EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP: THEORY AND TEACHING PRACTICE

Session 7: Implementing Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education (EDC/HRE) in history teaching in secondary education

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Introduction

History is considered an important subject in all school curricula, because it enables students to make sense of the world they live in, by connecting the past events and choices to the present and possibly the future (Nordgren, 2016: 488). It is also considered a subject that promotes critical thinking and multiperspectivity, since students, especially in secondary education, do not focus only on what happened, but equally on historical skills i.e. assessing sources and questioning the nature of historical knowledge (Black, 2011).

Therefore, it is considered a subject that is suitable for promoting Education for Democratic Culture and Human Rights Education (EDC/HRE) skills, values, attitudes and critical knowledge. This paper aims to focus on the teaching practices and methods which allow history teaching in secondary education to incorporate these elements and promote the development of historical consciousness. Initially, a short overview of the developments in history teaching will be presented, followed by the impact of different teaching methods on the students' historical consciousness. Then, teaching practices that cultivate EDC/HRE elements will be examined, focusing on certain case-studies.

A history of teaching methods

History is a complex and demanding school subject, which combines knowledge, skills and concepts. This complexity led to different methods of history teaching, placing the emphasis on the content of history or the skills required.

History teaching has traditionally been connected to identity formation and especially to national identity. In most European countries, history teaching had a prominent role in primary and secondary education curricula during the 19th and the 20th

century, aiming to promote national narratives by emphasizing heroic actions of the in-group and past grievances towards other nations. Even historiography as a scientific discourse was deeply connected to nation-formation during the 19th century (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002. Haydn, 2012). This type of national narrative, usually emphasises the continuity of national entity and the essentialist character of national identity. Moreover, history was taught as an *exemplum*, projecting moral models (Keating and Sheldon 2011: 6). Methodologically, this type of history teaching places emphasis on content and memorization of events. In terms of philosophy of history, it is associated to positivism, considering that historical research can verify the past events and historical narrative represents them.

Although there were many methodological shifts in the discipline of history during the 20th century, history teaching in secondary education was only tentatively revised in the 1960s and 1970s in some countries, where local history and class projects were introduced. Emphasis shifted from political and military to social and economic history. Documentary sources were introduced, initially as a verification of textbook historical narrative. Gradually, contradicting sources were included, aiming at the development of the students' historical skills. Students were expected to learn how to appreciate bias and have different perspectives on an historical event; curricula focused equally on content and on key historical concepts (Keating and Sheldon 2011: 10-11). History was considered a means to develop critical thinking, so as to enable students to make sense of the present world and make informed choices (Haydn 2011: 34).

In more recent decades in the wake of postcolonialism and the deconstruction of national identity (Anderson 1991. Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983) a change in the canon was encouraged. World history, regional history and history of social groups (such as Roma history, women's history, Black history) were introduced in an attempt to overcome the national focus and to bring in the classroom historical subjects that were hitherto overlooked. The approach towards past practices and mindsets is critical, questioning assumptions that have led to the silencing of their narratives. This re-claim of the past is a rupture in continuity (Rüsen 2004: 75. Anderson 2017).

Moreover, informed by the linguistic turn and the social turn in historical studies (White 1987), contemporary history teaching methods emphasize the importance of interpretation. The students are expected to realize that there is not only one narrative of the past possible; on the contrary students are expected to:
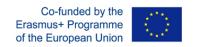
- "Understand that the past has been interpreted in different ways;
- Understand *how* the past has been interpreted in different ways;
- Explain *why* the past has been interpreted in different ways; and
- Evaluate different interpretations of the past". (Chapman 2011b: 97)

This approach does nor focus on chronology but on metahistorical concepts, i.e. concepts used by historical research and historiography: significance, evidence, continuity and change, cause and consequence, historical perspective-taking, and the ethical dimension (Anderson 2017:11). These teaching approaches aim to provide students with the ability to create a narrative of the past that "takes the world's complexities, ambivalences, and paradoxes, ambiguities and dissonances into account" (Létourneau and Moisan 2004: 122).

