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Embracing Ambiguity in the Artefacts of the Past: Teacher Identity and Pedagogy

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Abstract

In this paper, the author considers the correlation between the construct of teacher identity and pedagogical choice, with specific reference to secondary social studies teachers and their use of primary sources in the classroom. After a brief review of the benefits and challenges of using primary sources in the classroom, the author concludes that the more pervasive challenge to using primary sources is pedagogical rather than pragmatic, and that pedagogy is intrinsically linked to teacher identity formation. The literature suggests that the construct of teacher identity is influenced by many factors, from individual experience and teacher training, to socio-cultural discourses relating to nationalism. The article concludes with a variety of suggestions of ways in which teacher educators can promote both reflective pre-service teaching, and encourage wider use of primary sources in social studies classrooms as an effective pedagogical strategy in an increasingly global society.

Introduction

Social studies education in Canada is a complex interweaving of history, economics, geography, and politics, grounded in notions of citizenship. As a result, social studies teachers must regularly deal with issues of identity and values, on both an individual and societal level. Everyday social studies classrooms delve into topics that are, or have the potential to be, controversial in nature. Though ministries of education can standardize curriculum documents and resources, each teacher, as an individual being, brings a unique set of life experiences to his or her classroom. This individuality impacts a teacher's philosophical beliefs, and ultimately, the pedagogical approaches used in their classroom. We often refer to this construct as *teacher identity*. While there is a substantial body of literature relating to the general construct of teacher identity, there is surprisingly little research into the specific notion of teacher identity relating to the field of social studies. However, the literature that does exist suggests that the construct of teacher identity is influenced by many factors, from individual experience and teacher training, to socio-cultural discourses relating to

nationalism.

As a former teacher, and in my current role as a museum educator, I have been especially interested in the various ways in which teachers use primary sources in social studies education. In the past, many teachers I have spoken with informally suggest that lack of access to archival documents or historical objects have prevented their frequent use in the classroom. New technologies, such as the Internet, allow museums today to provide access to an unprecedented number of archival and photographic sources. However, increased access still has not resulted in their universal use in classrooms. It follows that the more pervasive challenge to using primary sources is pedagogical rather than pragmatic. Research shows us that primary sources have tremendous potential to help students develop critical thinking skills and to understand the complexity of historical interpretation (Lee, 2001; Cox & Barrow, 2000; Seixas, 1998). They also have the potential to spark ambiguity, and even controversy, in the social studies classroom. As a result, some teachers feel hesitant about incorporating primary sources into their classrooms. Focussing primarily on pre-service, secondary social studies teachers, in this paper I will demonstrate some of the benefits and challenges of using primary sources. I will then suggest that emerging teachers' reluctance to incorporate primary sources in the social studies classroom is a pedagogical issue that is firmly grounded in notions of teacher identity, which ultimately, may have profound implications for our current practices in pre-service teacher education.

Defining Primary Sources

Often the term *primary sources* itself is vague or ambiguous to teachers. VanFossen & Shiveley (2000) offer a good working definition of the term *primary sources*:

> …we define primary sources as documentary records or materials that have survived from a particular historical era and are contemporary or nearly contemporary with the period being studied….Examples of primary sources can include such materials as texts, photographs, etchings, paintings, maps, diaries, cartoons, broadsides, newspapers, or other firsthand accounts of events, and audio or video footage (p. 244).

Though the authors make reference to "materials", we must not let print-based records overshadow the rich learning potential that can also come from non-print sources. Cox and Barrow (2000), Susan Wunder (2002) and White & White (2000), all present interesting case studies of their work introducing pre-service teachers to the range of learning that can be facilitated by using such things as museum artifacts and historic buildings.

The Benefits of Using Primary Sources

Recently, there have been a number of interesting studies completed by Faculties of Education, in partnership with museums, which investigated the issues that pre-service teachers face when using primary sources with students. For example, Cox and Barrow (2000) developed a practicum for pre-service social studies teachers situated at a local museum. The authors concluded that the activities the pre-service teachers developed in the museum setting helped them learn to incorporate higher level thinking skills in their lessons, in addition to empowering them with the ability to construct personal meaning from primary sources.

