Visuals as a Tool to Incorporate Diversity into the Ontario Social Studies Curriculum

By

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Abstract

From my experience as a student, I had always found difficulty being interested in learning about social studies and history, which appears to be a common attitude in elementary schools. It was not until my undergraduate studies in art history that I began to understand the significance of historical concepts, though some teachers used visuals more effectively than others. Visual learning helps students engage in a variety of subjects. Thus, the purpose of this research was to discover how the use of visual resources can help bring diversity and multiple perspectives into the social studies and history classroom. This study adopts a qualitative approach and incorporates semi-structured interviews of two participants for the collection of its data. From my research findings, four key themes emerged; including content sensitivity, pedagogical strategies, accessibility to resources and the benefits of these visual resources within the social studies and/or history classroom.

Keywords: visuals, resources, diversity, History, Social Studies
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction: Research Context and Problem

When one thinks of history, endless facts and dates of events that occurred hundreds of years ago come to mind. A student might question the purpose of learning about historical events and how this relates to their present day. It may not be easily understood that “history is not the past but merely a tool for making meaning from past events” (Cutrara, 2010, p. 4). The past is everything that happened before today and history is the writing about the past.

Milo (2015) argues that “we attach names to eras and titles to chapters, and we stick it in a book, and we call it history” (2015). The author claims that by following the standard chronological order of teaching history does not leave much room for student inquiry. Therefore, it leaves students uninterested and bored, especially when the teacher focuses solely on memorizing information. This has become a crucial issue for educators teaching social studies in the classrooms. Soloman (1987) claims that “social studies is often given low priority…and is typically taught with materials and methods that fail to promote students’ thinking skills” (p. 556). In a subject area so focused on memorization, with little time for understanding the ideas behind such details, teachers are left to continue making the learning of social studies a less memorable experience for students in Ontario.

However, there are exceptions. One of the common strategies is that some teachers incorporate visuals in their social studies classrooms. Visual resources “are not only a rich source of information and insights, but deliberate constructions, rather than mere reflections, of reality; and as constructions, they represent their creators’ purposes and perspectives” (Clark, 2013, p. 290). In order for students to actively examine and uncover the meaning behind such images, “they first need to see them as an important part of the variety of information sources available to
them” (Clark, 2013, p. 290). Unfortunately, some teachers may not be integrating visuals thoroughly enough into their teaching practice. In the social studies context, the use of visuals is very limited and is often left to supplement the text rather than be the focus of a lesson. Visuals are often overlooked and confined to illustrations in textbooks for aesthetic use (Felton, 1990). As a result, visuals are not used to their fullest potential as they should be, especially as an easily accessible resource.

Visual learning, also known as ‘visual literacy’ (Felton, 1990), is often addressed only to one type of learner, visual learners who require visual aids throughout their learning experience. There appears to be a misconception around its purpose in the classroom, that it does not support all learners as well as it supports visual literate students. On the contrary, visuals are a great tool for all students, regardless of their learning preference. It is for this reason that in my research paper, I chose to explore how the incorporation of visuals can benefit both educators and students in the study of social studies, specifically history. In addition, I focus on how implementing visuals into social studies classrooms can address diversity and the multiple perspectives of most, if not all students, in which teachers are now expected to do in their practice.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

In view of the problem articulated above, my research goal is to discover best practices of elementary school teachers who incorporate visual learning into the classrooms while teaching social studies. I am interested in how teachers may do so by incorporating multiple perspectives in a way that interests and motivates students to promote eager learners for the future. My concern also lies in learning how visuals benefit and engage not only students, but teachers as well, in the overall classroom learning environment. Teachers can equally benefit from its use, as
it makes social studies more exciting to teach, especially when teachers can see their students enjoying themselves as they learn. In addition, I aim to discover the link between the use of visuals and multiple perspectives to promote diversity and multiculturalism within this subject area.

1.3 Research Questions

Several questions will be guiding this research study, however the primary question in which my paper focuses on is: In which ways can the incorporation of visuals bring diversity and multiple perspectives into the social studies curriculum, specifically when teaching history in the classrooms?

My research paper will address the following subsidiary questions:

- What are some of the factors you as a teacher would need to consider (such as the age or grade level) before implementing the use of visuals into your classroom?

- Does abiding to the Ontario Curriculum’s expectations affect your implementation of visuals resources?

- Do you believe visuals should be used for special distinctions or particular points in a lesson, if at all? Why or why not?

- Are visual tools/resources easily accessible for you to find in your school? What are some of the problems you as a teacher may face when looking for visual tools to access in the classroom?

- Would you as a teacher still benefit from the use of social studies/history textbooks? How about the use of older social studies/history textbooks?

These are the key questions directing this study, with an aim to consider diversity and multiple perspectives within teacher pedagogy.
1.4 Background of the Researcher

As a visual learner, I feel that it is extremely important to include visual learning into the field of subjects often considered less interesting to students. In the past, I found history to be quite dull and tedious. I was not very interested in hearing a teacher speak of events that occurred hundreds of years ago. During my undergraduate studies, I soon came to discover that history does at times have a way of repeating itself. In order to avoid making similar mistakes to those from the past, I believe we must learn about what these people had done to help guide future generations away from similar yet periodically different situations. Of course, learning about these eventful moments in history does not provide any guarantees because history does change from one period to the next. It would not be realistic of anyone to expect past solutions to succeed in future issues. Nevertheless, I continue to believe that our ancestors learned quite a bit of useful information in which our generations and those to come, can apply in some degree to their lives.

With my focus in art history, it was necessary to incorporate visual images of the artworks into the courses. However, I found that some teachers used them more effectively than others, and at times the texts outweighed the visual components. Yet, at the same time, it was during my time in undergraduate studies in which I finally understood the significance of historical context and its impact within our present time. Specifically, within my history classes that did incorporate a wider range of visual learning, I found that I learned so much more than I did from my previous experiences in primary and secondary school. Now that I am aware of how important visual learning is in the classroom, I feel obligated to encourage its use and learn how to better incorporate it into the social studies curriculum. As a prospective teacher, it is also something that I find myself very interested in using in the future.
1.5 Overview of this Study

In response to my research questions, I will interview two elementary school teachers, who have taught in the social studies stream to implement into my qualitative research study. I will question these teachers on their use of visual learning using multiple perspectives in the classrooms and how much priority, if any, it holds in comparison to other forms of learning, such as reading a text or lecturing. As well I will focus on which learning strategies their students preferred and how their students feel about the subject of social studies in general, specifically with history. In chapter 2, I will introduce the key themes of teacher pedagogy and strategies, visuals as a learning tool, the Ontario curriculum’s expectations, diverse and multiple perspectives in relation to visuals, and the context within my research topic lies. I will also review the literature associated with these themes.

For chapter 3, I will describe in more detail my qualitative research approach in supporting my argument using the information I attain from the two interviews with the elementary school teachers. In this section I will also discuss the procedures in which I will be following. Chapter 4 will be focused on reporting my overall research findings regarding the use of visuals in social studies lessons/units. Finally, in chapter 5, I will explain the significance and implications of my findings. In addition, I will draw upon my own conclusions and possibly a solution to my initial research problem as it relates to the development of my teaching practice.
Chapter 2: The Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter I review the literature in incorporating visuals through differentiated instruction, the ways in which visuals help provide greater diversity, and teacher pedagogies and strategies. I start by reviewing the literature in the area of the Ontario Curriculum for social studies, how social studies was previously taught and how visuals were used in the past, and I consider students’ attitudes towards this subject area, specifically history. Next, I review research on different types of visuals and their importance in the classrooms, in order to explain the significance of incorporating visuals through differentiated instruction. From there, I review the ways in which visuals help provide greater diversity by defining the term ‘diversity’ in relation to elementary school education, linking the use of visuals to diversity, and by reviewing literature in this area. I explore possible strategies that incorporate the two. Finally, I will review research on teacher practices in relation to the curriculum’s expectations, and will review examples of its use through the case studies from my research.

2.1 Historical Context

The historical context of this research paper explores the background knowledge pertaining to my topic, focusing on how the incorporation of diversity through the use of visuals can encourage elementary school students to actively participate when learning the subject of social studies. The historical context will explore the overall expectations and goals of Ontario’s Social Studies Curriculum, specifically for grades four to eight. As well, it will examine how social studies had been taught and how visuals had been incorporated into the teaching practices of the past. Finally, this historical review will address students’ attitudes and thoughts towards the subject matter, and how it might affect their learning.
2.1.1 Ontario Curriculum’s Expectations in Social Studies

Ontario’s Social Studies Curriculum’s main goals concentrate on fostering critical and disciplinary thinking, in which the big ideas address concepts relatable outside of social studies and to the students’ daily lives (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 14). Differentiated instruction, as discussed in the curriculum specifies different approaches teachers may adopt in their practice (Ontario, 2013, p. 34) that appeal to a variety of age groups and learners. These objectives outlined for teacher pedagogy in social studies are significant as it allows students to find interest and meaning in the material they are learning. In addition, Soloman (1987) suggests “kinds of thinking that fit naturally into elementary social studies curricula, [by] using a language readily understood and models of thinking that are not complex” (p. 556). He focuses on two forms of thinking he deems necessary in elementary social studies education: “general problem solving” and “specific types of individual tasks” (Soloman, 1987, p. 560). What the author fails to address is how visuals may be valuable tools in promoting these types of thinking for students, and how it can also promote diversity.

