

A Study of Primary Sources and Special Education: The Impact of Primary Sources on Special
Education Students

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CERTIFICATION OF PROJECT WORK

We, the undersigned, certify that this project entitled A STUDY OF PRIMARY SOURCES AND SPECIAL EDUCATION: THE IMPACT OF PRIMARY SOURCES ON SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS by Aaron Delcamp, candidate for the Degree of Masters of Science in Education, Curriculum and Instruction, is acceptable in form and content and demonstrates a satisfactory knowledge of the field covered by this project.

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Abstract

In this study, special education high school students were exposed to different examples of types of primary sources and were surveyed with their experiences with them. These students are not in a general education setting. The subjects are within a Boces district where they are in a high school rotation and are assessed by New York State Regents exams. These students were surveyed on if primary sources were useful in helping them understand the perspective of a soldier during World War II. Generally, students had a positive experience and considered that using primary sources was a learning experience.

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Special Education Students Success Rates with Primary Sources

Many students find social studies to be the most difficult or boring subject in school through classroom observations in a high school special education setting. Primary sources are lacking in many classrooms due to lack of funds and lack of access to such items. Primary sources can be great tools to help students learn through hands on activities' and to gain an understanding of perspectives from people in the past.

One may record, observe, or survey students who are not using primary sources and compare their level of engagement to students who are using these sources. Theoretically, students should be more engaged when having access to primary sources (Eamon, 2006). Primary sources, a document or physical object taken from the time studied, can be accessed in a variety of ways. Primary sources can be excerpts, political documents, relics, artifacts, or creative works like poems or plays. When students can gather a sense of how people felt, what tools they used, what hardships they faced, and a greater sense of perspective can be gained. English Language Arts (ELA)/Social Studies Common Core Standards expect students to be able to analyze what they are reading and to make predictions and inferences. Students with access to primary sources, especially those who have used them frequently in the classroom are better able to view information from different perspectives when given primary sources whether it be documents or artifacts. Students will likely be able to make more inferences, predictions, and analyze writing more successfully when having access to primary sources (Morgan & Rasinski, 2012).

Many special education students struggle with writing. Special education student scores are often lower than their regular education peers, but that does not necessarily lower

performance expectations. One may believe that special education students would benefit even more from having access to primary sources. Why?

School budgets must also be taken into consideration when dealing with access to primary sources. Special education students will often excel in Music and Art which are many times the first things to be negated out of a budget. Many times these subjects could/can be used to create learning experiences which could cross curriculum areas. For example, special education students could infer meaning behind them in their music classes. Also, students could recreate images or even replicate primary sources in art classes. There are many options to and understanding of text through primary sources.

Review of the Literature

A literature review was conducted to explore the connections between student involvement, academic success, and analysis for understanding when dealing with primary sources in social studies classes. The extant literature discussed students from a variety of different grade levels primary sources are successful as a whole or if they provide more positive feedback in different grade levels. Much of the research indicated success among students using primary sources. The following research will try and see that primary resources could also have the same positive impact on high school students with primary/ middle grade level reading abilities. Research on the use of primary sources with special education students may yield similar results to those of general education students when special education students are exposed to primary sources and given the opportunity to explore artifacts and documents that align with their studies.

Retrieving Primary Sources

Research conducted with middle school students claimed that students may not understand or be able to attain primary sources easily by researching through archived materials (Harris, 2002). “Archivists” may be hesitant to let young researchers dive into the information at hand due to worry of damage or theft (Harris, 2002). Many websites including the Library of Congress, Calvin College, and Smithsonian Institute to give students a chance to find examples of primary sources to use in a social studies classroom (Harris, 2002).

Biographies have also have had positive impacts on students studying social studies and primary sources (Morris, 2002). The notion of teachers supplying students with materials, rather than the students themselves searching through archived material, is also considered a way to make students successful. Students need to generate their own ideas and thought processes to be able to analyze and contemplate the emotions of those in the past (Morris, 2002). This is an area where biographies can help students understand a person’s point of view in the past. Students can more readily gain a general interest in being able to connect with historical figures’ successes and failures, which will help educators focus on students’ interest levels and their abilities to evaluate people and circumstances, infer other alternatives, and connect prior knowledge to what they are studying (Morris, 2002).