Wunder (2002) also discusses the benefits of teaching teachers how to use primary sources. She developed a partnership between her own elementary social studies methods students from the University of Nebraska and the education staff at the Museum of Nebraska History. Each student had the opportunity to work with groups of younger students in the museum setting. Wunder (2002) notes that working with primary sources has the benefit of promoting active learning and critical thinking skills (p. 159). Yet she also notes that "[f]or pre-service teachers, as for other classroom teachers, providing sufficient artefacts for historical inquiry is a challenge" (Wunder, 2002, p. 160). Therefore, this partnership was not only a way to help her pre-service teachers develop the confidence to use primary sources with children, but it was also a way of modelling to her own students how the challenge of access could be overcome by working directly with the education staff of a local museum.

Moving beyond artefacts to historic architecture, White & White (2000) discuss their approaches to introducing both pre-service and in-service teachers to primary sources. Pre-service teachers in a social studies methods course were taken on a field study of a historical district in Boston. The authors note the importance of teacher preparation for such field trips. "The field study was also a good experience in recognizing the kinds of questions teachers should ask and questions students might raise that can be answered, at least tentatively, when they return to their classroom, using primary and secondary sources" (White & White, 2000, p. 29). The examples cited above show that using primary sources has positive learning impacts. However, they do not specifically address how to overcome the ambiguous nature of primary sources and the unforeseen questions they can raise. For pre-service teachers, questions of ambiguity are the greatest obstacles teachers face when attempting to incorporate primary sources into their lessons.

The Fear of Ambiguity and Controversy in Social Studies Classrooms

Lee (2001) and Seixas (1998) both have studied the challenges that pre-service social studies teachers face when using primary resources. Lee (2001) conducted a qualitative study of twenty pre-service social studies teachers and investigated their ability to effectively use digital primary sources in the preparation of instructional materials. He found that "Pre-service teachers recognized the interpretive potential of digital historical collections, but downplayed controversial digital historical resources when developing their pedagogical content knowledge" (Lee, 2001, para.10). Though the pre-service teachers in his study acknowledged that using primary sources helped their students develop critical thinking skills by interpreting multiple points of view, they were reluctant to introduce any new sources that could result in controversy in their classrooms (Lee, 2001, para. 18). Unfortunately, most of the pre-service teachers in his study were unable to find ways to help themselves and their students effectively deal "…with the ambiguity and controversy associated with interpreting past events" (Lee, 2001, para. 34).

Seixas (1998) investigated the difficulties social studies methods students faced when they were asked to use primary sources in a lesson plan for their practicum. He reminds us that the use of primary sources requires teachers themselves to possess the confidence and cognitive ability (often rooted in discipline specific knowledge) to interpret the source. "Thus, the process of building knowledge about the past involves an analysis of the 'remainders of the past' (or texts), which proceeds in part through understanding them in the light of what we already know about the past (i.e. contextualization)" (Seixas, 1998, p. 312). Further complicating the issue of interpretation and contextualization is the postmodern suggestion that *presentism* prevents the accurate construction of historical knowledge because we can never truly separate our present frames of reference from our interpretations (Seixas, 1998, p.

313).

Another complication pre-service teachers face in the use of primary sources is based on their view of historical investigation itself (Seixas, 1998, p. 328). For example, Seixas (1998) found that even pre-service teachers with undergraduate degrees in history found it challenging to construct pedagogically appropriate lesson plans that allowed for multiple viewpoints to be discussed in the classroom. Two of the four pre-service teachers interviewed "construed the historian as detective finding answers to a puzzle whose answers are fixed, rather than historian as a builder of interpretations with limits set by text and context" (Seixas, 1998, p.334).

Language is another major challenge when using primary sources. Some authors note that the reading level of primary source documents or the colloquial terminology that is to be found in many historical documents may frustrate young students, thus negating the positive impacts (Lee, 2001; Seixas, 1998). In addition, there is the difficult question of cultural sensitivity; language used in the past may actually be deemed offensive by today's society. This is often problematic when dealing with cultural or racial topics, such as American slavery or the treatment of Japanese Canadians during World War II. One of the pre-service teachers in Lee's study struggled with the challenges of language and controversy during a lesson about the Civil War.

