



## Understanding agency and developing historical thinking through labour history in elementary school: A local history learning experience

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**ABSTRACT:** Local history has been much neglected in many social studies curricula, in spite of its potential for providing students with authentic and proximal objects of study for the development of historical thinking and understanding of historical agency. This paper presents the results of a collaborative research endeavour, conducted with two teachers and their fifth grade students, and centred on a learning unit about local history. The unit included a field enquiry and role-play based on the use of primary source evidence. Results show that the unit favoured the development of some structural concepts of historical thinking and helped students see themselves as historical agents.

**KEYWORDS:** social studies, local history, elementary school students, historical thinking, historical agency.

### Introduction

Since 2001, the official curriculum in Québec combines history with geography and citizenship education, from grade 3 to 6, in order to promote students' openness toward the world, help them "develop the ability to put things in perspective and to look at them objectively, which are the first steps toward an informed understanding of social and territorial phenomena" (MEQ, 2001, p. 165), and become aware of the value of individual and collective involvement in social choices and its impact on the course of events.

Such aims converge toward the prospective function of history long identified by historians and educational researchers alike. They are also aligned with the concept of agency, defined as the capacity to act upon the world, and to see oneself as a historical actor/subject (Barton, 1997). By examining how historical actors bring on change in their society, students therefore can imagine how their own actions can contribute to their community. Such an understanding of agency calls upon the confrontation of a diversity of viewpoints from which history, as an

PLEASE CITE AS: Demers, S., Lefrançois, D., & Ethier, M-A. (2015). Understanding agency and developing historical thinking through labour history in elementary school: A local history learning experience. *Historical Encounters*, 2(1), 34-46.

interpretative discipline, is constructed. It distances students from conceiving of history as the linear march to progress driven by the actions of “great white men” (Barton, 1996; Barton, 1997; Ethier, 2000; Plekhanov, 1898/2010; VanSledright & Brophy, 1992), in part through the analysis and problematization of plurivocal primary sources, which further the plausible narrative construction of historical phenomena by students.

Recent research on history teaching in Québec, as elsewhere, tends to portray teaching practices that are incompatible with the attainment of the above-described aims. For one, teaching practices from elementary to secondary school have remained “transmissive” and rooted in an objectivist conception of history as an accumulation of facts, as well as “techniques” to master and apply (how to read a map, for example) (Barton & Levstik, 2003; Colby, 2007; Demers, 2012). Textbooks further reinforce this view of history by presenting a single narrative and few, if any, source documents (Boutonnet, 2009). Students’ tasks as presented in textbook paratext most often involve short, objective-type questions, which can be answered through the reproduction of text.

In this perspective, historical knowledge is not the object of learning but of memorisation and its sources not submitted to interpretation and may even be completely absent from the historical narrative presented to students as fact (Lebrun, 2009). Knowing history then becomes a problem for elementary school students as it disengages them from processes of constructing knowledge and disregards the developmental dimensions of cognition (Foster & Yeager, 1999; VanSledright, 2002). As Levstik and Barton (2005) point out, memorisation cannot contribute to either conceptual understanding or the efficient organisation of concepts for use in interpreting social phenomena. Furthermore, the transmission of a single “true” historical narrative does little to develop either epistemic or historical agency in students (Audigier, 1995).

Research conducted on elementary school students’ historical cognition nevertheless tends to show that they can develop complex historical ways of thinking at a young age. Some research indicates that students as young as 8 or 9 can employ historical thinking’s structural concepts to construct a reasoned interpretation of historical phenomena and are able to profit from epistemic agency, understood as the power to interpret, validate and evaluate propositional knowledge (Cooper & Capita, 2004; Cooper & Dilek, 2007; Pontecorvo & Girardet, 1993). Hence, Barton and Levstik (2005) conclude that elementary school students can construct plausible interpretations of historical phenomena and develop historical thinking when the phenomenon is accessible, its problematization is relevant to them, and narrative construction requires the use of primary and secondary sources (which are also problematized). Through the lens of teaching practices, it is possible to identify some epistemic dispositions and processes, which have resulted in historical thinking (or epistemic agency) by students. Exploring research conducted on one or the other of Seixas’s (1996) structural concepts of historical thinking identify to what extent elementary school students may benefit from such activities.