2.1.2 How Social Studies and Visuals were Taught in the Past

Textbooks were the main source of knowledge in teaching social studies in the past. Although they “may be more multicultural than in the past…they are still crafted on frameworks that focus on the experiences of people who came from Europe, and they celebrate Europeans and their accomplishments” (Stanley, 2003, p. 38). There is little space left within the curriculum to teach the histories of other cultures and events from around the world. Specifically, in Ontario, the previous revised edition from 2004 of “the official curriculum does not require students to learn anything of Asian, African, or Latin American history” (Stanley, 2003, p. 38), therefore excluding possible diversity in social studies classrooms.
Another issue with textbooks is how they are written. Author and social studies department chair Greg Milo (2015) explains how he has encountered students who found his teaching of history and social studies to be quite boring. He suggests one of the reasons behind their lack of interest is how textbooks briefly mention the specifics of significant events and issues while missing important details (Milo, 2015). As a result, this leaves the text looking rushed, the students feeling overwhelmed and them not fully understanding the key concepts. Milo (2015) also claims that when textbooks do this, it “tend[s] to dismiss the humanity of the subject,” making it boring to read.

In addition, the primary form of visuals used in the past were present in textbooks. As a result, the use of visuals is very limited. It was generally applied as a supplement in order to support the ideas and concepts presented in the text. It does not necessarily provide opportunities for critical thinking. When descriptions of the text surround the image, it often directs the students’ understanding of the image, and at times without allowing any further thought. Otherwise, the text surrounding the images have no direct connection to the visual images, but provide additional information for the overall text with no mention of the initial image it is placed next to on the page. Yet it is important to clarify that the use of old textbooks has changed over time. They can continue to be used in classrooms, as I will explore further in section four of this chapter, but for a different purpose than they were originally intended when first published. However, in the past visual images in social studies textbooks were often overlooked by both teachers and students, only to be observed for its aesthetic use (Felton, 1990).

McKean (2002) discusses how “the artistic representations in social studies textbooks and the ways those expand or limit the social studies curriculum have not been a subject of inquiry” (p. 187). In her study, she explores the advantages and/or disadvantages of using visuals from
textbooks to teach the social studies curriculum (McKean, 2002). Although the author focuses on a specific type of visual tool, the use of the arts in social studies education in elementary schools as suggested by the more current editions of the textbooks, she does not mention how this can be used to address diversity, a concept in which is central to my paper. Another matter raised is the declining use of textbooks in the classrooms. As textbooks become more outdated and schools refuse to purchase new editions, teachers are less inclined to use older textbooks in the classrooms, primarily for their students’ sake. Can students continue to benefit from having textbooks today?

2.1.3 Students’ Attitudes and Thoughts Towards Social Studies

From personal experience, social studies is often perceived as an uninteresting subject matter. Customarily in the past, learning social studies includes reading from a textbook and having to answer the questions at the end of each chapter during class or for homework, only to be discussed for the next day (Lipsky, 1976). In the 1980s, people thought “social studies is often given low priority… and is typically taught with materials and methods that fail to promote students’ thinking skills” (Soloman, 1987, p. 556), which demonstrates to students what little importance it holds in their education and how unexciting it can be. If teachers show no motivation to teach it in a more exciting manner, students will also lack motivation to learn it. I will discuss how incorporating visuals and diversity into the social studies curriculum can help create a more exciting learning environment for students and possibly teachers, as a solution to this issue.

2.2 The Significance of Incorporating Visuals through Differentiated Instruction

Due to the wide range of students’ learning abilities, teachers are now encouraged to incorporate differentiated instruction (modifying the content, process, and product of a lesson)
into their practice as often as possible to make sure all students’ needs are met. Although teachers and educators have recently been more aware of these various abilities, some continue to have difficulty finding new ways to bring differentiated instruction into the classrooms. Incorporating visuals is a guaranteed way to attend to most of these needs, as it adheres to all learners, especially visual and hands-on learners.

2.2.1 Define the Term ‘Visuels’

The term ‘visuels’ is often identified as images or illustrations, particularly in textbooks. Visuels applies to a variety of tools beyond this basic understanding. It can be understood as “any item or element depending on the sense of sight” (‘Visual’, 2015), which provides an infinite amount of possibilities for teachers in their classrooms. Therefore, the concept of visuals can encompass a wide range of resources.

2.2.2 Why the use of Visuels is Important

The incorporation of visuals is beneficial because it supports student learning, provides multiple perspectives (differentiated learning), and promotes diversity in the classrooms (Ulbig, 2010; Felton & Allen, 1990; Rosier et. al., 2013). According to Ulbig (2010), “researchers have highlighted a litany of possible advantages associated with the use of visually enhanced teaching materials in the classroom” (p. 186). Some of these advantages include maintaining students’ attention, increasing their motivation, and providing a more engaging learning environment (Ulbig, 2010, p. 186). However, the author specifically focuses on how visual images enhance the learning experience for college students. In regard to my research paper, I would like to apply similar ideas regarding the benefits of visuals in relation to younger students, particularly in elementary schools.
When teaching social studies, Felton and Allen (1990) believe that carefully selected paintings, engravings, or photographs (historical resources) are rich in information and result in higher interest for students. “With visual historical source materials, poor readers are not quickly eliminated from the learning experience,” (Felton & Allen, 1990, p. 84) which applies to more than one learning need. The authors claim that “the use of historical visual materials opens an avenue for students to develop a new range of skills—the skills of visual literacy—‘reading’ pictures to find data, make inferences, and locate meaning” (Felton & Allen, 1990, p. 84). Thus, visuals are highly beneficial for students when learning social studies.

Another article (Rosier et. al., 2013) suggests that visuals improve one’s memorization skills. The authors (Rosier, Locker & Naufel, 2013) explain how in the past there has been research proving that art education is beneficial to students’ learning and memory abilities, and they decided to research this idea further. They focused on “what effects of different types of art exposure have on people’s memory” (Rosier et. al., 2013, p. 1), not solely on children’s. For my research paper, the way in which visuals help improve memorization will be considered for elementary school students, grades four to eight rather than people in general.

2.2.3 Different Types of Visual Tools

Different types of visual tools and resources include slides, photographs, maps, engravings, paintings, and technological tools (Clark, 2013; Felton & Allen, 1990). Although the possibility of visual tools is endless, many teachers encounter the problem of finding access to these tools. Lipsky (1976) states that “many of the projects are too expensive for individual instructors to purchase on their own, and too many schools, because of budgetary problems, cannot afford to buy them either” (p. 241). As a result, the unavailability of these tools makes it difficult for teachers to apply visuals into their daily instruction. Some research has suggested new ways for
teachers to use old resources, such as social studies textbooks (Downey, 1980; Lipsky, 1976). From these textbooks is where “the most abundant and accessible visual resources” (Clark, 2013, p. 290) are found, photographs and paintings; while visual resources that include an audio component fall in as the next convenient resource in teaching. I would like to apply this thinking with the use of other easily accessible visuals tools, and suggest other tools teachers could possibly use that they would have not otherwise previously considered.

2.3 The Ways in which Visuals help Provide Greater Diversity

Education today is all about promoting diversity in the classrooms by appreciating and valuing everyone’s unique qualities. It allows students of different ethnicities and cultural backgrounds to relate to the material in the curriculum more easily, and as a result encourages all students to get involved. As a relatively new concept to be integrating into practice, teachers may not be familiar with the different possibilities of incorporating diversity. For this research paper, I will suggest ways in which visuals can help provide greater diversity in social studies courses for elementary school students.

2.3.1 ‘Diversity’ Defined in Elementary School Education

According to the Ontario Ministry of Education (2009), the term diversity is understood as “the presence of a wide range of human qualities and attributes within a group, organization, or society. The dimensions of diversity include, but are not limited to, ancestry, culture, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, language, physical and intellectual ability, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status” (p. 4). It deals with presenting multiple perspectives in the teaching practice, rather than solely focusing on a single dominant view.
2.3.2 Links between Visuals and Diversity in the Classrooms

Diversity alone allows students to relate to content on a more personal level. When content is made relatable to students’ lives, students find interest in the material they are learning. Diversity in social studies is made more interesting for students to learn with the assistance of visuals. Milo (2015) adds to this statement by claiming that if teachers want their students “to make reasoned decisions, then they’ll have to be able to understand the complicated mix of people, places, and things that lead to an outcome” (p. 20) such as a historic event. The only way to address diversity successfully in social studies classrooms is to give students the opportunity to choose the kinds of histories they are interested in learning, all the while allowing students to develop critical thinking and decision-making skills.

