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Observing history teaching

Historical thinking and reasoning in the upper secondary classroom

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1 Introduction

1. Aim and scope

Worries about covering the syllabus seem to be a common concern of history teachers in many countries, at least at secondary school level. Many become rather discouraged after making futile attempts to do so, but even more disheartening is the negative image of history teaching many former students hold as a consequence of these very efforts. Although there are obviously many ways to teach history, the traditional approach seems to place an overwhelming emphasis on factual knowledge where each lesson has a Sisyphean aspect about it and lecturing reigns supreme (Bouhon, 2009; Grant, 2018; Reisman & Enumah, 2020; Sigurgeirsson et al., 2018; Wansink et al., 2016; Wiggins, 2015). Nevertheless, many history teachers and scholars maintain a different view where historical skills are to the fore. Historical knowledge and historical skills are certainly not mutually exclusive (see Counsell, 2000), since the skills gain their value by being put to use on historical content, thereby increasing the possibility of a deeper understanding of historical knowledge. It can be quite a challenge for teachers to pay conscious attention to these elements, in addition to everything else requiring their consideration within the classroom. The fact of the matter is that many questions concerning the approaches to history teaching still remain unanswered.

In this dissertation, the focus is on what teachers in upper secondary schools do when teaching historical thinking and reasoning (HTR), i.e. what kind of teacher behaviour enhances student skills of HTR. This may range from asking historical questions and problematizing to giving explicit instructions on HTR strategies. Since the main elements of HTR have already received considerable attention from the perspective of domain specific educational theories, we wanted to bring those theories into the classroom to find out if it is possible to establish *whether* the teaching of historical thinking and reasoning occurs in a lesson. Another point of interest is to know how teachers can develop their own ability to teach HTR. This leads directly to considering *to what extent* HTR is taught. It is influenced by several factors, among them the official curriculum teachers are expected to follow. There are also indications that teacher beliefs, i.e. teachers' (tacit) inferences about teaching and learning, students and subject matter (Kagan, 1992), play an important role when it comes to teacher behaviour. One of the questions concerning the teaching of HTR is if it is related to specific teacher beliefs that promote it.

The difficulties of translating theory into practice are well known and there are indications that even teachers who are interested in teaching HTR and fairly convinced of its value find it hard to implement (c.f. Barton & Levstik, 2003; Reisman, 2012). Teachers may be familiar with the basic concepts of HTR, such as its approach towards historical knowledge as a construct that is influenced by time, place and people. This has been covered quite extensively by the literature of the last three decades and increasingly so in the past few years. Nevertheless, how to operationalize these basic concepts is challenging for many and some teachers are even not fully aware of what takes place in their own teaching (Voet & De Wever, 2016; Wansink et al., 2016; Wilson, 2001). We wondered how teachers could be supported when they wanted to teach historical thinking and reasoning and needed assistance to overcome these challenges. We concluded that it was necessary to map out how HTR manifests itself in the actual classroom behaviour of teachers. Moreover, teachers needed support when analyzing their own practices from this point of view. Consequently, we acknowledged the need for a domain-specific observation instrument that would suit both purposes.

The overall aim of this dissertation is to operationalize the teaching of historical thinking and reasoning into observable behaviour to see if and to what extent it takes place in the classroom. Moreover, it aims to enable teachers to enhance their teaching of HTR, either during their initial training or as a part of their professional development. The dissertation intends to make a substantial contribution to the international research community in the field of history teaching as it constructs and validates an observation instrument for teaching HTR. This might enable a description of how and to what extent HTR is taught and can be used in either teacher training or professional development. A unique aspect of the dissertation is an investigation of the teaching of historical thinking and reasoning at upper secondary level in Iceland. Very little empirical research on history teaching in Iceland has taken place so far (Gestsdóttir, 2013), so the research should offer an unprecedented insight into the field. This is of particular value to teacher educators and history educators in the country, who up until now have not had any concrete information regarding history teaching in the classroom to build on.

The research questions were as follows:

1. How can the teaching of historical thinking and reasoning be operationalized and observed in upper secondary education?