Typologies of historical consciousness

As already suggested, the teaching methods described, result in very different types of historical consciousness and promote different values and political and social arrangements (Seixas 2004: 11). Historical consciousness, according to Jörn Rüsen, functions as a source of orientation, which enables us to understand the present through the past and allows us to create a perspective of the future. Historical consciousness is strongly connected to values. There are four types:

- The traditional type, which emphasizes continuity with the past and the fixed and unchanging nature of moral values
- The exemplary type, which considers the past as a source for cultural universals and moral rules. The celebration of exemplary heroes aims to inspire present cultural practices.
- The critical type, which denounces past cultural practices and aims to create a rupture from them, by shaping a counter-narrative.

- The generic type, which historicizes the present by acknowledging the legacy of the past and aims to recognize the dynamic character of cultural practices, moral values and identities. (Rüsen 2004: 71-78).

This hierarchy of types of historical consciousness has been enriched with a hierarchy of metahistorical concepts and skills, presenting different views concerting how we learn about the past:

- The past is given and reachable though narrative
- The past is inaccessible due to the passage of time
- The past determines the stories, difference in accounts is a result of lack of information
- The past is reported through truthful or biased testimonies. Difference in accounts is a result of bias. This constitutes a shift to the author rather than the story
- The past is presented from a viewpoint, stories are shaped by selection, they are not copies of the past
- The past is constructed by the questions asked and the criteria adopted. It is in the nature of accounts to differ. (Lee 2004: 134-139, 146-154).

Lee notes that not all the students reach the final type of historical consciousness or metahistorical skills and that the process in not always linear. Some of these concepts, such as the idea that the past is constructed and not given or that accounts do not differ because the authors lie but because they have asked different questions, are counter-intuitive and go against common-sense. Nevertheless, it is necessary for historical education to challenge students' preconceptions and to aim at the development of these concepts and skills, which will allow the students to make sense of history (Lee 2004: 133-134, 155).

These competences are connected to a set of values, such as respect for evidence, willingness to challenge one's own views if evidence led him to such conclusions and respect for the people in the past. (Lee 2011: 65).

Challenges in history teaching

Since history teaching is considered a means to shape a collective identity, curricula and textbooks have often become a contested ground for political groups or

communities in many countries (*International Journal of Historical Learning, Teaching and Research* 2013. Barca & Nakou (eds.) 2010).

Many of these debates focus on the 'correct' content of the stories students should be taught, such as the treatment of past grievances and national dark spots. Most of these debates reveal that public narratives of history remain on the traditional or exemplary level of historical consciousness. Access to the past is considered unproblematic and one-dimensional. Moreover, these narratives of the past are often based on 'schematic narrative templates' (Wertsch 2008: 140), where events are narrated according to basic narrative plots, which result in oversimplification. This has led to the division between disciplinary history and public memory or heritage, as presented in monuments, celebrations and films, which may endorse "myths and inherited notions" or apply the perspective of the present to the past. (Nordgren, 2016: 482).

Therefore, students enter secondary education, having already shaped their own notions and preconceptions about history content or the nature of the past. Their metahistorical skills are not as developed in early age and usually they adopt the schematic public narrative. Teachers in secondary education in some cases hesitate to challenge these dominant narratives, failing thus to provide them with nuanced narratives and interpretations and to assist them in developing their metahistorical skills (Létourneau and Moisan 2004: 114).

Moreover, due to the emphasis on examination results in secondary education, history teaching becomes more content-oriented or exam-oriented. Since history is considered a difficult subject, less able students are discouraged to attend history courses, especially in higher secondary education. Humanities subjects are also overshadowed by more market-oriented subjects (Chapman 2011: 51-55, Haydn 2011: 32-33).

