The Journal of Social Studies Research 38 (2014) 215–225

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

The Journal of Social Studies Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jssr

Instructional significance for teaching history: A preliminary framework

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Accepted 14 February 2014
Available online 13 April 2014

Keywords:
Significance
History teaching
Pedagogical content knowledge
World history

ABSTRACT

This study explores preservice and practicing teachers' conceptions of historical significance generally and for the history classroom. Using think-aloud interviews and card-sorting data, we engaged in qualitative analysis of how four preservice and five practicing teachers answered two questions related to determining significance: what events are most significant in world history and what events are most important for students to learn? Results showed that (a) participants answered the two questions differently, and (b) both practicing and preservice teachers added considerations when responding to the question about what events are most important for students to learn. Through these analyses, we developed the term *instructional significance* to describe an aspect of pedagogical content knowledge that serves as a lens through which teachers view the content they teach, and think about that content in preparing to teach students. We use these findings and research on student and teacher conceptions of historical significance to propose a preliminary framework for instructional significance for teaching history. We conclude by suggesting the utility of the framework to history classrooms and to future research.

Introduction

Determining significance is an important aspect of historical thinking (Lévesque, 2005; Peck & Seixas, 2008) and an essential skill for historical literacy (Monte-Sano, 2010). Historical significance is a quality assigned to past events that is determined by historians, policy makers, or teachers (Lévesque, 2008; Seixas, 1994). The act of determining significance allows students to make sense of the past as they construct historical knowledge (Cercadillo, 2001) and represent history through oral and written communications (Monte-Sano, 2010). As Lévesque (2008) writes, "to be meaningful, the past must be somehow coherently organized. And this implies distinguishing and selecting 'significant' from 'trivial' history" (p. 60).

Determining historical significance is not an easy task for anyone (Seixas, 1994; Yeager, Foster, & Greer, 2002). However, the complexity of significance decisions may be compounded in classrooms where there is a limited amount of time and it is impossible to teach everything of importance (Wiggins, 1989). What historians deem significant may not be a sufficient basis for curricular decision-making in particular elementary, middle or high school classrooms (Cunningham, 2007; Thornton & Barton, 2010). Teachers must also consider what we term instructional significance in making decisions for their

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jssr.2014.02.003
0885-985X/

classrooms. Just as historians select what is historically significant by deciding what to research and write about (Gaddis, 2002), teachers select what is instructionally significant by deciding what to teach, even within the parameters of mandated standards or curriculum. Instructional significance for teaching history[1] includes not only criteria for historical significance that historians use (e.g., the number of people impacted by an event; how deeply peoples' lives have been affected by an event; see Hunt, 2000; Partington, 1980), but also criteria like students' backgrounds and curricular concerns. But, how should teachers utilize and integrate criteria for historical significance and instructional significance?

In this article, we draw on our study of preservice and practicing teachers and the research of others to propose a preliminary framework for instructional significance for teaching history. In what follows we first review some of the literature on teachers' instructional decision-making, and significance and history teaching before turning to our study of preservice and practicing teachers. We conclude with recommendations for future lines of research and classroom applications.

Background

As curricular-instructional gatekeepers (Thornton, 2005), teachers play an important role in decisions about what is taught in classrooms. Grant (2003) contends that "teachers ultimately make most of the classroom decisions that effect their students" (p. 184). These decisions are based on a multitude of factors including teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and experiences within larger organizational and policy contexts (Grant, 2003). For at least 30 years there has been a robust body of research focused on the complex relationship between teachers' thinking and beliefs and their practices (Fang, 1996).

In the area of history education, research has shown that teachers' goals for instruction have a major impact on practice (Barton & Levstik, 2004). Cunningham (2007) argues that teachers' content knowledge is only one of the factors that drive curricular decisions in classrooms. She writes that to "to give these forms of teacher knowledge their due weight alongside content knowledge would allow educational researchers to reach a more sophisticated understanding of what many teachers actually do as they plan, and what levers must be considered if change is in order" (Cunningham, 2007, p. 597–98). Similarly, Husbands, Kitson, and Pendry (2003) stress the importance of examining the diverse and connected types of knowledge that successful teachers possess. The authors categorize this knowledge as: knowledge of subject, of pupils, of resources and activities (p. 82). In their study of teachers in eight schools in England, the authors found that this diverse knowledge informed teachers' choices of clear goals that promoted historical understandings. Thus, examining the decisions that teachers make about historical concepts such as significance can give us important insight into teachers' instructional goals that guide their practice.

Historical significance is what Lee and Ashby (2000) term a "second-order concept": a tool that represents the "doing of history" instead of what history is about (see also Lévesque, 2005). Determining significance is central to the work of historians (Gaddis, 2002; Seixas, 1994). Partington (1980) and later Hunt (2000) proposed that there are five overlapping criteria for determining significance that historians use: importance, profundity, quantity, durability, and relevance (in Hunt, 2000, p. 41). Several scholars have used Partington's criteria as a basis for examining significance for teaching and learning history (e.g., Hunt, 2000; Lévesque, 2008; Peck & Seixas, 2008). Peck and Seixas (2008) drew on and collapsed Partington's criteria to develop two main criteria for teachers and students in their Benchmarks of Historical Thinking Project:

> Resulting in change: The event/person/development had *deep* consequences, for *many* people, over a *long* period of time.
>
> Revealing: The event/person/development sheds light on enduring or emerging issues in history and contemporary life or was important at some stage in history within the collective memory of a group or groups (p. 1027; emphasis in the original).

The researchers developed these criteria to distinguish between what they call significance with a historical character and everyday significance.

Lévesque (2008) contends that teachers rely less on historians' criteria and more on what he terms *memory significance* criteria when making decisions for the classrooms. He describes these criteria as: *intimate interests* where people ascribe significance according to importance to oneself or the family; *symbolic significance* where events are important to some community of identity (this includes patriotic justification); and *contemporary lessons* where one "conceptualize(s) the present by using events for simple historical analogies: What lessons should we learn from the past?" (pp. 56–59). Lévesque references Partington's (1980) criteria to conclude that teachers and students should use more of the criteria that historians use for determining significance. He cautions that "without a defensible conceptualization of historical significance, students and teachers find it becomes extremely problematic to articulate their own conception of the collective past and develop more sophisticated historical understandings of it" (p. 61).

In our experience as social studies teacher educators, we have found that some teachers can be overly concerned with issues of relevance; they often try to make history relevant for students by linking history to what they think their students are interested in. While relevance is one of Partington's (1980) criteria for historical significance, and all three of Lévesque's

[1] In this article we specifically address instructional significance for teaching *history*, but for brevity at times we refer to it as instructional significance.