Elementary School Students, Artifacts and Primary Sources: Learning to Engage in Historical Inquiry

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This article highlights some of the experiences of elementary students learning to use primary sources to engage in historical inquiry. Two teacher educators developed and taught social studies lessons in collaboration with 5th and 6th grade teachers. The elementary students had little previous experience evaluating primary sources and artifacts. Using both digital and non-digital sources, the students began to understand historical perspective and use historical evidence as the basis of their conclusions. However, difficulties were encountered during lessons using artifacts to understand historical events. The article presents descriptive evidence and the lessons we learned as educators.

Introduction

As elementary social studies teacher educators, we often have the joy and privilege of working alongside elementary mentor teachers, preservice teachers, and their students. It is from this collaborative work that we engaged in this project. The current literature is replete with documentation of the narrowing and marginalization of social studies curriculum and instruction (Allen, 1994; Black & Blake, 2001; Jensen, 2001; Leming, Ellington, & Schug, 2006; Van Fossen, 2005; Vogler & Virtue, 2007; Zhao & Hoge, 2005). Within our contexts of working in and with elementary schools, we, too, have recognized this present absence (Grumet, 1988) of social studies. However, we also have worked collaboratively with elementary teachers who continue to find space to teach social studies in robust and meaningful ways: using primary sources to facilitate historical thinking and inquiry by their elementary students, integrating technology into their curriculum, and going beyond the prescribed textbooks in order to have students engage more authentically in the social studies.

Primary sources are “original items or records that have survived from the past, such as clothing, letters, photographs, and manuscripts. They were part of a direct personal experience of a time or event” (Library of Congress, 2003). Traditionally, primary sources have rarely been used in elementary classrooms. This has been due, primarily, to the lack of availability of primary sources and to the lack of time elementary teachers have to locate primary sources. In recent years, however, technology has allowed educators to connect with resources outside of the classroom (Dawson & Harris, 1999; Mason, Benson, Diem, Hicks, Lee, & Dralle, 2000). These digital sources give students greater access to primary source materials and provide resources for educators (International Society for Technology in Education, 2002).

Elementary students must have opportunities to engage in the evaluation of historical/primary sources, develop conclusions based upon evidence, and create historical knowledge (Barton & Levstik, 2004). This process of authentic investigation is commonly referred to as a disciplined inquiry or historical inquiry (Avery, 2000; Levstik & Barton, 2001;
Scheurman & Newmann, 1998). Disciplined inquiry can be thought of as investigation of personally relevant and intriguing questions in authentic ways. As students conduct historical inquiry, they are able to learn that the accounts they read in textbooks are subjective and are the creation of an author who has biases, motives, and beliefs. Thus, the foundation of our work with elementary students was historical inquiry.

In this article, we describe the experiences of elementary students using primary sources when engaged in historical inquiry and developing historical perspective, and we present descriptive evidence and consider implications for elementary teachers and teacher educators.

Background

Our work as teacher educator partners with classroom teachers served as the basis for our project. As we worked with the respective 5th and 6th grade teachers, we noticed that both continued to teach social studies as part of their regular curriculum and endeavored to engage students as doers of history. This was not an easy task for either teacher as mandated constraints to focus on other content areas instead of social studies were evident. We were fortunate to have built relationships with these teachers who provided us the opportunity to develop and teach the activities set forth in this article. As teacher educators, we were hopeful that the 5th and 6th grade students would learn about primary sources, engage in historical inquiry, and lay a foundation for their future engagement in the social studies. We were also curious about the responses and understandings of upper elementary students. Might the use of various technologies facilitate their historical inquiries? What curricular implications might be developed from our learning? We also hoped that our learning as educators would inform our teaching and our work with preservice and inservice teachers.

Since this was a collaborative project, we teacher educators communicated either by phone or email after each teaching episode. These communications allowed us to debrief the lessons, to reflect upon the lesson and student learning, and to plan the next lesson, hence helping us to remain in sync.

The School Settings

The population consisted of 60 elementary students in grades 5 and 6 from the Southeast and the Northwest Rocky Mountain regions of the United States. These schools are considered partner schools with the universities—schools in which university faculty maintain a presence and schools in which preservice teachers conduct their practicum (Teitel, 2003).

