Elementary Teachers Teaching History: A Tale of Two Teachers

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Abstract

Many of today’s children and youth find their school engagement with history to be boring or irrelevant. In today’s climate of standardized test and at a time when history and other social studies are viewed as second class subjects how do teachers make history interesting and relevant to students? This study investigates two teachers and their approach to teaching history. One teacher uses a traditional lecture and textbook method the other use a more active approach to engage students in learning history.

Many of today’s children and youth find their school engagement with social studies in general and history in particular boring or irrelevant (Kingsley & Boone 2008; Hootstein, 1995; Schug, Todd & Beery, 1984). This condition, unfortunately, long has been observed in American education (Harper, 1937). Not only do students describe social studies or history boring but many elementary teachers do as well (Zhao & Hoge 2005, Owens, 1997). Nevertheless, teaching methods and materials employed by teachers often are blamed for these students’ lack of interest (Goodlad, 1984). That students have limited interest in history should come as little surprise. Research reveals that many teachers in elementary classrooms place little or no emphasis on the teaching of social studies (McCall, 2006). The Study of Schooling survey (Goodlad, 1984) reported that in grades K-6, only 4.9% of instructional time was devoted to social studies instruction. This amount of time pales in contrast to the emphasis on reading that commands 64% and mathematics that takes 17.5% of instructional time (Sirotnik, as cited in Crabtree, 1992). No Child Left Behind and high stakes testing, with its emphasis on reading, writing, and mathematics at the expense of other subjects seems largely accountable for the inattention to or reduced concern for the teaching of history in elementary schools (Lanahan & Yeager, 2008; McCall, 2006). Moreover, the paltry amount of time spent on history and other social studies, as well as the academic content itself, may well be responsible for the lack of student interest in social studies offerings. For example, Larkins, Hawkins and Gilmore (1987) concluded that much of the social studies instruction in grades K-3 was “educational junk food,” and recommended its removal from the curriculum.

American students’ performance on history test items bears witness to the neglect suffered by history in the contemporary school curriculum (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2006; Ravitch & Finn, 1987; Wineburg 2004). Recent results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (2006), for example, revealed that many American fourth, eighth and twelfth grade students did not know numerous basic historical terms, people or events.

A prominent challenge to today’s history teachers is to make history more relevant and interesting (Kingsley & Boone 2008; Schug, Todd & Beery, 1984). Much research reveals that students’ learning increases as they are more active participants in their learning (Burenheide, 2007; Booth 1984; Hallam, 1979; Inhelder & Piaget, 1958). However, most American teachers continue to rely on the lecture method to convey information (McCall, 2006; Shaver, Davis & Helburn, 1979; Wiley, 1977). Goodlad (1984) reported somewhat similar findings: Students spent their time listening, reading the textbook, completing workbook/worksheet assignments, and taking
tests/quizzes. To be sure, many teachers appear to lack the necessary background knowledge to teach history effectively (Yeager & Davis, 1994, 1995a, 1995b). Consequently, many teachers closely follow the textbook and rely on the textbook as the main source of information. Such practice has been criticized for many years. A number of researchers, Richgels, Tunnell and Tomlinson, C. (1993); Van Middendorp and Lee, 1994; Beck and McKeown (1988) described many of the current history textbooks as being not student friendly because of the number of errors and the trivial information presented.

Wineburg and Wilson (1988) reported that expert historians possess more historical knowledge than do others, but, more importantly, they possess a “vision of history.” Expert teachers are able to convey the role of a historian, whereas novice history teachers often look at the subject as little more than rote memorization of dates, places and other miscellaneous facts. With this type of barren instruction, students never experience or understand how a historian interprets events, uses original sources, or creates and recreates narratives of an event that occurred many years ago.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate how a teacher’s knowledge of history impacted how history is taught in elementary classrooms. Three questions guided the study.

