can come prepared to speak to the class of gifted students about his or her military experience with a presentation and war memorabilia. A documentary could also be used as a prelude to the talk. The researcher can record the conversation with a digital recorder, and afterwards conduct a question and answer session with the students in order to gather the students’ opinions on the benefit of the oral history experience. Recorded material would be transcribed and coded for themes. All coded themes and questionnaire results could be analyzed to draw conclusions about oral history and its use in the gifted classroom.
References


Appendix A

Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
118 College Drive #5147 | Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001
Phone: 601.266.5997 | Fax: 601.266.4377 | www.usm.edu/research/institutional.review.board

NOTICE OF COMMITTEE ACTION

The project has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services (45 CFR Part 46), and university guidelines to ensure adherence to the following criteria:

- The risks to subjects are minimized.
- The risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered regarding risks to subjects must be reported immediately, but not later than 10 days following the event. This should be reported to the IRB Office via the “Adverse Effect Report Form”.
- If approved, the maximum period of approval is limited to twelve months. Projects that exceed this period must submit an application for renewal or continuation.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 17050302
PROJECT TITLE: Benefits of Veterans' Oral History on Gifted Students
PROJECT TYPE: New Project
RESEARCHER(S): Katelyn Watkins
COLLEGE/DIVISION: College of Education and Psychology
DEPARTMENT: CISE
FUNDING AGENCY/SPONSOR: N/A
IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Expedited Review Approval
PERIOD OF APPROVAL: 05/05/2017 to 05/04/2018

Lawrence A. Hosman, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board
Appendix B

Institutional Review Board Signed Consent Form

Office of Research Integrity

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
SIGNED CONSENT

SIGNING CONSENT PROCEDURES

This document must be completed and signed by each potential research participant.

- Information detailed in the Oral Presentation must be discussed with all potential research participants before signing this form.
- Signed copies of this form should be provided to all participants.
- The witness to consent may be either a third party, such as a translator, or the Principal Investigator if he or she is able to ensure that all of the participants' questions have been adequately addressed.

Last edited February 29th, 2017

Today's date: April 23, 2017

PROJECT INFORMATION

Project Title: Benefits of Veterans' Oral History on Gifted Students
Principal Investigator: Katelyn Watkins Phone: 6013474727 USM Email: katelyn.m.watkins@usm.edu
College: Education and Psychology Department: Curriculum, Instruction, and Special Education

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Participant's Name: Tommy Watkins

Consent is hereby given to participate in this research project. All procedures and/or investigations to be followed and their purpose, including any experimental procedures, were explained. Information was given about all benefits, risks, inconveniences, or discomforts that might be expected.

The opportunity to ask questions regarding the research and procedures was given. Participation in the project is completely voluntary, and I may withdraw at any time without penalty, prejudice, or loss of benefits. All personal information is strictly confidential, and no names will be disclosed. Any new information that develops during the project will be provided if that information may affect my willingness to continue participation in the project.

Questions concerning the research, at any time during or after the project, should be directed to the Principal Investigator using the contact information provided above. This project and consent procedures have been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board, which ensures that research projects involving human subjects follow federal regulations. Any questions or concerns about rights as a research participant should be directed to the Chair of the Institutional Review Board, The University of Southern Mississippi, 118 College Drive #5147, Hattiesburg, MS 39406-5001, (801) 286-5997, irb@usm.edu.

[Signature]

Research Participant 6-21-17

[Signature]

Witness 4-21-17

Date Date