Teaching and Teacher Education 35 (2013) 73–80

Contents lists available at SciVerse ScienceDirect

Teaching and Teacher Education

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

History teachers' thinking about the nature of their subject

Elizabeth McCrum*

Institute of Education, University of Reading, Redlands Road, Reading, Berkshire, RG1 5EX England, UK

HIGHLIGHTS

- History teachers' conceptions of their discipline were broadly empiricist.
- Postmodern perspectives on history were less influential on history teachers.
- Rationales for the purposes of the subject emphasised broader educational purposes.
- These influence curriculum delivery, pupil learning and teacher development.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 30 July 2012
Received in revised form
24 May 2013
Accepted 27 May 2013

Keywords:
History teachers
Teacher thinking
Subject understandings
Postmodernism
Qualitative research

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses how secondary history teachers view the nature and purposes of their subject and how they think these views impact on their practice. Data were collected through individual qualitative interviews with eleven UK history teachers at the start of their careers. Their views on the nature of history are broadly empiricist with postmodern perspectives having been less influential. Their rationales for the subject emphasise broader educational purposes. The case for further emphasis on subject understandings in teacher education is made through a consideration of the implications of a lack of emphasis of more postmodern perspectives on classroom practice.

1. Introduction

Research on teachers' knowledge and understanding of their subject suggests that this has a significant influence on their teaching, and so pupils' learning, as well as their own professional development. Teachers' knowledge of their subject can, whether tacitly or explicitly, shape what and how they teach; influencing: course structures; curricula; goals for instruction; assessments; resources and classroom questions (Ball, 1991; Grossman, 1991; Grossman, Wilson & Shulman, 1989). The range and depth of teachers' substantive content knowledge are significant factors in their teaching but so too is their syntactical knowledge; their understanding of the nature of their discipline influences the ways in which teachers communicate to pupils what is important about a subject and how 'truth' is determined within it (Shulman, 1987). Teachers need a syntactical knowledge of their subject if they are going to incorporate this into their teaching (Grossman et al., 1989). If teachers are to teach different aspects of the curriculum successfully they must understand the approaches to history which underpin them. In order to be successful in school history pupils need to develop an awareness of the range of different approaches to the past as each of these approaches has different ways of thinking, writing and finding out about the past (Coffin, 2006). The teacher must therefore be able to make the distinctions between approaches explicit to pupils.

An understanding of teachers' conceptions of the nature of their subject can help in the process of preparing and developing teachers. Consideration of teachers' knowledge can help us to understand what this knowledge is, and how it might be acquired, understood and transformed in the classroom. For beginning teachers a better understanding of what teachers know can help to clarify for them the knowledge which informs teaching, what they need to know and understand, not just what they need to be able to do (Turner-Bisset, 1999). It can also help them make sense of the practice of those experienced teachers with whom they work, and make explicit different approaches which they encounter in schools. It can also help to make sense of statutory requirements, as these arise from particular, dominant understandings of the nature of a subject.

* Tel.: +44 0 118 378 2657.
E-mail address: e.m.mccrum@reading.ac.uk.

0742-051X/$ – see front matter © 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2013.05.004

An understanding of teachers' perspectives on their subject is also beneficial to the continuing professional development of more experienced teachers. It can inform the delivery of professional training and interventions and innovations in teaching and learning. Research on effective professional development by Soler, Craft & Burgess, (2001) shows that change comes about by encouraging teachers to explore their practice critically, involving them in understanding what they know and how they use their knowledge.

This research sought to understand better beginning history teachers' understandings of the nature of their subject and their rationales for its place in the curriculum; giving consideration to how these are manifest in their classroom teaching. The research was undertaken in England where the dominant form of teacher education has been the University based Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) course, a 36 week course of initial teacher education programme during which students spend 24 weeks undertaking experience in a placement school, although current government policy encourages schools increasingly to take the lead in initial teacher education (DfE, 2011). It is hoped that the outcomes of this research will make explicit any influence that a teacher's syntactical knowledge of history might have on teaching and learning in classrooms. It will be important to articulate this knowledge if it is to inform those who are newly taking the lead in the education of teachers. It is hoped that this knowledge will transcend its context to be of value in a range of alternative contexts, whether the emphasis is on university or school based teacher preparation, to inform better those involved in the development of teachers. The context is history teaching, but similar variations in positioning exist in other disciplines (Ball, 1991; Grossman, 1991), so the findings may have wider applicability in alternative subject contexts.