Another author suggests teachers approach diversity by adopting the conceptual model she likes to call ‘Historic Space’ (Cutrara, 2010, p. 5), when teaching social studies and history. The concept is “focused on re-conceptualizing the simplistic, one-dimensional grand narrative popularly taught in schools as maps of key concepts free from narrative fixity and linear logic” (Cutrara, 2010, p. 5-6). ‘Historic Space’ provides students with the opportunity to deconstruct and analyse historical information to find for themselves a new and possibly deeper meaning from the same historical context. According to Cutrara (2010), this “allows students to think about the values insinuated in the grand narrative and think about what history could look like when their own values are privileged” (p. 5) as individuals. In other words, incorporating a range of historical world views not only encourages diversity, but also provides students with more control over their learning experience, thus fostering student interest.
2.3.3 Strategies to Incorporate Diversity using Visuals

Visual resources contribute to the meaning of social studies material and content taught in classrooms. More recent publications of historical texts for students use visuals that no longer directly support a body of text. Instead, these images portray their own narrative in which students may use the surrounding text to infer the meaning of the images without being directly told. This encourages critical thinking from students. Similarly, Rawlinson et. al (2007) “documents the effectiveness of Visual Thinking Strategies as a foundational strategy for developing critical-thinking skills upon which a multi-modal teaching approach that integrates visual materials and promotes artistic response can be built” (p. 155). The authors connect visual literacy and critical thinking to complex social issues, which relates to my research topic about promoting diversity. Another article uses a range of innovative classroom practices within arts-based activities to help students’ reading of literary texts (Grant, 2008), which can be applied to my research in terms of the historical content students are required to read. Some social studies or history book publications also include multiple perspectives in the different kinds of content portrayed in these images.

2.4 Teacher Pedagogy and Strategies

My research began with how the Ontario Curriculum stressed the importance of visuals and diversity in social studies classrooms. In this section of my research paper I will explore the multiple forms in which teacher pedagogy and strategies have been applied to integrate visuals and diversity in the social studies context within an actual classroom setting.
2.4.1 Teaching Practice vs Curriculum Expectations

Regardless of the kinds of strategies teachers implement in the social studies classroom, there are specific expectations they are required to follow based on the curriculum. Within this section, I will explore how teaching practice and curriculum expectations are simultaneously maintained.

2.4.2 Best Practices

In this section I will explore effective teaching strategies using visuals to promote diversity. From my research, I discovered numerous case studies suggesting possible visual materials and strategies teachers may employ in their practice. Several authors focus on using images from history textbooks as valuable teaching resources (Lipsky, 1976; Downey, 1980). Felton and Allen (1990) propose that teachers “select rich, high-interest pictures” that contain no labels in order to allow students to come up with their own understanding of the image by encouraging them to ‘read’ the image rather than be given the description and have them accept it as it is (p. 84). This may be an effective strategy for teachers struggling with low budgets or little resources all the while encouraging critical thinking from students. Werner (2002) in turn provides seven approaches to reading images effectively, “instrumental, narrative, iconic, editorial, indicative, oppositional, and reflexive” (p. 407), again focusing solely on pictures as possible visual tools for teachers.

Another text mentions the importance of incorporating visual aids “especially when dealing with sophisticated material” as a way to improve students’ cognitive development (Woolfolk, Winne, & Perry, 2016, p. 24). The authors provide examples such as the use of timelines to teach history or social studies and diagrams to illustrate hierarchal relationships (i.e. the branches of government) (Woolfolk et al., 2016, p. 24). Additionally, Clark (2013) suggests several activities teachers can incorporate while using paintings, photographs, and audiovisuals. One such activity
is to have students create their own narratives from an image after “examining the aesthetic features of photographs and paintings by focusing on techniques (for example, use of light, focus, and frame) that highlight or subdue various aspects of a picture” (Clark, 2013, p. 297). In terms of audiovisuals, Clark (2013) proposes an activity in which students contrast film clips “to develop students’ sense of the problematic relationships between historical evidence and historical interpretation” (p. 301). She also lists a number of other easily accessible resources teachers can bring into the classroom, including: brochures, calendars, newspapers; as well other sources students can observe such as government publications, store advertising displays, art galleries, etc. (Clark, 2013, p. 290).

My research will further explore other visual materials and tools not yet discussed in these case studies (artefacts such as letters, diaries, or paintings to name a few examples). While exposing the students to primary sources, teachers can use a variety of material to demonstrate multiple perspectives and diversity in cultures through the social studies context (i.e. notes written in a slaves’ perspective, soldiers’ letters to their families, examples of some cooking tools Aboriginal people used in their daily lives, etc.).

2.5 Conclusion

In this literature review I looked at research on historical context, the significance of incorporating visuals through differentiated instruction, the ways in which visuals help provide greater diversity, and teacher pedagogies and strategies. This review elucidates the extent that attention has been paid to incorporating visuals in the social studies curriculum mainly through the use of images from textbooks. It also raises questions about effective ways to ‘read’ visuals in order to promote critical thinking and points to the need for further research in the areas of directly linking the use of visuals to promote diversity in a social studies context. In light of this,
the purpose of my research is to find effective yet accessible visual tools that teachers can apply into their practice when teaching social studies. Having accessible tools and effectively implementing their use will improve students’ as well as teachers’ overall history learning experience.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction (Chapter Overview)

In this chapter, I will be describing my research methodology; the methods I will be employing in this qualitative study which focuses on how the implementation of visual resources in social studies can promote diversity and encourage student and teacher interest. First, I begin by reviewing general research approaches and procedures, as well as the data collecting instruments that apply to my research. I will then explain in detail the selection and sampling process of participants for the interviews. Next, I examine the data analysis procedures while considering ethical issues and implications involved in my study. I will also discuss several methodological limitations pertaining to this research, as well as strengths. I conclude with a brief overview of important methodological decisions and their rationale, with a preview of what is to come in the following chapter.

3.1 Research Approach & Procedures

The research for this study on visual tools that promote diversity in the social studies classroom will be conducted using a qualitative research approach. I will include a review of past and current literature relevant to the focus of my research, as well as semi-structured interviews with three teachers who specialize in the social studies or history fields. According to Lakshman et. al. (2000), “research tends to be considered real and serious only when it uses” a quantitative approach (p. 369). The reason for this derives from the fact that quantitative research focuses on content that can be measured and calculated, such as statistics and numeric facts. As a result, quantitative methods have gained more credibility over other forms of research, particularly in relation to qualitative research, and are more likely to be accepted in certain fields.
Lakshman et. al. (2000) state that “quantitative methods examine the effects of specified circumstances…on an outcome of interest …in ways that can be expressed numerically” (p. 369). Although quantitative research is based on measurable data, it does not always guarantee complete accuracy. The authors claim that “quantitative data, no matter how rigorously collected, is still vulnerable” (Lakshman et. al., 2000, p. 370). Often the information collected from quantitative studies does not focus on specific circumstances, but on general statements which tends to summarize the whole of any given information into one individual classification. It is then difficult to analyze numeric data when it does not accurately apply to all instances.

I am suggesting that qualitative research is significant on its own as a research approach, depending on what the researcher hopes to acquire from their results. “Quantitative methods work best when there is a minimum of dependent variables, all under the control of the investigator” (Lakshman et. al., 2000, p. 372). While qualitative research is “more revealing when contextual forces are ill-defined, uncontrollable or situational” (Lakshman et. al., 2000, p. 371). It addresses and engages with the examination and understanding “the nature, strengths, and interactions” (Lakshman et. al., 2000, p. 371) of events.

Creswell (2013) claims that “qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 53). Rather than depending on measurable data to frame one’s study as is expected with quantitative methods, qualitative research is responsive to the people and places in a more accepted environment. Its process “includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature or a call for
change” (Creswell, 2013, p. 53). Qualitative research often pays closer attention to how one examines and comprehends the collected information.

There are various characteristics which emphasize different aspects within qualitative research. One of the common characteristics of qualitative research is the participants’ meanings (Creswell, 2013, p. 55). For instance, within my study I will focus on learning and understanding each of my participants’ views on the issue pertaining to the use and access of visuals in social studies classrooms. This in turn introduces multiple perspectives and diverse views of the topic, and is one of the reasons I found qualitative research a suitable approach given my research purpose and questions as it allows for me as the researcher to gather information from the teacher participants experiencing the issue firsthand. Another reason is its emergent design (Creswell, 2013, p. 55). As I gather more data about my research topic, I will gain more resources and new perspectives from the additional research. Although in many qualitative studies the central focus may shift in direction, this paper specifically will be shaped by the research I gather within the multiple perspectives from both scholars and the interviewed participants.