2. To what extent do Icelandic history teachers teach historical thinking and reasoning at the upper secondary level?
3. Which beliefs about goals and strategies of teaching history play a role in teachers' inclinations towards teaching historical thinking and reasoning?
4. How can the use of an observation instrument enhance the professional growth of history student teachers and history teachers in the teaching of historical thinking and reasoning?

2. Theoretical framework

In this theoretical framework, four aspects of the research will be elaborated upon. Firstly, we will examine the construct historical thinking and reasoning, which is the foundation of the whole research. Secondly, domain-specific observation instruments and their use in initial teacher training and professional development will be discussed. Thirdly, we examine teacher beliefs and the part they play in the choices teachers make about their teaching and, finally, the Icelandic context of the research is explained.

2.1 Historical thinking and reasoning

Historical thinking and reasoning (HTR) belongs under the umbrella of higher order thinking skills and deeper learning, recently often referred to as 21st century skills (e.g. Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012). These skills are supposed to push students further intellectually, beyond the consumption and regurgitation of facts, often associated with 'traditional' history teaching (Bouhon, 2009; Grant, 2018; Huijgen et al., 2017; VanSledright, 2002). According to the advocates of HTR, it is essential to understand that historical knowledge is a construct dependent on evidence-based interpretation (Chapman, 2011; Maggioni et al., 2006). The main strategic skills required of students of HTR are usually considered to be being capable of (a) establishing historical significance, (b) undertaking the critical use of historical sources, (c) taking historical perspectives, (d) recognizing continuity and change, (e) considering cause and consequence and (f) understanding the ethical dimension of historical interpretations (Chapman, 2011; Levstik, 2008; Lévesque, 2008; Monte-Sano, 2011a; Reisman 2012; Seixas & Morton, 2013; Stoel et al., 2017; Stradling, 2003; Van Boxtel and Van Drie, 2013). In the words of Peter Seixas: "History takes shape from efforts to work with these problems.

Students' abilities to think historically can be defined in terms of their competence in negotiating productive solutions to them." (Seixas, 2017b, p. 597). An emphasis is put on using second order concepts, contextualization and asking historical questions (Chapman, 2011; Huijgen et al., 2019; Lee & Shemilt, 2004; Logtenberg et al., 2011; Seixas & Morton, 2013; Van Boxtel & Van Drie, 2018; Van Drie & Van Boxtel, 2008). These HTR skills have gained importance in the discourse on history education, as the number of researchers who have written about it shows. In some Western countries, models or frameworks have been developed to facilitate the teaching of history in line with these skills, e.g. in Canada (Seixas & Morton, 2013; Seixas, 2008), in Britain (Dawson, 1989; Lee & Ashby, 2000), in Germany (Körber, 2015) and in the Netherlands (Van Boxtel & Van Drie, 2018; Van Drie & Van Boxtel, 2008). Here, these models will be built upon to identify aspects of teaching behaviour that incorporate the teaching of HTR.

It is accepted that various teaching approaches come into play: it can either be demonstrated by the teacher herself or included in assignments, since engaging students actively in tasks and discussions that require historical thinking and reasoning is important for promoting HTR in the classroom (Barton & Levstik, 2003; Havekes et al., 2010; Van Drie & Van Boxtel, 2011). There is certainly considerable knowledge of historical thinking and effective pedagogy for teaching particular aspects of HTR. However, this knowledge is fragmented, it is neither brought together nor defined in terms of teacher behaviour. It is important to operationalize the teaching of historical thinking and reasoning in terms of teacher behaviour as it can help teachers at various stages in their professional life to connect their classroom strategies to theory. In this dissertation we aim to provide evidence-based information of what teachers actually do in history lessons when teaching the skills that are mapped out above. For that purpose, an observation instrument was developed.

