Social Studies Preservice Teachers' First-Order Documents

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This article presents the findings of a study that sought to gain an insight into social studies preservice teachers' reported reasons for selecting a primary source document they believe will be at the heart of their curriculum. Their selections included founding documents, historical speeches, inspirational sources, as well as personal mementos. The authors conclude with a discussion of implications for social studies teacher education.

Background

According to the National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] in 2006, there were approximately 115,500 social science teachers of whom 71.4% had obtained their undergraduate degree in the field of social sciences. Of these social science teachers, 50.1% held a Bachelor's degree; 43.1% held a Master's degree, and 4.2% held a doctorate (NCES, 2007, Table 67). In the 2004-2005 school year, degree-granting institutions conferred 105,451 Bachelor's degrees, 167,490 Master's degrees, and 7,681 doctorates in education. That same year, 2,148 students obtained their Bachelor's degree in social studies education; 782 received their Master's degree, but none were awarded a doctorate (NCES, 2007, Table 258).

The beliefs teachers hold about education have a profound impact on what goes on in their classrooms. Based on their beliefs, teachers make day-to-day decisions concerning the content they teach and the types of learning experiences their students have (Goodlad, 1990; Thornton, 1991; Wilson, Konopak, & Readance, 1994). The majority of teachers continues to come from White, middle-class backgrounds and is often a force against change (Nieto, 2004; Sarason, 1996). Personal background has been recognized also as an important factor in the beliefs social studies teachers hold. Three major background factors that influence their beliefs are race, gender and social class membership, prior experiences with diversity, and support for ideologies that promote individualism (Smith, 2000).

Teachers often play the role of gatekeepers in their classrooms (Hargreaves, 1995; Thornton, 1991). Although some recent findings suggest there is positive change (Grant & Gradwell, 2005), teachers have historically acted as gatekeepers in their equating curriculum with covering the content of their textbooks. Furthermore, Owens (1997) found that negative past experiences with social studies, a lack of interest in the subject, confusion over its nature, conflicting sociological beliefs, ever-increasing content demands, and being placed with directing teachers who were unmotivated to teach social studies pose additional challenges.

Most recently, the ever-increasing emphasis on high-stakes testing has further reinforced the focus on content coverage as teachers tend to teach to the test rather than model thoughtfulness and promote higher-order thinking skills (Heafner, Lipscomb, & Rock, 2006;
Rock, Heafner, O’Connor, Passe, Oldendorf, Good, & Byrd, 2006; Vogler, 2006).

Teacher education programs seek to prepare their students to become effective teachers within their respective disciplines and tacitly rest on the premise that it is possible, albeit often difficult, to influence preservice teachers’ beliefs (Featherstone, 1992; Johnston, 1990; Meuwissen, 2006). Preservice teachers’ beliefs about teaching in general, and social studies in particular, have tended to demonstrate little change over the course of an entire teacher preparation program (Adler, 1991; Armento, 1996), while receptivity to new ideas appears to largely depend on to what degree these overlap with and confirm preexisting beliefs (Angell, 1996). Even when social studies teachers profess receptivity to new ideas, often there is a discrepancy between their perceptions and practice, as De Waal-Lucas (2007) found when she examined social studies teachers’ treatment of multicultural content in a predominantly White and affluent, suburban middle school.

Nonetheless, social studies teacher educators continue to believe they can make a difference by challenging preservice teachers to question their beliefs through reflective practice (Fragnoli, 2005; Lewis, 2001; Meuwissen, 2006). For example, Neubert and Binko (2007) found that graduates from their teacher preparation program, who became excellent teachers, were able to relate theory to reality and can be described by nine characteristics: (a) outstanding content knowledge, (b) excellent pedagogical skills, (c) a reflective disposition, (d) a passion for teaching, (e) a positive attitude about students, (f) a genuine work ethic in and outside of the classroom, (g) outstanding interpersonal skills, (h) consistent acquisition of leadership roles, and (i) commitment to remain in education.

