

# A Constructivist Approach to Analyzing Historical Documents and Materials

Jill M. Black, PhD, CHES, FAAHE, Cleveland State University & Valerie A. Ubbes, PhD, CHES, Miami University



## Introduction

Identification, selection and preservation of documents and materials that are part of the history of the health education profession are lacking in the professional literature. If these materials exist, they often are difficult to locate and obtain. The history of the health education profession is an important but frequently overlooked aspect of professional preparation. Legitimate research approaches must be established to encourage scholars to begin to address these areas of study. Constructivist approaches focus on building new knowledge based upon the foundation of previous learning. Within this construct, learning is a search for meaning. Meaning requires understanding. Perspective and context are emphasized.

Historical research gives perspective. It is a process of critical inquiry into past events to produce an accurate description and interpretation of those events. Historical research uses no single research method because of its complexity and all-encompassing nature. Barzun and Graff (1992) suggested that history is not a subject unto itself but rather a mode of thinking that incorporates reflection upon the past. Since qualitative inquiry offers the opportunity for in-depth examination of information. It allows the researcher to focus more on data generation and less on the procedures for analyzing the data.

## Purpose

The purpose of this project was to explore the applicability of thematic textual analysis as a process for analysis and comparison of diverse health education materials. This project focused on the construction and comparison of themes found within the Children's Picture Book Database at Miami University (CPBD) and four of the six books from the McGuffey Readers Series. Figure 4 shows an overview of our original research. As an example of practical historical research, our work demonstrates how data were collected, what process was applied to the thematic textual analysis, what limitations we faced as we completed this project for health education, and how the construction of this information can contribute to the professional literature.

## Children's Picture Book Database @ Miami University

The Children's Picture Book Database at Miami University (CPBD) is a searchable database of developmentally appropriate literature for use with young children, preschool to grade 3. This multidisciplinary online resource allows for searches of keywords, topics, concepts, and skills to locate books with storylines adaptable to curricular needs.

## McGuffey Readers

The McGuffey Readers are a series of books prepared by William H. McGuffey to teach reading to schoolchildren. The series began to appear in the mid-to-late 1830s. The Readers were widely used in the nineteenth century and are still currently in use. The 1879 edition purportedly taught morality and good character to the emerging middle class and provided children with a common knowledge and worldview. These Readers have had a profound influence on public education in the U.S.

## Data Collection

Data for this study were gathered from interviews with the Project Director of the CPBD, a thorough review of the professional literature, and other available research sources. The selected McGuffey Readers (1879) included in this study were the Primer and Readers 1-3. Data were organized and presented in Figures 1-3.

Figure 2. Children's Picture Book Database (CPBD) Data

<http://www.lib.muohio.edu/pictbks/>

## Data Analysis

Figure 3 identifies the skills and concepts found in the McGuffey Readers that also are in the CPBD. This information allows for comparison of two very different data sets and indicates how data were organized and grouped for this analysis. Themes were carefully studied and placed into groupings, then categories. Categories were identified as topics, concepts and skills. We acknowledge that the categories developed did not derive only from the data (but were influenced by the professional literature and the researchers' professional experience and values). While these factors contributed to the conceptualization process, care was taken to ensure that the categories reflected the data and were not manipulated to force the data to fit within the categories.

## Thematic Analysis

This thematic analysis was conducted based on a six-step method described by Braun and Clarke (2006).

- Step 1 Become familiar with the data.
- Step 2 Generate initial codes.
- Step 3 Transform codes into grouped data and organize into categories.
- Step 4 Review themes determine representativeness.
- Step 5 Define and label categories.
- Step 6 Link themes to existing literature.

## Original Project

In the original project, we constructed a contextual and thematic method of analysis to aid in the documentation and interpretation of health education conference themes over the past 35 years across four professional organizations (AAHE, SOPHE, ASHA, and APHA).

