

University of Alberta

**Engaging with the Evidence: Exploring the Development of Historical
Understanding in Students using Primary Documents**

by

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Abstract

Research in the development of historical understanding in students has demonstrated that the use of primary source documents engages students in a more meaningful way in the study of history (Barton, 1997c; VanSledright, 2002; Wineburg, 2001). To determine if this research was supported in a local context, I conducted a series of lessons with a class of seventh grade students using primary source documents to answer the central research question: To what extent is the development of historical understanding in students enhanced by the use of primary documents? After learning about Louis Riel and engaging with a series of primary source documents, the students used the documents to answer the question: should Louis Riel have been convicted of treason at his trial in 1885?

From the class, the responses of ten participants were coded using VanSledright's (2002) four reading strategies, ranging from comprehension strategies to more sophisticated intertextual evaluations. This case study reveals that while students struggle to work at the higher levels of historical reading, the use of primary source documents enhances student self-efficacy in social studies. This study also accentuated the need for students to be specifically taught the necessary literacy skills to decode and interpret documents in isolation and intertextually.

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Chapter 1

Void of Evidence: A Beginning

Pieces of the past have always intrigued me: a letter from my great-great grandmother to her daughter, the intricately embellished gravestone of my great-great-great grandfather on a wind-swept hill in central Ireland, the studio portrait of my great-grandparents gazing stoically ahead, a snapshot of my grandparents gazing at each other on their wedding day, the transcripts from my mother's final exams for nursing school. All of these pieces of the past that I encountered throughout my formative years seemed to hold a mystical quality that enabled me to form a connection with people that I hadn't met or provided me with a glimpse into experiences that occurred long before my birth. Long before I knew these pieces of the past were called traces of the past or primary documents, I knew they had meaning.

As I studied towards a Bachelor's degree in history and an education degree, these sources continued to resonate with me. It was through these sources that the drudgery of studying names, dates, events and consequences faded. The names became living people, the dates and events created the context against which consequences had an impact on real lives. As a teacher, I entered elementary and junior high social studies classrooms with my desire to provide students with the opportunity to connect with people of the past on a visceral level. This became an integral component of my pedagogy.

Whenever possible, I shared what Seixas (1996) describes as traces and accounts of the human past with my students. Whether it was including a lesson that challenged students to visualize the person who last held a Minoan vase or to imagine the life of a young girl while reading her account of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, primary documents were central to how I developed historical understanding in my students. However well-intentioned I was, in

structuring these experiences, I was doing so blindly, without explicit knowledge of the correlation between the development of historical understanding and the use of primary documents. This dissonance between my knowledge and my desire to understand more about historical understanding created a perfect opportunity to deepen my understanding and to determine if there is a sound pedagogical basis for my approach to teaching social studies.

Developing a Research Question

As I examine my position in this research, I realize that it is not without inherent bias, which is a fundamental component to all research. It is imperative to recognize my personal attachment to primary documents and the role I believe they can play in the development of historical understanding in students as I progress through this project. It is my personal investment in the teaching of social studies that led to me to the development of the following research question: **To what extent is the development of historical understanding in students enhanced by the use of primary documents?**

Though my interest lies in the use of original source documents, the essence of my question is to explore how the use of original source documents can support the development of historical understanding in students. This question reflects the growth of my perspective from a single minded vision of the use of primary documents to a more encompassing perspective that recognizes that primary documents are a tool in the development of historical understanding. Intrinsic in this study is the belief that students are capable of engaging in meaningful historical inquiry (Barton, 1997b; Levstik & Barton, 1997; VanSledright, 2002c; Wineburg, 2001). I explored the extent to which the use of primary sources as evidence in historical inquiry supports the growth of historical understanding in students.

As a content vehicle for exploring the skills of historical understanding, I focused on a tumultuous period in Canadian history, the Red River Resistance of 1868-1869 to the Northwest Rebellion of 1885. I anticipated addressing the following subquestions:

- How does the use of original source documents affect the development of historical understanding in students?
- What are the benefits for students engaging with original source documents?
- What are the challenges for students engaging with original source documents?

In this study, students constructed an argument using original source documents as evidence to support their position. As Seixas (2006) noted, elements of historical understanding such as historical significance, evidence, continuity and change, cause and consequence, historical perspectives, and moral dimensions are simply tools that contribute to the underlying concepts that support the process of developing historical understanding.

This study, however, is not without challenges. I elected to work with students from one classroom within a school where I taught. The students were the students of a colleague with whom I worked closely through the implementation of the social studies curriculum. My desire to share the achievements of our hard work and growth in understanding potentially coloured my perception of this study. Also, in retrospect, throughout this study, I maintained the perspective of teacher. I viewed the conversations I had with students, the work they shared with me, and the evidence of their historical understanding through the lens of a classroom teacher rather than a researcher. As a result, some of the questions I asked in my interviews were more helpful to me as a teacher and did not illicit the same information that I would have asked in a more research based role. Thus, the results of this project need to be read with a consideration of my

personal perspective and approach, recognizing the relationship I had with the students and teacher, as well as my inability to subjugate my teacher perspective.

A Provincial Context

This research project is timely as social studies education in Alberta undergoes a fundamental shift in pedagogy. In 2005 the provincial government mandated the implementation of a new social studies curriculum for Kindergarten through to grade three. The next stage was implemented in September 2006 with the introduction of grades four and seven. Teachers were supported in the implementation process through the funding of professional development by regional learning consortia. The province also contracted the development of resources that aligned with the outcomes and philosophies embedded in the new program of studies. This support was an essential component of implementation because the program represents a significant departure from how social studies was previously taught.

The Alberta social studies program of studies is comprised of several different types of outcomes, which work together to create a balanced course of study. The values and attitudes outcomes represent often intangible ideals which encourage students to appreciate the depth of experiences and beliefs others may have, and how this appreciation can contribute to their understanding of issues facing Canadian and global societies. The knowledge and understanding outcomes represent learning opportunities in specific content areas and also act as a vehicle to develop the skills and process in students. The skills and processes outcomes are grounded in a series of thinking skills, which include: creative and critical thinking, historical thinking, geographic thinking, communication skills, development of skills for deliberative inquiry and

metacognition (Alberta Education, 2006). Historical thinking skills as represented in the program of studies form part of the foundation for this research project.

Within the program of studies, historical thinking is defined as "...a process whereby students are challenged to rethink assumptions about the past and to reimagine both the present and the future" (Alberta Education, 2006, p. 9). In seventh grade, students are asked to demonstrate historical thinking skills such as analyzing historical issues to support an opinion, sequence historical events using community or historical resources, explain the historical context of events, distinguish short and long term cause and effect relationships, create models with technology and recognize patterns in information. The goal of developing these skills is to provide students with the foundation so that they can approach issues in their future with an open and critical mind, particularly when they are confronted with ideas that challenge their own perspective (Alberta Education, 2006).

Alberta is not in a unique position. Peter Seixas (2006) proposed a set of benchmarks for historical thinking for implementation across the nation. This proposal does not address the content of social studies; rather Seixas focuses on providing a framework for assessing what he calls historical thinking concepts. Using six historical thinking concepts, Seixas identifies the concepts that provide meaning to history. One of the historical thinking concepts focuses on students using primary sources as evidence in a process of constructing knowledge about the past (Seixas, 2006). Students not only need to be able to read for information, they also need to be able to contextualize sources and draw inferences from them. According to Seixas, students working at the sophisticated level of the historical thinking concept for using evidence realize that primary sources not only reveal information about the explicit intent of the author but may also contain implicit information the author's values and worldview. At this level, students also

need to be able to contextualize the document, as well as analyze the source for evidence to support a thesis. These historical thinking concepts provide a framework for working with complex concepts such as historical understanding within a structure that allows sophisticated skills to be identified, scaffolded, and assessed.

The following chapter situates this project within a growing body of research that spans North America and the United Kingdom. The development of social studies curricula in Canada will also be considered. Chapter 3 reflects upon the research methodology and methods in the context of this study. In the final section, I reach draw conclusions about the results of this research project for students and educators.

Chapter 2

Historical Understanding? Thinking? Consciousness? What does it all mean? A Literature Review

As Alberta teachers work through the implementation of a new social studies curriculum in Alberta, there is much debate among teachers about the appropriateness of the skills that students are being asked to acquire. Some teachers argue that the skills are far too sophisticated for their students to master; other teachers argue that with the appropriate scaffolding, students will surprise us in their ability to acquire diverse skills. This section explores the academic work surrounding an argument that at its core is a discussion concerning our fundamental beliefs about learning. Each researcher approaches the study of historical understanding in a unique way, exploring elementary students to pre-service teachers and professional historians, using primary source documents in a variety of media, including electronic copies. Through the literature, however, emerges a common theme about the complexity of historical understanding, not only as a concept but as a teachable skill.

Defining Historical Understanding

Historical understanding in children is a complex concept; one that defies a single definition. This is exemplified by the lack of common terminology. Historical understanding is also recognized as historical thinking as well as historical consciousness. While there are many diverse definitions of historical understanding, scholars reached a consensus about what historical understanding is not. It is not merely listing chronological dates and facts, the regurgitation of accepted conclusions, or providing an opinion about historical events. However, in each of the diverse definitions, common themes about historical understanding emerge.

Kathryn Spoehr and Luther Spoehr (1994) approached historical understanding from the perspective of cognitive analysis. Too often in our history classrooms, Spoehr and Spoehr argue, students are not taught to think historically and "...the facts do not speak for themselves, and that it is the historian's job to ask the right questions, to draw appropriate inferences and to make careful judgments when possible (and speculations when necessary), and to arrive at considered conclusions about what it all means" (p. 71). Historical thinking, according to Spoehr and Spoehr, requires that students become historians by asking questions, seeking evidence, assembling arguments and counter-arguments, and finally arriving at a conclusion that is supported by the evidence. This is a challenging proposition for students; it requires flexibility and comprehensiveness, as well as a willingness to engage with the chaotic and messy aspects of doing history.

In proposing an electronic hypermedia program to assist students in constructing historical thinking Spoehr and Spoehr (1994) argue that historical thinking is further complicated by the "...messiness of reality – the unwillingness of events to stay in boxes neatly labeled "politics," "economics," and so on...when they must consider the imponderables of cause and effect" (1994, p. 73). Students must also confront the abstractions of crossing time periods, as well as the cause and effects resulting from manifest and latent events. Historical thinking demands dissonance from the student as they examine the meaning of abstractions, both culturally and personally. As a result, Spoehr and Spoehr present five attributes that are required for thinking historically. These attributes include the ability to use imagination, develop hypotheses, determine the validity of the hypotheses, to "define abstractions precisely, and to show how those abstractions, when used and defined by others, have changed their meaning over

time” (Spoehr & Spoehr, 1994, p. 74), and the ability to articulate personal values to create an opinion.

