

DOING HISTORY IN THE EARLY ELEMENTARY GRADES

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Introduction

Throughout my studies, which culminated in a Masters of Education, and now continue in my doctoral work, I aim to integrate imagination and historical thinking within social studies and history classrooms. These two fields are associated, particularly, with the work of Kieran Egan's Imaginative Education Research Group and Peter Seixas' Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness. Specifically, I plan to examine how Seixas' Historical Thinking concepts might be compatible with, and enhance, Egan's framework for teaching orally literate, early elementary school students.

Egan's argument

As an elementary school teacher with a love of the social studies, Egan's argument in his 1982 article, *Teaching History to Young Children*, was one that fascinated and ultimately impelled me to study further. He argues that the creators of elementary social studies curricula are mistaken in the belief that young children can only understand what is familiar to them, and that in fact they may better understand what is unfamiliar to them because it evokes wonder and curiosity. According to Egan, a history curriculum based on a storytelling approach would offer greater opportunities for cognitive development as well as lay the groundwork for a deeper understanding of history later in life.

In my research, I explore Egan's ideas and argue that it is in fact a current issue and one that is compatible with the current research in children's historical thinking. These two areas of research have not been largely examined in the same context. Apart from Bryant and Clark's 2006 article exploring the use of emotive empathy in historical storytelling, I have found no other sources discussing Egan and other researchers in historical thinking.

Why history is important in the early grades

Current research in children's understanding of history suggests that there are multiple narratives or historical stories that students construct, and there are dominant narratives that are given precedence in schools, marginalizing others. Prominent researchers in the field such as Sam Wineburg (2001), Peter Seixas (1993), Keith Barton and Linda Levstik (2011; 2004; 1998) found that some students have polarized frameworks for thinking about history. The way students learn to think about history in school is at one end, and the family and cultural history that they grow up

with is at the other. Often, these differ so greatly in what is historically significant that the frameworks are incompatible that students find it difficult to sort out what history really is.

In my Masters thesis research, I did a brief analysis of New Brunswick's K-2 curriculum, called *You and Your World*, which integrates science, health, and social studies, looking specifically at the social studies outcomes. I show that in this document the stated outcomes related to history are not supported by the suggested activities. Rather than supporting the critical and inclusive study of history, *You and Your World* emphasizes homogeneity, and presents an emphasis on sameness in lieu of recognition of and appreciation for difference. This orientation in the curriculum marginalizes diverse perspectives in history and emphasizes conformity to a dominant norm; it does not offer opportunities for doing history from a critical perspective with young students, nor does it provide a useable model for teaching about diversity.

Bringing together the two approaches

I wanted to see if Egan's (2008) claim: "The story is our best tool for understanding what it is like to be someone else", could lead to a more equitable approach to teaching history in elementary school (p. 54). I developed a study to examine extent to which Egan's theory of imaginative education could offer an approach to teaching history in public school classrooms that allows for multiple narratives to co-exist alongside the dominant narrative(s), by making alternative narratives meaningful for students. The majority of studies on children's historical thinking have focused on students who can read and write, and that there is very little data on the historical thinking of younger students who primarily use the tools of oral language to learn. Because the majority of my classroom teaching experience is in the early elementary grades, I believed that young students were capable of thinking historically and of doing history, and wanted to explore how Egan's model could facilitate this. Linda Levstik and Keith Barton's (2011) research on doing history orally with young students served as a guide for the study design.

In order to test Egan's theory in the classroom using the Historical Thinking concepts, I developed a case study wherein I designed and implemented a three-week history unit in a Grade One classroom here in New Brunswick. The unit topic was Canada's Immigration Boom, and included eight whole-group lessons, two small-group activities, and a take-home project. I intended this to be a model that could be used by a classroom teacher, and my data collected was primarily based on classroom work that a teacher would assess, with the exception of one-on-one interviews conducted at the beginning and end of the unit.

Findings

How is Egan's approach to doing history for orally literate children practically and theoretically compatible with current research in history education? On a theoretical level, there remain tensions between the discipline-based practice of doing history and the more humanistic imaginative education approach. For example, Egan's

sense that young students' history education should remain far from their own lives is in direct opposition to Barton and Levstik, Seixas, Wineburg, and other researchers' views that family and personal histories are a significant foundation for students' historical thinking. On a theoretical level these tensions may never be resolved.

Notwithstanding any tensions, I found that the two were highly compatible on a practical level. Doing history within Egan's Mythic framework was effective because the elements of puzzle and mystery were an ideal fit with the use of primary source evidence in particular. It not only fostered a great deal of debate and discussion, but also maximized students' curiosity, maintaining their engagement in the story. Because we were not using written texts as sources of primary evidence, we relied heavily on visual images: maps of pre-confederation Canada and of First Nations movement onto reserves, photographs of Immigration Boom era immigrants, posters sent to Europe advertising Canada's west, a Chinese head tax certificate, as well as the students' own artworks. These images told perhaps just as powerful a story as the oral storytelling we engaged in, as evidenced by the students' repeated references to these images in the narratives they told. The use of drama and role-play to examine multiple historical perspectives and analyze cause and consequence was also an effective tool that quite seamlessly integrated the Historical Thinking Concepts with the imaginative education framework.

Measuring results as a whole, students' ability to create historical narratives and take historical perspectives progressed significantly in only a few weeks. Several students came to the end of the unit with increasingly complex questions and discussions about the tensions highlighted in our study, rather than a sense of resolution or conclusion to the story. The sample size was not large enough to see any strong correlation between what students learn at home, and how this affects what they think about history. The study design may also not have allowed for this because I did not focus exclusively on family history and students' prior knowledge. This would require a more focused study to look at what is learned in the home and how it affects school performance and engagement with history, and possibly also a longer study, since not all of the students are progressing at the same rate or in the same areas.

The very fact that the imaginative education framework opens up a space wherein students must discuss difference as a matter of social and political conflict means that it creates more opportunities for addressing multiple perspectives than *You and Your World* does. Egan's model treats multiple perspectives in history as a requirement for good history teaching, rather than a contentious topic to be avoided, as posited by *Your and Your World*. The students' developing awareness that identity, family and history are connected shows a level of understanding that is more sophisticated than the expanding horizons curriculum could ever get at.

Implications

To conclude, I believe this study was successful in demonstrating both the ability of early elementary students to do history and to think historically without the use of written texts, as well as the compatibility of doing history with Egan's

imaginative education model. Based on the success of a short three-week venture, a longer, multi-grade study would offer an evidence base to make stronger claims about the effectiveness of this combined approach. I hope to continue this exploration in my doctoral research.

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Biography

Katherine Ireland is a doctoral student in the Faculty of Education at the University of New Brunswick. A former elementary school teacher, Katherine is investigating young students’ historical thinking in the classroom.

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