The Journal of Social Studies Research 38 (2014) 63–77

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

The Journal of Social Studies Research

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

High school world history teachers' experiences: Learning to use authentic intellectual work in schools of color ☆

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Accepted 10 June 2013
Available online 29 August 2013

Keywords:
Authentic intellectual work
Teachers' experiences
Educational reform
Social studies
Schools of color
Phenomenology

ABSTRACT

In our current times, educators as a whole—and social studies educators particularly—are facing increased pressures of conservatism and accountability as applied to their curriculum, resulting in excessive test preparation, narrowed curricula, and an inability to prepare students satisfactorily for their lives as adult citizens—factors which are exacerbated in schools of color. While some scholars have proposed the framework for authentic intellectual work (AIW) as a solution to satisfy both accountability pressures and students' needs beyond schooling while reducing achievement gaps, few have examined classroom teachers with this framework directly. To consider whether the AIW framework stands a chance at successful adoption long term, this study explores several high school world history teachers' experiences with learning to use authentic intellectual work in a school of color, describes the textures and structures of their experiences through the lens of hermeneutic phenomenology, and makes recommendations for additional research.

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Introduction

In this current age of heightened educational conservatism and accountability, social studies classroom teachers dedicated to the promotion of deep and meaningful student learning find themselves in a series of conundra. First, social educators are pressured by the force of law to abandon instruction which is interpretive, argumentative, socially critical, and essential to the development of the democratic character (e.g., FL HB 7087, 2006, lines 1159–1163). They may also face charges of liberal indoctrination from conservative students, parents, politicians, and pundits when they deviate from so-named "objective" or "fact-based" instruction and affect more interpretive and critical approaches in their classrooms (Dahlgren, 2009; Dahlgren & Masyada, 2009). These factors conspire to prevent social educators from fulfilling their mission—to ensure schoolchildren can "demonstrate an understanding that different people may describe the same event or situation in diverse ways, citing reasons for the differences in views" (NCSS, 1994, p. 34).

Second, classroom teachers face increased deskilling. From *A Nation at Risk* in the early 1980s (Gardner, 1983) through Race To The Top initiatives (United States Department of Education, 2009), teachers face pressures to tailor instruction to meet accountability mandates. The negative effects have been several: an inordinate focus on test preparation (Black, 2000), intense curricular narrowing (Barton & Levstik, 2004), and the "proletarianization of [teachers'] work" (Apple, 2004, p. 183, 190).

☆ An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the College and University Faculty Assembly's 2011 Annual Meeting in Washington, DC.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jssr.2013.06.001

It is precisely this deskilling, in the pursuit of lowering costs, which Ravitch (2010) recently blamed as prompting the perceived intellectual decline of the United States.

Finally, as a group, social studies teachers consider providing their students quality citizenship education an important part of their practice. The NCSS' mission statement (1994) holds that "the primary purpose of social studies is to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world" (p. vii). Educational conservatism and systems of accountability position social studies teachers such that teaching only one model of citizenship—the "personally responsible citizen" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 240, 241)—becomes possible. Social studies teachers committed to the promotion of democratic citizenship through wider civic participation and the challenging of social injustices may find themselves thwarted from the outset.

Authentic intellectual work—a solution to the problem?

Some scholars have promoted the framework for authentic intellectual work (AIW)—defined as using the construction of knowledge through a process of disciplined inquiry which has value beyond the purposes of certifying school competencies (Newmann, King, & Carmichael, 2007)—as a solution to these conundra, arguing it has a number of advantages over traditional instruction and can address many of the problems associated with the accountability movement in the schools. Newmann, Brandt, and Wiggins (1998) argue that an authentic approach to education satisfies the needs of accountability systems by providing instruction which addresses high educational standards anchored in real-world student academic performances. Some argue that such approaches close existing achievement gaps (Black & Wiliam, 2003; Newmann, Marks, & Gamoran, 1996), while others argue that failing to implement educational reform based on the principles of AIW may cause achievement gaps—particularly those relating to socioeconomic status (SES)—to worsen (Newmann et al., 2007, p. 24). Given the unlikelihood that policymakers will scuttle accountability measures attached to education in the near future, and given that traditional pedagogies appear to be failing the stated purposes of a social studies education (NCSS, 1994), bringing AIW into the nation's social studies classrooms appears imperative.

In spite of the promise AIW offers for the classroom, without having an understanding of how social studies teachers experience teach with AIW—and whether they would adopt it over the long term—is problematic. As scholars have acknowledged the importance of teacher buy-in with any pedagogical reform (e.g., Datnow, 2000; Datnow & Castellano, 2000), considering how social studies teachers experience learning to use AIW is an essential step in determining whether professional development related thereto will be successful. This research seeks to fill that void in part by focusing on high school teachers' experiences in schools of color—which I have defined herein as schools where the student population is 50% or more a population of color—those schools which suffer disproportionately from the negative effects of accountability (Darling-Hammond, 2000).

Literature review

Accountability and its unforeseen consequences

One of the major stated purposes of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) was to close persisting educational achievement gaps between students of color and their white peers. By holding all students to high standards of achievement and assessing their progress through standardized measures of achievement, NCLB was supposed to act as a great educational equalizer. A number of NCLB critics (e.g., Karen, 2005; Ravitch, 2010) charge that it has actually cemented the achievement gaps it was designed to address.

Educational accountability measures in the United States largely rest upon the statistical assumption of normality. From the appearance of standardized testing, however, school administrators and policymakers alike have violated this assumption to satisfy sociological assumptions classifying white English-speaking native-born Protestant middle-class Americans as normal. Fass (1980), for example, argued that "the IQ seemed to provide a form of social order and meritocratic evaluation at the same time as it helped to organize an increasingly complex educational process" during the social tumult of the early twentieth century (p. 431). Tests were further modified to meet and satisfy extant prejudice. When test results were persistently inconsistent with testers' sociological assumptions, rather than revise their assumptions—as would be consistent with the scientific method—testers discounted these results as outliers and modified their instruments to appropriately account for them. This persistent norming bias predisposed those students who fell outside the constructed sociological norm of the population—that is, students of color, students of poverty, and speakers of languages other than English—to underperform in comparison to their normed age-peers (Gipps, 1992, 1999). Critical race scholars, including Darling-Hammond (2007), have argued that such tests do more harm than good, and given that racism is systemically typical (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), one might surmise accountability measures exist actually to entrench achievement gaps rather than to remediate them.

While the nature of standardized testing has changed since the early twentieth century, the norming bias inherent to these tests remains static. This bias is evinced by the persistence of the same achievement gaps No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) has declared anathema (e.g., Florida Department of Education, 2009). The accountability movement in education has failed to close the achievement gaps it was declared to address. Furthermore, the curricular narrowing which has resulted from the accountability movement has had a disproportionate effect on students of color and of poverty, representing the

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