Barton and Levstik (2004) refer to the identification stance as the process through which students associate themselves or their social group with actors, institutions and social groups in the past. Learning situations that problematize historical phenomena in a way that relates them to students’ concrete experience allow students to understand the relevance of studying a particular historical phenomenon (Cooper & Capita, 2004). Students can also establish the significance of historical phenomena when their impact is part of their ambient history. Clarke and Lee (2004), as well as Coles and Welch (2002), suggest that using public and local historical resources as authentic sources may allow students to reconstruct personal, meaningful and engaged interpretations of the past and help them identify continuity and change. Elementary school students interact with history in everyday life, according to

Cooper (1995) and Seixas (1996), in part through material culture (historical buildings, technology, monuments, for example). Learning situations which ask students to identify changes in material culture in order to explain the impact of historical phenomena (such as industrialisation or urbanisation, for example) seem to offer students the opportunity to define continuity and change through general, transferable, yet concrete concepts (Cooper & Capita, 2004; Levstik & Barton, 2005).

Research on history teaching in the elementary grades illustrate that historical change is still presented by teachers and textbooks alike as the consequence or product of great historical figures' actions (Barton, 2001; Barton & Levstik, 2004). The curriculum section relating to the period of industrialisation in Québec (between 1820 and 1905) for its part only identifies two figures as having had influence on historical change, both of whom are politicians who worked to bring about the Canadian Confederation. Workers, farmers, and union leaders are absent from "essential knowledge" regarding the phenomenon of industrialisation. As noted by Levstik and Barton (2005), such a conception of history hinders the understanding of its plurivocal and problematic nature, in addition to being an obstacle to students' adopting an identification stance and envisioning the diversity of choices and interests at the core of historical agency. Yet research shows that primary school age children are capable of historical empathy, of placing themselves in the shoes of actors of the past in order to better understand their motivations, interest and actions while taking into account contextual societal constraints (Colby, 2007; Pontecorvo & Girardet, 1993). Levstik and Barton (2005) conclude that elementary school children can enter the past through imagination, in role-play supported by sources (eye-witness accounts, biographies, iconography, and others) originating from a variety of social groups and susceptible to help students understand how those who experience historical phenomenon make meaning of it and act as subjects of history. Understanding historical agency is thus within the reach of elementary school students.

Students are capable of applying procedural and cognitive action relevant to the use of primary sources in order to solve historical problems and elaborate their own narrative (Colby, 2007; Cooper & Capita, 2004). They understand how to source, corroborate, and contextualise known elements of sources. Younger students, however, more rarely rely on evidence from sources, have trouble explaining differences in perspectives, as well as understanding the constructed and interpretative nature of sources (VanSledright, 2002). They are nonetheless able to formulate plausible hypotheses if source analysis is performed with the teacher (Cooper & Capita, 2004). The results presented above suggest that studying historical phenomena from a local perspective might afford the conditions required to take into account the developmental dimensions of historical cognition and support the attainment of normative aims associated with agency.

Local history, defined as the study of the past as experienced locally or regionally (Danker, 2003), takes into account students' historical position (notably internalised cultural and family influence) that mediates their understanding of the phenomena studied in school (Barton, 2001; VanSledright, 2002). Local history can be viewed as ambient history and its material manifestations as historical documents to be analysed and interpreted through the "lens of the familiar" (Danker, 2005). It consequently offers the possibility for elementary students to build a repertoire of concrete conceptual markers or guides, and to call upon prior knowledge as well as their *cultural tool kit* (Wertsch, 1998), composed of familiar and culturally contextualised concepts. Such tools of intelligibility can be elements of vocabulary (idiomatic expressions, for example), family cultural references, beliefs and conceptions pertaining to the role played by family or community members in society.

