

Using the Strap for Learning about Educational Reforms of the 1960s and 1970s

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One of the joys of teaching the History/Philosophy of Education to pre-service elementary teachers is the ability to use artifacts, such as old exams, textbooks, photographs and policy documents – to name but a few items. Artifacts serve as social symbols, helping us to interpret dominant ideas and practices of an era. Once mainly the domain of museums, artifacts are being used more frequently in all kinds of classrooms. They can be used to focus instruction on evidence, assisting students to understand key concepts by exercising important thinking skills such as drawing informed decisions. Among my favorite artifacts is the “strap” (see photo below), used throughout the 19th and 20th centuries as “corporal punishment” to control students’ undesirable behaviors. I use the strap as a “bouncing off point” for discussing educational reforms in Canada during the late 1960s to mid-1970s. My goal is not only for students to understand reforms of the era but also to understand the forces acting in support of – as well as against – educational change.



Figure 1. The Strap. Image courtesy of the Education History Museum.

In this article, I briefly explain how I use the strap and how the 80-minute lesson (entitled “From Oppression to Educational Freedom”) unfolds. The artifact use (and the lesson more generally) was planned to adhere to the National Council for the Social Studies’ (NCSS) five principles of “powerful” Social Studies teaching. Specifically, the instruction is meant to be (1) meaningful, (2) integrative, (3) values based, (4) challenging, and (5) active.

To prepare for the lesson, students are pre-assigned a background chapter in Richard Neumann's book *Sixties Legacy: A History of the Public Alternative Schools Movement, 1967-2001*.⁸⁵ To open the lesson, I pass around two straps – one that is quite soft and malleable and another that is hard and rigid. The students' exploration of the straps is guided by the following questions that I project on a screen:

What are the objects made of? Who might have made them?

What feeling do you get by handling these objects? Why?

Why is one soft/ droopy and the other hard/ rigid?

When, where and how might these objects have been used?

What values are embodied in the use of these objects?

Are these objects still used? Why/ not?

Once the class has determined that the objects are straps (one well worn, the other almost brand new), I ask students what the strap symbolizes to them. They usually say social conformity (particularly of the 1950s, the topic of the last unit). Their answers include such topics as gender norms and cold war fears – which I jot on the board. I then project two images: one of Canada's Viola Desmond and one of Rosa Parks from the US. I ask them who these women were and what they did that was historically significant. Although most students don't know Viola Desmond's story of sitting in the "white" section of a movie theatre in Nova Scotia, most of them know about Rosa Parks' refusal to move to black seating at the back of an Alabama bus. They indicate that these women's defiance were turning points in the "Equality Revolution" that came into full bloom in the 1960s and early '70s.

Using a Powerpoint projection, I outline societal changes (e.g., desegregation and civil rights) and the reforms to education that followed soon after. These included: classrooms without walls, community schools, full funding for kindergarten, the rise in discovery learning, initiatives in homeschooling, course selection in high schools, alternative schools/programmes, the identification and elimination of gender- and racially-biased textbooks and curricula. I then indicate that the use of corporal punishment (the strap) was eliminated in BC in 1973 under education minister Eileen Dailly, a former teacher. She also brought in legislation to abolish large-scale government exams, shifted curriculum development to local districts, and gave school boards policy-making powers to establish alternative programming. BC's first alternative school was established in Nanaimo in 1966. Its inspiration was the concept of student "freedom" embodied in a British school called Summerhill that had been established by A.S. Neill in the 1920s. I then show the students a clip of a National Film Board video about the school.⁸⁶

After viewing the video, students work in small groups to discuss what they've seen. Their discussion is focused around two questions: Would you like to teach in a school like Summerhill? Why/ not? We close the lesson with a brief, whole class discussion soliciting why students think that a school like Summerhill does not exist in BC today. Students note that certain "freedoms" have remained, such as abolition of the strap and (limited) student course selection at the high school level. Nevertheless, they begin to understand the forces that work against educational reform – in addition to those that foster it.

Additional Resources

Brooks, Jacquelines, and Martin G. Brooks. *In Search of Understanding: The Case for Constructivist Classrooms*. Alexandria: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1993.

National Council for the Social Studies. *Powerful, Purposeful Pedagogy in Elementary School Social Studies*. Accessed 1 June 2018. <https://www.socialstudies.org/positions/powerfulandpurposeful>

⁸⁵ Richard Neumann, *Sixties Legacy: A History of the Public Alternative Schools Movement, 1967-2001* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003).

⁸⁶ Cecily Burwash, "Summerhill," National Film Board of Canada, 1967, video, 28:33, https://archive.org/details/summerhill_201701.