Artifacts from time periods can create greater interest in a time or place for students. Students are often more engaged with specific moments in history for which artifacts are attainable than with other time periods (Levy, 2004). Music can also be used as a primary source to study. While using music as a resource teachers argued that it could be used as a form of historical contextualization or a way to get students’ attention (Mangram & Weber,

2012). Use of music in social studies education can create an attachment with social studies settings (Mangram & Weber, 2012).

Importance of Primary Sources

Dependence solely on textbooks can negatively impact students' learning. Textbooks may be objective, limit students' ability to think about other points of view, sidestep controversial issues, or may give information differently according to other peoples/nations perspective (Harris, 2012). Often, textbook writers assume that students understand or have previous knowledge about content. Textbooks focus more on information recall, rather than interpretation, analysis, or constructive processing, creating a less engaging classroom environment (Harris, 2012). Students who exit the middle school grade levels with strong critical and historical thinking skills will have a greater ability to interpret and analyze from previous exposure to primary sources that will benefit them from high school and beyond (Waring & Robinson, 2010).

Primary sources give students a chance to make connections and enjoy a meaningful learning experience (Coughlin, 2010). They also make students comprehend at a higher level of critical thinking (Dutt-Doner, Cook-Cottone, & Catherine, 2008). Some findings suggest primary sources, such as primary source documents, engage critical thinking in students. This is often more effective than having others interpret history for them. (Dutt-Doner et al.,2008). Students can also make the change from knowledge telling, where information is recalled with little analysis, to knowledge transformation where students can create arguments using evidence from documents, showing evidence of being better critical thinkers. This gives students an opportunity to showcase their analytical skills while exposed to interpretations of others within documents (Young and Leinhardt, 1998).

Using artifacts can build background knowledge. Coughlin provided an example where field trip with third grade students were given artifacts such as toys, books, and a tour of the school house that corresponded with the timeframe they were studying - 1930-1958. The students were studying the idea of change in a school house setting. For many of the students, the artifacts provided more meaningful content that they could connect with their own grandparents and great grandparents who were alive during this time (Coughlin, 2010).

Expectations for students to use primary sources analyzing document-based questions in high school as well as in higher education are increasing. These demands are making it necessary for educators to start familiarizing students with documents, so they have prior experience to be successful analyzing these types of sources (Dutt-Doner et al.,2008)

Students using imagery or art as primary sources have an opportunity to imagine missing historical information, and to create a historical thinking process by processing the role of the individual/setting in an image and the impact of information given to students in advance when considering historical thinking, analysis, and imagination (Dilek, 2009). In a sixth grade setting primary sources were used to create imaginative responses after visiting a museum (Dilek, 2009). . Document analysis (what was in the museum) was successful when studying the past and a structured interview was used to collect information (Dilek, 2009). The interview and study employed an “interpretive approach” where students’ perceptions, rather than recall of information, were evaluated (Dilek). Hands-on approaches including field trips to a renovated pre-Revolutionary War schoolhouse also proved to be helpful to students (Coughlin, 2010).

Primary Sources have a role in the Common Core State Standards as well. These standards have students make interpretations based on documents to interpret perspective and point of view (Morgan & Rasinski, 2012). Students especially in the elementary grades have

expectations to become higher level thinkers that are college-prepared. Using primary sources gives students a chance to critique what they are reading with informal text. Students must understand the author's intent and also have the ability to question it (Morgan & Rasinski, 2012).

Social studies classes where games and competition are the emphasis of the learning process can create an environment that devalues the information as well as student abilities (DiCamillo, 2010).

Using Primary Sources

Teachers can create a series of documents that can describe the life of a person while not divulging the whole story until the end of the teaching exercise. With this technique, students are given documents that may include journal entries describing different aspect and events of a person's life (war, poverty, etc.) that tell the story of someone who is not famous. Many times students take more interest in those who are not famous (Levstik, 1983). Students who created soap operas, using primary sources such as the aforementioned documents, became excited about these projects and moved ahead in content without prompting (Levstik, 1983).