2.2 Observation and its use in initial teacher training and professional development

Traditionally, observation of teaching has been used to evaluate student teachers and serve administrative purposes by grading their classroom performance (Kohut et al., 2007; O'Leary, 2012). Most observation instruments are designed for classroom practices in general, such as classroom management, clear instructions and other elements of well-organized teaching. Many of them are directed at student teachers or newly qualified teachers. Nevertheless, they

can be powerful tools that allow teachers to take a closer look at their own teaching throughout their professional life. In that way, the agency is the teacher's own and the observation is an element of professional development (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). Many studies indicate the positive effects of observation on professional development during teacher training and throughout a teacher's professional life, as the literature review of Gaudin and Chaliès (2015) bears out. Three models of peer observation have been described: an evaluation model, a development model and a peer review model where colleagues reflect together on their teaching (Gosling, 2002). All these may help enhance a teacher's professional growth. Professional growth is marked by changes in e.g. teacher knowledge and beliefs, as well as professional experimentation (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Korthagen, 2017). Teachers are learners who change gradually through their professional activity and whose learning and consequent teaching behaviour is likely to be affected by conscious reflection. Observations of one's own teaching or the teaching of a peer can be an important foundation for such reflection.

Few observation instruments are domain specific and suited to the upper secondary level and fewer still focus on higher order thinking skills (c.f. Ofsted, 2018). One instrument belonging to history teaching is FAT-HC (Framework for Analyzing the Teaching of Historical Contextualization), which focuses on historical contextualization (Huijgen et al., 2017). Observations, and video viewing in particular, have been used without specific instruments, e.g. to assess a student teacher's pedagogical content knowledge (Waldis et al., 2019), to enhance a teacher's understanding and facilitation of historical discussions (Reisman & Enumah, 2020) and to describe quality history teaching (Gautchi, 2015). Observations can result in concrete examples of effective teaching strategies, which contribute to teachers' pedagogical content knowledge and challenge teachers to develop their own teaching. Post-observation dialogues can be a dynamic occasion to identify strengths, opportunities for action and targets for development (Hennissen et al., 2008). A domain-specific observation instrument might provide a constructive framework for such a dialogue, concerning the teaching of HTR.

Next to the potential such an instrument has for professionalization, it might serve researchers who are interested in how teachers teach HTR and to what extent. Questions connected to these factors and their relations to student outcomes have mainly been addressed in case studies or small-scale studies, using different theoretical models. An instrument focusing on

HTR might also allow for large-scale research in which the teaching of HTR can be related to other variables, such as learning outcomes, characteristics of the curriculum, teacher education etc.

2.3 Teacher beliefs

Teacher beliefs – i.e. teachers' (tacit) inferences about teaching and learning, students and subject matter (Kagan, 1992) – are an important agent in shaping what takes place in the classroom. Using the TALIS Database of OECD, researchers discerned a direct link between teacher beliefs about the nature of teaching and learning through classroom practices, and classroom level environment and student learning and student outcomes (OECD, 2009). Some even prioritize the importance of teacher beliefs more than other factors in educational research (Pajares, 1992). Similar to teacher beliefs in general, the beliefs of history teachers tend to split into two different directions, one adhering to the direct inference of facts from sources and the other subscribing to the impossibility of reproducing the past with historical accounts (McCrum, 2013). In constructivist and socio-constructivist theory, the socially constructed nature of knowledge is emphasized. Learning is described in terms of knowledge construction as an active and even individual process, as opposed to acquiring fixed knowledge. These ideas have very much in common with the notion of history as a process of interpretation in which historical narratives can be constructed in different ways and change over time. In general, more research has been directed towards the beliefs of student or novice history teachers (c.f. Aypay, 2011; Chan & Elliott, 2002; McCrum, 2013; VanSledright & Reddy, 2014; Virta, 2002). Experienced history teachers have gained less attention (Tuithof, 2017; Voet & De Wever, 2016; Yilmaz, 2008a), which is why we wanted to focus particularly on that group. An important question is if certain teacher beliefs can be linked to the teaching of HTR. At any rate, it must be taken into account that the connection between beliefs and practices is complex and teacher beliefs are not necessarily reflected in actual teacher behaviour. This has been made evident e.g. in research on the teaching of interpretational history (Wansink et al., 2016), historical contextualization (Huijgen et al., 2019) and inquiry-based learning (Voet & De Wever, 2016).