We believe local history may serve to provide students with significant and relevant learning situations. We also believe that they may help students take on and debate socially controversial, engaging and emancipatory issues and thus afford them the opportunity to see themselves as agents of change in their community. As the dominant teaching practice of transmitting historical knowledge as accumulation of objective fact cannot possibly lead to understanding agency and promoting historical thinking, alternative teaching practices must be identified.

In light of the results presented above, we sought to understand how a historical enquiry based in local history and the evolution of its material culture might help students conceptualise in a transferable way the concepts of industrialisation, urbanisation, unionisation, and social class, as well as promote the understanding of collective historical agency. We also aimed to contribute to the professional development of two newly certified elementary school teachers.

## **Objectives**

This research, conducted in 2011, originates from and finds its relevance in the professional needs of two of our former initial teacher education students. Dissatisfied with what they experienced as dissonance between their social studies methods course in university, the dominant teaching practices they observed during their professional induction, and the teaching material available to them, these teachers asked to be accompanied in the planning of a teaching unit which would be relevant to their grade five students.

In a collaborative research perspective (Desgagné, 1997), this research strove to reach three objectives:

1. Respond to the immediate needs of elementary school beginning teachers, emerging from a problem related to their social studies teaching practice;
2. Collaborate with these teachers in a process of inquiry and shared knowledge production about the contribution of local history to the development of historical thinking and agency by elementary school children;
3. Develop these teachers' professional competencies in regards to teaching social studies.

## **Method**

This study was designed in a collaborative research and training experience perspective (Desgagné, 1997) associated with the shared work of teachers and researchers creating a reflective community. Heron (1996) maintains that investigating knowledge issued from experience and practice is essential because it is most likely to generate transformative learning – that is to transform how participants structure meaning making and action. Practical reflection also serves as a starting point for formalising, contextualising, and transforming practical knowledge that can then be reinvested in practical contexts with the potential to enrich such knowledge.

Collaborative research and training experience allows for the problematization of practitioners' practical epistemology and its confrontation with empirical research results in the reconstruction of practical knowledge. It also provides research with practical and contextual dimensions and considerations, which are difficult to ascertain with traditional research designs.

Finally, collaborative research participates in refining epistemic tools and concepts associated with disciplined inquiry and knowledge production (through the use of a scientific

discipline's standards, procedures, and methods), including those associated with the practice of history.

### ***Participants/co-researchers***

The participants in this study, who also act as co-researchers, are two fifth grade teachers from two different school boards in Western Québec. This is an intentional sample as these teachers chose to engage in a process of co-construction of knowledge and reflective practice. They also agreed to keep a written record of their observations and reflections. The researchers are also participants, though their roles differ from those of the teachers. Their tasks included finding resources such as primary source documents, research articles and any other resource which might help participants co-construct the learning situation, as well as analysing the data collected throughout the research and training process.

The research progressed in three steps. The first step involved the analysis of a problem issued from teaching practice and training needs identified by the teachers.

The two teacher participants hoped to better acquaint themselves with and develop historical thinking and content knowledge, in order to insure their ability to transpose them to the classroom. There also remained issues relating to epistemology. Experienced colleagues' practical epistemology generated doubt as to whether students could or indeed should develop historical thinking – new teachers were confronted with the idea that elementary students were inherently incapable of historical cognition and that current conditions did not allow for such an approach to social studies. Finally, the imperative of standardised testing weighed heavily in teachers' decision to transmit "facts" for students to memorise.

The second step of the study/training experience required that all participants build a shared understanding of what developing historical thinking and agency may mean for children, and what research reveals about this process. In light of this understanding, participants then established learning objectives for the unit (developing dimensions of historical thinking and agency), identified the content knowledge, which was to be the object of study (concepts, phenomena, historical enquiry procedures and tools to reflect on how history is constructed). The teaching unit was then planned out and tasks were assigned to each participant.