> Noel's recognition that the language may be inflammatory and that her students needed forewarning about the offensive nature of the language was consistent with other participants' feelings about using primary source documents. Although none of the participants refused to use the documents, most insisted on mediating students' experiences. The forms of instruction chosen by participants denied their students an opportunity to deal with controversial documents. These pedagogical decisions would have the effect of limiting students' historical thinking (Lee, 2001, para. 22).

Lee's observations highlight what is perhaps the greatest challenge of using primary sources in the classroom. Introducing students to primary sources is not in itself an effective pedagogical approach. To fully realize the benefits of primary sources, teachers must possess the confidence and skills to help facilitate, not mediate, the controversial issues they may spark.

However, if teachers are unprepared to effectively deal with the challenges that primary sources can instigate, not only can the positive impacts be negated, but the result can lead to misunderstandings and uninformed conclusions. To more fully experience the range of cognitive and affective benefits, teachers must be taught how to effectively incorporate primary sources in their classrooms. More importantly, however, social studies teachers need to personally value the type of outcomes that result from using primary sources. They must envision a classroom where debate, ambiguity and even controversy are welcomed. They must see students as capable of thinking critically and compassionately about complex and potentially disturbing issues. They must have the confidence in themselves to be a facilitator of the inquiry process rather than the transmitter of indisputable facts. Ultimately, this pedagogical question is intrinsically linked to teacher identity.

The Discourse of Teacher Identity and Pedagogy

While there is a substantial amount of literature that discusses the construction of teacher identity in general terms, the literature is more limited in regards to social studies teachers specifically. Therefore, I have chosen to focus on aspects of teacher identity that directly or indirectly could be applied to the field of social studies. Of particular interest to my own work is the literature that explores the link between teacher identity and pedagogical choice (Miller Marsh, 2002; Gaudelli, 1999; Gibson, 1995).

Miller Marsh (2002), a teacher educator at Binghamton University, suggests that pedagogical choices are informed by teacher identity, which is shaped by both a child-centered discourse and a socio-cultural discourse. Working with her own pre-service education students, she challenged them to deconstruct the relationships between discourse, power and identity. She found that teacher identity is a process of social negotiation, strongly shaped by our experiences as students (Miller Marsh, 2002, p. 454), and deeply rooted in historical and contemporary constructs of power:

> …the various discourses that define what it means to be a particular type of student or teacher in this particular moment in the United States are rooted in the social, cultural, historical, and political contexts in which schools are situated in this country. These discourses of schooling shape what and who schools, teachers, children, and families can become. The social practices that are embedded in discourses have very real material consequences for the groups of individuals that are located within them (Miller Marsh, 2002, p. 460).

Throughout her course, she challenged her pre-service teachers to critically think about issues, from grading and standardized testing, to more philosophical issues about the role of language and the teacher's responsibilities within the classroom. In particular, she introduced strategies, such as group assignments, with collective grading, which forced her students to work reflectively within a socio-cultural discourse. Many of her education students found it challenging to move from the more traditional child-centred discourse, which establishes a linear progression of cognitive development, to a socio-cultural discourse, which questions the notion of power and encourages a more recursive approach to learning. As Danielewicz (2001) reminds us, teacher identity is shaped by the interplay of internal and external discourse. Miller Marsh (2002) concludes that, "Helping teachers to make visible the power in the discourses they use and illustrating to them that they can make some choices about their own identities and the social identities of the children in their care is one way to work towards social transformation (p. 467).

Gaudelli (1999) looked more directly at the relationship between teacher's personal identity and pedagogical choice in an ethnographic study of fourteen educators, with varying levels of experience, who were teaching a course in global education. He suggests that:

> The elements of identity that seemed to affect teacher pedagogy varied. The teacher identity categories included: gender, [previous] occupation, religious background, family history, athletic background and ethnic identity. Teachers, due in part to their identities, taught differently, specifically with regard to how they selected content, the amount of time and emphasis placed on topics and how they characterized course content

> related to their identity (Gaudelli, 1999, p. 4).