Field trips can be used in order for students to use hands-on artifacts. The negatives of field trips is that they may take up instruction time and they can be costly. As a result, these field trips must have meaning and be productive (Coughlin, 2010). After a visit to a school house that had been renovated to become a dynamic learning environment, third grade elementary students were assessed differently by teachers to connect learning with field trips. Some used discussions, verbally assessment, and written response. Student assessment included that teachers agreed students had the ability to find and analyze differences and similarities compared to their own classroom and the historical pre-revolution classroom (Coughlin, 2010).

Teachers who use artifacts increase student involvement (Coughlin, 2010). Students gave positive reviews when researching a decade (the 1960s) where there are many articles, artifacts, and resources to choose from (Levy, 2004). Students researched want advertisements and saw discrimination first-hand using them. There were different portions of want ads categorized by men, women, white, and colored. Using these want ads made students think critically about racial and sexual discrimination in the USA in the recent past (Levy, 2004).

Primary sources make learners think historically, where they think outside the realm of an all-knowing textbook recalling names, dates, and places. Many times interpretation even misses learners in higher level education (Burkholder, 2010). Burkholder (2010) describes an example where college students used their own school grounds – formerly a Vanderbilt family estate - as the source. The building itself as well as the former inhabitants were the subject of study and inquiry. These learners were to write a research paper without recalling from text research, which was quite a foreign approach for them. The students who wrote a research paper after making personal connections felt that the research made them more organized as well as the information being valid, truthful, and connected to their lives. (Burkholder, 2010).

Challenges Using Primary Sources

Students have difficulty expressing ideas when asked to take ideas and notions from primary documents and interpret them (Young and Leinhardt, 1998). Many students start to have a greater understanding and reasoning skills for historical interpretations around age 11 or middle school years (Dutt-Doner, et al., 2007). Students may not have the background knowledge necessary to create a well-developed answer regarding document-based questions. For example, when a sample of fifth graders were asked about the San Francisco Earthquake of 1906, many of their answers lacked evidence of background knowledge (e.g., “It

was in California” and *“A lot of people died”*). The researchers expected these results due to lack of exposure/ background knowledge about the earthquake (Dutt-Doner, et al., 2007). Without background knowledge students are less likely to be successful. Primary resources may also produce some pedagogical problems with inappropriate or lack of understanding in the context of documents. Students who lack prior knowledge with the subject at hand may have difficulties making connections to primary sources and subject matter. (Cleary & Neumann, 2009).

The perspective of an author may have a great impact on primary sources; opposing views may be scarce. (Bennison, 2010). History teachers may have the ability to teach away from the test where their main objective is not concrete and perspectives should be taken into consideration. Bennison (2010) presents an example of a 200 page diary describing the role Catholic nuns played in westward travels. This source included interviews, clerical narratives, and other activities. Because these nuns kept very few records about their accomplishments and travels, the story of the masculine West relied heavily on this diary from a woman’s perspective and none from that of the Native American that was discussed at length in the diary. These Catholic missionary schools ignored most and focused on what was written from the male perspective (Bennison, 2010).

Cultural responsiveness may also be ignored within primary sources (Swartz, 2012). In a qualitative study using document based questions from the New York State 11- Grade US History and Government Regents, cultural responsiveness was present but not to an extent where all or many ethnicities/cultures were included (Swartz, 2012). Distinguishing themes in these exams are focused on omitting historical cultures such as African Americans. Perspectives of African Perspectives of peoples in document-based questions may not be adequately expressed.

The viewpoint these document-based questions are written from are written by the oppressors. The document focuses on women being able to petition the slave trade yet not have the ability to vote on it. The indigenous population is the culture that the perspective of the document is thought to be based on. An earlier petition of the same nature was omitted involving Philadelphian African American leaders petitioning the same civic duty. Documents where others represent a different demographic of people on their behalf is to be considered the absence of inclusion and indigenous voice (Swartz, 2012).