The third step consisted of evaluating the experimentation of the unit and adjusting the planning sequence and resources according to student and teacher needs. Participants relied on research articles, written record of reflective practice, and classroom observation. The project was concluded with an analysis of student work, which was confronted with the original learning objectives. Participants also collectively reflected on the knowledge constructed during the collaborative research process.

## **Results**

*Description of the learning situation co-constructed by researchers and teachers* The learning situation centred around a historical enquiry in two stages, focused on the following historical problem: why do Francophones and Anglophones live in Western Québec?

In the first stage of the learning unit, students engaged in a field enquiry in the historical district of the city of Gatineau, the urban centre of the Outaouais (Western Québec). The elements of the field enquiry are presented in Table 2. This enquiry aimed to help students

establish the historical significance of industrialisation, establish connections between ambient history and their everyday life, promote conceptualisation through the use of primary sources issued from the material culture (notably historical buildings), and allow students to identify continuity and change in their community by comparing urban sites as they are today with how they were in the nineteenth century (though period illustrations and photographs). At various moments during the field enquiry, teachers and researchers shared first-person accounts of events shaping the industrialisation period, including those of Irish immigrants, lumber barons, parliamentarians, labourers (loggers and industrial workers), particularly the women who worked in the Eddy match factory.

This field enquiry led students to define historical concepts (Conquest, Loyalists, merchants, industrialisation, urbanisation, social class, labour union, etc.) in their own words. They were then asked to formulate a hypothesis to the question posed at the beginning of the enquiry relating to the establishment of Francophone and Anglophone communities in Western Québec.

Element	Objectives	Structural concepts of historical thinking developed
Formulation of initial questions Saint-James Anglican Cemetery (Hull)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Engage students’ prior knowledge (relating to New-France around 1745 and its subsequent conquest by the British);</li> <li>▪ Generate students’ questioning of the period.</li> </ul>	Establishing historical significance.
“Source” heuristics at Saint-James Anglican Cemetery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Allow students to establish facts by using tombstones as primary source evidence;</li> <li>▪ Identify patterns and differences in the evidence found on the tombstones;</li> <li>▪ Formulate hypotheses to explain these patterns and differences.</li> </ul>	Using primary source evidence; Adopting a historical perspective.
Exploration of the historic bourgeois district (also known as Eddyville)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Promote the “reading” of historic architecture and the characteristics of its environment, geographical location, relation to other elements of the urban landscape by presenting students with a repertoire of architectural reading “keys”;</li> <li>▪ Allow students to compare the present state of the urban landscape with iconography from the past and documents containing the historical analysis from historians at the Canadian Museum of Civilisations;</li> <li>▪ Encourage students’ use of historical concepts and provide them with contextual clues to help define the concepts;</li> <li>▪ Engage students in formulating increasingly precise and complex questions and in validating their hypotheses regarding continuity and change.</li> </ul>	Using primary source evidence; Adopting a historical perspective;
Exploration of the historic industrial district		Identify continuity and change;
Exploration of a working-class neighbourhood		Understand the motivations, interests and actions of collective actors; Evaluate the impact of human action on social change; Conceive of oneself as the subject of history.

Table 2. Elements of the field enquiry

In the second stage, students were invited to participate in a role-play activity in class. They were asked to build a character based on the local history explored during the field enquiry. They were then asked to identify the character's social class (bourgeoisie, working class or religious order) and were divided into groups according to class. Research participants had put together a series of primary and secondary source documents describing life in nineteenth century Québec and these were handed out to students who proceeded with identifying aspects of their character's daily life, their role in society, motivations, interests, and possible actions. The teacher's role was to confront students with a variety of events and phenomena from the period and ask them to narrate how their character would react. As teams of workers, bourgeois, members of the clergy, students thus reacted to the agricultural crisis, Irish immigration, industrialisation, the advent and expansion of the railway, poor working and living conditions, unionisation, among others. For each event or phenomenon confronting them, students used primary and secondary source evidence to identify their character's interests and take position in his or her name. They worked as individuals and as teams, exchanging on possible courses of action and solving disagreements.