Gaudelli determined that there was a relationship between teacher identity and the strategies individual teachers used to deal with controversy in the classroom. Though most teachers avoided having their students engage in substantive discussion about controversial issues, he noted that some of the teachers in his study actually sensationalized controversial issues as a pedagogical approach to generating student interest in the topic being studied (Gaudelli, 1999, p. 15). He ultimately concluded that:

> The teachers in this study lacked a firm grasp of the philosophical debate surrounding relativism and universalism. The teachers searched for criteria to limit non-judgement in the classroom, but did not engage their students in this ethical reasoning. They generally felt uncomfortable with the compromises that were struck between universalism and relativism outside the classroom. Inside the classroom, they either sensationalized the controversial practices inherent in the course of study or tried to avoid those topics completely. While these strategies seem quite opposite, they accomplish the same objective with regard to ethical reasoning: a simplification of the quandary of relativism. This simplification grew out of a lack of clarity on the part of the individual teachers about this contentious debate (Gaudelli, 1999, p. 20).

Clearly, even the experienced teachers in his study grappled with how to effectively deal with issues of ambiguity and controversy in their classrooms. Certainly this problem is exacerbated for most pre-service and emerging teachers.

Gibson (1995) completed a qualitative study with eight emerging social studies teachers as they made the transition from student to teacher. She found that teacher identity is strongly influenced by our prior conceptions of teachers, and that most emerging teachers had formed some ideas about the nature of social studies and pedagogy well before they began their formal teacher training (Gibson, 1995, p. 74). Despite the influence of their experiences as students in social studies classes, most participants agreed that extended practice teaching experience during teacher training was beneficial in helping them shape (or re-shape) their own teacher identities.

A recurring issue brought up by participants was the notion of moral responsibility. She noted that many of these teachers struggled with how to deal with controversial issues in their classrooms and though their strategies varied, all were directly linked to their personal sense of the moral responsibility of the teacher (Gibson, 1995, p. 127). The author reminds us of the need for more reflective teacher training, so that prior values and notions of social studies, pedagogy and moral responsibility can be critiqued and refined. Gibson (1995) concludes:

> For most of the eight participants, one of the more central elements in their sense making about learning to teach social studies was constructing an identity of themselves as teachers of social studies. Part of this identification process involved clarifying the "fuzzy thinking" by becoming more aware of their initial conceptualizations of social studies as important

> influences on their current thinking and future teaching. At times, is also involved confronting and rethinking these initial conceptualizations, particularly in terms of the moral responsibility of social studies teachers when addressing value-laden and controversial issues (p. 194).

Though some authors (Gaudelli, 1999; Gibson, 1995) suggest that the construction of teacher identity is a highly personal and ultimately internal process, other authors suggest that identity is predominantly constructed by larger external influences (Miller Marsh, 2002; Danielewicz, 2001).

Teacher Identity as a National Construct

Researchers, particularly in the United Kingdom, have written about how nationalism influences the construction of teacher identity (Moore et al., 2002; Grosvenor & Lawn, 2001). They suggest that government policy has been used to determine, manipulate and enforce teacher identity, which ultimately influences curriculum and pedagogy.

Grosvenor and Lawn (2001) investigated the links between national education policy and teacher identity in the twentieth century. They suggest that, "National identity and teaching were bound together, inseparable in their reliance on mythologies of the past, on the civilising rise of education and the distinguishing democratic responsibility of teaching in England. Professionalism and pedagogy were not separated, but intrinsically part of this process" (Grosvenor & Lawn, 2001, p. 357). Clearly, they suggest that nationalism and neo-liberal management practices imposed on schools shape both the individual and the collective identity of teachers (Grosvenor & Lawn, 2001, p. 359).

