

Historical Mindedness and the Valuation of New Brunswick's Educational History

The research project published here explores various questions relating to the teaching of social studies in the Faculty of Education at the University of New Brunswick. These questions emerge from an ongoing study of the most engaging and enriching means of exploring with teacher candidates the nature of historical understanding, and the implications of historical thinking for the ways that we can pursue social studies in education. How can educational history, which is on the peripheries of teacher education curricula, be incorporated more fully into the response to these aims? How can local resources and archives be best utilized to cultivate a culture of historical mindedness and critical reflection in New Brunswick's future teachers?

As a means of working out the implications, as well as various tentative responses to these questions, the research published here reflects both upon the construction and implementation of a historical project building understanding of the history of education in New Brunswick. The Benchmarks of Historical Thinking were used as a framework for teaching social studies with the working assumption that textbooks and examinations are inadequate means of educating, for these convey a message that historical understanding primarily involves memorization and mastery of content. The cultivation of historical mindedness is an aim of greater importance to pursue than the transmission of knowledge. Teachers in New Brunswick should endeavour to know the history of

education in their province, yet it is more important that they understand how that history is constructed, and that they apply habits of historical thinking to their own practice, engaging critically with the pedagogical contexts and ideas in which they are immersed.

The six Benchmarks, which have been developed by Peter Seixas at the Centre for Historical Consciousness, and developed in coordination with the Historical Foundation and The History of Education Network, concentrate on involving students of history in authentic historical questions, sources, and tasks. The Benchmarks, as educational aims, were used as a means of cultivating habits of mind that characterize historical mindfulness. The benchmarks include: a) establishing significance of particular questions or contexts, b) examining primary sources in addition to secondary source materials, c) contemplating both the causes and consequences of phenomena or events, d) examining forces of continuity and change, e) considering multiple perspectives, and f) discussing the moral aspects of events and activities. Using New Brunswick's educational history as a context for developing an understanding of these benchmarks yokes the joint aims of valuing study of the province's history and of making educational more central in teacher education.

This project aims to pick up the call made by Rosa Bruno-Jofré and Karen Steiner (2007) for the establishment of historical mindedness as an aim in history education. Historical mindedness, I argue, should be our ultimate aim in history education. The habits of mind framed by the historical benchmarks project are worthwhile aims to pursue only if related broadly to the way we interpret, evaluate, and act upon the world as human beings. While they work as a set of technical skills pertinent to the study of the past, such narrow applications uproot the concepts from the

philosophical terrain in which they blossom. Understanding disciplines as skills and content is a continent apart from understanding disciplines as particular ways of looking at and making sense of our world.

As Ken Osborn (2001) has noted, historical mindedness, first noted by the American Historical Association's Committee of Seven report (1898), characterize a set of dispositions that permit us to examine our world, as well as our place within it, and to engage with it critically. These dispositions include a detachment from immediate pressures, a willingness to search for comparisons and analogies, a readiness to subject emotions to reason, consideration of multiple perspectives in issues, and weighing the forces of continuity or change. In Osborn's words, then, historical mindedness is a way of looking at and acting upon the world around us that is "derived from a way of looking at the past" (553). The real measure of the research project's success is not the extent to which teacher candidates use the benchmarks to examine historical contexts, but whether they examine their own world critically, and whether they use these scaffolds to help their students to do likewise.

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