



The Certainty Paradox of student history teachers: Balancing between historical facts and interpretation



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Student teachers' development in regard to interpretational history teaching.
- Work environments influences epistemological representations of history.
- Teaching pupils uncertainty requires teachers to be certain.

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ABSTRACT

Teaching interpretational history is known to be challenging for history teachers. This study aimed at understanding how student teachers develop in terms of representing history epistemologically. 13 student teachers were interviewed drawing retrospective storylines. Student teachers reported more factual and less interpretational history teaching than they would have preferred, yet can be influenced in different epistemological directions by their work and learning environment. A prominent finding is that student teachers need to develop confidence in expertise before allowing the 'uncertainty' of interpretational history teaching, showing a 'Certainty Paradox'. A case for careful apprenticeship selection and epistemological reflection is made.

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1. Introduction

In the last decade, Dutch history teachers have witnessed a curriculum renewal for upper secondary education towards more emphasis on developing pupils' understanding of history as a form of knowledge with specific disciplinary skills and epistemological problems (Wilschut, 2009b). As a result, teachers in the Netherlands are officially required to teach history in such a manner that pupils are able to develop the epistemological insight that historical narratives are subjective interpretations, made in their own cultural contexts (Board of Examinations, 2013). Moreover, pupils should learn to judge and compare the validity of these interpretations on the basis of disciplinary criteria (Seixas & Morton, 2013; Van Drie & Van Boxtel, 2008; VanSledright, 2010;

Wineburg, 2001). The idea that pupils should learn that history involves interpretation has been introduced in the educational curricula of many countries, including the US, Canada, the UK, Australia, and Germany (Erdmann & Hassberg, 2011). For example in a recent publication of the *College, Career and Civic Life* (2013), a framework for social studies standards in the United States, it is explicitly stated that history is interpretive and that "historical understanding requires recognising this multiplicity of points of view in the past" (p. 47). Still, several studies revealed that many teachers struggle with teaching interpretational history, especially in concrete classroom practice (James, 2008; Martell, 2013; McCrum, 2013).

In the light of the internationally changing curricula it is important to consider student teachers' perceptions and practices, as they will be central actors in future education. The first year of a teacher in the classroom is known to be significant in determining his or her attitudes towards teaching and for developing long-term practice and routines (Flores, 2001; Gratch, 2001; Hawkey, 1996). Several scholars have argued that, once teachers fall into routines of 'traditional' pedagogies with a focus on content, their beliefs and

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practices hardly change (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Thornton, 1998). Until now it is unclear what factors support or constrain the teaching of interpretational history.

While factors important for the development of student teachers, including both personal and contextual aspects, have been widely studied (e.g. Hammerness et al., 2005), little empirical research has been conducted to determine whether these factors also impact teachers' epistemological representations of historical knowledge in the classroom. This study therefore investigates student history teachers' representation of historical knowledge during their pre-service teacher education programme, and which factors constrain or stimulate teaching history as *interpretational* as opposed to *factual*. Insight into these factors might help teacher educators to guide student teachers to achieve the new curriculum goals. Before going into the details of our study, we will describe how, from an epistemological perspective, historical knowledge can be represented in different ways. Then we will focus on the awareness of the subjective nature of historical knowledge which has become an important part of many curricula, including the Dutch. Finally, we will discuss factors known to impact teacher learning and development, including teacher expertise and various elements of the work and learning environments.

1.1. Factual and interpretive representations of the past

Southgate (1996) proposed that the debate about what historical 'truth' is can be simplified to seeing it as absolute, in the sense that history can be 'truthful', or considering it as relative, meaning that historical knowledge is always mediated. For those who agree that historical knowledge can be 'truthful', history can be condensed to 'historical facts'. Historical knowledge seen from this traditional, historicist and source-driven perspective can be displayed in a single objective and authoritative narrative, representing the past 'as it was'. Yilmaz (2008) proposes that this perspective reflects a more naïve understanding of history and for history education this translates, for example, into a teacher telling one specific narrative with no reflection on the epistemological status of the knowledge.