Primary Sources Evolving

Many educators are becoming advocates for the use of digital primary sources. Swan and Hicks had teachers participate in a study where classroom observations and digitized documents became the most frequent methods to get students using primary sources and technology in the classroom (Swan & Hicks, 2007). As early as 2001 there was one computer for every five students nationwide; technology gives more opportunity for students to access the internet and other databases (Lee, 2002). Digital resources are generally stored as electronic collections on the World Wide Web. The “American Memory Project” is one of the greatest efforts to maintain and preserve historical documents by the United States Library of Congress (Lee, 2002). These digital resources can be more accessible, can increase archival activity, can develop social networks, and are generally organized by content (Lee, 2002). Tally and Goldenberg (2005) found that some students gave the argument that using the computers made their assignment more active as well as interesting. Students surveyed also claimed to be able to actively research more effectively (Tally & Goldenberg, 2005).

There are problems with credibility dealing with online resources. For example, students may find conflicting information. The website's creators did this purposely and gave misinformation (Waring & Robinson). Other problems with online resources are that it is costly to create digital resources. Also, many schools and homes do not have the appropriate technology to view collections (Eamon, 2006).

Students may also have difficulty finding appropriate online information and researching open-ended topics that were not framed questions. The internet has a plethora of information for students, but they may struggle with the research process. Brown and Dotson (2007) reported that many students had difficulty creating an original query for successful research (Brown & Dotson, 2007).

Methods

The objective of this study is to see if the use of primary sources has such an impact on high school special education students (ages 15-21) using document based primary sources compared to artifacts. Students were given three different types of primary sources to explore throughout their unit pertaining to World War II. Students were taken to the Naval Yard in downtown Buffalo where students explored the ships. They were given a tour with information regarding the history of the ships, battles, and the life of a naval officer on board decommissioned ships the USS The Sullivans (a destroyer), the USS Little Rock (a Cleveland-class cruiser), and the USS Croaker (a submarine). Students were also exposed to a variety of smaller aircraft, vessels, and other vehicles from the World War II era. Students were also allowed to have lunch in the mess hall of the USS The Sullivans. This experience was for students to be able to explore the lives of soldiers on this ship.

Students were also given artifacts to explore from a soldier returning home as a prisoner of war in Africa (POW). The artifacts from the soldier's suitcase included a rifleman medal, prisoner identification tags, a journal describing his trip home from being liberated by American troops. The suitcase also contained stamps from Nazi Germany with Hitler's image, a fork and spoon that was used in his prison arrangements, a pipe, sewing kit, and his infantry patch of the 39th Red Bulls division (<http://www.34infdiv.org/>). Exposure to the war of the Pacific was also exposed to students from showing them a Japanese rifle, the Arisaka bolt action rifle. This rifle is unique due to that it still has the emblem of the Japanese emperor on the barrel, telling that it was taken from the field. A majority of these rifles had those emblems ground off. The rifle was non-operational missing the bolt action. Administration approved the presence of this artifact due to the non-operational condition (http://oldmilitarymarkings.com/japanese_markings.html).

Document based questions (DBQs) were primary sources students were also exposed to. These DBQs involved pictures of women in welding masks and inferred questions dealing with Rosie the Riveter. These questions asked about the roles of women and why their labor was necessary (Stitch, Pingel, and Farrell, 2013).

Participants

This study aims to see which types (documents or artifacts) of primary sources create a greater sense of understanding and ability to think critically about the lives, timeframe, and events in history with the aforementioned sources when studied by students in a high school special education environment.

The students selected are from multiple districts within Chautauqua County who receive educational services at the LoGuidice Educational Center. These students are bussed from their

home districts to LoGuidice on a daily basis, creating their own identity as a school. Their learning disabilities vary greatly, many have autism spectrum disorders, and some are learning disabled, among other disabilities. These students were studied through survey and observation during their United States History class periods. The primary sources given aligned with the subject of study through the schedule of the school year. . The information presented coincided with the scheduled lessons coordinated with the classroom teacher, assistants, and aides. All protocols were followed to align with each student's IEPs, 504s, etc.