Source analysis generated lively discussion, which was overseen by co-researchers. Sources were first presented on an interactive whiteboard and teachers lead students in analysing the source and its context, as well as evaluating its validity. The first sources presented to students were early photographs of farmers at work and industrial workers in factories. Students in both classes were more interested in the date and location of the photograph to ensure it was an appropriate source, than in its framing and purpose, insisting at first that it was not possible to manipulate information through photography because contrary to a painting or drawing, photography was "true" and "real". This claim was further reinforced by the idea that "Photoshop didn't exist back then" (C1E8). Drawing attention to differences between photographs presenting an idealised rural life and illustrations presenting poverty among the peasantry did however make students question whether framing and perspective had an impact on the "truthfulness" of photographs as reliable historical sources. Students also felt that written documents allowed for more manipulation of the "truth" or "reality" than did photographs. Most students believed that testimonial accounts were more reliable than newspaper articles as primary sources, "because the person is telling their story in their own words, as they lived it, whereas the journalist has to change the words and shorten the story to present it" (C2E12), but that the most reliable primary source texts were those from government sources "because they aren't allowed to lie" (C1E23).

In general, results indicate that the learning situation allowed for a majority of students in the two classrooms to establish the historical relevance of nineteenth century French-Canadian society, to establish connections between the phenomena that were studied and their daily life (especially in regard to the recognition of individual rights and freedoms and the preservation of the French language), but also with their family history. Students were able to adopt a form of historical perspective, but moral judgment of some historical actors and the moral norms used to evaluate historical events at times became an obstacle to the plausibility of students' narrative construction. For example, in one class, the students associated with the clergy during role-play were indignant at their lack of social and intellectual freedom and had suggested they should strike to demand more independence from the church hierarchy. This may have been a result of a lack of cultural referents regarding organised religion, and notably the Catholic Church.

Students showed that they were able to identify continuity and change, particularly in regards to the recognition of rights and some aspect of parliamentarianism. The suppression of the Governor's veto, for example, was seen by most students in one class as a turning point by all social groups during role-play, as an opportunity have some political influence: "our demands, as French Canadians, will be heard because the British won't be able to overturn the

decisions of the assembly” (C1E14). In the other class, however, workers and farmers felt that the bourgeois group continued to hold more influence than they did “they have all the money anyway, and they are the ones sitting in the assembly” (C2E12). While this oversimplifies the dynamics of political structure and alliances, it does show that some students had an understanding of issues of power and agency in social change. Almost all students were comfortable with recognising territorial transformation (such as the colonisation of northern Québec and its ensuing impact on forestry industries) and technological change (such as the mechanisation of sawmills), as historical rupture points. They were particularly adept at pointing out differences between period photographs, and between these photographs and *in situ* analysis of historical sites (electrification, for example, was identified as a major turning point both for accelerating industrialisation and for transforming urban living conditions). Students also noticed that whereas the main street had been used for more community-oriented activities in the nineteenth century (with the post office, cathedral, city hall, municipal court room and schools all situated within walking distance of each other and processions, marches, demonstrations having been held there), that street was now geared toward business (restaurants, business offices and shops).

However, students’ explanation of historical change was mostly mono-causal and driven by the will and interests of one group or the other (namely the group with which they had associated their character during role-play: industrialisation occurred “because the bourgeoisie invested in technology to increase profits” [C2E12], for example) and by material change (such as technological innovation). In this regard, students manifested an understanding of social groups’ historical agency in historical change. The traditional “great historical figure”, with the exception of the Governor, was mainly absent from their explanations for social change.

The impact of the local history-learning situation on the development of some structural concepts is examined in more detail in the following section.