Recently, Brown and Drake (2005) have offered a new method for improving students’ historical thinking by using primary sources in a process they refer to as a first-, second-, and third-order approach. They define a first-order document as a primary source that represents the heart of an historical issue or periodization in history and articulates a position that enables opportunities for other documents to be found that either challenge or corroborate the position (p. 22). Second-order documents are those primary resources that either support or challenge a first-order document. Third-order documents are primary sources that students ultimately find themselves which relate to the teacher’s first-order document. Drake and Brown (2003) further argue that a first-order document must be one that is so essential that the teacher regards it as one he or she cannot do without. It is so important that he or she believes it is located at “the epicenter of his or her instruction” (pp. 467-468). Thus the process of selecting a first-order and second-order document is a creative act on the teacher’s part (Brown & Drake, 2005, p. 29).

Asking preservice social studies teachers to identify their first-order documents provides an opportunity to gain an insight into their reasons for selecting a primary source document (Dyck, 2001; O’Brien & White, 1999; Seixas, 1998). Seixas (1997) found that students confront their history classes with their own frameworks of historical understanding which they have gleaned from family stories, historical films, television fiction, commemorations, and earlier school history experiences (p. 22). When he asked student teachers to choose one or more primary sources suitable for teaching high school students, 26 out of the 31 lesson plans they submitted were based on a single primary source. Sixteen used solely textual sources; eight used photographs; five used pictures other than photographs, and two used a combination of types (Seixas, 1998, p. 317).

According to Grant (2003), the sources preservice teachers intend to use are influenced
by a combination of personal knowledge and beliefs, professional experiences, personal history and narrative, and subject matter knowledge (p. 153). In addition, Barton and Levstik (2004) offer a model consisting of an identification, analytic, moral response, and exhibition stance that provides an additional lens through which we can seek to understand preservice teachers’ beliefs.

If social studies teachers are being asked to use primary sources with their students, social studies teacher educators should seek to gain a better understanding of what it is their teacher candidates believe to be essential to their own historical thinking. If it is important for social studies teachers to probe the positionalities of their students, as Davis, Yeager, and Foster (2001) have argued, then social studies teacher educators should certainly do the same when deciding how to respond to the beliefs their preservice teachers hold.

Method

This study sought to gain an insight into social studies preservice teachers’ reported reasons for selecting a first-order document they believed would be at the heart of their future social studies curriculum. As such, this study presents an adaptation of Brown and Drake’s model. We asked the preservice teachers to select one primary source document that was so essential they would feel compelled to share it with their future secondary students, regardless of the specific social studies courses they might be assigned to teach.

The setting for this study consisted of three separate undergraduate social studies methods courses for secondary social studies majors in their senior year at a medium-sized university in the Midwest. All 83 participants were Caucasian and nearly all were in their early 20s. In each course, the ratio of male-to-female participants was approximately 2:1. Preservice social studies teachers at this university typically enroll in their methods course during the quarter immediately prior to the one in which they are scheduled to student teach and after they have completed nearly all of their content and education courses. Preservice teachers in the secondary social studies program are being prepared for a license which will allow them to teach social studies in grades 7-12. These majors must complete 94 quarter hours in teaching field requirements that include coursework in psychology, sociology, economics, history, and political science. In addition, they must earn 55 quarter hours in education courses.

Each time, the data for this study were collected at the end of the methods course which modeled and advocated the use of primary sources. For example, as part of the course, the participants were required to develop a multi-week unit plan that included lessons using primary sources from the university archives to help their future secondary school students make local, national, and global connections. The data for this study consisted of these preservice teachers’ written explanations for selecting their first-order document. In order to protect their anonymity, each student was assigned a pseudonym.

To analyze the participants’ responses, we used Dana and Silva’s (2003) four steps for teacher inquirers. First, we read the responses in each methods course to form a detailed description. Next, we began the sense-making process by developing a number of categories that fit patterns in the responses. In order to determine common themes, we then engaged in an interpretation of the reasons the participants presented in each category for selecting their first-order document. Throughout the second and third stage of our analysis, we each independently analyzed the data before reaching a consensus. Finally, we looked at the
implications of this study for our own practice and how other social studies teacher educators might be able to use these findings in their own settings. Because of the qualitative nature of this study, the responsibility to transfer the findings resides with the reader.