To assist students to use these attributes as they become active historical thinkers, Spoehr and Spoehr (1994) employ a linked hypermedia program called ACCESS (American Cultural in Context: Enrichment for Secondary Schools). The goal of the ACCESS program is to provide students with a method of accessing the abstractions of historical concepts using linking structures. Employing a “...multiplicity of such horizontal links reinforces in the students’ minds the notion that facts and specifics can be combined and recombined in a variety of ways depending on the task at hand” (Spoehr & Spoehr, 1994, p. 75). From this, students are able to create connections between seemingly unrelated information to more clearly understand the complexity of conceptual categories. Information and evidence is not pre-selected by teachers as is often seen in the classroom. This permits the students to examine a wide variety of artifacts, rather than merely presenting students with the evidence that is not necessarily sufficient to support the development of historical understanding. Students must be scaffolded through the process of exploring questions, gathering evidence, creating sound arguments, and anticipating counter-arguments.

Linda Levstik and Christine Pappas (1992) approach the construction of historical understanding from a psychological perspective. Central to their argument is the notion that Piagetian theory has limited applicability to the development of historical understanding. According to Piaget, children’s understanding develops in a same stage progression. The implication of this lock-step progression of cognitive development is that there is a certain stage when children will be able to understand specific concepts, such as historical understanding. Piaget classified the study of history in the formal operations stage, “...as an essentially non-

observable content area learned through the abstractions of a particular form of discourse, chronological essays” (Levstik & Pappas, 1992, p. 370). This approach, however, does not acknowledge the importance of children’s prior knowledge or cultural experience in their development.

Drawing on the work of Clifford Geertz, Levstik and Pappas (1992) argue that the discipline of history does not merely occur as a mental abstraction, but is part of a social and cultural construct. The consequence of this idea is that as children develop, they

...learn how to “mean” in a variety of social contexts, and we learn how to express what we mean through a various symbolic forms...historical ideas are seen as a cultural artifact, characterized through its expressions in ways that sustain the activities pertaining to the domain of history (1992, p. 375).

By using a narrative structure, historical understanding becomes more accessible to children because it elicits high interest, assigns significance and is often a social activity. Levstik and Pappas contend that “...narrative discourse may provide a critical window into children’s patterns of meaning-making when confronted by historical data” (p. 379). Since narrative discourse itself is a cultural construct, it allows students to examine issues of multiculturalism and cultural perspective with greater depth and thoughtfulness.

Peter Seixas (1996) moves away from the psychological perspective and argues that the foundation of historical understanding is the structure of a discipline, specifically the discipline of history. Seixas questions whether “...there is something that distinguishes the structure of history from the structures of mathematics or the sciences in a way that fundamentally affects the educational research efforts and accomplishments in these respective fields” (1996, p. 765). As students construct historical understanding, they encounter traces of the past through physical

relics and accounts told from a variety of perspectives. Like Levstik and Pappas (1992), Seixas points to the importance of narrative organization in constructing historical understanding. Seixas arrives at a definition of historical understanding that centres on “organizing our collective experience of the past – i.e the traces and presentations of the past that we encounter in the present – in such a way that they provide a meaningful context for our present experience” (1996, p. 767). However, to fully appreciate how historical understanding is developed, a structure to guide student learning must be established.

Seixas (1996) proposes six fundamental elements in the structure of historical understanding. According to Seixas, students need to be able to examine traces and accounts to determine the significance of the information in relation to our present, as well as examine evidence to determine if a belief is valid or not. Students also need to understand the complexities of historical change against consistent standards. Students need to examine the past in terms of progress and decline, to approach the past and historical actors with empathy, realizing differences exist between themselves and historical figures. Finally, students need to explore power relationships as they examine social change. These historical thinking concepts constitute the structure of history, and according to Seixas, help us make the past meaningful in the present.

Seixas (1996) notes that it is often assumed that students come to our classrooms without any understanding of the past. He argues that “...the identification of a structure of historical understanding, constituted through a series of issues whose resolution remains problematic even for professional historians, provides the basis for a different kind of historical pedagogy” (1996, p. 777). By centering historical study on problems, rather than dates and facts, students will develop meaningful historical understanding.

In his book *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*, Sam Wineburg (2001) places himself firmly in the midst of a debate regarding American national history standards. Within the context of this debate, Wineburg notes that we often discard the history that contradicts our personal understanding. Echoing the work of Seixas (1996), Wineburg draws the complex idea of continuity and change into his definition of historical thinking, noting that it "...requires us to reconcile two contradictory positions: first, that our established modes of thinking are an inheritance that cannot be sloughed off, and, second, that if we make no attempt to slough them off, we are doomed to a mind-numbing presentism that reads the present onto the past" (2001, p. 12). The challenge in developing historical understanding in students is to encourage them to see beyond the similarities within history, and recognize the subtleties of change over time.

In creating his definition of historical understanding, Wineburg (2001) includes several recurring themes, such as the use of narrative as a part of the study of history (Seixas, 1996; Spoehr & Spoehr, 1994), the necessity of realizing that historical understanding is created within a cultural context (Levstik & Pappas, 1992; Seixas, 1996; Spoehr & Spoehr, 1994), as well as the realization that students can master complex, sophisticated processes (Seixas, 1996; Spoehr & Spoehr, 1994). Where Wineburg varies from other scholars is in his examination of the role of educational psychologists and historians, and their desire to quantify children's historical understanding. Wineburg notes that "...as educational psychologists worked to produce reliable and objective history scales, university historians tried to extricate themselves from their humanistic roots so as to emerge as scientists...[to] distinguish professional historians from their amateur colleagues" (2001, p. 36). The inclusion of this tension within the academic discipline of history is an important note because accurate and objective assessment in the teaching of history leads to a specific, fact based type of teaching. This is the very definition of historical

understanding that Wineburg is arguing against. Rather than examining what students answered correctly on their exams, Wineburg claims a deeper understanding of children's processing can be gathered from the incorrect answers.

Chris Husbands (1996) draws a clear distinction between the discipline of history and the teaching of history in his book *What is History Teaching?* (1996). Removed from the examination of the development models espoused by Levstik and Pappas (1992) and Wineburg (2001), Husbands does not include much evidence from the field of educational psychology. Rather, Husbands draws from the experiences of the development of the Schools Council History Project and the National Curriculum in the United Kingdom. In a manner similar to Wineburg, Husbands (1996) examines the expanding field of history. Race, class, gender, and constructs of otherness are now considered as legitimate areas of study within the discipline of history. This reevaluation of what constitutes history also forced a reassessment of accepted historical accounts, which "have been increasingly seen to be coloured by the concepts, questions and assumptions deployed by the historian" (1996, p. 6).

Historical understanding is not only developed in children, notes Husbands, but also in adults as they are exposed to a wider range of historical ideas. According to Husbands, "...greater pupil sophistication in acquiring and communicating historical understanding is then a consequence both of wider exposure to different models of causal connection in history...[and] an increasing emotional and moral sophistication" (1996, p 79). This sophistication can only evolve as part of a process of asking and answering questions through historical inquiry.

Husbands (1996) also challenges historians and the teachers of history to examine children's misconceptions. Through these misconceptions, argues Husbands, the prior knowledge and cultural constructions of history in children can be accessed. By addressing the

misunderstandings and misconceptions, we can "...support pupils' learning about the past in ways which both open their minds to the ways in which the past was different from the present and allow them to adjust their views of themselves and of how people think and live so that new perceptions are incorporated into their revised thinking" (1996, pp. 79-80). Thus, it is essential that children's historical misunderstandings, as well as historical understandings, are addressed.

Though each of these scholars approach historical understanding from a different perspective, common themes about historical understanding still emerge. Piagetian ideas of same stage, progressive cognitive development in children are generally rejected as playing a significant role in historical development. Rather, current literature emphasizes the importance of prior understanding of students, along with their specific cultural context, in creating individual historical understanding. Through the use of engaging stories, historical thinking can be developed by young children far earlier than previously thought. As Seixas (1996) and Wineburg (2001) argue, historical understanding must be approached as an extension of the discipline of history, with students engaging in historical meaning making through the use of sophisticated notions such as significance, historical agency, and continuity and change. Students are capable of far more complex rationalizations than previously thought, which supports changes in pedagogy to further the development of historical understanding in children.

Exploring Children's Historical Understanding: The Possibilities and Limitations

As research in the development of historical understanding in children moves from the theoretical to the practical, themes of both possibility and limitation emerge. While glimpses of the development of sophistication in historical understanding are present, the focus still tends to be on the limitations of children, instruction and curriculum.

A qualitative study of the ability of children to reconstruct history by Bruce VanSledright (1995) provides a dismal view of children's historical understanding. After concluding a unit on exploration and the British colonization of North America, VanSledright gathered data which he hoped would demonstrate how students develop historical understanding. Using a limited study of 22 ethnically diverse students in an urban eighth grade classroom, VanSledright gathered information about students' prior understanding of the topic. After the unit was complete, the students wrote a narrative to describe what they were learning about colonization. Of the 22 students, VanSledright chose to interview six students; it is the perceptions of these students that form the basis of his conclusions. Unfortunately, the reason why these particular students were chosen to form a sample is not described, thus there is no assurance that this meager sample is a representative sample of the class.

Through his six focus interviews, VanSledright (1995) notably discovered a surprising lack of student confidence in their understanding of the historical content, in both the pre- and post-unit interviews. In his discussion, VanSledright commented that absent is

...much recognizable value in the lives of these adolescents, the study of British colonization in North America makes little sense on the surface, builds on little in their personal experience, and results for the most part in the acquisition of disconnected facts without much coherent understanding, despite extended study (1995, p. 338).

The limitations of the students' abilities to create historical constructions, as well as the limitations of historical teaching that focuses on archival knowledge, is clear. However, it must be acknowledged that the context of this study is itself limited, both in the number of students studied and in the scope of the study. Though VanSledright concluded that pedagogy is a contributing factor in the difficulty of creating historical understanding in students, little insight

is provided to the procedures used by the teacher of this particular 8th grade class. Consequently, further study into the correlation between teaching and the development of historical understanding is clearly necessary.

Keith Barton (1997a) explored how students make connections between individuals and the role of institutions (such as government and the economy), as well as how misconceptions and omissions reflect their construction of historical understanding. Using two classrooms of fifth-grade students, Barton also endeavoured to augment current research by examining new historical constructions such as race and gender relations, as well as documenting how students used their previous understanding to create their interpretations of the historical content. To accomplish these diverse goals, Barton interviewed 33 students, observed in the classrooms, participated in discussions and conducted analysis of written assignments. Barton (1997a) discovered that the students encountered difficulty with abstract concepts such as historical agency. Students were able to parrot information about intangible concepts in discussion; however, they lacked a deep understanding of their function in historical events. Students tended to identify with individuals and their potential motivation and "...had little sense of how changes related to wide social and economic patterns" (p. 311). From this study, Barton concludes that students should study history as a subject to be contextualized, rather than as a grouping of famous people and events that need to be learned. It is interesting to note, however, that while Barton advocates that students need to have a contextualized history program, he does not indicate whether he believes the students are capable of making these complex and sophisticated connections.