Moore et al. (2002) also suggest that educational reforms resulting from rapid socio-economic changes and market forces in the United Kingdom are forcing teachers to form identities based less on educational theory and ideology, and more on what they term *principled pragmatism* (Moore et al., 2002, p. 552). They conclude that:

> …teachers - including more experienced practitioners…find it extremely difficult to accept that much of the practice they are currently constrained into pursuing has its origins in, and takes its impetus from, market forces and values rather than their own views as to what education should be for and how it should be experienced…[However] It is not inconceivable that teachers in this position, rather than confront the problem head-on, might find it easier to configure their altered practice within a normalised discourse of pragmatism, offering, as it does, a values- and pedagogy-based rationale for the shift that is immediately acceptable in terms of preferred individual teacher and whole-school identities. (Moore et al., 2002, 563-564).

Both of these studies remind us of the external forces shaping teacher identity, individually and collectively.

Competing Notions of Teacher Identity

It is clear that there are many differing opinions about which factors are more influential in

constructing teacher identity. Though each of the previous studies cited has something to add to the dialogue about teacher identity, any one factor alone can be proven to be more or less influential. In fact, it is imperative that as teachers we need to reconsider the relationship between our notions of personal identity and how they shape, and are shaped by, the wider discourse of collective teacher identity. This involves reflecting upon both the internal and external factors, which shape our identity as teachers. As Deborah Britzman (1991) suggests, teacher identity is formed by what she terms the *complexity of relationships*. "Enacted in every pedagogy are the tensions between knowing and being, thought and action, theory and practice, knowledge and experience, the technical and the existential, the objective and the subjective" (Britzman, 1991, p. 2)

In relation to the specific issue of controversy and ambiguity raised by using primary sources in the social studies classroom, pre-service teachers are reluctant to deal with these complex issues for a variety of reasons. Pre-service teachers do not get a great deal of time to engage in real teaching experience. In addition, not only do pre-service teachers require the skills to effectively incorporate primary sources into their daily lessons, but they need to personally believe in the outcomes the use of such sources can produce. Pre-service and emerging teachers need to envision a classroom where they and their students share the power and they need to give up their role as the central figure of authority. This is, indeed, a personal values issue steeped in one's sense of their identity. As Britzman (1998) also reminds us, dealing with *contentious history* "…requires educators to think carefully about their own theories of learning and how the stuff of such difficult knowledge becomes pedagogical" (p. 117).

However, emerging teachers also need to feel safe utilizing this pedagogical approach and believe that there is support, from both colleagues and administrators, in choosing the more messy approach to teaching social studies. Beyond individual identity formation, this is an issue of collective teacher identity, shaped by socio-cultural influences, including government policy. Danielewicz (2001) has concluded that collective identity is profoundly influenced by the positive or negative affiliations that pre-service teachers had with mentors or cooperating teachers during practicum placements. Though there is value in the student practicum process, teacher educators must do more to encourage pre-service teachers to not simply emulate or copy their supervising teacher's identity, but rather to experiment and find their own unique identities. In other words, pre-service teachers must become more aware and reflective of both the external and internal discourses which shape teacher identity, individually and collectively.

Incorporating Primary Sources into Pre-service Teacher Training

In terms of helping emerging teachers to embrace primary sources, there are a few key strategies that could be easily incorporated into teacher training. Ledford and Hattler (1997) suggest that pre-service teachers need increased training in the effective use of technology, so they can take advantage of on-line primary sources and promote active learning. However, this is only a very small part of the training teachers require to effectively use primary sources in the classroom. More importantly, pre-service teachers need the confidence and skills to contextualize primary sources and develop age-appropriate lessons around them. All learners, regardless of age, require time and practice to develop new skills. Pre-service teachers cannot be expected to effectively incorporate primary sources in their classrooms without repeated exposure and opportunity to learn how to effectively use such sources with students. Teacher educators must look beyond superficial field trips and consider the benefits of developing more formalized partnerships with area museums, acknowledging and utilizing the expertise held by museum education staff (Wunder, 2002; Cox & Barrow, 2000; Claire, 1996).