Findings

Our analysis suggested categorizing the first-order documents into three major groups that were nearly identical in size: founding documents, historical speeches, and inspirational sources. In addition, we created two lesser categories for personal mementos and participants who refused to select a first-order document.

Founding Documents

The first major category included 21 first-order documents. Except for one, all pertained, at some level, to the founding documents of the United States. These documents included the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the Emancipation Proclamation, the Civil Rights Act, and two Supreme Court cases. Only one student in this category selected a non-American document.

The participants in this study admired the Declaration of Independence because it symbolized a “sacrificial struggle against tyranny” and the fight for liberty and popular sovereignty. The Constitution and Bill of Rights were chosen because they “govern our everyday lives” and have shaped “our country as we know it.” These preservice teachers also emphasized that it is important for students to know the documents they selected because “it helps them to understand what it means to be American” and that these documents give them basic rights against oppression and tyranny. Several participants also made a direct connection with today. For example, Neil argued that if the Constitution is taught to “the next generation of children, when they take the reins of government the mutilation of the Constitution in the name of security or political correctness will end,” while Abbejean suggested that the Bill of Rights offers “protection against the overzealous hand of the government...as September 11 has brought us new laws and our privacy is being interfered with.” Mindy chose McCulloch v. Maryland as her first-order document because it affirms the concept of popular sovereignty, that “the government isn’t some abstract institution,” and that students need to understand “they have the power to make changes when they witness injustice and wrongdoing on the part of our nation’s leaders.”

While not a constitutional document, participants chose the Emancipation Proclamation because it affirmed the constitutional premise of equality “no matter what race or sex,” which ultimately led to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. While the proclamation showed “a person acting on moral judgment and using the power of office in a positive manner,” it also opened the door “not only for African Americans but also for women,” thus setting a “tone for the rest of the world to follow.” Although Cabe chose Roe v. Wade as his first-order document, he did not do so because of its historical significance. Affirming the importance of studying multiple perspectives, he argued that its controversial nature would help his students become critical thinkers and help them realize that “history is not objective but subjective.”

Katie chose the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights as her first-order document. Being the only student who stated a preference to teach World History rather than American History, she maintained that this document was “a genuine attempt at creating and maintaining peace worldwide, and “although very similar
to the Bill of Rights, it “preserves the rights and liberties of all members of the human family.”

**Historical Speeches**

The second major category included 28 first-order documents. Similar to the founding documents, all speeches, except one, were related to the history of the United States. These first-order documents included speeches by Abraham Lincoln, Robert E. Lee, Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., Lyndon B. Johnson, and Jimmy Carter. Only one student selected a non-American speech.

Three participants selected a speech from the Civil War era. Participants chose Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address because it re-examines the question of popular sovereignty and whether “all men are created equal,” and demonstrates that “we, as a nation, must pay for past indiscretions.” Again making a personal connection, Jeff argued that while these men gave “their last full measure of devotion” in “an age of corporate domination and money-laden election campaigns,” students must realize that “influence can be purchased.” For similar reasons Mandy chose Lee’s Farewell Address because it shows his honor and dedication to his soldiers in the “War of Northern Aggression.”

Six participants chose speeches by Franklin D. Roosevelt: his First and Second Inaugural Addresses, as well as his Infamy Speech. Several participants maintained they felt a personal connection to FDR because their grandparents had lived through the Great Depression or fought in World War II. Suggesting that his speeches touched them emotionally, they believed FDR’s message of hope, optimism, and dedication to the common man is something all students should learn to appreciate.

The largest group in this category, 17 participants, selected first-order documents from the Civil Rights era. JFK’s Inaugural Speech especially inspired seven of these preservice teachers because, as Kevin suggested, it called upon people “to act as democratic citizens by actually doing something to improve themselves, their neighbors, their country, and the world.” Similarly, Megan asserted that “those who made a difference in history, such as Rosa Parks or Abraham Lincoln, asked themselves what they could do to make things different and then proceeded to do so.” Seven participants also selected MLK’s *I Have a Dream* speech because of its universal message of hope. Suggesting that “racism [still] has not been totally overcome,” as Mandy argued, likewise “women have not fully gained the rights [they] deserve, … to do what [they] please with their bodies,” while “gays are denied the right to determine whom they would like to marry and spend the rest of their lives with.” Several participants also expressed MLK inspired them, as Bill indicated, to create “social justice” in their future classrooms and help students realize they can “make a difference in the world.” Megan selected LBJ’s *We Shall Overcome* speech for similar reasons.