Elizabeth Yeager, Stuart Foster and Jennifer Greer (2002) investigated students' perceptions of historical significance in hopes of explaining the reasoning students use to

determine if an event is historically significant. Using a single sample classroom on either side of the Atlantic in England and the United States, Yeager et al. asked participants to brainstorm a list of the ten most significant events of the twentieth century. Then they were asked to choose the ten most significant historical events from a list of one hundred items selected by the researchers. The results of this study indicated that students' choice for historically significant events is determined both by the selection of nation building events in the development of history curriculum and how that curriculum is taught. Yeager et al. note that the English students were more likely to include personal events in their lists of the ten most significant events of the twentieth century, whereas American students were more likely to be influenced by the news media. Both groups of students were more likely to choose an event which had a direct effect on their nation, indicating they lacked an understanding of global perspective and how events may impact other nations or cultures differently.

Based on this research, Yeager et al. (2002) placed a caveat on children's understanding of historical significance, especially when students become so consumed by their enjoyment of a narrative account. Students not only oversimplify the event but do not "...have access to alternative or more complex historical interpretations" or they fail "...to examine the historical evidence on which stories and details are based" (p. 215). Barton (1996) also cautions that students develop a "...selective perception of the past: they thought of history as involving a very limited set of people and events, and they collapsed length and complicated historical processes into short time frames and simple narratives" (p. 70). Thus care must be used as this popular method of engaging students in historical study is employed. Not only can students misinterpret narrative accounts, but they can create their own narratives, filled with misconceptions and simplifications of complex historical events.

Though Yeager et al. (2002) were “cautiously optimistic” (p. 217) and proposed a larger scale study that encompasses a greater diversity of nations. They identified some major holes not only in curriculum content and children’s understanding of historical significance, but also in the messages that teachers provide children as they teach the curriculum. From the results of this particular study, further research is also required into teaching methodology, examining how nationalistic ideals are communicated through the beliefs and practices of educators.

Engaging in one of the few large scale research studies, Peter Lee and Rosalyn Ashby (2000) explored changes in students’ historical understanding between the ages of seven and fourteen, with a focus on the acquisition of procedural understanding. Student responses to prompts and interview questions were analyzed as data sources for this study. However, it must be noted that Lee and Ashby decided to take an indirect approach, inferring student understanding from indirect questioning. More direct questions were asked of students in situations “...where the researchers had less experience with students’ reactions to tasks in a particular area” (2000, p. 203). This inherent lack of consistency in the questioning procedures raises its own questions about whether the analysis of Lee and Ashby is reliable when much of the information gathered had already been significantly interpreted through many different lenses.

Lee and Ashby (2000) determined that though children tend to progress as a group in their understanding, it is too simplistic to base progression in children’s understanding solely on age. Much of the development of children’s historical understanding is influenced by what is taught, how it is taught, and assessment practices (Lee & Ashby, 1997), rather than a specific progress through an age determined developmental process. As Lee and Ashby (2000) envision historical understanding, students are taken far beyond critique and multiple perspectives, to

form complex skills that will assist in questioning and development of sophisticated understandings.

In a more optimistic study, VanSledright (2002b) studied how students can use historical documents to construct evidence based interpretations of controversial events in American history. In this study, VanSledright (2002) acted as both instructor and researcher to a class of 23 fifth grade students for four months. To create a representative sample, VanSledright, in conjunction with the homeroom teacher, chose eight students to represent the class demographic. These students were chosen based on their ethnic background, economic status, and gender. VanSledright (2002b) also chose these students based on their reading ability, wanting to ensure that strong, average, and weak readers were represented in the study. Using the context of two performance tasks, students employed a number of primary documents as evidence (accounts and images) to answer a historical question where the answer is not clear, even to professional historians.

Through conversations with the eight primary school children, VanSledright (2002b) was able to determine that students demonstrated significant growth in their ability to use historical documents as evidentiary support to form and support an argument. In his discussion, VanSledright is cautiously optimistic, noting that "...the data suggest that teaching the fifth graders to think about history using specialized investigative practices and analytic processes met with some conditional success" (p.149). He concludes that through their investigations in history, students were able to recognize that reliability of documents is variable, the perspective of the author must be considered, and that interpreting documents is a process fraught with complexity. By providing students with the skills to move beyond simply accepting what is written in the textbook, they acquired the ability to question, rationalize, and arrive at reasonable

conclusions in their study of history. Despite whether a sample of eight students is generalizable and whether these students consistently reached higher levels of sophisticated thought, this study represents the potential that exists within students and teachers. This glimpse into “doing history” allows researchers and teachers to explore the possibility that students, even young students, can benefit and grow in their historical understanding through purposeful instruction.

In an attempt to implement the theoretical in a practical situation, Jada Kohlmeier (2006) investigated how 9th grade students used empathy as they examined the experiences of women through three historical accounts. As a researcher-practitioner, Kohlmeier accessed her 52 ninth grade students as subjects, engaging them in a process of using webs, Socratic seminars, and narrative essays to construct historical empathy. During seminars that progressed through each of the three documents, Kohlmeier notes that the students demonstrated a growing capacity to articulate their empathy. Not only did the students become more proficient at historical thinking skills such as critical reading and identifying perspective, but they also “...began to work hard at recognizing the differences between the historical period of the author and the text compared to the present, which required them to re-examine prior knowledge both to fill in gaps and to challenge their preconceptions of the period” (p. 51). This study illuminated the inquiry nature of history. Rather than exploring history in a linear fashion, students need to be able ask meaningful questions and struggle to find an answer or ask a different question to create a strong personal connection with the historical actors. Ultimately, as Kohlmeier notes, “...when given rich opportunities to investigate, analyze, and synthesize history as experienced by individuals of a certain era, students can demonstrate increasingly sophisticated abilities in historical empathy and critical analysis of historical events” (p. 54).

As many of researchers in the area of children's historical understanding explore diverse issues centering on development of understanding, teaching practices and curriculum choices, there is an underlying sense of pessimism. Kohlmeier (2006) and VanSledright (2002) provide much needed optimism to this topic by working with students over an extended period of time to support their belief that students are ultimately capable of developing sophisticated sense of historical understanding. Further research is required, on a large scale, to determine if their optimism is warranted.

Using Primary Documents in the Development of Historical Understanding

Using primary documents in the classroom is popular method of engaging students and providing an authentic method of illuminating the past. Yet, educators must consider if they are doing students a disservice by indiscriminately using historical sources in the classroom. With the growing access to documents and images through digitization projects, this question is not only relevant, but is also essential to the pedagogical discussion of how historical understanding is constructed by students.

A strategy that is growing in popularity in classrooms to help students construct a sense of how the past is different from the present is the use of historical sources. Incorporating primary sources, unedited accounts (text, visual or audio) created by a contemporary of a given time, is seen as a progressive strategy in actively engaging students in the process of "doing history." As educators introduce these sources into their classrooms, it is important to be clear about how primary sources are defined. Monica Edinger (2000) wrestles with the definition of primary sources to the extent it becomes clear that even an old textbook was a "...secondary source when new, [but] it is now a primary source, revealing pedagogical attitudes at the time it

was written” (p. 24). Barton (2004) proposes the phrase “original historical sources” as more inclusive because it encompasses primary sources and secondary sources that have become primary sources. This terminology would allow the students to then work with the sources without having to classify them into rigid categories of primary or secondary sources. While Barton and Edinger both provide valid points regarding the semantics of sources, primary source remains an accepted term and thus will be used interchangeably along with the terms historical sources and original source documents.

While it may be tempting for teachers to employ constructivist teaching methodologies with primary documents, the work of Stuart Foster, John Hoge, and Richard Rosch (1999), argue for direct instruction in order for children to successfully access visual primary documents. Using third, sixth and ninth grade students, the authors conducted interviews which explored students’ ability to “read” historical photographs and make inferences about the date of the photograph, why the photograph was taken and preserved, and the lives of the people in the photograph (Foster et al., 1999). From this study, Foster et al. concluded that generally students’ abilities to make inferences improves as they mature; however, even as students mature, their abilities to employ historical thinking do not necessary become more sophisticated. Limiting the usefulness of this conclusion is that Foster et al. (1999) did not provide a more detailed description of the students’ prior instruction and experience with interpreting and making inferences from historical photographs. Gauging prior student understanding is an important aspect of such a study. As Barton (1997b) and VanSledright (2002b) demonstrated, appropriate scaffolding is necessary for students to become proficient and critical consumers of historical sources. Yet, it is the accessibility of visual images for primary and elementary-aged children that make this research so valuable. Indeed, further study of this topic is warranted to determine

if age appropriate instruction and opportunities to engage prior understanding assist young children in accessing historical sources in their study of history.

Though students may be given rich opportunities to explore historical documents, without pedagogically sound instruction on evaluating historical sources, and opportunities to apply their learning, many students revert to a “I just kinda know” mentality. In his year long study, Barton (1997b) explored how fifth graders developed an understanding of historical evidence and its applications. During the course of this study, Barton taught the students how to read historical documents with a critical eye and provided the students with opportunities to demonstrate their learning. Yet, when these same students engaged in projects where their newfound skills could be applied, Barton (1997b) notes that “...students neglected the evidence altogether...[and] developed their projects without making use of any of the information available” (p. 419). Students simply abandoned the evidence and employed a narrative construction to communicate their position.

Though the usefulness of fictional historical stories in teaching history has been viewed positively by some (Barton, 1996; Levstik & Pappas, 1992), Barton (1997b) indicates that caution must be used when framing historical understanding using nonfiction narratives that students may approach in an uncritical manner without the ability or strategies to determine the veracity of the work. By believing historical knowledge can exist independently of the evidence, students do not make connections between the historical documents and their role as evidence in the creation of a specific version of history. As a result, application of learning surrounding historical documents needs to be strengthened and explicitly taught.

Foster and Yeager (1999) explored the impact of a national history curriculum that encourages critical reading and questioning of historical documents. Data was collected from 51

students through both written questions and interviews, from which Foster and Yeager extrapolated that students tended to answer similar interview and written questions differently. Indeed, in answering the written questions, students were more likely to answer in a way that indicate a belief that there was a knowable, unquestionable truth about the events of the Boston Massacre. However, in discussion during the interviews, the same students demonstrated that they were comfortable with the notion that historical events are not completely knowable, but that an understanding is constructed from the evidence. Though not familiar with the topic, “pupils approached their analysis of the Boston Massacre in particular, and the study of history in general, with a healthy skepticism. They refused to accept the sources at face value and understood that accounts from the past are fallible and often replete with limitations” (p. 313). Foster and Yeager, along with Ruth Sandwell (2003) and Barton (1997a), conclude that students need specific instruction in which they are taught how to question historical information and examine historical documents in a manner that takes them beyond the evident bias.

Though VanSledright’s article, “Confronting History’s Interpretative Paradox While Teaching Fifth Graders to Investigate the Past” (2002a), is based on the much analyzed study of his work with how fifth grade students approach doing history (VanSledright, 2002b), he also introduces new insights, and asks several difficult questions in this piece. Using the context of the Jamestown Starving Time, VanSledright monitored his pedagogical approach of teaching history with historical documents to elementary students and assessed how the students responded to his teaching.