Various historiographical traditions in the twentieth century have attacked the idea that historical accounts can be truthful and objective descriptions of the past. To begin with, historians related to The Annales School broke with traditional historiography, criticising the idea that there is a one-dimensional time, from past to future, and emphasising the plurality of coexisting times. They changed the focus of history by studying long-term socioeconomic processes of the past rather than political or diplomatic themes. In essence, it was an analytical history and its methodology was strongly based upon the social sciences. They tried to revitalise the historiographical tradition, but they were still committed to what they understood as a scientific approach to the past, and believed that rational constructions of the past are possible (Burguière, 2009; Iggers, 1997). However, a more radical approach followed The Annales School, taken by historians such as Hayden White (1987) and Keith Jenkins (2003). These historians explicitly challenged claims of neutrality and objectivity in historical research (Kosso, 2009; Southgate, 2009; Yilmaz, 2010). White's and Jenkins' ideas were influenced by post-structuralism, which focuses on the role of language in understanding the past. For example, White points out that historians, when interpreting historical accounts, cannot detach themselves from their own context, meaning that their ideological and theoretical orientation will influence their explanation and construction of the past (1987). It is important to note that White, although often interpreted as a radical sceptic, did not

entirely reject historiographical enquiry, with historians being responsible for constructing the past based on the best evidence available (Yilmaz, 2010).

We have recently seen a more pragmatic stance from historians. Levisohn (2010), for example, stated that the past can never be fully represented, as it is always a matter of interpretation. However, building on the ideas of David Carr (1986), he suggested it is important to demonstrate the virtues of interpretation. He stressed that such epistemological grounding is also important for history education, which could otherwise lose its purpose. These ideas are in line with other historians who are taking a pragmatic historiographical position, such as Evans (1997), Iggers (1997), and Tucker (2004), all aiming for relative plausibility by adhering to academically accepted research methodologies. Most researchers in history education seem to adopt this more pragmatic position and advocate that teachers should incorporate epistemological reflection in their lessons, which is not the case in a factual representation of the past. For example, Parkes (2009) proposes a 'critical pluralist' stance towards history, which means the acceptance of narrative diversity in the curriculum and recognizing the inevitable different historical interpretations, but also learning pupils to make value-judgements about the historical narratives they encounter. Yilmaz (2008) proposes that understanding how different schools of historical thought construct historical explanations is a precondition for history teachers to help pupils to gain a more nuanced understanding of the past.

Researchers in social studies have focused on different aspects of how to make pupils good interpreters. For example, one line of research focuses on pupils' reading of, and epistemological orientations towards, historical accounts. Well known amongst these is Wineburg (2001), who points out that historical thinking can be an 'unnatural act' for pupils, as they do not automatically take a more critical and reflexive position towards the past. Another line of research focuses on how to influence the epistemological beliefs of pupils through instruction. VanSledright (2002), for example, shows that fifth graders can engage in a more interpretative and investigative approach when they are properly trained. Another line of research focuses on the societal benefits of making pupils into good interpreters, because an underlying goal can be to make pupils more humane and tolerant citizens (Barton & Levstik, 2004). Research suggests that teaching interpretation can encourage young people to 'care' for those from different backgrounds (Kolikant & Pollack, 2009; McCully, 2012). Moreover, Whitehouse (2008) proposes that studying different historical interpretations also can help understanding current society and the conditions which have led to it.

1.2. The Dutch history curriculum

Comparing historical interpretations became an important part of the Dutch curriculum when Dalhuisen, an influential editor of a Dutch textbook on historical didactics in the 1970s, started to promote the 'methodology of inquiry', an adaptation of what Fenton (1966; 1967) in the US had been propagating as the 'new social studies' (Dalhuisen & Korevaar, 1971; Wilschut, 2009b). However, the 1990s saw a change in public opinion and politicians started to criticise the focus on thinking skills in favour of learning historical 'facts'. A committee led by history professor Piet De Rooy (2001) was asked by the Minister of Education to design a new curriculum; however, this committee did not produce a list of 'historical facts' but rather a chronological framework of 'orientation knowledge'. The framework consists of ten clear-cut 'eras' with associative names and 49 distinctive

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