

Visiting Doctoral Program Report 2013

Early Elementary Students' Historical Thinking

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During my two weeks as a Visiting Doctoral Student I visited with Dr. Amy von Heyking at the University of Lethbridge. Dr. von Heyking has conducted some of the most current Canadian research both in elementary students' historical thinking and in elementary teacher preparation for teaching history. My doctoral dissertation focuses on historical thinking in the early elementary grades, examining what orally literate students' historical thinking looks like, as well as teacher preparedness and strategies for doing history with young students. During my visit with Dr. von Heyking, she supported work on my first comprehensive exam, which she had set for me, on models of historical thinking, and we also explored methodological approaches and considerations for my study.

The goal of my project is to develop an approach to conducting research in this area with early elementary students and their teachers, using *The Big Six Historical Thinking Concepts* by Peter Seixas and Tom Morton with students who cannot yet fluently read and write. Dr. von Heyking and I discussed what preparation or support teachers might require in order to use these approaches, as well what the potential goals are for elementary teacher history education. In addition to discussing and helping to shape my comprehensive exam in historical thinking, we also discussed what aspects of the research I did for this piece would particularly support my dissertation. There were two gaps in my review of the literature that stood out in particular: the role of imagination and the framing of young children's thinking in a deficit model. These are areas where I aim to focus my proposed study. One major question that I hope this study may help answer is: How does teacher imaginative engagement with history affect student imaginative engagement with history?

I had the opportunity to meet with some of Dr. von Heyking's colleagues in Early Childhood, Literacy and Anthropology, who recommended some additional readings on doing research with young children, particularly on listening to children in the classroom. These discussions gave me an excellent starting point for compiling a bibliography for my methodology chapter. Dr. von Heyking showed me the University of Lethbridge Curriculum Library, where I looked at Alberta's Grade One and Two curriculum documents and how they frame personal, local, and Canadian history, as well as how historical research skills are taught in the early grades. This was an interesting opportunity to compare this context with other Canadian curricula, particularly my own in New Brunswick.



I also visited the Galt Museum with Dr. von Heyking, where we attended a workshop for students in Grade Two. I had the opportunity to meet with the program coordinator and discuss with her choices in how she structures and guides the activities for the young students. We then observed and participated in the workshop, and I was able to see how her planning

translated to practice. This provided an excellent platform for Dr. von Heyking and me to discuss how teachers think about their decision-making and planning process, and what this looks like in the classroom.

To begin developing methods for my study, we read together and discussed Keith Barton and Linda Levstik's book, *Researching History Education*. This text has been pivotal in providing a basis for my methodology and methods. Some of the questions that arose, which Dr. von Heyking stressed were important considerations for my work, involved the importance of having meaningful, in-depth conversations with students in order to collect rich data, the socially constructed nature of historical thinking development and therefore the importance of the classroom context, as well as realistic expectations of classroom research where data collection can take a lot of time. The notion of student confidence is particularly important in both in-class interactions as well as in effective data collection. We also discussed the role of interviews, which will be a primary form of data collection, being informed and focused by observation. Matching work samples with student interviews is important; getting the products of students' thinking and comparing them with what the teacher thinks they are doing will hopefully provide some excellent insights into how we do history in the elementary classroom.

Regarding working with classroom teachers, Dr. von Heyking and I explored what my relationship with the participating teachers will be. We discussed the role of the social studies mentor: to help implement new policies/approaches, and to provide materials and strategies, as well as feedback. Ideally, we could take this further where the mentor helps capacity-building within the school, with teachers taking on different aspects of the approaches they are being taught, learning more themselves, and supporting their school community as experts from within. My role will also involve looking at teachers' developing expertise and areas of interest, and how these benefit the group. Their thinking about their own thinking, and how this translates to the classroom, will be a valuable component of the study. We also discussed how teachers working in a collaborative group, with differing perspectives about teaching and learning, will affect the data interpretation.

There is currently little empirical research on the historical thinking of students who cannot yet read and write. Consequently, there is little corresponding research on how teachers do history with students who are orally literate. I aim to add to both the practice of and literature on historical thinking by opening this window onto an unexplored area. My visit with Dr. von Heyking provided me the opportunity to gather some excellent resources for doing history with young students, as well as ask some important questions about doing history in the classroom.

I would like to thank Dr. von Heyking for being such a gracious host, and for taking the time to guide me through the two week visit. I would also like to thank THEN/HiER for this opportunity, which has provided an excellent foundation for my research.