The process of teaching young students to question historical documents for source, reliability, and significance allowed the children to gain valuable skills; however, it also brought into question some fundamental aspects of history teaching (VanSledright, 2002a). As the

students questioned the validity of historical sources, VanSledright noted they "...jump[ed] from initial trust in the general veracity of accounts to the conclusion that people were prevaricating" (2002a, p. 1104). By not understanding the sophisticated nature of creating an interpretation of historical events from accounts, students were unable to engage in a meaningful way with the texts. Their desire to categorize sources as completely right or completely wrong prevented them from creating a reasoned, persuasive argument about the events (VanSledright, 2002a). As VanSledright witnessed this growing distrust in the students, he questioned whether it was right that young students were taught to question the authority of the textbook, particularly with their rudimentary understanding of the very essence of the rules for interpreting historical evidence.

These are certainly significant questions that need to be considered as curricula are reformed and teaching practices are examined. More meaningful, however, are VanSledright's (2002a) conclusions that as students engaged with historical documents, questioning reliability and significance, they also made striking gains in their understanding. The students developed a comprehensive knowledge base and understanding of a history "mystery," negotiated the limits of historical interpretation, tangled with the interpretative nature of historical study, and constructed historical knowledge (VanSledright, 2002a). As VanSledright notes, using the study of history "...provides students with in-school experience in becoming active, thoughtful democratic citizens, wide awake to the rights and responsibilities they must learn to exercise" (p. 1107). Though content coverage may suffer, these students learned a valuable set of skills that, with further sophistication, will enable them to become critical consumers, not only of historical sources but in many facets of their daily lives.

Wineburg (1997), in his intriguing study comparing the manner in which high school students and historians approach historical texts, postulates several of the conclusions presented

by VanSledright (2002a). Using the Battle at Lexington Green, Wineburg presented eight historians and eight high school students with documents ranging from primary sources to fictional narratives. Significantly, the eight historians were from varied disciplines, none of which was American history. Wineburg deliberately chose historians who would be uncomfortable with the content of the documents so that they would clearly exhibit the dichotomy between how historians and high school students approach historical evidence.

Historians, regardless of their level of understanding of a particular specialization in content, approached the documents in a considerably different manner than the high school students. Wineburg (1997) notes that the historians were able to comprehend the subtext of the documents, exploring the author's intentions in creating the document, as well as exploring the messages that may be cultural or subconscious constructions. For the students, however, the textbook provided the most reliable account of the Battle at Lexington Green. This was determined by the students without critically analyzing the interpretative nature of the textbook or the biased language used by the author. Wineburg describes this difference in approach by noting that for the students "...reading history was not a process of puzzling about the authors' intentions or situating texts in a social world but gathering information, with texts serving as bearers of information" (p. 74). On the other hand, the historians engaged with the documents as human creations that required contextualizing within a cultural construction. Wineburg calls into question the decision to teach history to students differently from the way historians approach doing history. This elemental question demands that educators examine the disservice that they do the students by removing the essence of critical inquiry from the curriculum and presenting students with an authoritative, narrative textbook.

Sandwell (2003) furthers this argument by stating that primary documents can not be introduced to students with the limited intention of determining bias. Drawing on the work of Barton (1997), Sandwell argues that students may well be able to articulately engage with historical documents, but they are often unable to apply critical and evidentiary skills to a particular historical situation. By using primary sources as simply a method of evaluating bias, students are prevented from understanding the central activity of historians, which is “...negotiating that middle ground between complete relativism and absolute truth” (Sandwell, 2003, p. 174). Sandwell counters this concern with a series of lessons that encourage students to understand the critical context by examining the difference between history and the past, truth and meaning, and exploring the world that the document was created (Sandwell, 2003). The notion that history is an active process, a process that students must be engaged in, is central to the introduction of primary documents in the study of history.

The potential that the introduction of primary documents offers students is indisputable. However, it does not come without caveats. Concern that historical sources can be used indiscriminately and inappropriately is valid, and must be addressed. Through the work of Barton (1997) and VanSledright (2002) it is clear that students are capable of engaging with historical texts in a meaningful manner. However, as we approach a changing pedagogy in teaching history, it is necessary to understand the connection between the discipline of history and the study of history in social studies. Students need to understand that the versions of history that they read in their textbooks are human creations, and that the study of history should be based on a piecing together of available evidence. Following this important distinction, it is also important to provide students with the necessary scaffolding to contextualize their learning. With explicit instruction and judicious use, the introduction of historical documents within the

classroom will not only enrich students' experiences, it will also encourage them to become more critical consumers of ideas.

Developing Historical Understanding in the Classroom

An examination of current scholarship in children's historical understanding provides intriguing possibilities for students as they study history. Rather than focusing on the limitations of children's ability to understand the complexities of historical thought, many scholars choose to focus on the potential of engaging students in the process of "doing history". Through this process, students become actively engaged in constructing an interpretation of the past that reflects critical analysis, reasoned judgment, and the use of evidence. The vision of the history classroom that is reflected in current research is by no means easily achievable; however, with constructivist strategies, the aspiration of creating student historians is closer to reality.

It is in Sam Wineburg's (2001) oft quoted examination of the differences between how professional historians and high school students deconstruct historical texts that the deficiencies in the practices of teaching history to students becomes clearly evident. Wineburg presented a series of historical documents relating to the battle at Lexington Green to eight historians, all of whom work in diverse areas of specialization. As each historian worked through the documents, which ranged from primary sources to textbook accounts and fictional narratives, they demonstrated a methodology and manner of approaching the texts that was common. Each historian approached the documents in a methodical manner, asking critical questions at each stage. Central to the historians' analysis was information about the authors of the documents and their potential motivation. As Wineburg summarizes, "To historians, a document's attribution was not the end of the document but its beginning; sources were viewed as people, not objects,

as social exchanges, not sets of propositions. In this sense, the sourcing heuristic was simply the manifestation of a belief system in which texts were defined by their authors” (2001, p. 77).

Throughout their work, the historians clearly engaged on a personal level, questioning and “talking” with the documents.

The Advanced Placement high school students also demonstrated that they have a common way of looking at historical documents. Though very sophisticated readers, the high school students approached the historical documents as informational text. Interestingly, regardless of the sophistication of their reading strategies, these students were unable to critically assess the implications of authorship, shifting language, or comprehend that each document was a social construction (Wineburg, 2001). Ultimately, the high school students chose the textbook as providing the most reliable account of the battle at Lexington Green; conversely, the historians placed the textbook account as the least reliable. This discrepancy illuminates a fundamental predicament in the teaching of history in our schools.

Sam Wineburg’s (2001) examination of high school students’ interaction with historical documents is corroborated by John Wooden’s (2008) study of sixth graders using documents on black-white relations during the American Civil War era. Wooden selected two strong readers from his class to examine several sources focused on the perspective of Abraham Lincoln on race. Within this limited study, Wooden concluded that while the students engaged with documents in a way that went beyond simple reading comprehension, they did not create connections between the documents. Wooden also concluded that “...it is important for teachers to be skillful in the selection of sources that represent the complicated nature of the past and the study of history...[recognizing that] students can become frustrated with the conflicting nature of

historical evidence” (2008, p 29). This study provides further clarity about the important role the teacher plays in supporting the development of historical understanding in students.

In Barton’s (1997) study of fourth and fifth grade students it becomes evident that regardless of the scaffolding provided by teachers, students often fail to make connections between historical documents and evidence. Students were actively engaged in historical inquiry using historical documents throughout the study. In the instructional model used by Barton, students also actively participated in social learning activities to promote greater depth of understanding. Yet when opportunities were presented to students to demonstrate their ability to apply the sophisticated skills they had demonstrated, the students reverted to their previously unskilled approach. Thus, it is important that students are adept at using sophisticated thinking skills.

Students in the present study made impressive use of their understanding in analyzing primary sources describing the battle at Lexington Green. These fourth and fifth graders engaged in precisely the kinds of historical thinking that eluded the high schoolers studied by Wineburg (1992)...Students’ experiences with disagreements, with bias, and with memory – all developed outside the context of school history – equipped them with the critical skills needed for sound historical reasoning. (Barton, 1997, pp. 419-420)

An essential element of Barton’s conclusion indicates that young children, even elementary school aged children, are capable of creating sophisticated notions of historical understanding.

Barton (1997) also noted, however, the students often relegated some documents to fictional status because they recognized historical sources are not without bias or question. The students were unwilling to consider that documents which provided disparate accounts or were contradictory still had evidentiary value. Barton concluded that students are capable of learning

and applying the skills that form the foundation of historical understanding, however, they “...need much more experience connecting historical evidence and conclusions. Despite their critical strengths, students did not spontaneously bring these to bear on their historical studies” (p. 424). Students clearly need to understand how our worldview is constructed and how historical evidence plays a role in creating that understanding.

Students are often introduced to topics in history through the use of engaging fictional narratives that are based on the actual events. In an earlier paper, Barton (1996) explores the dangers of using narrative structures in developing historical understanding. Though narratives are a natural way to retell and engage students in the study of history, people tend to simplify the stories, resulting in an inaccurate understanding of historical events. The impact of this simplification, Barton explains, is students’ tendency to “distort history by thinking of it in terms of uniform, linear progress (or sometimes decline)” (1996, p. 72). The collapsed version of the past created by the students breeds further misconceptions and misunderstandings, particularly when only the major figures and events of history are deemed worthy of remembering.

Also working with upper elementary students, VanSledright (2002c) corroborates research that children have the ability to construct historical understanding in a mature and sophisticated manner. VanSledright advocates engaging students in active inquiry, where the investigative act of doing history is of primary importance. Indeed, by “...placing the investigation process front and center, history teachers expose the fact that the reality to which an interpretation refers is nothing other than someone’s view of that reality” (2002c, p 149). This process also allows students to become motivated historians, engaged and responsible for their own learning.

Echoing Barton (1996) and Wineburg's (2001) concerns about comprehension and the use of narrative structures, VanSledright (2002c), also found that students had a tendency to read for literal comprehension when approaching historical documents. By engaging students in active historical inquiry, they are encouraged to learn critical thinking skills which allow them to ultimately approach remnants of the past with an analytic eye. VanSledright emphasizes the need for students to become proficient not only with reading for the purpose of gathering information, but that they also need to become proficient with reading inter-textually. Thus students need to be able to examine words and images created long ago, in a different context than their own, and detect the perspectives and biases of the author, as well as any subtext and allusions to other historical issues. VanSledright expresses faith in the potential of students to engage in doing history. He also cautions, however, that to achieve positive results, assessment, resources, pre-service teacher education, and ongoing professional development will all need to be modified to provide the necessary supports for approaching history as an active process.

