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## More than a feeling: Tracing the progressive era origins of historical empathy in the social studies curriculum, 1890–1940s

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### ABSTRACT

Understanding historical empathy is a burgeoning subfield of social studies education research. Students demonstrate historical empathy by analyzing sources 1) to determine historical context, 2) identify perspectives of historical figures, and 3) make affective connections to historical content. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to examine primary sources from educational leaders and organizations during the Progressive Era in American public school education in order to trace the origins of historical empathy as an implicit goal in the social studies curriculum. Our guiding research question is “How does the work of Progressive Era organizations and educational leaders impact how Americans viewed historical empathy?” We purposefully selected documents from Progressive Era organizations and certain leaders whose work formed a strong foundation of social studies education history. We conclude with an examination of the importance of historical empathy today in order to demonstrate the importance of historical empathy as a curricular aim of social studies education.

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### Introduction

Historical empathy is a burgeoning subfield of social studies education research. Students demonstrate historical empathy by analyzing sources 1) to determine historical context, 2) identify perspectives of historical figures, and 3) make affective connections to historical content. Much of the existing scholarship focuses on teaching methods that can foster historical empathy among elementary and secondary social studies students. Studies spanning 20 years highlight that students are capable of engaging in historical empathy through debate (Jensen, 2008), film analysis (Metzger, 2012), Socratic questioning sessions (Kohlmeier, 2005), source analysis, and narrative writing (Perrotta, 2016; Barton, 1996; Brooks, 2011; Colby, 2008; Foster, 1999). Although student demonstration of these skills is important, historical empathy is not an explicitly stated curricular goal in most state and national social studies standards.

As scholarship on historical empathy grows among social studies researchers and practitioners, so does the need to examine its theoretical and pedagogical roots as a curricular goal in social studies. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to examine primary sources from educational leaders and organizations during the progressive era in American public school education in order to trace the origins of historical empathy as an implicit goal in the social studies curriculum. Our

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guiding research question is “How does the work of progressive era organizations and educational leaders impact how Americans viewed historical empathy?” We purposefully selected documents from progressive era organizations and certain leaders whose work formed a strong foundation of social studies education history. We conclude with an examination of the importance of historical empathy today in order to demonstrate the importance of historical empathy as a curricular aim of social studies education.

### Historical empathy defined

Historical empathy involves intellectual and affective dimensions of historical thinking that “develop from the active engagement in thinking about particular people, events, and situations in their context” (Davis, 2001, p. 3). According to Yilmaz (2007), historical empathy “is the skill to re-enact the thought of a historical agent in one’s mind or the ability to view the world as it was seen by the people in the past without imposing today’s values on the past” (p. 331). Historical empathy is not the practice of simply pretending to walk in someone else’s shoes, but the process of 1) evaluating historical context and significance, 2) identifying perspectives, and 3) making affective connections (Brooks, 2011).

Scholars use several terms to define historical empathy. The terms “perspective recognition” (Barton & Levstik, 2004) and “perspective taking” (Davis, 2001; Duhlberg, 2002) have been used interchangeably to mean historical empathy. Endacott (2014) notes that *perspective recognition* means identifying with a particular person’s point of view, versus *perspective taking*, which refers to the dialogue students engage in when considering their perspectives, as well as others’ point of views. Consequently, demonstration of historical empathy through historical study involves both perspective recognition and perspective taking.

Furthermore, debate persists on whether historical empathy is only achievable in social studies. One concern is that the term *historical empathy* is only “particular to history” (Lee & Shemilt, 2011, p. 40). Blake (1998) argues for the use of the phrase “empathy in history” due to the misconception that empathy is not relevant or achievable in other academic disciplines (p. 26). Brooks (2009) notes that Blake’s call for the use of the term “empathy in history” is a valid point because it “conceptualizes empathy as involving a range of skills, insights, and feelings, which are commonly applied in any field of study” (p. 217). In short, a major issue with defining the term *historical empathy* is the connotation that empathy is something only achievable or relatable to history and/or social studies content.

Despite the discrepancies about the exact theoretical meaning of historical empathy, agreement exists with regard to how scholars describe its instructional elements. Endacott and Brooks (2013) provide an updated theoretical conceptualization for teaching historical empathy through narrative writing. Their theoretical conceptualization outlines “three interrelated and interdependent endeavors” that combine the three cognitive acts of 1) historical contextualization, 2) perspective talking, and 3) affective connection (p. 43). Additionally, this framework emphasizes the importance of using multiple texts to engage students in the intellectual and emotive acts of historical empathy. For instance, Marcus, Metzger, Paxton, and Stoddard (2010) contend that teachers can promote historical empathy by engaging in film-based instruction for students to practice recognizing and explaining the viewpoints of people and groups from the past. For the purposes of this research, the researchers use Endacott and Brooks’ (2013) definition as their criterion for tracing the origins of historical empathy back to progressive era curricular documents. This definition not only represents a consensus of the scholarly definition of historical empathy as a pedagogical tool, but is most effectively used to analyze for evidence of the existence of historical empathy as an unstated curricular goal in social studies education.

### The Early Progressive Era, 1880–1900s

The progressive era was a time when grassroots and governmental reforms were enacted to address the socio-economic and political ills of the Gilded Age. Among these ills included unfettered laissez-faire capitalism, corporate monopolies, industrialization, urbanization, child labor, and racial discrimination. For example, Riis (1901) indicated in his quintessential, *How the Other Half Lives*, “what are you going to do about it? is the question of to-day” with regard to the disparities in American society at the end of the 19th century (p. 2). In response to this question, reformers from various walks of life became involved in social causes. These causes, which included legislative action addressing labor, housing, consumer protections, public health, and education highlighted growing socio-economic and political inequalities in the United States, particularly in American schools.

During the Progressive Era, the purpose of schooling “became the core upon which Americans relied to assure the continuity and evolution of their government, their economy, and their social values” (Graham, 2005, p. 3). Traditionally, the aim of history in American public schools focused on promoting virtues and morals necessary to cultivate citizenship in the early republic through teacher-centered instruction of the classics (Bohan, 2005; Evans, 2004; Reese, 2007). After the Civil War, the influx of immigrants and abolition of slavery spurred a rapid urbanization that changed the stated purpose of American public schooling, particularly in history and social studies education. As a result, progressive educational reformers called for a holistic curriculum that focused on social studies content that prepared children for work, life, and citizenship in the 20th century.

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