



Parents', students', and teachers' beliefs about teaching heritage histories in public school history classrooms



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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines the expectations and beliefs parents, students, and teachers have about the teaching of heritage histories in public high schools. Students from three heritage groups, as well as their parents and teachers, were interviewed to shed light on this complex, often silent, relationship. This study is grounded in literature about the purposes of history education, historical distance, and collective memory/heritage, which give shape to and help to explicate some of the more complex issues inherent in the teaching of heritage histories. Participants included four Hmong students, three of their parents, and their teacher in St. Paul, Minnesota; eight Chinese students, nine of their parents, and their teacher in Elmdale, California; and five Jewish students, five of their parents, and their teacher in Maple Lake, Illinois. Findings indicate that the three stakeholder groups believe that the public school history classroom is an appropriate and desired place for heritage histories to be taught. This is complicated, however, by several factors: the placement of the heritage history narratives within larger curricular and mainstream narratives, how the teachers choose to incorporate the heritage narratives into the formal classroom curriculum, and the changing nature of historical and generational distance.

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Introduction

Teachers are often exhorted to make curriculum relevant to their students' lives (Gay, 2002; Style, 1996). Yet, there is little guidance for teachers regarding curriculum that is already relevant – perhaps far more relevant to the students than to the teachers. Heritage histories – narratives about events or people specific to a heritage group – are one example of this type of curricular content. Further, how should teachers approach relatively recent heritage histories knowing that, for their students and their students' families, these histories are also lived experiences? How would the students and their parents like this curriculum enacted? How do these ideas mesh with the accepted and established purposes for history education in U.S. public schools?

This paper explores these questions by examining the following research question: what expectations and beliefs do parents, students, and teachers have about the role of school in the teaching of heritage histories? Research on heritage histories has focused primarily on students' understandings of heritage histories. Given the unique nature of these histories

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and their relationship and relevance to parents and communities, it is worth examining how three groups of stakeholders – parents, students, and teachers – envision the teaching of heritage histories in history classrooms in the United States. This paper focuses on three distinct heritage groups (Hmong, Chinese, and Jewish) studying three heritage events (the Vietnam War, the Cultural Revolution, and the Holocaust) and uses interview data from the three stakeholder groups (parents, students, and teachers) in order to shed light on this complex, often silent, relationship.

Importantly, this paper is organized by heritage group/heritage event. Each of these groups is at a different point on the spectrum of generational distance from the heritage event. The Jewish parents are not themselves Holocaust survivors, though one is the daughter of a survivor. All of the Jewish parents and students were born in the United States and have few ties to family in other countries. The Chinese parents are the children of people who lived through the Cultural Revolution, which affected their families in varied and diverse ways. The Chinese parents were all born in China, as were half of the Chinese students, which may impact their understanding of Chinese history. Finally, the Hmong parents all experienced the heritage event, which led to their emigration to the United States, where all but one of the Hmong students were born. The Hmong parents are refugees who fled Laos during the Secret War. These disparate trajectories and paths impact the ways in which the members of the different groups understand these histories. As none of the teachers identified as members of the heritage groups, their understandings are also necessarily quite different. These generational differences will be explored further throughout this paper.

Review of literature and theoretical framework

The purposes of history education

In the United States, history education has ostensibly existed to “cultivate the mind and teach the individual to think” as well as to “develop good citizens and promote moral character” (Bohan, 2004, p. 7). Here, Bohan recounts the aims of history education according to the Committee of Ten, a group of progressive educators convened by the National Education Association to discuss the state of public education in the U.S. in 1893. Over one hundred years later, Barton and Levstik (2004) describe four “stances” toward history education: identify, analyze, respond morally, and display knowledge (p. 7). These two ways of thinking about the purposes of history education are similar – they both espouse the development of thinking skills and morality. Importantly, they also focus on the role school history plays in developing a sense of affinity for, allegiance to, and responsibility toward the nation. The “identify” stance refers to asking students to identify with people or ideas of the past which, when combined with the “respond morally” stance, may be similar to the development of “good citizens.”

As Carretero and Kriger (2011) note, “school versions [of history] unite stories with different degrees of importance and hierarchy in a long narrative chain, thus linked by virtue of the role they play in the construction of what we might call the nation’s ‘saga’” (p. 179). This is to say that formal, sanctioned history at the primary and secondary school levels serve to construct and transmit a single, linear story of a nation’s past. The authors note that this holistic narrative is made up of individual narrative threads that are privileged or discounted based on their ability to contribute to the larger story. Barton and Levstik (2004) and VanSledright (2008) have noted that in the United States, this narrative is focused on a permanent quest for “freedom and progress.” Therefore, any aspects of history that do not align closely with this narrative are often left out or minimized in the teaching of U.S. history.

It is important to consider the purpose(s) of history education when contemplating how parents, students, and teachers may approach the teaching of heritage histories. As one of the purported purposes of history education is to foster identification with people and events in the past (Chinnery, 2011), it seems that heritage histories may be ideally suited for this purpose. However, the placement of the heritage history within the larger narrative may not always be a perfect fit. Therefore, students will need to navigate potentially divergent narratives in order to make sense of what they are learning. Additionally, parents may have their own narratives that do not align with the mainstream narrative often found in history classrooms. Chinnery (2011) refers to this work as “critical historical consciousness,” yet admits that she does not know exactly how to envision this type of history education in primary and secondary school classrooms. This study aims to shed light on how, exactly, these three stakeholder groups envision heritage history education. As two of the three heritage groups profiled in this paper are also recent immigrant and refugee populations, it is also worth investigating how these groups view their histories in light of the larger mainstream narrative.

Heritage and collective memory

Heritage and collective memory literature frames this study. Collective memory (Halbwachs, 1952/1992; Wertsch, 2002) refers to the stories, memories, and other artifacts of the past that are synthesized and shared among members of particular ethnic, national, or religious groups. Collective memory centers on events, people, and places that are significant and meaningful to the group. Heritage can be similarly characterized: “Heritage starts with what individuals inherit and bequeath” (Lowenthal, 1998, p. 31). Much like collective memory, heritage can be collective and people with a shared heritage pass narratives through generations.

Heritage and collective memory create and foster group identity and feelings of belonging within a group; they provide clean, linear accounts of the past for these purposes. For this reason, they are often juxtaposed with disciplinary history,

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