1. What were the roles of the teacher during class? Was the teacher a dispenser of knowledge or a knowledge facilitator?
2. Given the available resources, how did teachers use the resources to help teach the subject matter? What influences guided a teacher’s decision as she chooses which resources to use and which resources to ignore?
3. How did the teacher’s knowledge influence how the content was taught and presented?

**Review of the Literature**

Ravitch and Finn (1986) described the typical history class as one where students listen to the teacher, use the textbook, and take tests. Little, if any, time was devoted to discussing the significance of events. Additionally, Wineburg and Wilson (1988), and Yeager and Davis (1994, 1995a, 1995b), studied history teachers, teaching methods, and teachers’ understanding of how history is created, and how these factors influenced teaching in history courses.

Wineburg and Wilson (1988) observed 11 high school teachers and described two of the teachers they observed and the teaching methods they employed. They described that both teachers were successful, even though the teachers used different methods, because they were “masters of their subject matter” (Wineburg and Wilson 1988, p. 56). Other than knowing much history, both teachers understand how the knowledge of history is constructed. In addition, the teachers discussed easily why particular events are important.

In three related studies, Yeager and Davis (1994, 1995a, 1995b) studied the historical thinking of elementary school student teachers, high school history teachers and secondary school student teachers. Following Wineburg (1991), they asked individuals to read and analyze eight documents about the Battle of Lexington. Then, the individuals were interviewed. During the interview, each person discussed not only the documents, but also how they might use the documents in the teaching of social studies or history.

The implications of the three studies by Yeager and Davis seem clear. Elementary school teachers attend little to historical thinking. The lack of emphasis placed on social studies at the elementary school level prompted one of the student teachers to comment, “Social studies is just not
done on the elementary level from what I’ve seen, because a lot of people don’t think it’s important or that it relates to anything… Elementary teachers in general don’t care about it.” (Yeager & Davis, 1994, p. 4). The middle school and high school teachers offered history as a set of unquestionable facts. With likely few teachers utilizing primary sources, emphasizing the analysis of data, and teaching their students how to corroborate information, Yeager and Davis concluded that students likely never understand that the study of history is problematic and is interpretive. For teachers to take more history courses seems an important but insufficient proposal. Teachers must possess a vision of history and knowledge of how history is created. Student teachers imitate the teaching procedures used by their cooperating teachers. Teachers who took typical history courses in high school and college (characterized by emphasis on rote memorization of “facts”) had the most problems analyzing historical data. If elementary, secondary and college history instructors are unwilling, or unable to teach the how to of history, then the burden must fall on the instructors of social studies methods courses.

Furthermore, good, engaged teaching often is discouraged by school administrators (McNeil, 1988a, 1988b, 1988c). Principals appear to want teachers who keep an orderly classroom rather than those who are creative. Many school officials’ attitude can be characterized by the statement, “If it is not going to help the standardized test scores, then it is not important.” Other administrative leaders believe that coverage of vast amounts of material is more important than studying fewer topics in depth. Attitudes like these inside schools, with little emphasis placed on the teaching of history, result in students who know little history and have little interest in the subject. This should not surprise either the profession or the public.

Teachers need to have a vision of history. Teachers need to possess the necessary background knowledge in order to decide which learning activities will maximize student learning. Teachers who lack background information are unable to make informed decisions about how and where the class activities fit into the curriculum. Background knowledge is also essential for the teacher to conduct a beneficial debriefing session after

**Methodology**

Qualitative methods were used to collect and analyze data obtained in this study. Student informants were asked to think-aloud as they proceeded through the class activities which were recorded on audiotape. Afterward, the students and teachers were interviewed about various aspects of the class. Also, students and teachers were observed during social studies class to verify the validity of what the informants reported.