2. Theoretical background/conceptual framework

Within the academic discipline of history there are a range of approaches to the subject. A review of the literature on the nature of history enables some central issues of debate to be identified (Carr, 1987; Elton, 1967; Evans, 1997; Jenkins, 1991, 1995, 1999; Jenkins & Munslow, 2004; Marwick, 1970, 2001; Munslow, 2000, 2006; Southgate, 1996; Tosh & Lang, 2006).

These might be categorised as:

- the knowability of the past;
- the role of the historian in acquiring knowledge of the past;
- the nature and use of evidence;
- the use of social theory and explanatory frameworks
- and the significance to historical explanation of the narrative form.

Positionings in relation to these debates vary. A broad distinction can be drawn, as an organising framework, between modernist and postmodernist perspectives based on their conceptions of the ontological nature of existence and resulting epistemology. Modernist perspectives are characterised according to their belief in the knowability of past reality, accessible through its traces, and able to be represented in the texts of the historian. Postmodernist perspectives are characterised as those that problematize the possibility of a knowable past reality and instead conceive of knowledge as the construction of the historian, gaining meaning only through narrative discourse and within dominant discourses of power.

What are characterized as modernist perspectives on history cover a spectrum of approaches from those who emphasise the reconstruction of the past through to those who incorporate a greater recognition of the constructed nature of history (Jenkins & Munslow, 2004; Munslow, 1997, 2006). The central tenets of more reconstructionist perspectives on the nature of history include an emphasis on an empiricist historical methodology of the objective inference of facts from sources (Elton, 1991; Marwick, 2001). The exercise of this method is the domain of the trained professional historian, who is able to recognise and consequently eliminate their preoccupations (Elton, 1967: 84). They subject the evidence to critical analysis according to a set of methodological rules, the proper application of which can guard against the subjectivity that could come from the evidence (Marwick, 1970). Explanation comes from the evidence through a process of abductive inference (Elton, 1967). Less consideration is given to theoretical models or explanatory frameworks from outside history by which explanation might come from outside the evidential base. This approach to the past is idiographic; it is studied on its own terms and for its own sake. The purpose of historical study lies in its ability to illuminate the ways in which people have acted in given circumstances providing insight into the possibilities of human thought and action. Content, in the form of the past itself, is more important than form, in the guise of the historical narrative. The past can be re-presented in an historical account. An historical account can be judged according to its correspondence to the reality or truth of the knowable past.

Modernist perspectives with a greater focus on history as construction include those who are open to the possibility of discovering patterns or laws of human behaviour and who incorporate consideration of social theories, concepts and explanatory frameworks to help explain the past. This might include Marxist and neo-Marxist approaches to history (Hill, 1940, 1971; Hobsbawn, 1997; Thompson, 1991); and anthropological and sociological approaches (Geertz, 1960; Giddens, 1995). More Constructionist history recognises the influence of the historian on the evidence, facts are selected and historical explanation is subject to the mediation of the historian (Carr, 1987; Collingwood, 1946). The distinction between truth and falsehood is verifiable with recourse to the evidential base enforced by the self-reflexive historian operating within a scholarly community and subject to peer-review (Tosh & Lang, 2006). Those with these more constructionist modernist perspectives maintain the primacy of content over form. The truth of the past can be accurately represented in language and their concepts and theories are believed to be narrative free and so narrative is not important in their analysis and explanation of the past.

Postmodern perspectives on history drawn on poststructuralism, privileging the role of language in understandings of the past. If the only access to the past is through language the non-referentiality of linguistic representation (Saussure, 1966) means that the past is always mediated and it is not possible for the actuality of the past to be re-presented in historical accounts. If the meaning of texts is subject to a continuous process of deferral (Derrida, 1981) there can be no definitive reading of texts, and knowledge can only be tentative and narratives interpretive. Historical evidence pre-exists within narrative structures and is freighted with cultural meanings (Munslow, 1997). The process of putting statements together into a narrative requires selection, weighting and deployment by the historian. The sheer amount of the past and the incompleteness of traces available mean that it is never possible for this account to be complete; therefore the context the historian constructs to contextualise these statements is always imagined (White, 1973, 1978).

Within more postmodern perspectives of history there can be no single narrative of the past, no universal historical truths or transcendental values to be discovered; notions of historical truth are linked to the power which produces and sustains them. Social phenomena are themselves imbued with interpretation (Scott, 1996). The ways in which a culture acquires and organises knowledge, Foucault's, (1989) episteme, inflects history, as the nature of the episteme is apparent in the figurative and narrative