Furthermore, qualitative research can take place in a natural setting. It involves gathering “up-close information by actually talking directly to people” (Creswell, 2013, p. 54), as I will be doing in my interviews with social studies or history teachers in the Greater Toronto area. It will also allow me to see “them behave and act within their context” (p. 54), in this case, as classroom educators, which I feel my study depends on to strength my overall research. Lastly, qualitative research is a suitable approach to my research study because of its holistic account. It attempts “to develop a complex picture of the problem or issue under study” by having a focus on “reporting multiple perspectives, identifying the many factors involved in a situation, and
generally sketching the larger picture that emerges” (Creswell, 2013, p. 56) from the findings. These are some of the key elements in qualitative research which applies to my research purpose.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

The primary instrument I will be using to collect my data for this study is a semi-structured interview protocol. In contrast to structured interviews’ detailed formulated questions, semi-structured interviews begin with broader questions which later become more general as the interview proceeds. Before the interview process, “only topics and sub-topics are identified rather than specific questions” (Pathak & Intratat, 2012, p. 4). The aim of this purpose is for specific questions to arise from the examination of these topics, which provides the interviewer and the interviewee with more liberty to delve into the issues. This tool is appropriate for my research because it would create a fairly open framework. As well, it allows for a “focused yet conversational two-way communication with the participants” involved (Pathak & Intratat, 2012, p. 4), a component I find necessary for the interviews.

Semi-structured interviews also “provide a very flexible technique for small-scale research” (Pathak & Intratat, 2012, p. 4). Similarly, as the authors have described in their study, I will only be interviewing a few teachers. Therefore, semi-structured interviews are appropriate due to my time constraints and the other guidelines I must follow for this research paper. Pathak and Intratat (2012) explain that “in fact this method seems to provide more useful data when the sample size is relatively small” (p. 4). Since my sample size is considerably small, I believe that using semi-structured interviews will benefit my study.

In addition, semi-structured interviews focus on the past experiences and thoughts of the interviewees. They “allow all participants to be asked the same questions within a flexible framework” (Dearnley, 2005, p. 22). In Christine Dearnley’s (2005) case, semi-structured
interviews gave her the option of asking the same set of questions to each of her interviewees in no particular order. To her, the order depended on which direction the conversation of the interview followed. “Participants were encouraged to talk about their experiences through open-ended questions, and the ordering of further questions was determined by their responses” (Dearnley, 2005, p. 22). By doing so, the questions encouraged “depth and vitality” in order for new ideas to arise (Dearnley, 2005, p. 22). Likewise, I plan to approach my semi-structured interview protocol by asking questions that specifically focus on my research topic, yet allow the participants to elaborate further and possibly re-direct the attention to an area I had not previously considered. Furthermore, I plan to attain detailed information from my interviewees by asking for specific examples, as the author had done in her research (Dearnley, 2005, p. 22), and by using probing questions when necessary.

3.3 Participants

In this section, I will review the sampling criteria that had been established for the selection of participants. I will also review the possible opportunities from the teacher selections. In addition, I have included a sub-heading in which I introduce the participants I interviewed for this study on the integration of visuals in social studies classrooms to promote diversity and student interest.

3.3.1 Sampling Criteria

Participants were selected based on the following criteria:

1. Teachers will have experience teaching social studies specifically the History strand of the curriculum.

2. Teachers will be teaching or have had prior experience teaching in an elementary school.

3. Each participant will be teaching a different grade from one another.
4. Teachers will have a minimum of five years teaching experience inside a classroom.
5. Teachers will have experience using any form of visual resources and/or tools.
6. Teachers will have experience addressing diversity.

Due to the small sample size of this qualitative study, the information collected from the semi-structured interviews must pertain specifically to my research purpose. In order to effectively inform my study and answer my research questions, participants met the criteria articulated above. As the central focus of my research topic, all participants were teachers who have taught social studies, specifically within the strand of History or the subject of History from grades seven and up. In addition, as the subject area in which I specialize in, I will use my research findings to inform me of my future practice in the classroom. The teachers in which participated also have experience teaching in an elementary school; a point in my education which I struggled the most as a student within the subject area of social studies and History. I am interested to learn successful strategies to help students who may experience similar struggles. As well, I questioned a range of teachers in terms of their specified grade levels, to compare the similarities and differences between students of each grade. In order to gain richer insight into the participants teaching practice, each candidate had a minimum number of five years of experience in the classroom. Finally, all participants had experience addressing diversity either from their experience as a student or as a teacher, and using visual resources in their practice as it once again applies to my research topic. Each of the six criteria stated above ensured that the teachers participating were appropriately suited to effectively inform my study.

3.3.2 Sampling Procedures

One important factor researchers must consider when collecting data is the sample size. Marshall (1996) states that “an appropriate sample size for a qualitative study is one that
adequately answers the research question” (p. 523). Once again, it depends on the research topic and what the researcher deems sufficient for their study. As new ideas and explanations arise from the collection of data, “the number of required subjects usually becomes obvious as the study progresses” (Marshall, 1996, 523). In contrast with the quantitative design, it requires more flexibility and a recurring sampling approach. The purpose of qualitative research is “to elucidate the particular, the specific” (Creswell, 2013, p. 138) rather than focus on generalizing information.

Researchers must recognize that decisions must be made regarding the participant expectations, as was mentioned in the previous subheading, the number of participants involved, and the type of sampling the researcher will establish. There are several possible sampling strategies to approach this that may also be used in conjunction in an individual study. One sampling strategy is the “maximum variation sampling” which Creswell (2013) states is the preferred approach in qualitative research (p. 138). It allows researchers to determine in advance some of the criteria that differentiates the participants, and later choosing participants that are fairly dissimilar based on the criteria.

Another sampling strategy is judgment sampling also known as purposeful sampling, which is common and is used in this qualitative research. It is when “the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (Creswell, 2013, p. 137). It involves actively selecting the most appropriate sample to answer the research question (Marshall, 1996, p. 523). Finally, the sampling strategy I will apply to my research is convenience sampling. It consists of individuals in which the researcher can easily access and is the least rigorous technique as it involved little “time, effort, and money, but may result in poor quality data” (Marshall, 1996, p. 523). As a
teaching candidate engrossed in a community of teacher colleagues and mentors, particularly from school and practicum experiences, I will rely on my existing contacts to acquire participants.

3.3.3 Participant Bios

Among the two participants involved in this study, Navin teaches for the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) while the second candidate, Charlie, teaches for the Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB). Each participant has taught History or social studies for approximately six years or longer at the required age range for this study. Apart from Navin who has also taught at the high school level, each participant has experience teaching in elementary schools while using visual resources and addressing diversity.

3.4 Data Analysis

To analyse the data, I will be following a series of interconnected steps. These steps include “preparing and organizing the data (i.e., text data as in transcripts, or image data as in photographs) for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion” (Creswell, 2013, p. 155). Generally, coding a process in which researchers employ in their qualitative studies, yet there are some slight distinctions of this approach. Organizing the data is the first step in data analysis. It consists of organizing the collected information into separate files that can be easily located for later use. The next step is rereading the information collected and recording thoughts or ideas that occur to the researcher as they look over the transcript. This helps with the “initial process of exploring a database” and will allow me to reflect “on the larger thoughts presented in the data” (Creswell, 2013, p. 158) and create a few “initial categories” (p. 159) for the following step.
After reading and recording notes, I will then describe, classify, and interpret the data by placing it into codes and themes. I will develop a short list of categories that later expand as I continue to review the data. Another strategy Creswell (2013) suggests when decoding collected data is “to use a deconstructive stance” which helps “focus attention on types of information to analyze from qualitative data in all approaches” (p. 160). Some strategies used in deconstruction which I feel may pertain to my qualitative study are “examining …what is not said” in an interview, “attending to disruptions and contradictions…where a text fails to make sense,” and “separating group-specific and more general sources of bias by ‘reconstructing’ the text with substitution of its main elements” (Creswell, 2013, p. 160).