**School Setting**

The study was conducted at a rural elementary school located in the southwestern United States. The school has a Mexican American student population of 56%. Many of the students come from a low socioeconomic background; 65% of the students receive free or reduced lunch. There are over 750 students enrolled at the K-6 elementary school. Many of the students in Chapman Elementary2 move during the school year. Many of these students who move from place to place and school to school fit the state definition of an at risk student. At the time of this study, 75% of Chapman’s students were considered at-risk. Faced with the task of educating many students considered at-risk by state standards, the administrators and faculty of Chapman Elementary have been willing to try a variety of programs as a means to increase students’ grades, attendance, self-esteem and motivation. While not all of the programs the school has tried have been successful, the principal and teachers are open to new ideas.
In past years, the principal of Chapman Elementary School strived to have fourth, fifth, and sixth grade teachers teach in one specialized area. Typically, one teacher would teach reading and language arts, another mathematics, and a third teacher would teach science and one teacher would teach social studies. However, due to declining enrollment, Chapman Elementary School reduced by one the number of its fifth grade teachers. With the loss of one teaching position at the fifth grade level, a specialist teacher in social studies was no longer possible. Thus, each fifth grade teacher taught one section of social studies.

In the fifth grade at Chapman Elementary School, social studies was scheduled for Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays for a 45 minutes period. This period on Tuesdays and Thursdays was used to prepare students for the state-wide standardized assessment test. The district’s concern over standardized test scores has placed the additional burden on teachers of trying to teach a year’s worth of social studies content in three days a week instead of five days. One teacher at Chapman reported that little emphasis was placed on social studies and that she could not remember the district offering any in-service preparation for the teaching of social studies. She also reported that the other fifth grade teachers had stopped teaching social studies after the Spring Break, in order to use the time for extra standardized test practice.

Participants

The two teachers, Emily Grant and Donna Becker, who participated in the study, were recommended by their principal. The teachers in the study have taught for more than fifteen years, both are certified teachers and have the same level of education, a bachelors degree in elementary education. Neither teacher has a degree in history. In addition, the principal of the school considers both above average teachers.

Emily Grant has more than twenty years of teaching experience and has taught in a variety of settings. She enjoys teaching and studying history. Ms. Grant and her husband frequently travel during the summer months and they visit historic sites that they encounter during their travels. During the summer of 1996, the Grants traveled through parts of the Midwest United States and had the opportunity to see parts of what was once the Oregon Trail. Because of her travels, Ms. Grant was able to bring in various maps and artifacts from the Trail. In addition, she brought to the class a wealth of background information about the Trail which she shared with her students.

The other teacher, Donna Becker, has more than fifteen years of teaching experience. Ms. Becker’s specialization is reading, but she is certified to teach all academic subjects in grades one through six. Ms. Becker said her interest in teaching social studies had increased since she first began teaching social studies. She admits that she lacks some of the necessary background knowledge that would enable her to teach history at a deeper level. Although she would like to spend more time outside of the classroom preparing for social studies lessons, her time is limited. Thus, she often relies on the social studies textbook. Because she does care about her students and she would like to offer them an enriched curriculum, Ms. Becker was excited to participate in the project.

The demographics of the students from both classes are similar. According to Ms. Grant, not many of her students come from an environment that encourages learning. In the case of one student, Roger, Ms. Grant speculated that, if were not for one of Roger’s aunts who worked at the school, she did not know if Roger would come to school or if he would have any school supplies.

Prior to beginning the unit, preliminary conversations with the students from both classes revealed they had little or no knowledge of the Oregon Trail. This is not unexpected since United States History is not taught until the fifth grade in Texas schools.
Class Setting

On the first day of the unit Ms. Grant was dressed similar to a lady who was preparing to walk the Oregon Trail in the 1850s. On the second day the students watched a documentary “West to Oregon”. The third and fourth days of the unit were devoted to a detailed discussion of the supplies the emigrants might have taken on their journey. To aid the discussion, Ms. Grant used an elaborate diagram of the inside of an emigrant wagon packed with provisions. The diagram, which was drawn on white butcher-block paper, measured four feet high, and was about eight feet long. Other lessons focused on skills which would have been useful for people crossing the country, why people made the journey, and who were some of the famous people of the Oregon Trail. The students also looked at possible trails the emigrants may have traveled.