Although Erica’s choice of Carter’s *Malaise Speech* reflects the distrust people felt about their government in the aftermath of Watergate, like several other speeches, it also echoes the belief that government exists at the will of the people. Finally, Matt was the only participant who selected a non-American speech. He argued that Socrates’ Oration is “at the heart of what social studies is and what it is intended to accomplish” because it asks students to not only examine themselves but their surroundings as well.
Inspirational Sources

The third major category included 28 first-order documents. Eighteen of these documents referred to quotations and passages from or the entire oeuvre of a literary or scholarly work. The remaining documents were inspired by popular culture, religious beliefs, and patriotic symbols. Each document, to a larger or lesser extent, revealed values the participants in this study believed to be at the heart of their personal philosophy of life.

The 15 literary works the participants selected ranged from ancient authors, such as Cicero, to more recent ones, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Mark Twain, and George Bernard Shaw, all of whom emphasized human virtues such as serving others, being compassionate, being the best you can be, being honest and fair, and having pride in self yet remaining humble. In a typical quote, Kermit quoted Einstein’s assertion that “the value of a man resides in what he gives and not in what he is capable of receiving.” These selections were predominantly related to a personal reason why these participants had decided to become social studies teachers. In a typical response, Sally quoted George Bernard Shaw who suggested that “education is a succession of eye-openers involving the repudiation of some previously held belief.”

Three participants selected a scholarly work as their first-order document. Morgan selected Marx’s Communist Manifesto because of “its major historical importance.” Arguing that he was neither “a communist [nor] able to teach the Bible,” he maintained that the Communist Manifesto was important because it would help “students realize that the heavily capitalistic perspectives in America are not the only ones that exist.” Likewise, Alvin selected Howard Zinn’s A People’s History of the United States as his first-order document because “it really shows the other side of history and gives the ‘losers’ a chance to get their story heard.” Finally, Misha selected The Autobiography of Malcolm X because it demonstrates not only how education transformed Malcolm X but also how it offers “the best opportunity for the oppressed to improve themselves [as] Freire suggested.”

Three participants chose a primary source from the popular culture — Alois chose the song Imagine by John Lennon; Brittany chose Lee Ann Womack’s I Hope You Dance, and Ruby quoted world champion cowboy Ty Murray. Similar to the literary works, these sources emphasized believing in yourself, following your dreams, and never giving up. Three other participants selected an explicitly religious document, including the Bible, the Serenity Prayer and Ehrman’s Desiderata. Likewise, they chose these documents because they emphasized such virtues as wisdom, humility, and love of God and their fellow humans.

Finally, four participants selected a patriotic symbol as their first-order document: the United States flag. While this may appear to be an easy choice, it, in fact, held deep personal meaning. For example, Jared stated that he “pondered the question for more than a week [and] then realized it was looking over [him] all this time on the wall of his bedroom.” “A symbol of freedom,” he argued, the flag meant the most to him because “even in the dark times of the Civil War, Pearl Harbor, and September 11 her light did not dim, [but instead] it only grew brighter.” Coming from a family of fire fighters, Rick chose the photograph of the “two firemen raising the beaten and torn American flag after the tragic events of September 11” because it will help students understand “the inner faith and will-power of the American people.” For Leonard, the flag held special meaning because his family members had fought in World War II, Vietnam, and the First Gulf War. A symbol of
freedom and bravery, Rosenthal’s photograph of raising the American flag on Mount Suribachi during the battle of Iwo Jima was important to Brin because it would remind his students of the price American troops have paid for freedom.