Next in the analysis process, I will interpret the data. I will look for similarities and differences to form an understanding of the overall data, in order to make sense of it. The final step is representing the data in whichever visual form I prefer. This includes figures such as charts or graphs, tables, a hierarchal tree diagram, or a discussion (Creswell, 2013, p. 161). I will be following each of these steps within my data analysis process.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

Through the planning and designing stages of the qualitative study, I will face numerous ethical issues that emerge during the collection of data. Each of these issues will be addressed before their data can be analyzed further. Creswell (2013) suggests that researchers approach the ethical issues by examining them and considering the possible issues that may arise (p. 62). As I plan to do during my study, it is better to plan ahead and be prepared to address the ethical issues, so if they do occur, I will know exactly how to approach the situation. Before I begin conducting the qualitative study, it is important that I have “approval from the institutional review board for the data collection involved in the study” (Creswell, 2013, p. 62), which in my
case will be from the Masters of Teaching program at University of Toronto and from my research professor. As a requirement of the program to partake in the qualitative research, ethical approval to continue with my study has already been granted. However, the interview questions I compose will be reviewed by the research professor prior to sending and asking the questions to participants.

During the process of conducting the study, I aim to create a positive environment for the participants involved. “The participants should not be deceived about the nature of the research” (Creswell, 2013, p. 63), therefore I will begin by informing participants of the general purpose before they contribute to my study. Although there is minimal to no known risks to participate in this study, there may still be a point in the interview in which one of the questions asked prompts an emotional response leaving the participant feeling uncomfortable. In order to reduce this risk, all participants will be asked to sign the consent forms if they agree to all terms included in the process, such as being audio-recorded by the interviewer. I will remind them that “participating in the study is voluntary and that it would not place the participants at undue risk” (Creswell, 2013, p. 63). In no way will they be pressured to sign or agree to anything that makes them feel uncomfortable. “Special provisions…for sensitive populations” (Creswell, 2013, p. 63) will not be necessary because this qualitative research only requires teacher interviewees. Participants will also be provided with a copy of the questions in advance to ensure they are prepared for the interview. As well, I will offer participants the opportunity to read over the transcript from the interview, and to remove or make clear of any of their statements before my analysis process.

To further ensure a positive space for the participants, I will remind participants that they do not need to answer any questions which makes them feel uncomfortable. They will have the opportunity to skip onto the next question if this ethical issue occurs. As well, they will be
reminded of their right to withdraw at any point during the interview. If questions continue to raise uncomfortable topics or issues for participants and they no longer wish to contribute to the study, they have the right to discontinue their participation. Furthermore, participants have the option of allowing me to use their real names in my study or of remaining anonymous. If participants choose the latter, I will provide them with pseudonyms to respect their choice and privacy.

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

As in any study, I will be facing a number of methodological limitations and strengths throughout my research study. One of these limitations includes the fact that this is solely a qualitative study, and therefore is not supported by numeric evidence but various experiences and perspectives. Quantitative research may have aided my study by providing statistical context, in terms of the facts and measurement of how often visuals are implemented into social studies and History classrooms, and how often it had or had not been successful while it aimed at encouraging diversity. I feel that my qualitative research could have built on these ‘how often’ and ‘how much’ questions by answering the ‘why’ behind them.

Unfortunately, there are other guidelines limiting me from pursuing both research approaches into my study. Time constraints are one of these major limitations. There is simply not enough time to truly understand and analyze the information gathered behind our research within the two-year time frame of our program. In addition are the length constraints. This paper is required to follow a certain length which does not allow for further quantitative research. That is why the guidelines for this qualitative research study are so specific and focused. Another limitation involves the ethical parameters for this qualitative study. Due to the limited time and length of the research paper, it is expected that the researchers only ask educators to be the interviewed
participants. Therefore, parents and students are not included, which limits the perspectives from all aspects of the educational system. Education does not only involve the classroom teachers and the knowledge or skills they teach, but also involves the students, how they learn, and how their parents’ view on education affects their learning.

The length and time constraints also limit the number of teachers able to participate. The MTRP guidelines expect the researcher to interview only a few teachers. As a result, researchers are expected to decide on which range of teachers’ perspectives will best benefit their study. In my case, I decided to choose two teachers of different grades to analyze how teachers of different grade levels approach the incorporation of visuals. As an alternative, I could have chosen teachers with distinct teaching styles but of the same grade level. This limitation makes it difficult for researchers to decide the best approach when selecting teachers.

In terms of methodological strengths, the qualitative study allows for more in depth research pertaining to the individuals involved. It is more “concerned with the beliefs, motivations and actions of people, organizations or institutions” (Lakshman et. al., 2000, p. 371), rather than rigorously collected data. Qualitative research places an emphasis on the experiences of the teachers which is significant to my research purpose. Another strength pertains to working solely with teachers during the interviewing process. Although the research may benefit of other perspectives from parents and students, involving these participants becomes too complex of a process. There are additional factors the researcher must take into consideration, such as finding an appropriate setting or time to conduct the interviews if parents or students are not available during school hours.

Furthermore, similarly to asking the teacher participants, a consent form is required of all participants to sign. For younger students, this process involves an additional step and requires
both the students and the students’ parents to sign consent forms, regardless if that parent is involved or not. The researcher needs to reconsider the types of questions they will ask the younger participants and how they will approach these interviews while remaining “sensitive to [the] needs of vulnerable populations” (Creswell, 2013, p. 64). As a result, the researcher must be mindful of other probable ethical issues arising simply by having parents and students involved in the interviewing process. Focusing on the experiences of only three teachers strengthens the research purpose and avoids the complexity of possibly unnecessary factors.

3.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, I described and explained my research methodology in this chapter. I began by comparing the two research approaches, deciding that qualitative research is more suitable for my study compared to quantitative because it emphasizes the teachers’ experiences rather than focusing on statistical data. I also discussed the primary instrument I will be using to collect data which is a semi-structured interview protocol. It is most appropriate to my research because semi-structured interviews are a flexible technique that works better with my small sample size. In terms of participants, they will be selected based on a set of criteria pertinent to my research questions and purpose. After examining a few of the sampling strategies, I decided to use a convenience sampling strategy as it allows me to acquire participants by relying on existing contacts.

I will also be following a series of interconnected steps to analyze the data, including organizing and reducing it into related themes through coding, then visually representing the data into charts or tables. I also address a number of ethical issues that may arise throughout my interview process, such as reminding participants of their right to withdraw and providing a positive environment for them. Finally, I discuss several methodological limitations and
strengths pertaining to my research, which include time and length constraints, to name a few. In the following chapter, I will report my research findings from the interviews I conduct, while comparing the results to past and current literature.
Chapter 4: Research Findings

4.0 Introduction to the Chapter

In this chapter, I will discuss and analyze my findings from the semi-structured interviews I conducted in relation to the focus of this paper, which explores how the implementation of visual resources can benefit both the teacher and students in a social studies and history classroom, while providing greater opportunity for diversity of students’ learning abilities as well as cultural diversity. Each of the participants involved in this study share their experience as educators addressing diversity and incorporating visuals within the social studies and History context. The emerging themes I uncovered from my findings and will discuss further are content sensitivity, pedagogical strategies, accessibility to resources, and the benefits of visual resources. These themes are then divided into sub-themes. For each of the following themes I will begin by describing it, then discuss the data I collected from my findings, and explain its significance in relation to the literature I presented in previous chapters. I will then summarize my findings and discuss how to proceed further.

4.1 Content Sensitivity

When considering visual resources, there are certain factors teachers must consider before implementing its use into the classroom. Both participants during the interviews spoke to the importance of being mindful of content sensitivity and what is appropriate to show and not show students; a concept with limited mention in my research of the literature. One interviewee, Navin, believes that one of the vital factors to consider is the age group and grade level of the students. He claims that in the context of social studies, specifically with History, the content “needs to be taught as building blocks, leading to much more complicated topics such as the
World Wars or the Holocaust.” As a result, teachers need to be mindful of the type of content they present to their students.

Charlie speaks about sensitivity in terms of the diversity of her students. Although she feels she is at a disadvantage when addressing cultural diversity in her school within a Catholic board, she does share an experience in which she had a student who “had seen a lot of violence” from his life back home in Angola. She further explains that there is a need for teachers to be sensitive about certain images and videos they bring into the classroom, especially when it may trigger some posttraumatic memories a student may have experienced. Charlie believes that “as a teacher you have to be aware of those kinds of things and make sure you’re sensitive to how you present a lot of the things you would talk about.” The same can be said with a student’s social class, gender and/or race along with their cultural background; all qualities and attributes acknowledged as significant to all students’ education in the Ontario Ministry of Education document (2009, p.4). For students struggling and having issues with identifying themselves, the content covered may be a sensitive topic for some students than it is for others.

Navin also shares his concern for content sensitivity in terms of a students’ diversity. He comments, “it’s really being understanding who your audience is and mak[ing] sure that what you introduce, you introduce to them the right way [by] having conversations before or setting boundaries, setting rules around it” such as what it appropriate behaviour when speaking about a certain topic. In addition, he feels that “a lot of history teachers don’t think about that and we teach certain things at the wrong time and we end up desensitizing kids to [it] when it should have real value.” He explains that what may be appropriate for one grade, age, or background, may not always be appropriate for another. Navin stresses the importance of “knowing your students” and taking into consideration the types of students any given educator is working with
prior to introducing a new topic in a lesson. Being mindful of content sensitivity eliminates the devaluing of historical significance and encourages a more safe and comfortable learning space for both students and teachers.