The most subtle, and perhaps the most difficult, issue to address in developing students' historical understanding is the notion of language. Chris Husbands (1996) examines how fundamental language is to the construction of knowledge, particularly knowledge about the past. Not only do societal understandings of words change over time, but terminology and analytic language that relate directly to historical study must be considered. Teachers need to be cognizant that "...learners and teachers construe meanings in different ways. It is not that the language of history is unfamiliar to the learner but that the learner already attaches different meaning to the language" (Husbands, 1996, p. 32). Compounding the language issue is the interpretative nature of the language that is used in the classroom. Ultimately, teachers use language to construct a version of the past, however, the very language that teachers use

predisposes students to a specific interpretation. Thus, both teachers and students need to critically assess the language being used to communicate information about history because it impacts the development of historical understanding.

Resources for Teaching History

To witness the full potential and to mitigate the possible limitations of developing historical understanding in students, changes need to be made in how educators approach teaching history. Educators must take steps to reduce the reliance on the textbooks that are so pervasive in history classrooms. David Korbin notes that not only do textbooks convey history through a narrative structure, but a "...tone of authority pervades textbook narratives; producing history textbooks has always been, and remains, susceptible to contemporary pressures" (1996, p. 4). Though students, and often educators, believe they are receiving an accurate and objective account through a textbook narrative, textbooks have a distinct subtext that represents the cultural, social, and political mores of the time in which the book was written.

As a solution to this, Korbin suggests that rather than a textbook, students should be provided with a guide book. Instead of acting as an impediment to the study of history, the textbook can provide the skeleton of the content. How students learn history would be the focus of the guidebook, which would contain primary documents, places for students to ask questions and create their own definitions. The guide book would further focus on developing the skills of apprentice historian by analyzing, synthesizing and validating, and provide opportunities for students to practice these skills with appropriate scaffolding (Korbin, 1996). This ambitious strategy to overcome educators' reliance on textbooks will need significant support since many

educators themselves are also just learning to critically examine history from a variety of perspectives.

Another popular and less intensive method of reducing educators' reliance on the textbook is to incorporate primary documents as a supplement to textbook materials (Barton, 1996, 1997; Britt et al., 2000; Levstik & Barton, 2001; Sandwell, 2003; VanSledright, 2002c). Rather than read a narrative account, it is much more powerful for students to experience the voices of those who participated in the events. Using historical documents also demands that students engage directly with a variety of perspectives, biases, and conflicting accounts. They are called upon to use critical inquiry to try to resolve the conflicts between competing documents and ultimately accept that a single "true" version of history is unknowable.

Sandwell (2003) also explored the limitations of developing children's historical understanding, particularly with the use of primary documents. The essence of Sandwell's argument is that "students in elementary and secondary school tend to learn about history as an inert set of mostly irrelevant facts: history is a "finished product" rather than an "active process"" (2003, p. 183). As a result, students do not actively engage in doing history. To counteract this disengagement, many teachers introduce primary documents into their social studies classrooms.

While using primary documents is clearly a method of engaging students in the active process of doing history, Sandwell (2003) cautions that these documents are often used only for determining bias. Providing an explicit model, Sandwell structures a series of lessons that will first encourage students to understand the fundamental difference between history and the past. The next lesson engages the students in the work of historians: to distinguish truth and meaning.

Finally, students read historical documents to determine the multiplicity of voices and meanings that documents may contain.

A lesson plan in the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) bulletin, *A Link to the Past* (Yell, Scheurman & Reynolds, 2004), encourages students to directly confront issues of conflicting evidence. Beyond identifying the differences within the primary documents related to the battle on Lexington Green, students are called upon to determine criteria for assessing the credibility of sources, to create an interpretation of the events of April 19, 1775 and finally, the students are expected to use those documents to justify their interpretation. As a result, students are engaging in doing history in a manner similar to historians. Rather than reading a historical document simply for literal meaning or bias, students are assessing the document and actively using it for evidentiary purposes.

To overcome the limitations with using narrative structures, Barton (1996) provides suggestions such as explicitly instructing on the reasons for change, and for teachers to emphasize how the events and consequences are interconnected with other aspects of historical study. Edinger (2000), an educator who infuses her social studies teaching with primary sources, also uses historical narratives to develop understanding in her students. However, Edinger provides supports for using narratives as a method of developing historical understanding. Before introducing a historical fiction piece to her class, Edinger ensures that the students have acquired a deep understanding of the historical context of the piece because she wants her students to construct their own historical understanding. By creating a foundation with the historical context, students have the opportunity to be more critical consumers of the narrative in historical fiction, especially since “providing them with a prepackaged view absolves them from

creating one of their own” (2000, p. 125). Thus, Edinger treats historical fiction as a supplement to the development of historical understanding in her students.

It is essential that students understand that they themselves are a product of a particular world view and the people they are studying are also a product of their world view. Barton notes that “...teachers need to give students the opportunity to examine the ways in which the world view of people in the past differed from their own...[and] it is imperative that instruction focus on the diversity of experience that characterizes a given time period.” (1996, pp. 73-74). *A Link to the Past* (Yell, Scheurman & Reynolds, 2004), a bulletin published by the NCSS, provides specific strategies that support Barton’s suggestions. A “big ideas” lesson emphasizes that students need to be able to construct a “conceptual continuum” that will allow them to examine an issue through a particular lens. In this unifying lesson, students are asked to consider the concepts that are fundamental to a given context, and “by leading students to view concrete artifacts and events, as well of people and social phenomena, in terms of conceptual categories, we enhance their ability to discriminate the qualities and attributes reflected by people in a given context” (Yell, Scheurman & Reynolds, 2004, p. 36). By presenting artifacts that represent various perspectives, students learn to extrapolate meaning which can be applied to isolated facts, creating a cohesive and nuanced understanding of a historical context.

Students’ struggle with reading beyond the text is a common theme in scholarship exploring the historical understanding of students. Barton (1997), Husbands (1996), Wineburg (2001), and VanSledright (2002c) indicate that students’ inability to read the intertextual nature of historical documents, as well as the nuances of language, hampers their development of historical understanding. Husbands (1996) suggests that talk is the most important step that a teacher can make to connect the activities of historians, such as reading the subtext of documents

and creating interpretations using evidence, and students' role as learners. It is through questioning and discussing the events, interpretations, and evidence that students will learn to be more critical readers of historical documents and develop their sense of historical understanding. Rather than questioning for the correct answer, it is important to ask a purposeful question that will result in a thoughtful answer.

The goal of my research is to apply the lessons from my own classroom experiences as a teacher and the lessons from scholarly literature to a local context. Using the social studies program of studies developed for seventh grade Alberta students, I examined whether the use of primary source documents affected the development of historical understanding in students as described by VanSledright (2002c) and Wineburg (2001). The message of current research in children's historical understanding as it applies to my research is two fold. There is a message of hope; students, even young students, are capable of developing and articulating sophisticated historical understanding with explicit and purposeful instruction. There is also a message of change; educators must change how they develop historical understanding in their students. Each student must be an active participant in the construction of historical understanding and to support this, teachers must be trained to act as mentors, scaffolding students through the process of thinking as historians are trained to think. By facilitating a fundamental shift in how historical understanding is developed in our social studies classrooms, educators can provide students with invaluable insights into their own world as well as worlds of the past and future.

Summary

From these varied perspectives on the development of historical understanding emerges a common pattern. While a complex topic that can be viewed in diverse ways, it is clear in the

literature that historical understanding can be developed in students, even young students, but must be approached in a purposeful, thoughtful manner by teachers. As a result, I structured the learning and activities for the students in the project with the goal of building their understanding and supporting their skill development with opportunities for practice.

Chapter 3

Conducting Historical Inquiry with Seventh Graders

The purpose of this research project is to gather evidence of the extent to which the use of primary documents as evidence encourages the development of historical understanding in students. Historical understanding is the result of complex and nuanced application of skills, as Wineburg (2001) terms it, a process of collaboration. This process is further described by VanSeldright (2002c) as:

...making a series of careful judgments about the perspective presented in, say, a diary, or an image, or eyewitness testimony. Judgments of the relative validity and reliability of perspectives also must be made. In doing so, investigators need to read the evidence for different sorts of political and sociopolitical subtexts, as a means of sorting out validity and reliability issues. From this collection of research techniques and judgments comes the construction of a viable interpretation of the events. Investigators then become authors as they make a carefully argued case – as tightly linked to the evidence as possible – for their understanding of the event or events. (p. 6)

It is this description of historical understanding that guides the exploration of the subject in this research project. In the first section of this chapter, I explore the methodology used in the research study. In the final section of the chapter, I explain the procedure which was used to elicit the evidence.

Case Study

Using a case study methodology is particularly relevant to this research. Sharan Merriam (1998) defines case study as a process that explores an instance, phenomenon or unit using a

bounded system. Specifically, through the process of a heuristic case study, “previously unknown relationships and variables can be expected to emerge from case studies leading to a rethinking of the phenomenon being studied. Insights into how things get to be the way they are can be expected to result from case studies” (Strake, 1981, as cited in Merriam, 1998, p. 47).

Exploring the development of historical understanding in students using primary documents is a bounded unit of study. This study was bounded by a two week time frame and by the study of the experiences of one seventh grade classroom. Data collection was bounded by a purposeful sampling of ten students, selected from the consenting participants to be representative of the classroom demographics.

John Creswell (1998) also notes that case studies draw from multiple sources of data. During the course of this study, data was collected from several sources including student research logs, journal entries, tasks, field notes and observations, as well as the focus interviews.

While case studies are not limited to a particular methodology for reporting, Creswell (2005) remarks that reporting of researcher biases is an essential component to a creating the case study narrative. For me, situating myself as researcher within the research context is very important. Realizing that I come to this research with a host of past experiences, ideas and perceptions is not only important to me, but it also important for the consumers of the research. By explaining the context of this particular case study and my personal investment in it, it is my hope that other readers will be able to find areas that resonate with their own experiences.

Grounding the Research: Using Grounded Theory for Data Analysis

Grounded theory is a research methodology where theory emerges from the data collected. Developed by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in 1967, grounded

theory is a qualitative methodology that is "...used to generate a theory that explains, on a broad conceptual level, a process, an action, or interaction about a substantive topic" (Creswell, 2005, p. 396). As Merriam (1998) notes, the theory developed is usually setting specific, rather than a global theory. This is particularly useful for a limited case study such as being conducted in this research project because it allows the experiences of specific students to be used for the development of practical applications. Glaser and Strauss (1967) also postulate that grounded theory corresponds with the realities of practical application and is understandable to the people who will be working with the emerging theory. It is hoped, then, that not only will the case study resonate with readers, but that the results can be implemented in the classroom.

The approach to data analysis in a grounded theory methodology is systematic. Through open coding of the data in the first phase initial categories within the data are identified. Strauss and Corbin describe the categories as having "...conceptual power because they are able to pull together around them other groups of concepts or subcategories" (1990, p. 65). The second stage of coding is known as axial coding. One category is selected by the researcher as the core phenomenon, and the other categories are then related to the core phenomenon (Creswell, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In the final stage of coding, selective coding, a theory is development through the exploration of the abstract interrelationships between the categories of the axial coding stage. The result is a substantive theory that is based on interactions within the research.

