



Measuring students' appraisals of the relevance of history: The construction and validation of the Relevance of History Measurement Scale (RHMS)



Dick van Straaten^{a,*,1}, Arie Wilschut^{a,2}, Ron Oostdam^{b,c,3}

^a Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, Centre for Applied Research in Education (CARE), Wibautstraat 2-4, 1091 GM, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

^b Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, Centre for Applied Research in Education (CARE), Wibautstraat 2-4, 1091 GM, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

^c Research Institute of Child Development and Education (RICDE), University of Amsterdam, Nieuwe Achtergracht 127, 1018 WS, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the psychometric qualities of the Relevance of History Measurement Scale (RHMS), a questionnaire designed to measure students' beliefs about the relevance of history. Participants were 1459 Dutch secondary school students aged between 12 and 18. Data analysis revealed three reliable factors, compliant with our theoretical framework which defines three strands of relevance of history: relevance for building a personal identity, for citizenship, and for insight into the 'human condition'. The convergent and known-groups validity of the RHMS was demonstrated. The collected data show that students find history more relevant as they grow older, with most progress taking place between 14 and 16. Out of the three strands of relevance, building a personal identity scores lowest in students' appraisals. This study shows that the RHMS is psychometrically sound and can be used to evaluate effects of lesson interventions directed at enhancing the relevance of history to students.

1. Introduction

In documents describing standards for history teaching in Western countries, connecting the past to the present and the future is frequently being regarded as a means to prepare students for their future role as citizens in society (ACARA, 2015; DFE, 2013; NCHS, 1996; SLO, 2016; Seixas & Morton, 2013; VGD, 2006). As a rule, history's contributions to citizenship are expressed in terms of general goals of history teaching expounded in the preambles of these curriculum documents. In most of the more specific content descriptions, however, systematic elaborations of meaningful links between the past, the present and the future are largely absent. Content standards focus almost entirely on understanding the past and learning historical thinking skills as aims in themselves. This is reinforced by high-stakes tests emphasizing the acquisition of factual knowledge described in the standards (Saye & SSIRC, 2013; Stern, 2010). There is, therefore, a discrepancy between general goals explicating the value of history beyond school and specific learning objectives focusing on 'value-within-content', i.e., the value of certain content knowledge in view of mastering more content knowledge (Francis, 2014). Apparently, developers of history curricula assume that studying the past yields insights into the present and the

future as a matter of course, and they take knowledge transfer beyond school for granted without any explicit learning activities directed at achieving this aim.

Research suggests that such expectations may not be justified. According to Haerberli (2005), students may develop either an 'intimate' or an 'external' relationship with history. Students of the 'intimate' type enjoy history and consider it useful in view of their understanding of the world and of their own lives, while students of the 'external' type have a much more negative attitude and hardly see the benefits of studying the past. The latter type is probably much more numerous among secondary school students than the first, as indeed appeared to be the case in Haerberli's (2005) study. Research has shown that 14-year-old students in countries like Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands tend to think that history is 'dead and gone and has nothing to do with my present life' (Angvik & Von Borries, 1997, p. B26). Dutch secondary students find history significantly less useful than English language, economics and mathematics (Wilschut, 2013). Several studies indicate that students in England and North America have limited views on the purposes and benefits of history and struggle to explain the point of studying the past (Barton & Levstik, 2011; Biddulph & Adey, 2003; Foster, Ashby, & Lee, 2008; Harris & Reynolds, 2014;

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: t.van.straaten@hva.nl (D. van Straaten), a.h.j.wilschut@hva.nl (A. Wilschut), r.j.oostdam@hva.nl (R. Oostdam).

¹ www.amsterdamuas.com.

² www.amsterdamuas.com.

³ www.amsterdamuas.com and <http://cde.uva.nl>.

Haydn & Harris, 2010; VanSledright, 1997; Zhao & Hoge, 2005). All of this implies that there are ample reasons for an active attitude among teachers to promote the relevance of history by means of linking the past to the present and the future.

In earlier work pedagogical approaches were devised for teaching history in ways which may be expected to improve students' appraisals of the relevance of history in terms of building a personal identity, becoming a citizen and understanding the human condition (Van Straaten, Wilschut, & Oostdam, 2016). The extent to which such approaches are effective can only be determined by means of valid and reliable measurement tools. To date, appropriate tools for measuring students' views with regard to the three relevance domains mentioned above are not available. Extant measures are designed to gauge students' personal affiliation with historical subject matter (e.g., Grever, Pelzer, & Haydn, 2011; Harris & Reynolds, 2014); students' epistemological beliefs about history (e.g., Maggioni, VanSledright, & Alexander, 2009; Stoel, Logtenberg, Wansink, Huijgen, Van Boxtel, & Van Drie, 2017); relationships between students' self-identity and history teaching (e.g., Andrews, McGlynn, & Mycock, 2009); or students' experiences with school history (e.g., Angvik & Von Borries, 1998; Biddulph & Adey, 2003). Some of these measures do question students why history matters, but always in a very general way, i.e., not specified to the three relevance domains as defined in this study.