*Historical relevance and identification stance.* The local dimension of the objects of study appears to have contributed to students adopting an identification stance, which in turn promoted connections between historical phenomena and their daily lives. Many students connected elements of their family’s history to local history: an Irish ancestor who had settled in the Outaouais in the nineteenth century, or the involvement of members of their family with the forest industry and logging (a surprising number of students), in the Eddy mills and factories, for example. Some students also established connections to the urban landscape with which they come into contact everyday: from physical manifestations such as the railroad, abandoned factories or historical homes to familiar idiomatic expressions (mostly related to logging) and characters from local mythology like Ezra Eddy (an English-speaking owner of a large pulp and paper company and match factory) or Jos Montferrand (a French-speaking logger, strong man, and working class hero), whose names were given to streets or public buildings. They had some knowledge of these elements of ambient history within their cultural toolkits.

Students expressed that they believed the industrialisation period was a relevant object of study and significant because of how workers had been able to organise into unions, have their rights recognised, and consequently improve the lives of all workers. They felt particularly inspired by the first hand accounts of the women who made matches for the Eddy Match Company and whose strikes were instrumental in changing labour laws in Canada. The impact of this historical phenomenon was identified by many students: “now we... women have maternity leave and the workweek only lasts 40 hours because of workers’ strikes during the 1900’s” (C2E8).

*Agency and historical empathy.* Most students constructed explanations and narratives that placed collective historical actors at the centre of historical change. They were able to adopt their characters' point of view and understand their motivations and interests as well as those of their classmates' characters from other social groups. For example, students representing the French clergy and the working class in one class demanded that the British-appointed Governor's veto be rescinded and that a responsible elected government controlled the colony's expenses. When the British government (represented by one of the researchers) refused, students whose character was from the working class decided to take up arms to chase the British from Lower Canada. Students representing the clergy opposed this and tried to talk them out of it by telling them "you anger God when you defy authority. You can't do whatever you want. Taking up arms and violence, God and the Church don't like this" (C1E12). Some propositions for action were less plausible, however, like the idea of seeking help from Ireland and France against the British.

In the other classroom, when faced with poor work conditions imposed by the bourgeois owner of a factory, students whose character was from the working class decided to form a union "like the match makers" and demanded that their work hours be reduced, as well as better wages. Students playing farmers decided to support their classmates and refused to sell their crops to the bourgeois.

These positions were not only plausible, but also supported by references to examples from the field enquiry.

*Source heuristics and understanding of the constructed nature of history.* Students demonstrated their ability to analyse and compare elements from material culture (factories, houses, grocery stores, cemetery, public places, tramway rails, etc.) and connect them to social phenomena and specific concepts. They nonetheless required much teacher support and repeated "reading" keys or clues to do so.<sup>1</sup> The impact of the field enquiry was evident throughout the role-play activities, as students repeatedly stated that "material" sources (such as buildings or tombstones) were the most valid and important sources for reconstructing history. They placed period photographs and historical actors' first-hand accounts second in validity and importance. They believed these sources to be "true" because they felt that such documents could not be altered or manipulated. It might be postulated that because students found these types of sources easier to interpret, they appeared to them to be more valid and relevant. In general, students identified books and the Internet as the best means of corroborating historical sources. Ultimately, though, the teacher's word had the most legitimacy for the students. Teachers were seen as those "who know".

Students had most trouble interpreting documents that presented statistics, and caricatures. Thematic maps, such as a map showing the development of the railroad, also seemed to stump students. They seldom used political or legal texts, socioeconomic data, or historians' interpretations to support their narrative. They often pointed out that they did not understand the words used in these documents and felt it was easier to rely on more accessible sources.

Generally, students relied more strongly on elements from the field enquiry than on the written documents handed out in class to support their explanations and hypotheses. A minority systematically read through all the documents before taking position in regards to the various phenomena presented. In order to decide on a course of action for their characters, students drew more heavily from historical imagination and their understanding of the motivations and interests of their character's social group, which they deduced mostly from the first-hand accounts studied during the field enquiry.

Students' use of historical imagination at times seemed to be a hindrance to their elaboration of plausible explanations. Students whose characters were members of the clergy, for example, began the role-play by wishing to pressure the Church into paying them for their

work. Students who represented the bourgeoisie overwhelmingly decided that their role should be limited to watching their employees, establishing their work conditions, and forging profitable alliances. The remainder of their time was dedicated to leisure. Students sometimes seemed to forget that they were to act as if living in a particular historical context, namely the nineteenth century. As a result, their decisions were sometimes decontextualized.