One unit assignment was the construction of model Conestoga wagons. The students used cardboard for the body of the wagon and the wheels. The students used grapevine as the arches to hold the cloth cover of the wagon. For the supplies Ms. Grant sewed small bags which the students filled with corn, beans, and rice. The students used plastic straws to make rifles and the containers of 35mm film to make water barrels.

The students in Ms. Becker’s class read the state adopted United States history textbook. All lessons were either teacher lecture and or reading from the textbook. The assignments consisted of answering questions from the textbook. There was no variation from this pattern during the unit covering the Westward expansion which included a section on the Oregon Trail.

Data Collection

During classroom observations, the researcher kept notes recorded on paper. While the students engaged in class activities observations were made about student-to-student interactions, and student-to-teacher interactions. In addition, students were monitored for on task and off task behaviors. The previously listed behaviors were noted as well the types of questions students asked. Later, the hand written notes were transferred to a computer file. The interviews were recorded on an audio tape recorder and, later, were transcribed, as were the students’ think-aloud recordings.

Results

Question 1: What was the role of the teacher during class? Was the teacher a dispenser of knowledge or a knowledge facilitator?

Ms. Grant was both a dispenser of knowledge and knowledge facilitator. Her role varied depending on the type of lesson planned for the day. If Ms. Grant believed that the students needed direct instruction before engaging a learning activity then she was a knowledge dispenser. When Ms. Grant’s class was engaged in class activities she acted more as a coach for her students than an instructor. She monitored the class by walking around the room and watched the students’ behavior and asked students questions about their progress. When the students did ask for assistance, Ms. Grant posed questions to the student. She wanted the students to answer their own questions.

Ms. Becker, on the other hand, was a dispenser of knowledge following the traditional social studies teaching model of lecture and having the students read-a-loud from the textbook. If she observed students it was to redirect misbehavior. There was little student-to-teacher interaction and even less student-to-student interaction.
Question 2: How did teachers use the available resources to teach the subject matter? What influences guided a teacher’s decision as she chose which resources to use and which resources to ignore?

Part 1: How did teachers use the available resources to teach the subject matter?

Ms. Grant used information from several different sources. First, she relied on her personal knowledge which she had gained during her travels and through reading. Second, Ms. Grant used information from National Geographic Magazine, maps that outlined the trail, and current maps of the United States. Third, she emphasized fiction and non-fiction children's literature about the Oregon Trail. Fourth, she used other material such as materials that she had bought, found, made, borrowed, or been given. Materials in this category included a diagram of a wagon with the supplies emigrants may have taken on their trip, a bonnet similar to the type pioneer woman wore, and a part of a barrel from the 1800s. Fifth, was the film “West to Oregon”. In addition, to using a variety of sources, Ms. Grant used a variety of teaching methods. She began the unit with a lecture. During the second class period, she showed the film, “West to Oregon”. Students discussed what they had learned from the film during the third class session. She gave worksheets to students; however, these worksheets were not the type which students completed by filling in the blanks. Her worksheets asked the students what type of people they would like to accompany them on their trip to Oregon. What types of skills would they want their wagon mates to possess? One worksheet asked the students about the supplies each student would take with them. Also, Grant used an information sheet which showed a typical wagon used on the Trail. As mentioned earlier, each student made a model covered wagon of cardboard and cloth. The students used whatever they could find in the classroom to make their supplies. One student used a stirring straw to make a rifle. Another used Popsicle sticks to make a bench for the wagon.

Ms. Becker began the unit on the Oregon Trail by reading a brief section from the textbook to the class and showing “West to Oregon”. For the remainder of the unit, Ms. Becker relied on the information from the textbook. Although Ms. Becker had access to activities, she did not use the activities because she judged that her class did not have the time to use them. Ms. Becker said that, although she has begun to enjoy teaching social studies, she lacks the personal knowledge that many history teachers have.

