Myths of source work

This passage is adapted from Taylor, Fahey, Kriewaldt and Boon’s *Place and Time: Explorations in Teaching History and Geography*. It refers to the work of the American educator Keith Barton and also the British educator Christine Counsell.

Keith Barton (2005) outlines seven myths or beliefs that teachers hold about sources and historians’ work and how to overcome them:

**Myth 1: primary sources are more reliable and significant than secondary sources.** This position is justified on the grounds of authenticity and immediacy, but primary sources can be one-eyed and should be considered alongside secondary sources.

**Myth 2: primary sources can be read as arguments about the past.** Often, sources are testimonies, but testimonies constitute a small portion of the materials used by historians to construct historical accounts.

**Myth 3: historians use a 'sourcing heuristic' to evaluate bias and reliability.** This type of heuristic aims at evaluating bias that might arise from authorship, time, place and purpose. However, bias is not a bad thing because it does not necessarily diminish the usefulness of the evidence; rather, it offers insights into the range of views held about an event, an individual or a circumstance. The notion that a historian’s main purpose is to detect bias perpetuates further myths that condone the exclusive use of primary sources in history classrooms.

**Myth 4: using primary sources engages learners in authentic historical inquiry.** Giving students one or two sources with an associated task is not how historians inquire into the past and construct accounts. While emphasis has been placed on working with primary sources, secondary sources are central to historians’ work. Historians analyse, interpret and corroborate secondary sources as evidence, produce secondary sources as a result of inquiry and communicate within their own community through secondary sources. In other words, secondary sources are the authentic outcome of what is entailed in 'doing' history.

**Myth 5: learners can build an understanding of the past through primary sources.** Learners’ ability to make sense of historical sources depends on their understanding of the context in which the sources were produced. It is impossible to construct meaning from a source without embedding it in a larger framework of the past.

**Myth 6: primary sources are fun.** While the use of primary source materials is central to history teaching and learning, overuse depletes enthusiasm. Counsell (2000) suggests that the tyranny of source inquiry in history classrooms results in the tedious dismemberment of relics that deadens learners' curiosity.

**Myth 7: sources can be classified as primary or secondary-primary (of the time) and secondary (those not present at the event).** Considerable class time is spent ascribing status, rather than identifying the nature of a source by the purpose it serves in an historical investigation.
References


Barton, K.  ‘Primary sources in history: Breaking through the myths’, *Phi Delta Kappan*, vol. 89, no. 10, 2005, pp. 745-754