4.2 Pedagogical Strategies

Many factors play a role on each of the teachers’ decisions of when and how to incorporate visuals into a lesson or activity. Visual resources can include a wide range of mediums; such as paintings, photographs, maps, technology, and newspapers just to name a few (Clark, 2013; Felton & Allen, 1990), and therefore can be included in a variety of ways. As Charlie states, “there’s no concrete way” or strategy that can be applied in all circumstances. Simply, there is no correct or wrong way to use visual resources. Instead, as both interviewees had mentioned countless times, it all ‘depends’ on multiple factors in which I will explore in this section of the chapter.

4.2.1 Based on Student Ability, Learning and Interests

One of the major factors affecting the participants’ use of visual resources is based on their diverse students’ abilities, learning and interests. Charlie confirms that implementing the use of visual resources into her lesson planning greatly depends on her students. She states, “I don’t believe there is a specific point in a lesson where they should be used. It really depends on the students you have in front of you and knowing what really works for them.” Teachers need to be made aware of the kinds of students they are working with, then to plan their lessons accordingly. The same can be said when including visual resources into their lesson. Navin comments that “it really depends on the particular lesson that is being taught and the comprehension of the class. Sometimes I will use visuals to really bring home certain facts so students have a chance to connect with the material.” Students are then able to connect to these
visuals if it compliments their learning abilities and interests. Charlie says, “because students have such different learning abilities, using visuals and technology are important when planning a lesson.” When students are provided with multiple opportunities to learn through the various uses of visuals, Charlie claims that is when her students have shown the most success in demonstrating their ability to understand key concepts.

4.2.2 Purpose/Goal of Visual Resources

Another point to consider when implementing visual resources is the purpose or goal one is attempting to accomplish using any particular visual in a lesson. In different ways, both participants agree that their implementation of visuals must abide by the expectations of the Ontario Curriculum. Charlie feels that the curriculum expectations have not changed the way she teaches. She continues to follow the social studies and History curriculum each year, but changes her approach as to how she covers these expectations. To her, “keeping all students engaged… should be the key goal when creating the lesson.” Navin believes that everything that is taught should be primarily based on the curriculum as he refers to it often during the interview. He states, “there’s no point in using the visual if it doesn’t match with the curriculum…it’s a waste of time and its bad pedagogy, unless it’s supplementing a point you’re already making.” One of his strategies for implementing visuals is to begin by looking at the curriculum, deciding which outcomes he is trying to accomplish “and then everything is built around what am I trying to achieve.” Another strategy is “to find your visuals and resources first and then plan a lesson that way,” in which he feels have also made his lessons successful.

Not only is it important for visual resources to support the curriculum, but it must also support other elements necessary in a lesson. Navin is interested in how visuals such as “maps, timelines, images and videos… support the facts we are covering.” In addition, the value of the
visual plays a major role in whether it is implemented into a lesson or not. Navin explains, “I don’t like using visuals for the sake of using visuals, I like using them if they have a value.” If it can support the curriculum or the selected facts to be covered, then he encourages its use as much as possible. For him as an educator, visual tools and resources are an integral part of all his lessons because it is the key factor that gets his students motivated to learn.

However, Charlie claims that “one concern when implementing visual tools and resources in the classroom is that they can become a distraction from the goals or expectations in the lesson.” According to Charlie, the use of visuals has the potential to divert the focus of a lesson when it is not integrated correctly. She suggests that teachers monitor its use and see what is or is not working well for that group of students. She also suggests reinforcing the visuals with written work as a diagnostic of students’ understanding. Another solution to this concern, as had been previously mentioned by Navin, is to avoid misuse of this resource or tool by reevaluating its purpose in the lesson. If it holds no value to the lesson, or does not contribute to students’ understanding in any way, then perhaps the teacher should not include this resource in the future.

4.3 Accessibility to Resources

Both participants have also shown a major concern for accessibility to visual resources and the lack of it in schools. At the school Navin is currently working in, he finds that “most of the visual aids we have are outdated and hard to access.” In addition, the materials available at his school are mainly primary-based rather than being appropriate for middle-school students, leaving him to seek resources elsewhere such as nearby libraries. Fortunate for him however, “having taught high school history, I have a lot of my own resources I’m able to incorporate.” Since high schools operate differently than elementary or middle schools, such as having departments specified for each subject area, there are more easily accessible materials available
within the school. According to Navin, these specific departments in high schools also results in greater availability of newer visual resources. From his experience teaching in an elementary school, he feels that finding the right resources when they are not easily accessible takes up a lot more of his time outside of the classroom and may therefore discourages a teacher from trying to implement it into their lessons. Navin also finds it difficult “to find counter arguments or… resources that are reflecting a particular group of people… incident or… event because… it’s just not out there yet.”

Although Charlie agrees that visual resources are more easily accessible at her school, there continues to be the issue with costs of additional resources. Charlie says, “funds are very limited in schools and asking for undated resources can be a struggle.” However, one resource that is most commonly found in schools today is technology. Charlie’s school in particular has seen an increase in various technological devices such as the class set of iPads and mini laptops for students to use in the classroom. In terms of technology and visual resources, Navin states that “some of the new materials being produced is pretty accessible digitally [and] online.”

Despite this, technology is not necessarily easy for all students to access. As Clark (1999) states, “we need to remember, too, that we cannot assume that all students have equal access to computer technology outside the classroom” (p. 104). Due to these issues, some teachers return to the use of textbooks in their practice. Charlie explains that she likes “having textbooks because working in a school where internet and technology might not be available for all students, at least they have the textbook as a reference point.” Similarly, Navin believes “they still have a place in the classroom and provide a foundation to build from.” He uses textbooks to set a foundation for himself to later refer to whenever he feels he may be veering off in the wrong direction in terms of the content and curriculum he must cover. Navin explains that
recently published textbooks provide a good starting point to anchor one’s self and wander away from as they go through a lesson.

When it comes to the use of outdated social studies or history textbooks, some teachers are less inclined to continue using it. For instance, Charlie would rather not use outdated textbooks because she feels “students have shown a lack of interest in them.” Although this may often be the case, literature believes there continues to be value in its use. Clark (1999) explains that outdated textbooks “provide excellent opportunities for critical thinking,” especially when the content presented is controversial (p. 104). Navin agrees and feels that these outdated textbooks have the potential to show students “the voice of that time… to illustrate bias in history” and how it has changed today. Navin further explains, “even like language, right, words that were okay to use then and that are not okay to use now.” To Navin, they provide an opportunity to understand a different point of view from an older era, in which students can analyze and compare to other perspectives that were unfairly omitted in these texts, and to challenge these ways of thinking.

4.4 Benefits of Visual Resources

A common agreement shared among both participants is the numerous benefits of implementing visual resources and tools. Similarly, as suggested by literature (Ulbig, 2010; Felton & Allen, 1990; Rosier et. al., 2013), visuals provide multiple opportunities for a greater learning experience for all of those involved. This includes the students receiving the additional support and educators implementing its use in the classroom. In the following sub-headings, I will introduce and explain the benefits of visual resources as described by experienced teachers.
4.4.1 Benefits for Students

When both participants shared their experience learning social studies and History in elementary school, a visual element was present in each of their experiences. For Charlie, “in elementary…the only thing I remember the most is grade five. The teacher talked about dinosaurs… and then she showed us some photos… and it just became… so fascinating to me.” It was the one memory that stood out the most from Charlie’s elementary experience because, as she had mentioned, of that additional visual the teacher included within her lesson. She states, “when you see stuff as a kid it really has a big impact than just talking about it,” specially something concrete that allows students to look at, watch or experience the content they are learning about. Similarly, one of Navin’s most memorable moments in elementary included the presence of concrete material. Navin recounts his experience as a student by saying “I enjoyed hands on activities where I got to make historical tools and maps. One particular assignment that stands out is making a map on a tablet of stone.” He is even able to describe how they made it using corn starch for the stone and then painting on top to recreate the image of a map.

When Charlie gives her students the opportunity to work on the iPads at school, “they’re pulling out their own pictures, their own maps, their own information on the specific topic,” which then fosters student independence and responsibility. Specifically, for students struggling academically in school, visual resources provide an even greater benefit to them. Charlie states, “I found that even kids at a lower level… excelled” when there were visual resources available; “they weren’t necessarily just reading something and writing something down, they could even pull up videos and listen to them”) just as easily as the other students. Navin also witnessed students who are struggling in school benefit from the use of visuals in this way: “Some kids have a hard time with words and vocabulary… and sometimes the visuals make it easier to
express what they’re thinking.” Felton and Allen (1990) agree when they state, “poor readers are not quickly eliminated from the learning experience” (p. 84) with the availability of visuals. As Navin noted, these resources make it “easier for them to share their knowledge” and feel a sense of belonging. They are then given the chance to be heard and have a voice in the classroom, regardless of which academic difficulties they had faced before.

