



History teachers' conceptions of inquiry-based learning, beliefs about the nature of history, and their relation to the classroom context



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Most history teachers' held beliefs that stressed history's interpretative nature.
- Yet, student inquiry was often misconstrued as a critical evaluation of sources.
- Only a few considered full investigations of a problem statement about the past.
- Teachers' epistemological beliefs partly influenced their conceptions of inquiry.
- These conceptions could also be linked to the context in which teachers worked.

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ABSTRACT

The present study provides a comprehensive picture of history teachers' conceptions of inquiry-based-learning (IBL), based on interviews with 22 secondary school teachers. The results indicate that, although most teachers' beliefs about the nature of history were conducive to teaching historical reasoning, their conceptions of IBL often remained limited to critically evaluating information, instead of using the available information to conduct inquiries into the past. Furthermore, teachers' conceptions of IBL appeared to be strongly connected to the context in which they worked. Based on these findings, several implications for supporting history teachers' adoption of IBL are discussed.

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1. Introduction

School history's purpose and content have long been subject to heavy debate. In the U.S., Evans (2004) described the subject's long succession of curriculum reforms as a clash between different pedagogical and ideological movements. The extent to which each of them could bring their ideas to bear, appeared to depend mainly on the social and political climate: whereas a move towards traditional curricula was often observed during times that could be labeled as more conservative, more liberal times appeared to create an environment that was instead favorable to inquiry- or issue-based curricula (Evans, 2006). The situation seems to be similar in European countries, such as England, Germany and the Netherlands, where a study of curriculum developments led

Wilschut (2010) to conclude that, apart from pedagogical considerations, the course of history teaching is often directed by politics and society.

In contrast to the often divided and fluctuating public opinion, research on history teaching agrees that, for students to develop a deep understanding of the subject, history lessons must strike a balance between *knowing and doing history* (Havekes, Arno-Coppen, Luttenberg, & van Boxtel, 2012). In addition to cultivating and building onto students' frameworks of the past, teachers are called on to involve their students in disciplinary thinking and to improve their understanding of how historical knowledge is constructed (Lee & Ashby, 2000). Central to this approach is a premise that knowledge in history is something that needs to be grounded (Haydn, 2011), with proponents arguing that a basic understanding of the way history works is necessary to make sense of what teachers, historians or others might say about the past (Lee, 2005).

According to Ashby (2005), the concept of evidence is

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fundamental to an understanding of history, as it supports the ability to make claims based on information sources about the past. More specifically, it can be argued that the key to historical understanding lies in grasping the discipline's interpretative nature. In history, the meaning of sources can vary depending on the questions that are asked, and the ideas that one brings to the investigation (Monte-Sano, 2011b). Yet, this does not mean that sources are investigated haphazardly, as historians have been found to use a number of heuristics, such as situating information within the historical context in which it was produced (see also Wineburg, 1991). Accounts of the past are then constructed by carefully weighing different arguments and interpretations against each other (Kuhn, 1991).

Efforts to develop students' understanding of these ideas have underlined the importance of *inquiry-based learning* (IBL) activities (e.g. Bain, 2005; Barton & Levstik, 2011; Monte-Sano, 2011a), which require students to form their own conclusions about the past, based on an analysis of sources (Levy, Thomas, Drago, & Rex, 2013). Next to providing opportunities to build deep knowledge of the content (Wiley & Voss, 1999), such activities enable teachers to involve students in disciplinary thinking and develop their ideas about the discipline (Hartzler-Miller, 2001). However, as Lee (2011) cautioned, this does not mean that students should be expected to do work at the same level of historians, but rather that they should acquire and learn to apply a conceptual understanding of how we know, explain, and give accounts of the past.

Although research in different countries has paid considerable attention to developing history teachers' pedagogical content knowledge (e.g. Husbands, 2011; Monte-Sano, 2011b; Seixas, 1998), it has frequently overlooked their conceptions of IBL. Furthermore, the findings presented in earlier work on this topic are generally inconsistent (see Sections 2.1, 2.2. and 2.3). As such, more information is needed, especially as a review by Kagan (1992) suggests that "a teacher's beliefs tend to be associated with a congruent style of teaching that is often evident across different classes and grade levels" (p. 66). The present study therefore aims to uncover the status of IBL in history teachers' ideas about the subject, which can help to inform future research and educational practice at an international level.