In terms of developing their ability to use primary sources Lee (2001) also makes a series of recommendations for pre-service teacher education. He suggests that social studies methods courses must prepare emerging teachers to handle the ambiguity that can arise when a primary source contradicts an accepted interpretation of an historical event. Teachers must be willing and able to help their students challenge the authoritative voice often found in instructional materials, such as textbooks (Lee, 2001, para 34). In addition, he suggests that "…teacher preparation programs need to help pre-service history and social studies teachers develop the attitudes and skills necessary to objectively address controversial issues in the classroom" (Lee, 2001, para. 35). All of these suggestions would, in my opinion, promote more effective use of primary sources in the social studies classroom.

Teacher Identity and Pre-service Education

Though pre-service teachers are often focused on issues centred on curriculum and subject content, teacher educators must model reflective practice and specifically address the complex issue of teacher identity, particularly in the social studies. As Britzman (1991) reminds us:

> Social studies is grounded in the dynamics of society and culture; it is necessarily made from the stuff of controversy, antagonistic discourses that push and pull at our sensibilities, our deep investments, and our desires and fears. Controversy is always emotive, threatening to disorganize social convention and individual perceptions… [Though teachers] might desire balanced perspectives, there is still the messy issue of how to consider the cacophony of discourses that endow an idea, event or relationship with controversial meanings (pp. 187-188)

The issues Britzman (1991) speaks of are firmly rooted in the construction of individual and collective teacher identity. To not address this issue head-on with emerging social studies teachers is to propagate the myth that social studies is neutral and to perpetuate what Gaudelli (1999) terms the *quandary of relativism*. As the world becomes increasingly concerned with the economic forces of globalization, we as teachers must deconstruct the impacts of the borderless world on our students, our schools, and ourselves. We must become more conscious of how these influences shape teachers individually and collectively.

In addition, Britzman (1991) and Danielewicz (2001) remind us that pre-service teachers are concurrently experiencing many kinds of identity formation, personally and professionally, as they approach the milestone of graduation. They both call for teacher training that is reflective and acknowledge the complexity of teaching.

> Methods courses that focus on mechanistic applications and view knowledge as a form of technical rationality implicitly encourage conservatism among student teachers in two ways. First, knowledge is presented as an accomplished fact, separate from discursive practices and the relations of power it supposes. Second, the curriculum and its presentation are not considered in dialogic relationship to the lives of students and teachers (Britzman, 1991, p. 47).

Britzman's observations about the impact of technical rationality may help to explain why so

many new social studies teachers are reluctant to use primary sources in the classroom. With the pressures that probationary teachers face to exhibit strong classroom management skills and to have students do well on high stakes achievement tests, it is no wonder that they are hesitant to introduce any pedagogical strategy that might be messy. Yet, if young teachers spend the most formative years of their careers teaching conservatively and avoiding risks a significant concern is that many will continue to teach this way throughout their entire careers. Surely avoiding the richness and complexity of social studies education is not the end goal of teacher education?

Danielewicz (2001) suggests that, "To promote identities, teacher education programs should be situated, authentic contexts where they are an organic part of a discourse community that includes real schools, teachers…students, districts, administrators, and any other people usually present in school settings" (p. 182). In addition to student practicum placements, teacher trainers need to incorporate more meaningful experiences in informal learning settings, such as museums, cultural centres and civic offices, into their social studies methods courses. If social studies is truly grounded in notions of citizenship, we cannot be afraid to move beyond the often sterile walls of our classrooms and engage with our communities, *in situ*.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I feel that there is much more research needed in the area of pedagogy and teacher identity, particularly as it relates to social studies. After all, the richness of social studies lies in the complex issues it raises. Rather than avoid such topics, pre-service and emerging teachers need to be given the tools to begin to embrace uncertainty and stimulate debate in their classrooms. Granted this is not always easy and can even be personally painful, as we are forced to look inward to our own values, biases, and ideologies. However, in an increasingly global society, the issues that are debated, and skills that are developed within the context of the social studies classroom, are going to become imperative life skills in the twenty-first century. More than teaching concepts of citizenship, social studies will be the cornerstone for teaching about what it means to be human in an increasingly borderless world. We owe it to ourselves as educators, and to our present and future students, to embrace this challenge and consider the benefits that can rise out of the ambiguity and controversy.

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