4.4.2 Benefits for Teachers

Similarly, teachers can benefit from the use of visual resources in their practice. Nowadays, Navin believes “students have become heavily visually dependent due to smartphones, tablets and computers. If you do not use visuals, you lose your students.” One major resource in which both participants enjoy implementing in their lessons is technology. Charlie states, “I focus a lot on… working with the iPads because… the kids respond to them well.” Her students enjoy having access to material on their own as well as being able to use technology in the classroom. From a teacher’s point of view, technology has made it easier to access a variety of resources. Specifically, both Charlie and Navin agree that it has made access to resources easier to find, especially visuals reflecting diversity. Navin believes it is important when students can connect or relate to the content they are learning about in some way, in order to keep students engaged. Correspondingly, in order to do so, Milo (2015) claims that students must be able to understand the diversity of people and places to be able to make critical decisions. Students must then be exposed to a variety of histories and cultures if teachers want them to properly understand the significance of these past events.

In addition, teachers can better differentiate material due to the visual resources available through technology. This is especially beneficial to Charlie who has had difficulty appealing to the diversity of student learning abilities in her class. She states, “the challenges of teaching in a
diverse classroom can be overwhelming. Creating lessons that keep the higher-level students interested and the lower level students able to understand has its challenges.” Not only are there students working at lower than expected grade levels, but she explains there are also those students which teachers do not always notice, that need to be more challenged and are working beyond their curriculum grade expectations. Charlie claims, “using a lot of differentiated tools helps. Video clips, iMovie on the iPad, passages from historic newspapers… can keep every student learning.”

Visuals resources also allows for teacher creativity in their practice. One of the benefits of teaching today, according to Navin, is how teachers “are no longer married to one resource or textbook.” Certainly, they are expected to continue following the curriculum, yet, how they choose to approach the curriculum is entirely up to them. This is most beneficial when addressing diversity in a social studies or History context. Navin states, “we live in a very interesting time now where we can access so many different resources or visuals to show more points of view [and] honour more diversity” something that was not possible quite years ago. He goes on to explain that depending on the visual, they can use it to highlight a point, stimulate conversation, and encourage critical thinking. To Navin, the variety of visual tools used to differentiate instruction based on students’ abilities and interests are endless in any given lesson, therefore, it is vital to find visuals that benefit the students and their learning in one way or another. For instance, teachers can differentiate by bringing in the students’ favourite genre in literature into a social studies or History lesson. As well, perhaps teachers can simply include videos or class trips of famous cartoon characters that relate to significant points in history similarly as Charlie had done with her students by telling the story of the infamous bear in which they named the cartoon “Winnie the Pooh” after. Thus, teachers can now indulge in the variety
visual resources available and create a unit or lesson that appeals to the diversity of student needs and interests.

4.5 Conclusion

Through my analysis of the collected data during the interviews, four key themes emerged. As discussed above, my research findings revealed that there are several factors teachers must take into consideration when implementing visual resources into a social studies and/or history classroom while addressing diversity. These factors include the sensitivity of the content teachers are presenting to students, the pedagogical strategies they choose to adopt, the accessibility of resources to teachers and students both in and outside of school, and finally how these visual tools can benefit learning as well as address diversity. Moving forward, I am interested in learning more about the relationship between diversity, visuals and the inquiry process which has not yet been considered simultaneously in my research. Both research and practice have proven the benefits of implementing visual resources and tools into the social studies and History classrooms, as it addresses student diversity in both culture and learning ability. In the next chapter I will explore the implications from this study as well as suggest a few recommendations and areas for further research.
Chapter 5: Implications

5.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I explore the various implications of my research. I begin with a summary of my findings, and then explore the implications of these findings as it applies to my development as a researcher and practitioner of education, and how it applies to the greater educational community. Following the implications, I suggest a few recommendations for teachers, administrators, and educators. Next, I identify areas for further research that have been raised as a result of the study findings and which future educational research scholars can explore. And finally, I conclude by commenting on the significance of this research study to me and to the rest of the education community.

5.1 Summary of Findings

In the previous chapter, I discussed and analysed the data I collected from my interviews involving two participants. From my research findings, four major themes emerged which include content sensitivity, pedagogical strategies, accessibility to resources and the benefits of these visual resources within the social studies and/or history classroom. These findings revealed that there are a variety of factors teachers must take into account prior to implementing visual tools and resources into their classrooms. One factor is that teachers must be mindful of the content they expose to their students, to be aware of what is appropriate, especially in terms of respecting the diversity of their students. Both participants found that the success of their incorporation of visual tools into lessons or units depended on a number of circumstances. One major concern was the accessibility of these resources to both students and teachers. Another common factor was considering students’ learning abilities and interests. In the end, participants found the Ontario curriculum to be flexible enough to take these factors into consideration.
5.2 Implications

My research findings revealed that there are several factors teachers must take into consideration when implementing visual resources into a social studies and/or history classroom while addressing diversity. In this section, I explore the implications within this study by discussing their relevance to me and my development as a teacher and researcher and how they apply to the educational community.

5.2.1 Narrow Implications

Initially my expectation for this study was to explore the ways in which visuals can make learning history a more enriching experience for students. However, my findings revealed that the benefits of implementing visual resources are far greater than I had originally expected. Visuals provide the opportunity to create culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom by bringing in alternate perspectives of different groups of people and allowing insight into another lens to discuss various topics. Therefore, there needs to be a change in what is considered significant within the History curriculum and the timeline of historical events. History often reinforces the patriarchal views of the past and has been created to fit a standard identity which only a few can relate to. Other identities are then only included wherever they can complement this standard otherwise they are excluded as relevant content. It is not enough to simply include different viewpoints that ‘fit’ patriarchal views, but to equally address them as part of our overall human history. The implementation of visual resources becomes that avenue towards a more culturally diverse history-learning experience for all students.

In terms of teacher pedagogy, visuals make teaching history a more positive experience. It provides teachers with a tool to open broader discussions and to create engaging content about the past. Visuals is a pedagogical tool that can be incorporated into any given lesson. As the
results of my study have indicated, there is no single strategy that will always be successful when implementing it in the classroom. Although circumstances may dictate when and how visual resources can be successfully incorporated, the possibilities are truly endless. Teachers can explore any topic in a variety of ways that best suits their teaching style as well as the objectives of their lesson. Visual resources that appeal to students make the content they are learning that much more interesting. This study demonstrated that information is better remembered when a visual element is associated with it, especially for the visual and kinesthetic learners, though it benefits all types of learners. Using visual resources is certainly a step closer to engaging students in a lesson and remains a vital pedagogical source in the classroom.

My final narrow implication applies to me and my development as a practitioner of education. As I had previously mentioned, throughout this study my understanding of implementing visual resources has changed tremendously. I am no longer interested in using visuals solely as an ‘add-on’ in a lesson or for its aesthetic value because the benefits of visuals are much greater. To me visuals need to stimulate students’ minds and keep them interested at the topic at hand. I plan on incorporating it in a more central way as the focus of lessons, for students to also understand its relevance and impact on their learning. I understand that no single teacher teaches the same way, similarly as no single student or class learns the same way in any subject area. For the use of visuals to be effective in one’s teaching practice, the teacher needs to truly know their students, not only their interests but also their learning preferences and habits to help them achieve success.

5.2.2 Broad Implications

In regards to the educational community, a few broader implications emerged from my findings. One of these include how visuals allow students to develop additional skills, which is a
significant part of the social studies and history curriculum. The implementation of visual resources and tools into daily lessons provides another avenue for students to acquire a range of skills necessary in the future. Specifically within the social studies and history curriculum, visuals can address the expectations required from the disciplinary thinking concepts. For instance, within ‘continuity and change’ students can compare the images or photographs of different time periods and discuss the meanings behind these changes or continuities. One image alone can provide an enormous amount of information about a particular time period and the people living in it, such as their social values, their environment or their political policies. Allowing students the freedom to research their own material and find creative ways to present or share it with the rest of class gives them the confidence they need to succeed. In addition, it provides them with the knowledge they need to become active and responsible citizens for the future.