How to include EDC/HRE goals in history teaching

Despite these challenges, in a globalized world where the national frameworks are overcome and cultural encounters proliferate, history is considered as a subject that can prepare the students so as to use their critical thinking skills as citizens to analyze current issues, to rationally calculate different aspects of situations, to

accept different viewpoints if they are based on valid evidence, to weigh competing interests and thus make informed choices at a time of post-truth. Moreover, it aims to promote intercultural competences. These aims are connected to the development of historical consciousness, historical thinking and the values that define historical research. These goals are very close to EDC/HRE skills, attitudes, values and critical thinking.

How can these goals be achieved on a practical level?

- **Revising historical content.** As textbook and curricula debates in various countries show, national narratives are still very much prevalent. History teachers most probably have to follow a historical narrative focused though nation-building. Nevertheless, teachers can offer alternative views, by focusing on cultural encounters and migrations (Nordgren & Johansson 2015: 10), or what happened in other parts of the world at the same period. Moreover, the fluidity and multiplicity of identities within communities and nations also nuances nation-orriented historical narratives. Class projects can also offer alternative views on nation-oriented narrative. An example would be to examine how other nations or communities experienced a nation-defining event, such as a war of independence or a revolution. The use of primary sources is very important in this case. Thus the 'others' enter the classroom as "agents with voices of their own" (Nordgren & Johansson 2015: 11) An indicative alternative textbook is *Crossroads of European Histories* (2009), which applies multiperspectivity on five key historical periods of European history.

- **Student views and historical narratives.** As already mentioned, students enter secondary education with an already shaped notion about the past and the basic 'plot' of national narrative. Moreover, in classrooms with diverse population, students from a minority background might bring a different narrative. Teachers should respect these elements and possibly make their historical cultures the object of study, thus recognizing difference (Nordgren & Johansson 2015: 12). At the same time, students should learn how to

challenge their own views, based on evidence. This should begin from less sensitive or contested issues and gradually move to more controversial ones.

- **Respecting the past.** A fundamental metahistorical concept is that the past should not be judged by present criteria (Lee 2011: 65), and people who lived in the past should be viewed as persons who faced complex situations and made their choices according to the resources, values and possibilities they had at the time. This concept develops students' empathy and respect for different cultural practices. At the same time, it teaches them to be cautious of oversimplified uses of the past to promote present goals.

- **Focus on ordinary individuals and groups of people.** Recent shift to the teaching of social history brings to light everyday life in the past and the contribution of ordinary individuals to historical events (*Quality history education in the 21st century* 2018: 14). Oral history projects can play a crucial role in motivating students to research the recent past and see events from a more personal perspective. This develops empathy and at the same time prepares them to evaluate diverse perspectives and bias.

- **The use of the past.** Use of the past is a dominant element in our culture, from monuments and celebrations to films and computer games. Teaching students to examine how cultures use the past so as to give meaning to the present and how this shapes identity is crucial in developing their competence to be conscious of the legitimacy of different value systems. This also allows the students to question their own identity-defining narratives and to examine why they are perceived important. (Nordgren 2017).

- **Multiperspectivity does not equal relativism.** Although multiperspectivity is an important part of history teaching, this should not result in the concept that any interpretation is valid (Chapman 2011b: 103-104). Students should learn that their interpretations should adhere to certain methodological criteria.

- **Controversial issues.** The classroom is a space where controversial issues should be discussed openly, enabling the students to deal with identity-defining and dividing grievances in a respectful manner and to listen to other people's points of view. This prepares the students to engage in democratic dialogue and to resolve differences and deal with controversies in
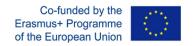
a non-violent manner. This presupposes a democratic climate in the classroom, where student feel free to express their opinion, based on evidence, even if they disagree with the teacher or their peers. It also presupposes that the teacher is able to manage a heated discussion, by employing a number of teaching techniques. (Kerr and Huddleston 2015).

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