

The existentialising potential of history education

Robert Thorp, Stockholm University

Anders Persson, Dalarna University

The aim of history education

A two-fold aim that may provide tensions for history educators:

1. Give pupils referential knowledge about history, i.e. to provide them with substantive knowledge.
 2. To foster a critical attitude towards historical accounts, i.e. procedural or disciplinary knowledge, among pupils. This will endow them with the ability to tolerate and respect other perspectives on history in particular and life in general. (Skolverket 2011)
- One the one hand we reproduce and reiterate history but we should also learn to appreciate history as historical in the broadest meaning of the term, i.e. it is characterised by historicity (cf. Gadamer 1975).

Existentialisation

- A notion derived from a hermeneutical philosophical tradition that stresses an openness and sensitivity for what is unexpected or unfamiliar.
- Good education should connect to pupils' experiences and/or previous knowledge, and enable them to question and discuss presupposed knowledge, opinions and perspectives (Aspelin 2015).
- This theoretical perspective stresses the same tension as highlighted above.

Existentialisation and history education

3 challenges for history education:

1. History education should create opportunities to engage pupils in their own life world.
2. History education should create opportunities to challenge preconceived views and opinions.
3. History education should contribute to an awareness of the historicity of all history and all our encounters with it.

Teaching the Cold War

The Cold War era (1945-1989) seemed an interesting area to investigate:

- A very dominant grand narrative of the Cold War in Swedish textbooks and curricula: "a conflict between the free and democratic West and the communist dictatorship of the East" (cf. Thorp 2015).
- Relative proximity to teachers' and pupils' life world.
- Two actors with distinct political motives that struggled against each other.

Results

- The teacher expresses a wish to provide her pupils with an understanding of their present world and to enable them to approach it with a critical attitude, but she acknowledges difficulties in doing so that are related to her own and her pupils' life world, curricular demands and a lack of time.
- The observed teaching reproduces a traditional monoperspectival rendering of the Cold War and reinforces the Swedish grand narrative of the conflict.
- Pupils' seem alienated from the historical content and has learnt to reproduce the grand Swedish narrative of the Cold War.

A look forward

- The theoretical perspective chosen highlights pertinent aspects of history education: the tension of the subject is placed in the centre of attention.
- The study stresses the importance of an awareness of historicity (i.e. historical consciousness) to counter the “normative pull” of history and enable a critical approach to history and our encounters with it.
- The study also stresses the difficulty and complexity of history education and the challenge history teachers face – their task is to reproduce and challenge not only the history presented in educational media, but also their own experiences and preconceptions of it (cf. Thorp 2016).

References

Aspelin, J. (2015), "The elementary forms of educational life: understanding the meaning of education from the concept of 'social responsivity'" in *Social Psychology of Education*, 18(3), 487–501.

Gadamer, H.-G. (1975), "The problem of historical consciousness" in *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 5(1), pp. 8-52.

Skolverket (2011), *Läroplan för grundskolan, förskoleklassen och fritidshemmet 2011*, Stockholm: Skolverket.

Thorp, R. (2015), "Representation and interpretation: Textbooks, teachers and historical culture" in *IARTEM e-Journal* (7)2, pp. 73-99.

Thorp R. (2016), *Uses of history in history education*, Umeå: Umeå universitet