In addition, she does not believe that the district has supported teachers to teach social studies. Further, she believed that many of her colleagues would benefit from in-service programs that helped teachers teach social studies. Ms. Grant agreed with Ms. Becker on this point and added that she believed that standardized test skills could be taught along with content in science and social studies, but that teachers need help from their administrators. Most classroom teachers, she noted, have enough to do without having to develop social studies lessons which are meaningful but do not help prepare students for the state testing program.

Part 2: What influences guided a teacher’s decision as she chose which resources to use and which resources to ignore?

Results: Ms. Grant had several advantages that Ms. Becker did not enjoy. First, she had more personal resources that she could use. Ms. Grant had books, authentic clothing, maps and artifacts that she has collected throughout the years. Second, Ms. Grant has more historical knowledge.
While she was not a history major while in college she does enjoy reading and studying history after the school day and during the summer. Her history background allows her to go beyond the textbook when she is teaching. This background helps her chose activities that she believes will help her students understand the material.

Ms. Becker does not enjoy the same advantages as Ms. Grant. Thus she most often chose activities based on time, and if it will help the children’s state test scores. She also chose activities based on how accessible the necessary materials are. Because Ms. Becker lacks the background knowledge that Ms. Grant has, she often relies on the textbook because she believes it is the best source of information, and it is readily accessible.

Question 3: How did the teacher’s knowledge influence how the content was taught and presented?

Results: Ms. Becker lacks the confidence in her historical knowledge to go beyond the textbook. Therefore she relies almost exclusive on the history textbook to teach. Ms Grant is able to call upon her historical knowledge to help her go beyond the textbook and help her select activities that the students engage during class.

Conclusion

This study examined the classrooms of two different teachers and the way those teachers teach history. In addition, it examined the resources the teachers chose to use while teaching about the westward expansion of the United States in general and of the Oregon Trail in particular.

This study confirms the findings of earlier studies that teachers with more historical background knowledge and that have a vision of history, make better teachers of history. At least in this study the teacher with greater historical knowledge was able to select more resources and use those resources in way that kept her students engaged with the material. Because of her interest in history and her travels Ms. Grant had also accumulated more resources and thus had more resources to select from. While passion or enthusiasm for a subject maybe difficult to quantify it appears that because history is something that Ms. Grant enjoys she is able to pass along some of that enthusiasm to her students. The students were more involved with in Ms. Grant’s class and reported that learning history was fun while the students in Ms. Becker’s classes reported that history was boring.

Ms. Becker on the other hand, who in the eyes of her principal is an above average teacher, lacks not only resources but confidence in teaching history so she relies on the textbook. Her lack of confidence translates into a lack of passion or enthusiasm for the subject matter and thus her students report that history is boring.

Teachers likely need workshops about how to teach history and how to integrate materials into history lessons. The two teachers in this study had not received any instruction about how to teach history. Both Ms. Becker and Ms. Grant believed that teachers would welcome the opportunity to learn how to become better history teachers. While some may consider Ms. Grant an above average history teacher, it is her love of history, and not special training that drives her teaching. She has developed her own style for teaching history and has had to acquire a resource library. Schools would do well to create a history laboratory. The facility could be stocked with artifacts, films, simulations and activity ideas that could help teachers construct interesting and informative units.
Teachers need time to prepare lessons that examine topics in depth. Many teachers rely on the textbook not because they believe it is the best source of information but, rather, because it is a quick source of information and lessons.

Teachers need support from their principal and from district-level curriculum consultants. At Chapman Elementary, much emphasis is placed on high stated mandated test scores. In order to obtain high scores, increased amounts of time are devoted to test preparation than is devoted to history. This lack of importance placed on history has led to some teachers to drop the subject from their daily schedule.

Future studies may examine the impact of school districts investing time and resources in staff development to teach history and other social studies subjects. Also it would be interesting to see what if any impact a social studies specialist, a district level staff person who would help teacher prepare lessons and model teaching would have on student learning and how history is taught.
References
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