Finally, students raised some socially controversial issues, such as those concerning social class and political-economic power. For some, there appeared to be a dissonance between what they believed to be an “egalitarian” contemporary Québec society and references to the continuity of social struggles in the present, notably in public sector cuts, the retreat of social measures such as unemployment insurance, and hunger in schools. Students struggled with the transfer of what they had learnt about the causes of inequality in the nineteenth century (such as social class interests, or capitalism) to contemporary social problems, though the solutions they proposed were inspired by the collective actions they associated with the learning activity (workers going on strike, for example). They also clearly saw themselves as having a role to play in bringing about social change.

## **Discussion**

Results of this research establish the relevance of using local history to promote the development of some dimensions of historical agency and thinking from concrete and proximal benchmarks, such as proposed by Peck and Harding (2013), namely those related to historical relevance and perspective, and the identification of continuity and change. These results converge with results obtained by Barton (1996, 1997, 2001). However, students retained a very confused conception of historical time and their interpretation of causes of historical phenomena remained simplistic and mono-causal. Furthermore, the use of labour history, which explores the daily life, struggles and actions of everyday people, appeared to promote an identification stance.

The field enquiry, while providing students with primary source evidence they felt comfortable using, seems to have distorted the relationship they have with sources in general, leading them to assign greater importance and legitimacy to sources from the material culture than to written sources. This suggests local field inquiry might prove effective as an introduction to source analysis if epistemic processes are transferred through analogy to other types of sources. Results show that written documents should be carefully selected for age-specific accessibility. Some written sources may indeed have been set aside because the vocabulary used was less accessible to students than that used in testimonial accounts. We hypothesise that this also partly explains why students were reluctant to use historians’ interpretations as sources to interpret the phenomena under study.

As was the case for Cooper and Dilek (2007), Lee (1998), Barton (1997) and Brophy and VanSledright (1997), we conclude that students have some difficulty in interpreting written sources, evaluating their validity, and understanding differences in actors’ points of view about the same events. Students’ reliance on testimonial accounts, which are characterised by emotion, may have stimulated the students’ empathy. Lerner (1997) suggests that affectivity can act as an accessible means of introduction to historical phenomena. It may however conceal or distract from contextual elements essential to interpretation and generally obstruct understanding of causal links associated with interpretation. The activities conducted in the two classes did not succeed in bringing students toward a balance between empathy/affectivity and using a variety of primary source evidence or historians’ interpretations. We conclude, however, that local history may be successfully used as an

introduction to historical phenomena and that the study of material culture as a primary historical source may also initiate students to historical thinking.

We also hypothesise that the “newness” of the field inquiry may have made it more engaging and significant to students than analysing written documents, which might also explain their preference for material rather than documentary sources. Reading and interpreting texts is a recurring, familiar task in school and students are conditioned to formulate interpretations which conform to very clearly defined answer keys and reading strategies not associated with history’s epistemic tools. It is possible that the possibility of using other source material and their own historical imagination to complete their interpretation proved more enticing than doing what they are asked to do on a regular basis.

It should be noted, in closing, that these classroom experiences greatly benefitted from significant time and organisational investments from teachers. Their sustained support of students work was only achievable because teachers had planned in an interdisciplinary perspective which must be further explored as a solution to time constraints for teaching social studies in elementary school.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Source analysis was accompanied by simplified “reading” cues based on Lefebvre’s (1974) urban organisation model, which postulates that the organisation of urban spaces is a symbolic representation of power relations based of modes of production and directs analysis to the social practices associated with urban sites, what is produced within the site, by whom and in whose interest. Eco’s (1997) architectural semiotics was also used to “read” the social norms, values and structures symbolically represented in period architecture. Students were asked to hypothesise what the choices in building layout, material, landscaping, geographical location revealed about living conditions, daily life, etc.

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