

Using Primary Sources in the Elementary Grades

Summary: The use of primary sources (original historical works) is sometimes thought of as an action reserved for middle or high school students. In an article for *The Reading Teacher*, reading expert Timothy Rasinski and fellow Kent State University professor Denise Morgan discuss how to tap the immense potential of primary sources for the elementary grades.

Practical Applications

There is research that shows students even as young as 1st grade have been able to effectively use primary sources (both visual and text). The authors point out are many benefits to using primary sources beyond just learning historical facts, including increasing word knowledge, using very high-level critical thinking skills, and learning to work with informational texts. The authors offer some suggestions for effectively using primary sources:

- A circular approach developed by the Library of Congress says students should be doing three things when engaging with a primary source:
 - Observe – “identify and note details in the source” including inexplicable details that beg further questions
 - Reflect – “generate and test hypotheses about the source” such as why the document is important or where it came from.
 - Question – “ask questions that lead to more observations and reflections” especially around the who, what, when, where and why of the source
- Another researcher offers these four acts to help students interpret sources:
 - Identification – figure out what kind of source it is (e.g. a diary entry) and what that means students can expect to read/see
 - Attribution – figure out who the author is and how that changes the context (e.g. a diary of a boy during wartime vs. prosperous peacetime)
 - Judging Perspective – figure out why the author created the source, and how that might change the author’s version of events (e.g. a diary vs. an editorial)
 - Reliability Assessment – figure out what other sources could be brought in to corroborate the information in the one source
- Primary sources work best “when they are collected around a particular theme” and include collections of texts, visuals, physical artifacts, etc. These are known as “jackdaws”; places like the Library of Congress (www.loc.gov/teachers) can be helpful.
- Because younger students do have fewer primary sources they can fully engage with, consider using primary sources about students’ family histories or the history of the community. Upper elementary students may be mature enough to move into primary source material from topics such as the Civil War.

Conclusion and Citation

Primary sources in the elementary classroom have “untapped potential.” There are many sites on the internet that have free and easily accessible primary sources, and teachers should consider utilizing them.

Rasinski, T. & Morgan, D. “The Power and Potential of Primary Sources.” *The Reading Teacher* (May 2012), pp. 584-594. <http://bit.ly/LYvn67> (subscription only).