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“[My] family has gone through that”: How high school students determine the trustworthiness of historical documents

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ABSTRACT

This mixed-methods study explores how high school students ($n = 35$) enrolled in a school with a high Latino/a population evaluate the trustworthiness of documents in two historical reasoning tasks: one about the Dust Bowl in the 1930s and the other about the experiences of Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the 1920s. Students indicated whether they trusted each document, provided a rationale for their trust (or distrust) of each document, and ranked the trustworthiness of the documents. We also interviewed 10 focal students to explore students' reasoning in more in-depth ways than the written responses allowed. We found that students tended to trust the secondary source documents more than the primary source documents because, as they argued, the secondary source documents contained more facts. In contrast, students were less likely to trust the primary source documents, particularly the songs, arguing that they were more opinion-based than factual. We also found that some students had an emotional response to the content of some of the documents, and in some cases, these emotional responses shaped how they viewed the documents' trustworthiness. Additionally, students' heritage may have played a role in some students' trust justifications for some documents in the experiences of Mexicans and Mexican Americans task. We conclude with implications for curriculum and instruction.
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Introduction

Recently educators have begun paying more attention to literacy skills in history classrooms with the release of the English Language Arts Common Core State Standards (ELA CCSS). The ELA CCSS include specific reading and writing standards for grades 6–12 history within the *Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects*. These standards outline literacy skills that history teachers must address, such as “evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010, p. 61). Social studies educators also emphasize the importance of historical literacy skills. The new *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* asks students to engage in

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historical inquiry by "pay[ing] attention to the wider historical context in order to choose sources that are relevant and credible" (National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 2013, p. 48). Both the ELA CCSS and the C3 Framework highlight the literacy skills involved with source analysis as critical aspects of historical study (see also VanSledright, 2002a). With many states in the US using the ELA CCSS and some states using the C3 Framework to create their own history standards, it is important to investigate how students demonstrate these literacy skills.

Many of the literacy skills included in the ELA CCSS and the C3 Framework are what history educators refer to as *historical thinking* or *historical reasoning* skills. Although definitions for these terms vary, history educators agree that historical skills such as engaging in investigations, analyzing and comparing sources, determining author credibility, and producing arguments are important abilities of historical literacy (Bain, 2006; Moje, 2008; Monte-Sano, 2010; Wineburg, 2001). Evaluating author and source credibility requires students to examine the role of the historical context of the source to evaluate how they *trust* the source to address a particular question about the past. Determining the trustworthiness of sources, thus, is a critical skill of historical reasoning that involves students in deliberating about the past. However, unless directly instructed to reason about history in this way and determine the trustworthiness of sources, students may not think critically about historical texts (Macedo-Rouet, Braasch, Britt, & Rouet, 2013; VanSledright, 2004). Teaching historical reasoning skills, such as determining the trustworthiness of sources, to *all* students is important given the vast quantities of information available to individuals, who then need to determine the credibility of sources. Teaching historical reasoning skills to traditionally underserved populations such as Latino/a students, who comprise 25% of all school-age students, is particularly important because they perform significantly lower than their White peers. Specifically, a 21-point differential for both eighth graders and 12th graders in US history exists, as documented on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) between White and Latino/a students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Additionally, equipping students with the skills to analyze and judge the trustworthiness of sources is an essential skill for all students in their current information-saturated digital lives (VanSledright, 2002a).

This mixed-methods study is part of a larger project about how high school students who are enrolled in a charter school with a high Latino/a population performed on and perceived (in terms of interest and relevance) two document-based type historical reasoning tasks. We focused on Latino/a students because of the achievement gap between them and their White peers. Additionally, we recognize the unique cultural spaces that Latino/a students inhabit, so we are interested in whether the perceived cultural relevancy of a task influences students' motivation and performance. In this study, we focus on a particular aspect of historical reasoning—sourcing—to explore the rationales students provide for evaluating the trustworthiness of documents[1] and whether students make connections between their heritage and their rationales. Understanding how students, particularly those from traditionally underserved populations, source documents is critical for teachers and curriculum makers who seek to help students develop their historical sourcing skills and their general sourcing skills for the massive amounts of information they interact with every day.

Literature review

Two streams of research inform this study: (a) the historical reasoning skill of determining the trustworthiness of sources; and (b) cultural relevance and historical reasoning.

Determining the trustworthiness of sources

In evaluating the trustworthiness of sources, students use assessments of reliability and credibility to examine, for example, "an author's position in an account" (VanSledright, 2002b, p. 134). These assessments depend not on a source's innate "character," but instead on the relationship of the source to the question being asked by the investigator. VanSledright (2004) notes that "because a source's reliability cannot be fixed definitively, judging reliability is almost always a relative and partial accomplishment, even among experts" (p. 231). Barton (2005) cautions against having students examine the "bias" or reliability of individual primary sources; instead, he contends, "in evaluating historical accounts, students should learn to look for the relationship between the kinds of claims made and the types of evidence used" (p. 748).

Macedo-Rouet, Braasch, Britt and Rouet (2013) borrowed the term *cognitive authority* from the information sciences field to describe the credibility and seriousness of sources. The more cognitive authority people give sources, the more credible they deem the source. The authors write that "the extent to which the information source possesses knowledge about the topic seems to be a constant in determining relevance judgments" (p. 206). Without aid, Macedo-Rouet et al. (2013) wrote, children and adolescents may not be able to determine the cognitive authority of different sources.

In studies of how students judge trustworthiness, researchers have found that students of different ages often need teacher assistance to engage in *healthy skepticism* (VanSledright, 2004) of historical sources. Wineburg's (1991) study of 12th-grade Advanced Placement students and historians found that the students mainly read the sources for factual information without reading the subtext or examining the authors' intentions within the larger historical context. These students trusted the sources

[1] We use the term *documents* to refer to the particular documents students used in the tasks (all of which were represented in written or visual format). We use the term, "sources" to refer more generally to material people use to examine what happened in the past, which includes documents but also extends to artifacts, architecture, art, and other non-documents.

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