2. Research on history teachers' beliefs

Teachers' beliefs have been described as a body of suppositions, commitments and ideologies (Calderhead, 1996), and have generally been regarded as distinct from knowledge due to their strong affective and evaluative nature (Pajares, 1992). More recently, however, it has been argued that, rather than existing separate from knowledge, beliefs constitute a particular form of personal knowledge (Murphy, 2000). As teachers' experience in classrooms increases, their beliefs grow richer and more coherent, into a personal pedagogy or belief system (Kagan, 1992), which is generally resistant to change (Brousseau, Book, & Byers, 1988), and determines teachers' perception and behavior (Goodman, 1988). According to Nespor (1987), the reason why beliefs play such a major role in teachers' behavior, is that they are particularly well-suited for dealing with the ill-defined and complex problems that often characterize the context where teachers work.

Research indicates that teachers' thought and action are mainly driven by strong beliefs about what constitutes relevant content and how it should be taught (Gess-Newsome & Lederman, 1999). As such, beliefs about the subject matter of history are of prime importance for understanding teachers' instruction (Yilmaz, 2010). A broad distinction can be made between (1) *beliefs about the nature of history*, including propositions about knowledge and knowing within the field, and (2) *beliefs about teaching history*, or

ideas about learning goals and effective instruction (Kagan, 1992). Some studies have also investigated the (3) *interplay between these two types of beliefs* (e.g. Bouhon, 2009; Hartzler-Miller, 2001; McDiarmid, 1994). Furthermore, due to their socially constructed nature, teachers' beliefs are strongly intertwined with (4) *contextual influences*, such as those exerted by students, parents and the school (Fang, 1996). It is clear that each of these four research topics can contribute to an understanding of history teachers' conceptions of IBL. They provide the theoretical basis for the present study, and are further explored through a review of studies that were carried out in a variety of countries.

2.1. Beliefs about the nature of history

Teachers' ideas about knowledge and knowing in history, also referred to as (domain-bound) epistemological beliefs (Muis, Bendixen, & Haerle, 2006), center around the roles of evidence and interpretation within the discipline (Yilmaz, 2010). In line with research on how epistemological beliefs influence reasoning (e.g. King & Kitchener, 1994; Kuhn, Cheney, & Weinstock, 2000), studies on beliefs about the nature of history have often adopted a developmental perspective, advancing from a right-or-wrong view to a view of knowledge as constructed and contextual, rather than regarding epistemological ideas as a system of independent beliefs (e.g. Schommer, 1990). According to Wilson and Wineburg (1993), the different perspectives that have been found overlap with distinct conceptualizations of history that academia has adopted over the past decades. For instance, Bouhon (2009) distinguished between positivist beliefs, emphasizing a neutral, distant and objective report of historical facts, and constructivist beliefs, which argue that facts are inevitably interpreted by historians, in the construction of a personal narrative of the past. Adding a third type of beliefs to the continuum, Maggioni, VanSledright, and Reddy (2009) identify teachers' beliefs as: (1) *objectivism*, maintaining that history has no need of interpretation, but must stick to the evidence; (2) *subjectivism*, which insists that all of history is an interpretation, and that there is no real evidence of the past; or (3) *criticalism*, proposing that history is an interpretation, but should nevertheless be grounded in evidence and arguments. Similarly, McCrum (2013) found that teachers held either reconstructionist, constructionist or postmodernist beliefs.

Although the frameworks clearly overlap, findings across different countries have often been inconsistent. Whereas Bouhon (2009) noted that secondary school teachers carried both positivist and constructivist beliefs, Maggioni, VanSledright and Alexander (2009) reported that most of them agreed with criticalist statements, and disagreed with objectivist statements. In contrast, McCrum (2013) found that different types of beliefs were almost evenly spread across student teachers.

2.2. Beliefs about the teaching of history

When it comes to teachers' beliefs about instruction, McCrum (2013) reported a broad distinction between teacher-centered beliefs, which emphasize the transmission of content knowledge, and pupil-centered beliefs, focusing on students' reasoning skills. Earlier, Evans (1994) had outlined 5 types of history teachers: the story teller and cosmic philosopher, respectively focusing on stories about the past and patterns or grand theories; the scientific historian and relativist, stressing inquiry to improve understanding of either competing interpretations of history or present day issues; and eclectic teachers, displaying the characteristic of two or more of the other categories. Similarly, Bouhon (2009) described three types of teacher beliefs: (1) *exposition-recital*, viewing instruction as an act of transmitting historical knowledge; (2) *discourse-*

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