2.4 The context of the study: History teaching in Iceland

Parts of the studies described in this paper were conducted in the context of history teaching in Iceland. As the first major study of history teaching in the country it will give valuable information on how history is taught in a school environment where teachers enjoy considerable freedom of choice. The upper secondary school in Iceland is highly decentralized. History teachers are relatively free when it comes to teaching approaches, how much time they devote to particular issues and even the content of their lessons. The national curriculum guide, the document that obviously has considerable impact on teaching, does not make any specific demands concerning any of these. All teaching at every school level is to be based on six fundamental pillars of education: literacy, sustainability, democracy and human rights, equality, health and welfare and creativity (*The Icelandic national curriculum guide for upper secondary schools*, 2012). Beyond that, individual schools and teachers at the upper secondary level almost have a *carte blanche*. Since historical thinking and reasoning is nowhere mentioned in the national curriculum guide, it should prove interesting to investigate if Icelandic history teachers nevertheless give it consideration in their teaching. Furthermore, it should be noteworthy to see how Icelandic teachers might develop their competencies of teaching HTR if they so wish.

In this context, it is necessary to briefly explain the Icelandic school system. The first ten years, for pupils aged 6 – 16, are compulsory. No formal distinction is made between primary education and lower secondary. At the upper secondary level, pupils can choose to enrol in a grammar school, a comprehensive school or a vocational school. During the course of this research, the duration of the upper secondary school was shortened from four years to three years (the average age of students being 16-19). After matriculation, students can apply for university courses. All the teachers participating in this study work in either grammar or comprehensive schools, the former being a more traditional institution where students follow the set schedule of their year, while the latter offers a more flexible form of schooling where students of various ages and abilities can influence the composition of their schedule from one semester to another. Teachers at upper secondary level already have a degree in their subject before they complete a one or two year course in pedagogy, depending on whether they hold a bachelor or a master's degree. The pedagogy course is very generic, as student history teachers belong to a larger group of teachers in various social studies subjects.

3. Overview of the dissertation

Four studies were conducted, each addressing one of the research questions. In chapter 2 we describe the development of the observation instrument Teach-HTR. The literature on historical thinking and reasoning was reviewed to operationalize the main components of its teaching and learning. A group of international experts evaluated the first draft of the instrument, which was subsequently revised. When we had designed a usable instrument, further revision took place after the conducting of pilots in two countries. The observation instrument contains 33 items, divided into seven categories. Its internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha and the inter-rater reliability by using intraclass correlation coefficients (ICCs) and percentage of agreement. To facilitate the use of the instrument it is supplemented by several examples of teacher behaviour for each of the items.

Chapter 3 describes the results of an observational study that took place in Iceland. Fifty-four lessons of 27 history teachers were videotaped and consequently analyzed by the instrument Teach-HTR to investigate if and to what extent the teaching of historical thinking and reasoning takes place.

In chapter 4 teacher beliefs are spotlighted to see if the teaching of historical thinking and reasoning goes hand in hand with particular teacher beliefs. A qualitative study was conducted where eight of the history teachers whose lessons were analyzed in the previous study were interviewed. The aim was to discern their beliefs about the nature of history, their goals and their beliefs about effective pedagogy when teaching history. The interviews were coded accordingly and the teachers were divided into three groups according to their teaching of HTR.

Chapter 5 is devoted to the question if the observation instrument Teach-HTR can be used by pre-service and in-service history teachers to promote their professional growth on teaching HTR. Two case studies were conducted. In the first one, three experienced teachers in Iceland participated in a professional development program where they used the instrument to increase their capability to teach HTR. After analysis of their lessons, they selected two elements of HTR to focus on in two lessons each. Observations and interviews were used to discern eventual change and professional growth. In the second case study we collaborated with a teacher educator in The Netherlands. Seven master's students of his used it when preparing a lesson on HTR and to reflect upon each other's lessons. Pre- and post-

measurements were used to discern change in their knowledge or attitude towards teaching HTR. The Interconnected Model of Professional Growth (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002) was used to describe change in different domains, such as the personal domain and the domain of practice.

Chapter 6 summarizes the main outcomes of the studies and discusses implications for practice, both regarding the initial training of history teachers and their professional development. Possibilities for further research are also considered.

The chapters of the dissertation have been written as independent articles. Consequently, some parts of them may overlap. The dissertation is written in British English, except for Chapter 5 which has been submitted to an American journal.