Another factor my research findings drew attention to is the accessibility of these visual resources. Provided that there is connection to the internet on a device, accessing resources should not be as difficult as it was in the past. One of the benefits of twenty-first century learning is having the easy access to resources in which technology offers, from both in and outside of school. Despite this, visuals in terms of technology are not incorporated enough into students’ education. A part of this issue is that educators do not prioritize and value visuals the same way as the media. They understand how visuals have such a great impact on viewers, especially children who are easily influenced by what they see and hear. If schools were to incorporate it more often and appropriately, students of all ages would be able to think more critically about the images and videos they are exposed to everyday, rather than simply accepting it as facts.
However, another issue may be the limited accessibility to visual resources in schools. Many schools lack the resources and technology necessary to enhance students’ learning. As a result, it may be up to the teachers to take responsibility and to invest in these tools for their own classrooms. Not only will these resources benefit the students, but it will also benefit them and their teaching practice since they will already have access to a variety of resources they can easily refer to for the rest of their career. Yet some teachers may continue to choose a tool that is already planned-out and easier to find, such as a textbook, which may not be entirely accurate with the content it presents. While others are not entirely sure where to begin due to the vast amount of content available. Teachers may be conflicted with the kinds of perspectives they should include and which of those they should omit, or if they should omit any. As they become aware of the diversity of their students, teachers must then be mindful of the content so that it is appropriate for all students, considering factors such as their age, grade, cultural and academic backgrounds. Nevertheless, with the use of visual resources it is possible to incorporate most if not all these points of view while being mindful of students’ learning abilities. Implementing visual resources is a guaranteed way to address the diversity of these viewpoints and to pinpoint multiple cultural perspectives.

5.3 Recommendations

As a result of my research findings and implications I encourage teachers to implement the use of visual resources and tools into their daily lessons. Both the literature and best practices of teachers revealed numerous benefits to its use. For students, visuals provide different avenues to express their thoughts and opinions, rather than simply writing it down using a pen and paper. It also improves their memory and makes the content they are learning more meaningful. Teachers can use visuals to differentiate instruction and provide multiple point of views in any given topic.
As well, it allows teachers to become more creative with their teaching practice. For all these reasons, I strongly support teachers to implement its use whenever possible.

This research paper has demonstrated how important it is for teachers to incorporate resources that appeal to the diversity of their students. Teachers need to make sure the visual resources they choose to implement are culturally relevant and appropriate to their students. In accordance with this, I recommend that teachers use a diagnostic assessment, also known as assessment for learning, prior to introducing a new topic. It can help “determine students’ readiness to learn new knowledge and skills, as well as obtain information about their interests and learning preferences” (Ontario, 2010, p. 31). Assessment for learning allows teachers to measure the diversity of their students, both academically and culturally. Teachers can later use the information they gather from this assessment to guide their approach to teaching that specific topic or unit.

I would also recommend that administrators organize workshops for teachers and other staff members to expose them to a variety of approaches that implement visual resources. These workshops can be conducted by teachers within the school or neighbouring schools, where they provide real-life examples of visual resources they had used with their students, while clarifying what the incorporation of visual resources can look like in a classroom setting. It can also offer suggestions of effective strategies that teachers can have available in their practice at any time. When strategies and ideas are shared among staff members, it helps build a better sense of community. This then helps teachers feel comfortable enough to experiment with these resources within their own classrooms.

However, it is important to remember that what works for some teachers, may not essentially work for others, therefore, it may take a bit more effort for some teachers to find visual resources
that work best for them and their circumstances. Teachers should take this as an opportunity to explore new pedagogical strategies within their practice. In addition, having the principal and administrative team organize workshops that support the initiative to bring more visual resources into the classroom, places more significance on its use as a valuable resource. Teachers become more aware of how important it is and learn how particularly easy it can be to implement into any lesson.

5.4 Areas for Further Research

Moving forward, I am interested in learning more about the relationship between diversity, the use of visuals, and the inquiry process, which has not yet been considered simultaneously in my research. I feel that inquiry-based learning has grown tremendously in importance and has received more attention as a teaching approach in schools. As more and more teachers move away from the traditional way of teaching, they begin adopting this model. Within the context of this research paper, inquiry-based learning provides a potential avenue for the use of visual resources that address student diversity. I am interested to learn more about how exactly this fairly new approach can succeed in accordance to my research topic. In addition, due to the limitation of this study involving interviews with only teachers, I was not able to gain insight from a student’s perspective about the issues raised in this study concerning visuals and history education. I am interested in discovering which age group of students would have the greatest impact from learning with visuals and the implications this may have for my research. I suggest this be further explored in studies to come.

5.5 Conclusion

I began this study with the purpose of determining effective approaches and tools teachers can use to teach such a tedious subject as social studies and history. Upon reflection, I soon
realized how effective visual resources were during my own education. I also understand how fundamental it is for teachers to create more inclusive environments for all students and that visual resources may help in supporting inclusive goals. In conclusion, this study has initiated a conversation about the use of visuals in the classrooms. Its benefits are obvious and have been mentioned throughout this study; all that is left to think about is how can they be effectively implemented in a way that appeals to students of this generation. It is not enough to state that more visual resources are needed but to consider which kinds would be most beneficial. The standards of what engages students have changed. As a result, this study suggests we think about what these new standards are and what would appeal to students today.
References


Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
OISE | ONTARIO INSTITUTE
FOR STUDIES IN EDUCATION

Date: April 4, 2016

Dear ______________________________,

My Name is Melissa De Caires and I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on how teachers incorporate visual tools and resources into the Social Studies and/or History classrooms, while addressing student diversity and multiple perspectives to motivate and promote eager learners for the future. I am interested in interviewing teachers who have past experience teaching Social Studies and/or History at the elementary school level. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one 45-60 minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you, outside of school time. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates. I may also present my research findings via conference presentations and/or through publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. Any information that identifies your school or students will also be excluded. The interview data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only person who will have access to the research data will be my course instructor. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question during the interview. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks to participation, and I will share a copy of the transcript with you shortly after the interview to ensure accuracy.

Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,

Name: Melissa De Caires
Phone Number: [Phone Number]
Email: melissa.decaires@mail.utoronto.ca

Course Instructor’s Name: Dr. Rose Fine-Meyer
Contact Info: rose.fine.meyer@utoronto.ca
Consent Form
I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty.
I have read the letter provided to me by Melissa De Caires and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: _______________________________________
Name: (printed) _______________________________________________
Date: ______________________________________
Appendix B: Interview Questions

Introductory Script: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study, and for making time to be interviewed today. This research study aims to learn how teachers incorporate visual tools and resources into the Social Studies and/or History classrooms while addressing student diversity for the purpose of motivating and promoting eager learners in students. This interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes, and I will ask you a series of questions focused on your use of visuals in Social Studies and/or History classrooms and ways in which diversity has been addressed. I want to remind you that you may refrain from answering any question, and you have the right to withdraw your participation from the study at any time. As I explained in the consent letter, this interview will be audio-recorded. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Background Information

- How long have you taught Social Studies and/or History at the elementary school level and for which grades?
- In a typical Social Studies or History lesson, how often do you find yourself implementing the use of visual tools or resources?
- What were some of your experiences as a student learning Social Studies or History in elementary school? Did you enjoy learning it then? Were these experiences positive or negative?
- Have your past experiences as a student impacted your career choice in any way?
- What are some of your experiences as a student or as a teacher with diversity in the classroom?

Teacher Perspectives/Beliefs
• Do you use visuals to supplement your Social Studies and/or History lessons or as a learning tool on its own? Why?
• Do you think using visuals as a teaching tool is important enough to consider when planning out your daily or weekly lessons? Why or why not?
• Do you feel it is important to include student diversity into Social Studies and/or History lessons?
• What are some ways in which you had or wish you had incorporated diversity?
• What are some ways visual tools and resources can benefit the implementation of diversity?
• Do you think there is a link between diversity and the use of visuals? How do they complement or contradict one another?
• Can both be incorporated simultaneously in a Social Studies and/or History lesson? How?

Teacher Practices

• Do you believe visuals should be used for special distinctions or particular points in a lesson, if at all? Why or why not?
• What may be some of your concerns when implementing visual tools and resources into your lessons?
• Are visual tools or resources easily accessible for you to find in your school?
• What are some of the problems you as a teacher may face when looking for visual tools to access in the classroom?
• Would you as a teacher still benefit from the use of Social Studies or History textbooks?
• How about the use of older Social Studies or History textbooks?
• How would you assess or evaluate the students when a visual component is the main focus of the lesson? Would your assessment or evaluation involve visuals as well?

**Supports and Challenges**

• What are some of the factors you as a teacher would need to consider before implementing the use of visuals into your classroom?

• Is the age group or grade level of the students you teach an important factor to consider?

• Does abiding to the Ontario Curriculum’s expectations affect your implementation of visuals resources?

**Next Steps**

• Has this interview affected your perspective on diversity and the use of visuals in any way?

• Do you think you are more likely to implement it now into your classroom? Why or why not?

Thank you for your participation in this research study.