Personal Mementos

A fourth smaller category consisted of personal mementos. Two participants treasured letters written by family members. While Missy treasured the daily letters her grandmother wrote to her, Chelsea cherished the letters her grandfather had written during World War II. Similarly, Brianna selected a recent letter an American soldier had written to her while he was stationed in Iraq. Although she did not have a family connection, Alice felt particularly connected to a family in her community whose history had been published in the early 20th century and whose house had been converted into a local history museum. Believing that it is important to teach students about their local community and instill in them “a sense of pride of their home,” she hoped to teach her students about her community’s history.

Tyler and Rob were aficionados of maps. While Tyler chose a Civil War map that had adorned his childhood bedroom, Rob believed it “all started in 1st grade” when “on the side of milk-cartons for school lunch, there would be a random country displayed with its map and interesting facts.” Because the milk cartoons he saved “after a while smelled pretty bad,” his parents bought him a world atlas, which he went through “from front to back thousands of times.” Having won the middle school geography bee, he believed “maps alone might be a large reason why [he was] headed to become a social studies teacher.

Refusiniks

Constituting a fifth category, two participants argued they should not have been asked to select a first-order document. Although Juli believed selecting a first-order document was an overgeneralization, he nonetheless chose Don Quixote because Cervantes argued that “historians are bound by right to be exact, truthful, and absolutely unprejudiced.” Rush simply refused to make any selection at all because he argued that primary documents should be taken “for what they are and view[ed] in the context of their historical significance. He believed that an “objective historian [does not] get emotionally involved in the material” and that doing so would “lead to bias in the classroom and compromise his integrity.”

Conclusions

According to Barton and Levstik (2004), schooling in the United States serves to help students identify with the nation by conveying “a clear and consistent national story that emphasizes the founding people, events, and documents of the nation (p. 50). They develop a moral response as they learn to admire, condemn, or simply remember heroes, villains, and other events in the past (Barton & Levstik, 2004, p. 91; Dyck, 2001; O’Brien & White, 1999). In addition, Seixas (1997) and Grant (2003) have identified the importance of personal history and narrative as a significant factor in shaping social studies preservice teachers’ values.

Consistent with the research, our findings suggest that the preservice social studies teachers in this study strongly identified with the American nation and that their selection of a first-order document often included a moral response (Barton & Levstik, 2004). Those who chose a founding document or historical
speech typically did so because of the American ideals of citizenship these items represent as well as the belief that everyone can make a difference by working towards social justice, believing in oneself, and following his or her dreams.

Although they were allowed to select any kind of primary source, as Seixas (1998) found in his study, nearly all preservice social studies teachers in this study selected a text source. Only two participants chose the American flag; two chose a photograph that included the American flag, and two participants selected a song. This finding suggests that social studies teacher educators should strive to deliberately help preservice teachers develop a broader and more encompassing understanding of what constitutes a primary source.

Nearly all participants selected an American document. In total, only eight participants chose a non-American primary source. This apparent lack of a global focus suggests social studies teacher educators should be strong advocates for a broader global perspective among their preservice teachers.

Furthermore, several participants emphasized that students must learn to become critical thinkers and that exposing them to different perspectives will help them become better citizens. Consequently, social studies teacher educators should teach their preservice teachers how to incorporate multiple global perspectives into their teaching about primary resources and not just limit themselves to multiple perspectives from similar cultures.

Nearly all first-order documents these participants chose represented some universal values they hope to install in their future students. While not an explicit part of the social studies curriculum, the preservice teachers in this study nonetheless believed that it is important to model such values as honesty, humility, and compassion. Therefore, social studies teacher educators should help their preservice teachers clarify these values, so they will develop a more explicit personal philosophy of teaching social studies.

Another important implication of this study is that the preservice social studies teachers in this study professed to be strong advocates of the civic function of social studies. Wanting their students to become active, participatory citizens, the question is raised as to what extent they themselves act upon such professed beliefs. Similarly, social studies teacher educators should examine to what extent they are personally engaged in social action and whether they will encourage their preservice teachers to do so as well.

Finally, longitudinal research is necessary to determine whether these pre-service teachers, after they have become social studies teachers, actually use the first-order document they selected in their teaching. In addition, such research would allow us to examine the context of the courses in which they use both American and non-American primary sources.

References


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