The elementary school located in the Southeastern United States serves students in Kindergarten through fifth grade. It is located in a metropolitan area with approximately two million people and serves students from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. The fifth-grade teacher at this school has been teaching for twenty years and is an adjunct instructor at the local university. Thus, she welcomes collaborative efforts with university faculty on projects within her classroom, as long as it benefits her student population and fits her scope and sequence at that time.

The K-6 school in the Northwestern United States is located in a metropolitan area and serves approximately 600 students. Representative of the district, less than 10% of the students are English Language Learners, and 30% receive free/reduced lunch. The sixth-grade teacher is a nineteen-year veteran teacher. She also serves as a mentor teacher and works closely with preservice teachers. She happily opened her classroom for this project and worked closely with the teacher educator.

We taught these lessons during the spring term (January-May) in the two elementary classrooms. The lessons were collaboratively developed with the classroom teachers to ensure that our lessons were part of the teach-
ers’ social studies units. Our intent was to take “regular and required” social studies content and integrate technology into the curriculum (e.g., U.S. History in 5th grade and the Western Hemisphere in 6th grade); we did not want to teach stand alone lessons devoid of context, and we were cognizant of the limited amount of time devoted to social studies. Our preservice teachers were also involved in the development process and served as observers during the teaching episodes. The teacher educators used digital and non-digital primary sources to teach historical perspective to these students as well as to facilitate historical inquiry among the students.

The Work with Elementary Students

As aforementioned, these lessons were taught over the course of the spring term. Although we coordinated across distances in planning and throughout our teaching of the lessons, we taught the lessons in concert with the elementary school schedules. Our teaching schedules worked around field trips, testing, Spring Break, and other routine scheduling conflicts. Initially, each lesson was planned for a one-hour period; however, lesson three took three class periods.

Lesson One

The first lesson addressed the topic of primary sources. We wanted to assess student knowledge of primary sources in an effort to inform our future lessons as well as to provide a jumping off place for the students. We used a SMART Board (an interactive white board that connects a computer and projector to show the image on the SMART Board). The interactive white boards allow computer applications to be controlled directly from the display, and notes can be written and recorded in digital ink and then saved to be used later. Using the SMART Boards to record elementary student ideas, the first question we asked the students was “What is a primary source?” Figure 1 is an example of some of the students’ responses.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 1:** An example of a student’s response to the question, “What is a primary source?”

This was followed by the development of an operational definition of primary and secondary sources; the students constructed their definitions in small groups. In almost every group, operational definitions of primary sources included “things that are old and that people who lived then used or made”; the operational definitions of secondary sources were “books and other things that people said later,” “things written later,” “encyclopedias, movies, and things like that.” These were posted around the classroom for later use. We noticed that the students referred to these lists during subsequent lessons when making decisions about historical sources.

Lesson Two

Our goal for the second lesson was to further develop student understanding of a primary source. Therefore, we used a protocol called *mind walk* (Library of Congress, 2003) that we adapted for elementary students. We asked the elementary students, working in pairs, to list everything they had done (not private matters) in the past 24 hours. Their lists included eating breakfast, playing basketball, having soccer practice, working in math class, going to the movies, sleeping, going to ballet practice, jumping rope, brushing teeth, and
doing homework. From their lengthy lists, the students were asked to circle two activities they wanted to attend to for the rest of the lesson (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: An example of students’ engaging in the first step of the mind walk activity.

For each of these two choices, the students listed everything they needed/used to complete the task (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: An example of students’ listing everything needed or used to complete tasks.

Figure 4 provides an example of the entire brainstorming process.

Figure 4: An example of students’ brainstorming process.

We then facilitated a brief discussion about considering everything used/needed, as well as what evidence might remain after the activity had been completed. Using the ‘brush teeth’ activity as a model, the students decided that only a toothbrush, toothpaste, sink, teeth, floss, and towel might remain as evidence. Each pair of students then shared their list with another pair and discussed “what counts as evidence” of our activity. It was during these small group discussions in each of our classrooms that the students decided their evidence were primary sources. One student asked, “Are these primary sources?” Another student walked group to group and told everyone he was “leaving behind primary sources for others to see.”

We concluded the second lesson by asking the students to revisit and make changes to their operational definitions of primary sources. The student changes included correcting the notion that primary sources had to be old because, as one pair said, “We are making and using primary sources.” In one classroom, a
lively discussion ensued over whether or not a newspaper or magazine is a primary source. A fifth grader told the class, “My dad doesn’t read the [local newspaper] because it is controlled by communists.” The class decided that print artifacts could be primary sources,” BUT as long as we write down that they are prejudiced.”