While using primary sources in the development of historical understanding has been addressed in many contexts (Barton, 2004; Korbin, 1996; Sandwell, 2003; VanSledright, 2002c) it has yet to be explored in the context of the 2006 Alberta Social Studies program of studies. Grounded theory was selected as a method for data analysis because of the focus on emerging themes and the potential to develop a theory grounded in the data from students. This study

seeks to answer the question: what is the nature of the development of historical understanding in students using primary documents?

Visiting the Research Site

Tyndale Junior High School (pseudonym) is located in the suburbs of a large urban centre in the Canadian prairies. It is the largest junior high school in the district with a student population of approximately 650 students. Tyndale is also a district magnet school for a range of student programming, including the French Immersion, Late French Immersion, Logos Christian Education, Academic Challenge, Behaviour Improvement, Knowledge and Employability, Learning Assistance, and Junior Opportunity programs. As a result, though part of an affluent community, students at Tyndale represent a diversity of socio-economic backgrounds. The school community also includes students from a variety of ethnic backgrounds; however, a majority of students are of European descent. A booming economy has led to growth in student population, which has placed stress upon the services of the special education programs.

Recently renovated, Tyndale Junior High School has a bright, modernized campus. The school population has access to four updated computer labs, including a mobile wireless laptop lab. Teachers are also able to incorporate technologies such as projectors, SMART boards, and video conferencing in their lessons. In the surrounding community, there is also access to a variety of cultural, social, and sporting opportunities that are often used to supplement classroom learning.

During the 2006-2007 school year, Tyndale Junior High School implemented the new grade seven social studies program of studies. It was the intention of the administration and teachers that the entirety of grade seven curriculum would be taught based on the new program

of studies. Since implementation was phased in with Kindergarten to grade three in 2005-2006 and grades four and seven in 2006-2007, none of the grade seven students had any experience with the principles of the new curriculum. Implementation was a new experience for both students and teachers.

Tyndale Junior High School also has a strong staff development program. In the second cycle of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI), the school focused on developing Professional Learning Communities centred on subject areas. This initiative encouraged the development of a collaborative atmosphere and willingness to explore educational innovations. For the third cycle of AISI beginning in September 2006, Tyndale Junior High School staff, as well as a majority of other schools in the district, is focusing on honing their emerging understanding of the principles of Assessment for Learning. Working within their existing Professional Learning Community groupings, teachers are collaborating to improve student learning through formative assessment.

Tyndale Junior High School was chosen as the research site for this project because of its accessibility and the commitment of the teachers to implementing the new social studies program of studies.

Room 209

Room 209 represents one of seven seventh grade classrooms at Tyndale Junior High School. The classroom teacher, Mrs. Thompson (pseudonym), has created an atmosphere to welcome her students and encourage them in their learning. Mrs. Thompson is a twenty-seven year veteran to the teaching profession, having taught in various Canadian provinces, as well as internationally. A self-described traditional social studies teacher, Mrs. Thompson focuses on

teaching her students about what she considers to be the important events in Canadian history. Having taught Canadian history for over a decade, Mrs. Thompson believes that students need a certain amount of content knowledge to be able to understand the complexities of Canadian history. There is a strong element of lecture in her teaching style, along with structured note taking. Mrs. Thompson believes that constant review of the facts of history is an essential part of the learning process in social studies. Mrs. Thompson is a strong advocate for the necessity of teaching students Canadian history and often incorporates stories about key historical agents in her teaching.

Since it is the first year of implementation of the new social studies curriculum, Mrs. Thompson has not had the opportunity to access a great deal of professional development on implementation. She attended a one day overview session on the principles and goals of the new curriculum with the other seventh grade social studies teachers from Tyndale. Mrs. Thompson is also an active participant in the school's Professional Learning Community for social studies, which provides opportunities for discussion and peer support for implementation.

This year, Mrs. Thompson's class contains 25 students, with 11 girls and 14 boys. A majority of the students in this class have average reading abilities, with several students struggling with longer, complex passages. There are also several strong readers in the class. In this classroom none of the students have an Individual Program Plan, which would be in place to support students with special needs.

Working with this group of students does present two challenges within the context of this research project. The students in Room 209 have had few opportunities to engage meaningfully with primary sources other than the images that they encountered in their textbook.

Thus, time will need to be spent to ensure that students have a solid understanding how sources are read and be used for evidence.

Another challenge at Tyndale Junior High School is that the researcher is also a teacher on site. Though Room 209 is not the researcher's homeroom, I do come in contact with the students in her role as a teacher on staff in whole school or supervisory situations. This challenge, however, also provides the researcher with the beginnings of a rapport with the students. It is anticipated that the students will be more accepting of the introduction of another in teacher in their classroom without having to spend a great deal of time building credibility.

Background to the Lessons

The method for this research study was developed using two important considerations. Firstly, the topic that students in seventh grade social studies explore had to be based on the Alberta Learning mandated program of studies. It is important to note that the school chose to teach the new program of studies during this first year of implementation. Secondly, within the context of this research study, the goal was to illicit information from the students about the development of their historical understanding. Thus, a series of five lessons was developed to meet the needs of these contexts.

Since this study occurred during the latter part of the school year, the topic of study needed to be chosen from unit 7.2 Following Confederation: Canadian Expansions (Alberta Learning, 2006, p. 5). Specifically, the study addressed learner outcomes related to Louis Riel, the Red River Resistance and the Northwest Rebellion. According to the program of studies, students are expected to discuss Louis Riel's leadership role, examine the similarities and differences between the Red River Resistance and the Northwest Rebellion, explore the response

of the Canadian government and identify the Métis, First Nations, French and British perspectives.

Louis Riel's role in Canadian history is much debated, particularly depending upon the perspective taken. In 1867, the nation we now know of as Canada was confederated as the Dominion of Canada with the provinces of Canada (later Ontario and Quebec), Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. In the years following Confederation, the Canadian government attempted to deal with issues surrounding expansion into the west by ending the Hudson Bay Company's rule over Rupert's Land. The arrival of government agents to survey land in the Red River Settlement in 1868 prompted a swift, negative response from residents. As the government encouraged settlement in the west, the land claims of the Aboriginal and Métis were disputed. The Métis, led by Louis Riel, refused to let the government appointed governor into the community and seized Fort Garry. During this armed insurrection, an Ontarian named Thomas Scott was executed by the Métis, raising the ire of Anglophone Ontario. Compromises were reached, including provisions for Aboriginal and Métis land claims, and the province of Manitoba was formed (Government of Canada, n.d.).

For the next fifteen years, Louis Riel lived in exile in the United States and the settlement continued in the west. As the Métis settled in Saskatchewan and Northwest Territories, issues and grievances similar to the Red River Settlement continued. The Métis approached Louis Riel to represent them to petition the government. Believing that he was a missionary from God, Louis Riel decided that a grand gesture to win support from the Aboriginal, Métis and Francophone communities was necessary, and so an armed group of Métis seized the parish church at Batoche in 1885 (Government of Canada, n.d.). Within two months Louis Riel and his

followers were forced to surrender. A subsequent trial led to the conviction of Louis Riel for treason and he was executed in November 1885.

In the hundred and thirty years following the execution of Louis, he has been painted as both a hero and a traitor. For some people, particularly the Métis and Francophone communities of Canada, Louis Riel represents a man who stood up for the rights of minorities and whose protests against the Government of Canada made him the Father of Manitoba. For others, Louis Riel represents an insane man whose rebellious actions caused the deaths of many. With views on such a controversial figure being played out in the media, not only does Louis Riel present a mysterious figure for students, there is also plethora of original source documents available to examine.

Lessons

These five lessons, administered over the course of ten, 47 minute classroom blocks during two weeks in May, were based on sound pedagogy to honour the needs of the students, as well as elicit information about the development of students' historical understanding as they engage with original source documents. Central to sound pedagogy was ensuring that the students were provided with the necessary instruction, opportunities to practice what they were learning and, finally, employ those skills in a meaningful manner.

Creating a Context

The first lesson of this project involved an overview of the historical context. This background information contributed to the students' understanding of the time period, main actors and consequences. To achieve this, the students were presented a narrative about Louis

Riel, the Red River Resistance and Northwest Rebellion based on historical accounts and supported by images, maps and audio-visual materials. Both VanSledright (2002c) and Barton (2004) have noted that it is important for students to have a clear understanding of how their work and tasks fit into a larger historical scheme. This also enabled students to make connections with their previous understanding, and perhaps correct any misconceptions. The lesson structure also allowed the students to become comfortable with the researcher with a familiar instruction approach.

How is History Constructed?

The second lesson encouraged students to construct an understanding of how history is negotiated by historians. At the beginning of the lesson, students were clustered in small groups of two or three according to their reading abilities. Based on the advice of Mrs. Thompson, the homeroom teacher, students with stronger reading abilities were paired with students who needed assistance with reading for subsequent tasks. The groupings also took into account students who consented to participate in the study. The final focus interview encouraged students to draw upon their discoveries during the learning process which occurred in teams.

Each group of students was given a brown paper bag that contained artifacts. These artifacts were a collection of materials that represented the remnants that people leave behind; in this instance, the students were told that their artifacts were left behind in a hotel room trash can. For example, a bag may contain items such as a receipt for take-out food, a gum wrapper, an addressed envelope, part of a newspaper advertisement and a handwritten note. The students were challenged to construct a “picture” of the person who left these remnants behind, using the artifacts as evidence. After the students shared what they gleaned from the artifacts, the class

explored the role of history and historians. At this point, a distinction was made between primary and secondary sources, as well as difference between traces and accounts, as described by Seixas (1996).

Reading Sources Like a Historian

This lesson provided opportunities to review the students' understanding of primary and secondary sources, as well as an opportunity to model and practice the skills of using traces and accounts as evidence. The modeling procedure occurred as whole class instruction, as was the guided practice. Students then worked in their small groups to practice the skills of referring to original source documents, discussing, debating and recording evidence independently. During this lesson, students recorded their findings using the Research Log recording sheet that they used in future lessons for this project. Since using original source documents in a purposeful manner was foreign to this group of students, the structure that the Research Log provided necessary to focus the students. Taking the time to model and give students the opportunity for guided practice is essential because, as Anne Davies (2000) notes, students need time to learn, receive and give descriptive feedback, collect proof of their learning and self-assess.