Measurement

The students selected used three types of primary sources. The researcher will take notice of which type of primary source students found to be more educational. Students using primary documents were chosen from an eleventh grade United States History class containing six students.. These six students were exposed to primary sources: documents, artifacts, and field trip artifacts. Students were also given a document-based question dealing with WWII. Students used artifacts from WWII, including a diary from an American prisoner, utensils, stamps, newspaper articles, and other articles kept from an American prisoner in WWII to answer the question. Students also took a field trip to the historic naval ship located in Buffalo, NY.

Data collected via a self-report student survey consisting of a 1 – 5 scale of response choices ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. Students answered questions that aligned with their activities and engagement with the primary sources. The survey also asked students to describe their interactions with the primary sources and their feelings about using them. More specifically, the questions focused on their levels of involvement and enjoyment, whether they preferred this form of learning, and their perceptions about their learning.

Previous surveys about their social studies classes with no use of primary sources were described as “boring,” “I hate social studies,” and “It’s stupid.” The argument for using primary sources in a classroom is to get students thinking critically. Even students who receive special education services are not exempt from New York State Regents Exams or the upcoming Common Core Social Studies Standards (<https://www.engageny.org/resource/new-york-state-common-core-sample-questions>), both of which have great emphasis on thinking critically and writing from a different perspective. With these types of expectations being held for students with an array of educational disabilities, these students need to become familiar with writing from another perspective. If these students show more positive states of mind while doing Social Studies with primary sources it would be beneficial for teachers and students.

Results

Six students completed surveys that asked students questions about their experiences with primary sources. Students were asked to indicate the level to which they agreed with each of 6 questions/statements using a scale that ranged from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. The first question asked: *When we went to the Naval Yard in downtown Buffalo, was it more about socializing with friends than educational?* Two students strongly disagreed, one student disagreed, one agreed, and one reported being “not sure”, indicating that the majority considered it a learning experience. One student commented that the experience was “both educational and social.” The second question asked: *While exploring artifacts from WWII, did it help you understand the perspective of a soldier in WWII?* Three students strongly agreed, one student strongly disagreed, and another disagreed. From these results, an answer to the question seems inconclusive. *My experience at the Naval Yard helped me understand the perspective of a*

WWII soldier was the next question/statement. Three students agreed, one disagreed, and another was not sure. Again, this information about perspective seems inconclusive. Student comments included, “these objects were very educational.” For Question #4, students were asked: *While exploring and discussing the artifacts (Japanese rifle and suitcase items) do you think it was more of a socializing experience than an educational one?* Three students agreed while the other two answered “not sure”. These answers would make one believe it was a positive learning experience. Question #5, *Do you think using/reading documents (DBQs) helps you understand the perspective of WWII soldiers?*, yielded the following answers: three students agreed, one was not sure, and another disagreed. Thus, these students considered using DBQs a positive learning experience. Question #6 asked: *Working with documents (DBQs) from WWII, was it more of a socializing experience than educational?* Three students disagreed, one was not sure, and another disagreed. Overall, results indicate that special education students exploring artifacts (Question #1) exploring history from a soldier’s perspective using artifacts, was considered the favorite activity.

Limitations

The students surveyed in this study may have some skewed interpretations in their survey. The students were familiar with the individual administering (the researcher) he is the teaching assistant in their social studies classrooms. The participants may be inclined to provide positive answers about their engagement with primary sources due to the rapport established with the administrator. Students may also have provided positive answers in order to continue to be given opportunities for social engagement through these types of activities.

The participants used Survey Monkey® (www.surveymonkey.com) as the tool for data collection. This survey tool keeps track of how long it took for participants to finish the

survey. The time frame to take the survey ranged from participants time ranging from 9 minutes and 59 seconds, to 2 minutes and 2 seconds. It might be assumed that those individuals who took more time gave more appropriate answers and put more effort into completing the survey than those that took a little shorter amount of time.

Conclusion

Educators often feel that the use of primary sources will engage students more than retrieving and recalling information from a textbook. Results from this study support the hypothesis that using artifacts has a more positive impact on student learning and critical thinking ability, compared to simple reading and interpretation.

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