Lesson Three

The third lesson was a follow-up to the adapted mind walk activity. We listed the following evidence/primary sources items on the board: waxed string, shoes, wagon wheel, large round hoop, washboard, and an apron. Our query to the students was the question, “What do these tell you about the people who used them?” This proved difficult for the students; they were trying to make sense of the items and construct meaning through 21st century, 10- and 11-year-old lenses. Their responses included comments such as “wood and cloth things,” “they made things,” “they didn’t have cars,” “pioneer people,” and more commonly, “We don’t know.” Without the artifacts to handle and view, little to no context existed for the students.

We concluded this lesson by giving each group of students an “artifact box.” The 5th graders were given artifacts from World War II (i.e., ration stamp books, images of factory workers, propaganda posters, coffee and sugar packets, steel pennies, aluminum foil), and the 6th graders’ boxes consisted of artifacts from Canada (i.e., coins, pelts, miniature canoes, photos of beavers, blanket pieces, fish hooks, exploration maps). The only instructions to the students were “As a group, decide what these artifacts tell you about the people who used them and make a list of what else you want to know.” The 6th graders quickly decided that the maps were of Canada, and they thought that most of the artifacts had to do with the trading of pelts. Only one group identified the fish hooks as an item that was traded; they thought it indicated that people fished for food.

Additional questions included the following: (a) What were the fish hooks for? (b) Are beavers extinct? (c) What was most valuable? (d) Who used the maps and what were they looking for? and (e) Who decided what the things were worth? The inclusion of the nickel coins (with a beaver on one side) was meant to assist the students identifying that beaver pelts were once used as money; however, this was overlooked by every group.

The fifth graders identified the pennies as coins but did not make the connection between steel and the rationing of materials during World War II. They also identified the sugar, coffee beans, and foil, but again, they did not make strong connections with rationing. At their request, several groups of students used the Internet to help them understand the artifacts. For example, one group used the words on a poster as a search term, “Do with less—so they'll have enough” and “When you ride alone, you ride with Hitler.” Once the students began Internet searches, the class determined that “a lot of stuff” was rationed during the war and that “life was harder back then.” Their additional list labeled “things we want to know” was sparse, but nearly every group wanted to know what children their ages did during the war: (a) Did they recycle? (b) Did kids earn money? and (c) What was school like?

Lesson Four

The final lesson with the elementary students engaged the students in the analysis of digital photographs. Using the classroom computer and projector, we showed the students a photograph of a bread peddler in a city street scene we had located online (Library of Congress, 2003); we asked them to hide themselves in the photo (they could shrink). When each student indicated they had “hidden,” we began the process of finding each student in his or her hiding place. With each discovery of a hiding place, we asked the student to think about and tell the class his or her thoughts.
regarding the following: “From where you are hiding, what do you smell; from where you are hiding, what do you feel; from where you are hiding, what do you hear; and from where you are hiding, what do you see?” This activity allows for greater analysis of images than by simply glancing at a photo of a wagon. We followed this up by showing two additional photos and playing the hide and seek using each photo. The students quickly realized that things are different depending upon your viewpoint/perspective.

At the end of each lesson, we asked the students what they enjoyed, what worked for them, and what area they had more difficulty. The students were engaged during the lessons, and we knew understandings were developing; however, their frustrations during lesson three were palpable. One sixth grader declared, “I don’t think today was very good, I didn’t know what waxed string was … I still don’t know.” This student decided to add waxed string to the list of things he wanted to know. This type of discourse and informal assessment informed us as educators and helped the students clarify their thinking.

Our Learning

As stated previously, we taught these lessons during the spring semester of the elementary school calendar. However, a contextual perspective is also needed to aid our understanding. The 6th grade students had spent computer lab and social studies time earlier in the school year acquiring basic technology skills including web search skills and etiquette, including Microsoft Office (Word, PowerPoint, and beginning Access [database] skills). Clearly, as teacher educators, we were pleased to see this occurring. This was not the case with the 5th grade classroom, and a significant amount of time was spent on teaching technology skills to the students. Even though access to and availability of computer technologies existed at the school, the students had limited experience using the technologies. At this school, computer lab time had been allocated primarily for standardized testing.