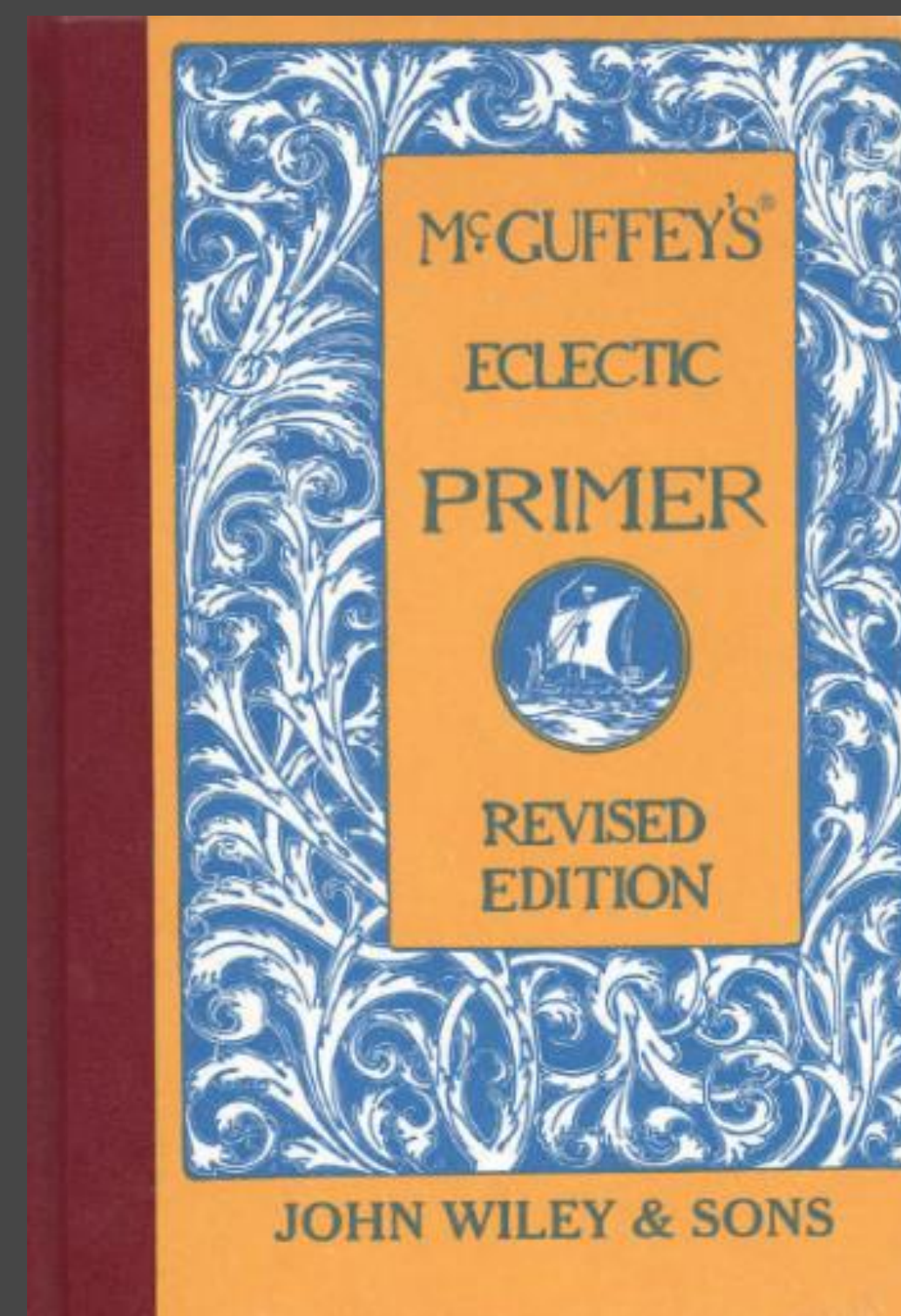


Figure 3. Skills and Concepts in the McGuffey Readers that also are in the Children's Picture Book Database

Skills	1 <sup>st</sup> Reader	2 <sup>nd</sup> Reader	3 <sup>rd</sup> Reader
Hear = 2	Jump = 3	Danced	Dances
Play = 3	Play = 5	Hear	Dancing = 2
Run = 3	Play = 5	Help	Hear = 2
Sing = 2	Reading	Helping	Hurt = 2
Status = 2	Run = 6	Hurt	Help = 3
Walk = 2	Singing	Jump	Play = 5
Walks	Tease	Jumped	Run
		Learned	Running
		Play = 5	Sing
		Playing = 2	Singing = 3
		Read = 2	Walking = 3
		Reading = 2	Write = 2

Concepts	1 <sup>st</sup> Reader	2 <sup>nd</sup> Reader	3 <sup>rd</sup> Reader
Bird	Books	Healthy	Anger
Fish	Home	Life	Brave
		Sport	Education
		Toys=2	Humor
			Love
			Neighbors
			Time

## Method

Thematic textual analysis (TTA) examines words and phrases that are used in a message. The focus of this analysis was to identify themes in both data sets and to be able to compare two diverse types of curricular materials. As a searchable database, the CPBD is organized by topics, concepts and skills. The McGuffey Readers were examined for occurrence of selected terms that included topics, concepts and skills that were both implicit and explicit. While explicit terms obviously are easy to identify, coding for implicit terms was based on a somewhat subjective system. The words and phrases selected needed to represent some patterned meaning or grouping within the data set. To clarify our methodology, we chose the label *textual* or *thematic content analysis* as a basis for data analysis. Linking *content* with *thematic* also served to distinguish this method from other types of content analysis that typically focus on counting the frequencies of words. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. At a basic level, it allows for organization and description of data. Thematic analysis is widely used but there is limited agreement about the steps and procedures researchers should follow.

Figure 1. McGuffey Readers Data

Figure 4. Thematic Analysis of Conference Themes

## Conclusions

This project utilized a qualitative, historical research approach that described a set of procedures for analyzing thematic content. This approach allowed for the comparison of different types of curricular materials. Historical research provides an analytical framework or approach that ought to be present in any analysis of popular culture. Our textual or thematic content analysis focused on identifiable themes and patterns. Themes that emerged from the data were organized to form a comprehensive collection. Thematic textual analysis demonstrated the following advantages over conventional content analysis: (1) TTA provided a convenient and reasonable means of finding meaningful themes within different texts; (2) the themes emerged from the data rather than be imposed by the researchers; (3) the investigative techniques revealed the relative importance and interrelationships among the themes; and (4) TTA allowed for comparison of diverse types of materials.