Engaging with the Evidence

Over the course of four blocks, the students examined a historical quandary using original source documents. Students were provided with a package of approximately ten primary documents that included:

- Letter from Louis Riel regarding Charles Nolin's testimony, 1885

- Portrait of Louis Riel published in the *London Illustrated News*, 1885
- Proclamation issued against the rebels by Crozier, Commander of the Battleford Northwest Mounted Police detachment, 1885
- Gabriel Dumont's account of the Battle of Duck Lake from 1889
- Louis Riel's final statement at his trial, 1885 (excerpt)
- Testimony of Charles Nolin at Louis Riel's trial, 1885
- Diary entry of Walter Stewart, enlisted soldier, published in 1966
- Louis Riel's writings (exhibit at his trial, 1885)
- Alice Loomis's recollections of Louis Riel's trial, published in 1963
- Newspaper articles from *The Globe* and the *Montreal Gazette*

Though many documents were chosen for their suitability for a typical thirteen-year-old's reading level, in order to maintain the integrity of the evidence it was necessary to employ some documents that are more complex. Some of the documents, such as Louis Riel's final statement at his trial, were "translated" into age appropriate language for the students (VanSledright, 2002c). It is also important to note that these documents were selected by the researcher for the purpose of this study. The documents were selected from the diversity of documents available based on their accessibility for students. Reading level appropriateness, or the ability to make the reading level more appropriate while maintaining the integrity of the document, was a primary consideration. As well, it was important that a variety of voices were heard in the documents. The final consideration in the document selection was ensuring that not all the documents were text based, but did also include an image.

In authentic historical inquiry, the historian would select the appropriate documents to build their case, a complaint Barton (2004) levels at the use of primary documents in the typical classroom. However, due to the novice status of these students, prudence demanded that the students only deal with a limited number of documents. Thus, this with grouping of original source documents, each document was considered for its author, context, audience and perspective, and a balance between the voices was attempted.

Students were challenged to answer the question: should Louis Riel have been convicted of treason at his trial in 1885? Each student received a package of documents and they were encouraged to write directly on the documents, as well as in their Research Log, so that they engaged directly and immediately with the evidence. As they gleaned evidence from the documents, students were expected to begin formulating an answer to the question.

Constructing an Argument

Part of using evidence to construct an argument is using articulating a position. Since students rarely have an opportunity to construct an argument that is directly supported with evidence, this lesson provided modeling and guided practice. By the end of this lesson, students structured and supported their arguments.

Presenting the Position

As a culminating activity, students had an opportunity to share their positions with classmates. By sharing their positions, students were also be able to engage in discussions with classmates they had not worked with about their application of the evidence.

Data Collection

Data were collected from multiple sources to aid in triangulation during the process of data analysis. At the end of each lesson, the students were given a reflective journal prompt. These prompts were designed to monitor the development of the students' historical understanding. The prompts ranged from philosophical considerations such as: what does history mean to you? to practical applications such as: what did you find challenging about working with the original source documents?

At the end of the project, students submitted their Research Logs which were completed as they worked with the primary source documents. The logs enabled the researcher to observe whether the students used the documents to confirm factual information or if they used the documents in a critical manner to gather evidence for their position.

Finally, ten students were invited to participate in audio-taped focus group interviews. Interviews were conducted in student groupings of approximately three students. The students were excused from their regular class and the interview was conducted in a classroom. To provide the students with a foundation, the interview began with questions relating to an image provided by the researcher. Further conversation was aimed at obtaining an understanding of how the students perceive history, the work of historians and the use of evidence.

The researcher also completed field notes following each class with the students. These observations contributed another perspective on how the students were engaging with the primary source documents and the classroom dynamics as they worked.

Summary

The procedure for this study was drawn from the lessons learned by VanSledright (2002c) and Wineburg (2001), with an awareness of potential readability issues and the need for student support as they worked with the documents. These steps served as a plan of action, a way of approaching teaching students whose sense of historical understanding I was as yet unsure of. As with any teaching, however, the plan is merely a guideline and I soon discovered that student dynamics, as well as their varying levels of skill, would add other elements to the project.

Chapter 4

Working with the Evidence: Students Engage with Primary Sources

Our first class together began inauspiciously, 25 pairs of eyes politely staring at me, with varying degrees of interest. It was clear that I was a bit of novelty in the classroom; a teacher who taught in their school who was conducting a research project with them, but who had never taught them before. As I taught the lesson providing the context for Louis Riel's rise within the Métis community and the development of the Red River Resistance in 1869 and the second Metis Uprising in 1885, the use of maps and an excerpt from a graphic novel (Brown, 2003), encouraged students to respond with insightful questions, probing to discover more about Louis Riel. They wanted to know more about the relationships between the historical agents and in particular why they acted in certain ways. The execution of Thomas Scott provoked much conversation, with students curious about why Louis Riel didn't stop the execution, if he was as against it as Brown's (2003) account suggested. As we worked through the introductory lessons, my timeline was often threatened by the students' desire to discuss their understandings and perceptions further.

Following the introductory lessons, students were placed in groups to work with the primary sources with the goal of answering the central question, should Louis Riel have been convicted of treason at his trial in 1885? Students were placed in groups created by me with input from the homeroom teacher, Mrs. Thompson. The groups were developed to distribute students so that each group had a variety of student ability represented. Since the students would present their conclusions as a group, it was also important that the students who returned the forms to participate in the study were grouped together. Each student was provided with a

package of pre-selected primary sources and graphic organizers to guide them through the interpretation process. Due to the students' reading levels and the growing time constraints, I reduced the primary sources by removing two of the more text-laden documents. The group was provided a folder to store their materials, which I collected at the end of each class so that the materials and student work would not be misplaced. I explained to the students their responsibilities in this project. Due to time constraints, students needed to become an expert on some of the documents by reading the documents and completing the Original Source Document Organizer. After everyone had presented their documents, students individually completed the Organizing My Argument graphic organizer (Figure 2), developing a thesis statement about whether Louis Riel should or should not have been executed. This graphic organizer expected students to not only state their reasons for the thesis, but to provide excerpts from the evidence. Once students completed the Organizing My Argument graphic organizer, each student shared their position with the group. I encouraged each group to arrive at a consensus about whether or not Louis Riel should be executed.

The group work contributed an unpredictable dynamic to this research project. Limited by time and the homeroom teacher's need to have her classroom back, as well as the students' unfamiliarity with interpreting primary source materials, it was necessary to ensure that the students didn't become disengaged in having to work through ten documents independently. These groups not only supported the students as they worked, but also were sources for conflict. As much as Mrs. Thompson and I tried to create groups that capitalized on classroom dynamics, some students raised concerns about the efforts their partners were putting into the project and others expressed a desire to work on their own. However, the students remained on task for most of their working time and discussions were related to the documents and question.

As the students worked together interpreting the sources (Figure 1), both the classroom aide and I circulated. The classroom aide worked with a group of students who struggled with comprehension of the documents. While each group had a least one student who struggled with comprehension, as a class, the students worked to help each other understand the text of the documents, and asked insightful questions when something didn't make sense to them. Once the students had a basic understanding of a source, all students engaged in a group conversation about the meaning of the source. Whether a student struggled or not with the comprehension aspects, all students engaged in a lively debate about how a particular source could or could not be used to support their argument to answer the focus question. The original intention was to have each student write a short essay answering the question should Louis Riel have been convicted of treason at his trial in 1885? Then they would use their individual responses to create a group essay. The reality of the situation was the students needed more time with the documents, to read and discuss.

Primary Sources Used by Students

- Letter from Louis Riel regarding Charles Nolin's testimony, 1885
- Portrait of Louis Riel published in the *London Illustrated News*, 1885
- Proclamation issued against the rebels by Crozier, Commander of the Battleford Northwest Mounted Police detachment, 1885
- Gabriel Dumont's account of the Battle of Duck Lake from 1889
- Louis Riel's final statement at his trial, 1885 (excerpt)
- Testimony of Charles Nolin at Louis Riel's trial, 1885
- Diary entry of Walter Stewart, enlisted soldier, published in 1966
- Louis Riel's writings (exhibit at his trial, 1885)

Figure 1 Primary source documents used by students as evidence in their arguments

Organizing My Argument

I believe...	
because...	
Reason	Evidence

Figure 2 Student graphic organizer to support creating an argument and using evidence

As a result, I asked the students to create a group response that had a thesis statement and supporting evidence. As the students worked to create a unified response, each student demonstrated their investment in their point of view and interpretation of the evidence. Though asking each group to arrive at a consensus conclusion to the central question added tension in the groups, it is this tension that demonstrated the students' ability to use the evidence to support their arguments.

Arriving at a group consensus was challenging, but each student first constructed an argument about whether or not Louis Riel was guilty. One student noted that Riel was protecting his rights, supported by two quotes about "Indians suffering" and "half-breeds getting sick and weak" from Louis Riel's final trial statement. Another student noted that he believed "Louis Riel shouldn't have been executed in 1885 because he was trying to make the needs of the Metis people met and the government just ignored him. I found this information in the excerpt from the final statement of Louis Riel at his trial in Regina". While most students struggled to use evidence in a sophisticated manner, one group brought their arguments together to create a strong statement: "Louis also tried to help the Metis people when he first arrived in Canada. He describes how he helped them in his final statement. We know this because he said "We have made petitions, I have made petitions with other Canadian government asking to relieve the conditions of this country". From rudimentary to more sophisticated uses of evidence, the students certainly understood that they needed concrete reasons to put forth an argument.

The students did struggle with putting together the pieces of contradictory evidence. The evidence of Louis Riel's cousin, Charles Nolan, provided some dissonance and was at odds with many other pieces of evidence. As a result, many students struggled to fit this evidence into their understanding. Some dismissed the evidence as a man who was trying to save himself, noting

that “when Louis Riel wrote his letter it made him look like he was crazy but really was just mad at his cousin” and should not have been executed because of his cousin’s testimony. However, students who incorporated the evidence of Charles Nolan tended to make the argument that Riel was part of a greater plot make money from the Rebellion. As one student noted “Riel’s cousin told the truth about Riel’s evil plan...He talks about Riel’s plan to destroy England, Canada, Rom and Pope. Charles Nolan said that Riel was in it just for the money”. Several students believed that Louis Riel appeared insane and that he should not have been found guilty for this reason, applying Seixas’s (2006) principle of presentism to their understanding of the past.

Each student had a definite opinion about whether Louis Riel should have been found guilty at his trial in 1885. The opinion was divided and this sparked some intense debates in groups as students negotiated to arrive at a supportable conclusion for their concluding response. It was clear in the debriefing interviews that these debates continued well beyond the scope of the project for students who were heavily invested in their opinion.

There was also a certainty in the students’ writing about their argument. They were convinced that they had put the evidence together in such a way to arrive at a supportable conclusion, a conclusion that they believed in. While I classified their use of the primary source documents more frequently at the comprehension level rather than intertextual level, the students were becoming more adept at using the evidence. More importantly, a sense of their self-efficacy using the documents is strong. Students created a definite thesis statement, one way or the other, and used pieces of evidence to support their thesis statement, demonstrating their confidence in their understanding of the events and motivations of the people.

At the conclusion of the classroom lessons, two groups of students participated in small group focus interviews. Each group of five students was asked to examine a primary document

related to Louis Riel, which they had not seen before and, as a group, to talk through the information they could extrapolate from the document. The students were also asked questions (Appendix I) about their perceptions of the project and how it impacted their understanding. As with their work in class, the students tended to remain at the comprehension level when discussing the primary source documents. However, it is in these interviews that their personal confidence in their understanding of the events and motivations of the historical agents is clearly evident.