The students overwhelmingly indicated that the use of primary sources made history “come alive” for them; they especially enjoyed the hide and seek with digital photographs. Not surprisingly, much time was initially spent on helping the elementary students understand primary sources. Many of these students had never engaged formally, on their own or in a school setting, in historical inquiry or been asked to consider historical perspective.

We were surprised by the difficulties encountered during Lesson Three (adapted mind walk and artifact boxes). Although the sources listed on the board were not without prior context (both classes of students had studied pioneers), they were out of context during the time frames we addressed them. The students were more enthusiastic and lively with the artifact boxes. The areas of inquiry the students generated were the most beneficial outcomes of these lessons. Their questions helped guide further lesson development by the classroom teachers. The challenges of this lesson informed us that it is well worth taking the instructional time to help students use and understand artifacts as evidence. Due to time constraints, we were not able to continue to student-generated inquiries. Perhaps these lessons would be ideally taught at the beginning of a school year. This would allow a teacher to build upon artifacts as evidence and eventually as conclusions built upon evidence during the rest of the school year.

Over the course of our lessons, these elementary students clearly articulated that they, too, were makers of history. The notion of evidence and artifacts left behind greatly helped with this discovery. The concept of multiple perspectives and historical bias also surfaced with these students. Their grappling with print sources being primary sources and biased was of great importance. All of the students eventually made distinctions between primary and secondary sources, yet questions remained. The realization that little is set in
stone regarding history and that history is constructed was a key outcome.

Both classroom teachers indicated that their students were more “engaged” in social studies than they had been previously. One teacher noted that she had not previously believed that elementary students could use primary source materials and engage in authentic inquiry; however, she also noted that this process takes more time. She doubted whether external constraints (i.e., testing) would allow her to do such lessons on a frequent basis. However, both teachers indicated that the use of digital resources allowed their students to connect with resources outside of the classroom and to engage in disciplined inquiry (see Appendix for suggested websites). The preservice teachers noted surprise as well. The preservice teachers had neither used computers to teach social studies nor attempted to use primary sources with elementary students. One preservice teacher captured the sentiment of the group when she stated, “I didn’t think little kids could do this.” Another said, “You told us about elementary students being able to ‘DO history’—I’d just never seen it done.” Perhaps much of their surprise stemmed from their inexperience, as learners, with primary sources and technology integrated in social studies. Their surprise at observing, firsthand, what elementary students are capable of, is one of the joys of and reasons for student teaching.

We, of course, are grateful to our classroom teacher partners who allowed us such unfettered access to their classrooms and use of instructional time. We learned that upper elementary students can, indeed, use and make sense of primary sources as well as create historical knowledge and when given appropriate time and scaffolding develop conclusions based upon evidence. Most often, the students with whom we worked began from their personal experiences and lives when inquiring into historical time periods, and they were most interested in the lives of children their ages. This learning greatly informed our teaching of social studies methods, but more importantly, the lessons learned can influence curriculum development and instructional planning in the elementary social studies classroom.

References

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### Appendix A

#### Primary Sources Websites

**Library of Congress**

[http://www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov)

This site includes exhibits and documents from the library’s collections and American Memory (http://memory.loc.gov/ammem) that houses digital collections in a variety of formats. This is a teacher friendly site and a longstanding favorite.

**National Archives and Records Administration**


This site contains primary source documents including U.S. historical documents, archival research catalog, and other tools for teachers and students. The site also provides links to other primary source and teacher sites such as follows:

- Our Documents ([http://www.ourdocuments.gov](http://www.ourdocuments.gov))
- Digital Vaults ([http://www.digitalvaults.org](http://www.digitalvaults.org))

**The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History**

[http://www.gilderlehrman.org](http://www.gilderlehrman.org)

This site contains primary source documents that detail the political and social history of the United States ranging from 1493 to the present.

These two directories list sites that contain history-related primary sources:

**National History Education Clearinghouse**

[http://teachinghistory.org/history-content/featured-website-reviews](http://teachinghistory.org/history-content/featured-website-reviews)

This clearinghouse is designed to help K-12 history teachers access resources and materials for classroom use.

**Federal Resources for Educational Excellence**

[http://free.ed.gov/HandSS.cfm](http://free.ed.gov/HandSS.cfm)

More than 1,500 federally supported teaching and learning resources are included from various federal agencies.