In the absence of appropriate measurement tools for assessing students' attitudes towards the relevance of history, we developed the Relevance of History Measurement Scale (RHMS). The development process and the psychometric qualities of the RHMS are reported in this study. First, we formulate a theoretically underpinned definition of the concept of 'relevance of history' and describe its operationalization in the design of the RHMS. Second, we examine the reliability and the validity of the RHMS, using data collected from a sample of 1459 Dutch secondary schools students between the ages of 12 and 18. Third, we discuss results of RHMS measurements among our sample group and possible uses of the RHMS for practitioners and researchers.

2. Relevance of history

The relevance of history has been defined as 'allowing students to recognize and experience what history has to do with themselves, with today's society and their general understanding of human existence' (Wilschut, Van Straaten, & Van Riessen, 2013, p. 36). This description stemmed from three types of theoretical sources: (1) educational philosophy on meaningful education, (2) constructivist educational theory on meaningful learning, and (3) historical philosophy on historical consciousness and historical thinking in relation to the temporal dimension of human existence.

2.1. Educational philosophy

The first category of literature yields overall goals for meaningful education, including history education (e.g., Biesta, 2010; Pring, 2005; Winch, 2006). Three main functions of education are commonly distinguished: qualification, socialization and subjectification.

Qualification entails that education should prepare students to accomplish something later on in their lives, e.g. exercising a profession or participating in political life. History can play a role in qualifying students, because it may enhance their political literacy, for example by means of studying the origins of political ideas or by means of acquiring the requisite vocabulary for understanding political phenomena and processes; mastering historical thinking skills may also enhance students' ability to develop and substantiate opinions with fact-based arguments and qualify them to participate in political and social discourses (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Davis, 2009; Jordanova, 2006).

Socialization implies that students are initiated into societal structures whose traditions, rules, values and norms they have to become familiar with in order to function as citizens. History obviously has an

eminently socializing effect. It provides narratives for nation-building and collective-memories approaches which can be powerful tools for cultural acclimation of young people, in particular the younger generations of newcomers (VanSledright, 2008; Wertsch, 2002). It teaches students where institutions, traditions and dominant ways of thinking originate from and why it may be worthwhile to uphold or rather to contest them. Students learn how society has developed historically, how to grasp processes of change and continuity in past and present societies, how society operates and what is needed for successful civic participation and action (Gies, 2004; Stearns, 2000; Stricker, 1992). History sheds light on the origins and development of human culture over long spans of time. Historiography implies reproducing 'culture' which is thus transferred to future generations. The activities of critically analyzing primary sources and shaping plausible images of the past also socialize students into the rules and standards that apply in the academic world (Wineburg, 1991).

Subjectification means that students develop their own identities based on values, ideals and beliefs which make them unique persons vis-à-vis the communities to which they belong (family, ethnic group, religious community, etc.). Learning about the history of these and other communities enables students to reflect on the traditions, customs and beliefs that have shaped their personality, or to which they might wish to oppose. Students also have personal experiences, which are usually remembered as an ongoing story shaping a person into an individual. Temporal continuity 'identifies' a person: without a past, without memorized experiences, developing a personal identity is inconceivable (Ishige, 2005). Finally, through the study of history students encounter all sorts of people with whom they have to 'communicate' in order to make sense of the past; studying the lives of others may result in a better understanding of oneself (Southgate, 2013; Wineburg, 2010).

2.2. Constructivist learning theory

Constructivist learning theory dissuades rote learning and focuses on active construction of knowledge and knowledge transfer to extra-curricular contexts (Narayan, Rodriguez, Araujo, Shaqlaih, & Moss 2013). Meaningful learning is nurtured if students are emotionally engaged and relate new information to prior knowledge, personal needs, interests and goals (Novak, 2002). Linking subject matter to students' needs increases its relevance and may also positively influence students' motivation (Frymier & Shulman, 1995; Muddiman & Frymier, 2009; Pintrich, 2003). 'Authentic pedagogy' propagates inquiry-based instruction on disciplinary ideas and emphasizes learning outcomes beyond successful performing in school (Newmann et al., 1996; Saye and SSIRC, 2013). Inquiry-based instruction may also meet one of the 'basic needs in education' related to motivation, viz. the need for autonomy to decide on learning objectives and learning activities (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

These constructivist learning principles are consistent with empirical research in the field of history education. For example, organizing the history curriculum around inquiry into enduring societal issues promotes student engagement and creates more opportunities for meaning making than a curriculum mainly focusing on learning facts and dates (Barton & Levstik, 2011; Saye and SSIRC, 2013). History becomes meaningful to students if the past is connected to the present and if students feel emotionally involved, for instance by examples of inhumane or heroic behavior of people in the past (Barton, 2008). Real life issues may lead to effective construction of new knowledge if incidents and events in history are interpreted in the context of general conceptual frameworks, which facilitate relating new to already existing knowledge (Jadallah, 2000).

2.3. Historical philosophy

Historical philosophy on historical consciousness and historical

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