Interpreting the Results

During my time in Room 209, I was able to collect several artifacts from the students. These artifacts included their journal reflections, graphic organizers and concluding responses. In addition, I also interviewed ten students in small groups, which also provided further insight into the project.

It was my intention to use grounded theory to interpret the results of this study. However, upon reviewing the data collected, there were limitations in the quantity of data I collected, as well as the content of the data. It became clear to me that I did not have enough evidence for a substantive theory to emerge from the data. I recognized the appropriateness of using VanSledright's (2002c) model to guide my data analysis. Thus, beginning with VanSledright's model and later making some modifications to fit the context of this study, I was able to develop meaningful conclusions about the implications of this study.

VanSledright (2002c) developed a methodology for coding results of student interaction with primary source materials. Using a four level continuum, VanSledright explored the

complexity of student response, ranging from a summary position to intertextual evaluations.

The four coding categories determined by VanSledright (2002c) include:

Level 1: Comprehension Monitoring Strategies

In Level 1, students read and have the ability to summarize the intent of a document (both written and visual sources).

Level 2: Intratextual Evaluations

In Level 2, students are able to read the document and infer the perspective of the author, as well as determine if the document contributed to their understanding of the events.

Level 3: Event Knowledge Accretion

In Level 3, students are able to question the source in relation to other sources, as well as corroborate the details with other accounts.

Level 4: Critical Intertextual Evaluations

In Level 4, students are able to assess the reliability of the source, as well as judge it against other sources and apply the information to their interpretation of the events.

Level 1 and 2 are considered by VanSledright (2002c) to be global reading strategies, or strategies that students should apply to anything they read. Level 3 and 4 are history-specific reading strategies. The fourth category is of particular importance because it is a specialized reading strategy that is used by trained historians who not only interpret a particular source, but also bring other known sources into the interpretation, comparing, assessing, accepting and rejecting based upon those other sources. Level 4 in particular, VanSledright notes,

...come[s] closest to what historical investigators must do to successfully engage historical documents and evidence: comparing, contrasting, corroborating details contained within the documents and evaluating – against others – an author’s or artist’s

perspective and its reliability on the basis of assessing his or her partisan position or allegiance. This way of reading must occur with a view to understanding historical context in which an event occurred” (2002c, p 162).

While logically these steps on the continuum are progressive, students are not necessarily bound to follow the steps in a chronology as their understanding deepens.

Using the graphic organizers, student response essays and the portion of the interviews where the students discuss a document, I coded the results using VanSledright’s (2002c) continuum. A majority of student writing and discussion occurred using the global reading strategies of Levels 1 and 2. Students were able to summarize documents adeptly and were strong at determining the perspective of the author. Examining the diary entry of Walter Stewart who was president at the Battle of Batoche, one student noted that Stewart “...thinks his trike on Batoche was heroic. An example of this was how he glamorized his own troops”. Another student used the final statement of Louis Riel to arrive at the conclusion that Riel “...thought what he was good of everyone [sic]. He believed that God was on his side”.

However, most students had a tendency to examine the documents in isolation. They were often frustrated at the prompt to consider aspects of the source that needed to be backed by other sources. As one student noted: “...it was hard to find all the evidence and match it up with other evidence so it would make sense” and another student’s frustration was clear as he said, “I found it challenging using evidence because I do not now if that source is accurate and not just another person [sic] belief about Louis Reil or there [sic] perspective”. As I observed the students conducting their discussions to arrive at a consensus, the students tended to be more comfortable examining and interpreting one source at a time rather than examining the sources as a whole. As a result, the groups developed arguments to the central question that were linear

with the evidentiary support compartmentalized. The students did not recognize how documents could work together to provide layers of support for their arguments.

While VanSledright's (2002c) structure for coding student responses was useful for examining students' work with sources, it was also limiting. In the work samples collected and interviews, students rarely demonstrated the ability to work with the documents at the higher levels of thought. However, throughout the student responses there was a sense of growing self-efficacy. I was particularly struck by one response. This student was not the strongest in the class academically and often put himself down as he worked with his group members examining his assigned documents. Yet, he was an avid participant in the discussions and frequently made points, both in whole class and small group discussions that made some of the more confident and assertive students pause and consider their own position. Yet, his response to the journal prompt asking the students to consider what was challenging about this task, shows something different: "I found that the comprehension part was the most challenging. Other than that, it was not that challenging. I thought it was kind of fun."

This student was not the only one to demonstrate a sense of empowerment. During the interviews, this growing confidence about how to approach documents was quite clear. One student commented "...the documents were kind of hard, because a lot of the things they were saying made it sound like it was fact for sure, but when you think about it there was also evidence from other people who say that was fact for sure. You have to be really careful on what you assume to be true" and another shared that "I thought it was interesting to see the perspectives of people, through all the wars that we read about. It was about this person's perspective and then in another document it was another side's perspective and that made it a bit harder to figure who was right because they could also be lying. I found that interesting." So

while they struggled at times to reach the fourth level of intertextual analysis, it certainly became a part of their consciousness and students were aware of its implications in a theoretical sense.

At the conclusion of the interview, students were asked to explain the job of the historian. Some students responded with variations of “finding information”, but other students also recognized the complexity of a historian’s job, with comments such as “Difficult for them because they have to go through everything and find everyone’s perspective, but sometimes there’s not enough information so it’s a hard job,” and “It would be hard because if you don’t get the information you need, you have to go back and find it.”

Students were positive about the project and most indicated that it enhanced their learning. Students found that working on the project was more “real” than reading their textbook and answering questions. One student also noted that it was better that he was able to read what a person thought rather than read about it filtered through a second or third person. In this instance, it may not have been working with primary documents that was central to developing their sense of historical understanding, but rather the opportunity to discuss the issues surrounding an event in Canadian history which was important.

Summary

The students engaged with the primary source documents to support their conclusions. While the students did not engage with these documents in the way I had anticipated, using higher level thinking skills and intertextual analysis, they did still use the documents. Each document was read and used to either add to the argument or detract from the argument. More noticeably, though, the students used their engagement with the documents as a source of self-efficacy, demonstrating that they believed themselves to be capable historians, able to put forth a

viable argument that could be supported. While not my anticipated result, this sense of self-efficacy is an important result of using primary source materials with this class.

Chapter 5

Concluding Historical Inquiry with “Why?”

Though this research project began from a desire to explore an area of personal interest, it has the potential to reach further than a single classroom. Although I was not able to develop a grounded theory, this study provides evidence, within a growing body of research, that not only are students capable of working with original source documents in a purposeful manner, but that original source documents have the potential to assist students in the development of their historical understanding. Indeed, this project has the potential, with further research involving more participants and extended immersion in classrooms, to move into a grounded theory study.

I also believe that this research is particularly timely within the context of social studies in Alberta and Canada. Alberta Education began an ambitious project to implement a new social studies curriculum from Kindergarten to grade 12 over the course of five years, beginning in 2005. Not only is historical thinking listed as one of the dimensions of thinking, but it is also developed through skills and processes such as examining evidence. On the national front, Peter Seixas (2006) has proposed a set of underlying concepts that students will require to become adept at the practice of history. Since historical thinking has become an explicit part of the Alberta curriculum, changes in teaching pedagogy need to be explored so that the skills and concepts that support the development of historical understanding are addressed.

The implications for this project range beyond the use of original source documents as a tool to aid in the development of historical understanding. At the core of this exercise is reading comprehension and how we move students into a place where the critical analysis of text is of primary importance. Decoding the text was a challenge that was easily met by most students,

however, as a class it was a challenge for the students to move into the critical analysis. This is an essential skill for all students. In a world where students are bombarded with images and text, they need to be able to determine the context of material, the source of the material and consider its implications in light of conflicting messages. Examining original source documents is a small piece of this skill and is widely transferable to all aspects of students' lives.

Before students can begin to engage with original source documents as historians, they need to have the skills to engage with them as part of their literacy. Students need to be able to read text and view images with the skills to use the information embedded, exposing what is true and what is questionable within the documents. Social studies, like language arts, has a strong literacy component, and this literacy needs to be addressed.

The literacy skills important in social studies have the students engaging with the text before, during and after reading. Students need to be taught how to employ their background knowledge and make predictions about the author and context, as well as the content of the source. Students also need to be able to decipher the meaning of the words and how the author attempted to share their perceptions of an event or person. Finally, students need to know how to assimilate the message of original source documents into their prior understanding. This is a challenging process, with students forming conclusions about the original source document they read as well as other documents and images. Too often this metacognitive process is taken as instinctive, rather than explicitly taught. It is imperative that students have these fundamental literacy skills to be able to engage meaningfully with primary source documents.

The selection of documents to present to students also plays an important role. With a diversity of opinions and perspectives, sources can add frustration rather than clarity to students' understanding of an event. While it is important to ensure that students have a sense of the

complexity of history and that there may not be one right answer or definitive account, too much information can create student disengagement. Thus, work with primary sources can not be haphazard, but with documents chosen with care. Students need to be guided through the process of making sense of primary sources and how they can work together to create a rich and dynamic account of history.

This project was not without its challenges in its application in a typical seventh grade classroom. There was a diversity of student experience, often demonstrated through the varying levels of reading comprehension. Student diversity was also evident in the varying levels of motivation; many students were willing participants in the class discussions, with some active observers and some not so active observers. However, when we were working to create a product, some students approached the project with a defeatist attitude, which added to the challenge of introducing original source documents. Finally, within a junior high classroom context, the bells become the driver of education, and we often found ourselves bound by the start/stop nature of learning and discussion due to time constraints. These challenges can be met.

I hope that teachers will use this study as an example of the capabilities of seventh grade students and understand that regardless of the challenges of using primary source documents, there are distinct advantages. When working in an atmosphere where critical and analytic thinking is the norm, students will rise to meet the challenges we set before them. The growing self-efficacy in how students discussed the use of original source documents is, in my opinion, an indicator of how with more time, modeling and practice, students will become critical consumers of history.

Ultimately, I hope that this research will influence my colleagues to incorporate the purposeful use of original source documents in their own teaching for their students' benefit. In

particular, purposeful use of original source documents needs to include substantial analysis of the documents, and relate those documents to an authentic historical problem. Students were often able to decode the documents accurately, however, they struggled with applying the documents to a problem. For too long has our teaching of history been tied to a textbook, but does not encourage our students to think critically or engage in historical inquiry.

Appendix I

Focus Group Discussion Questions

Students will be asked to examine an original source document and address the following questions:

- Describe the type of information you can gather from this source.
- Do you think it is important to examine the perspective of the person who produced an original source document?
- If an author of an original source document writes from a specific perspective, can it still be useful evidence?

Students will also be asked questions not directly related to the original source document:

- Do you enjoy your Social Studies classes? Why or why not?
- Did working on this project change your view of Social Studies? Why or why not?
- What parts of working with original source materials were challenging?
- What parts of working with original source materials was interesting?
- If someone asked you to explain the job of a historian, what would you say?

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