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History as performance: pupil perspectives on history in the age of ‘pressure to perform’

Johan Samuelsson
Department of Political, Historical, Religious and Cultural Studies, Karlstad University, Karlstad, Sweden

ABSTRACT
The development a standard-based curriculum in History can be related to the school reforms where ‘performance’ are crucial principles. The aim is to analyse pupils’ perspectives on the relation between their views on historical knowledge and the national test in History and grading. When the pupils in this study – directly after taking a national test in History – were asked to reason about what historical knowledge is, another subject emerged: a collective memory subject. History as ‘performance’ emerges clearly in connection with the pupils’ discourse on grades and History, which has an emphasis on ‘working’, ‘writing’, and ‘doing homework’ to get a better grade in History. The disciplinary knowledge content specified in the curricula does not correspond to pupils’ experiences of what the central historical knowledge is in national tests and grading. It is apparent that disciplinary knowledge content is ‘under pressure’ in the age of performance.

Introduction
In the first quote above, a pupil, aged 12 years, in a prestigious inner city school explains what type of historical knowledge the teacher takes into account when grading Year 6 pupils in History. According to the pupil, it is above all active performance in the classroom and the results on national tests that are considered and not specific historical knowledge or skills. In the second quote, a pupil aged 12 years in a rural area of Sweden explains why there are national tests in History in Year 6. These statements neatly sum up the predominant trend in Swedish and international thinking on pedagogy, which posits that pupils, teachers, schools, and nations must urgently improve their performance to be competitive in an increasingly globalised world. In recent years, Swedish politicians concerned with education have radically shifted focus towards a more ‘performance-oriented’ policy, emphasising test results and grading in many subject areas, including History.

This article investigates the way in which pupils aged 12 years understand and participate in implementing or ‘enacting’ this policy, in terms of Ball et al.’s (2012) theories of how policy is enacted at different levels. The findings will be related to the changes made in the history syllabus. The new syllabus is partly built on the collective memory approach of the old syllabus, but also introduced new perspectives that emphasised the critical approach of history.
'Making things happen': the role of policy in education

Politicians try to control schools by implementing different reforms with the central aim of ‘making things happen’, i.e. to put legislation into practice. According to Ball and colleagues, there is a type of delivery chain beginning with the governing politicians and ending with pupils. Located between these ends are, for example, national bureaucrats, test designers from universities, public and private stakeholders and their bureaucrats, and finally teachers and pupils. Aided by education laws, curricula, standards, assessment criteria, and national tests, performance results are noted higher up in the chain where they are analysed and checked, thus leading them to a ‘pressure to perform’ (Ball et al. 2012, 3; Biesta 2010; Darling-Hammond 2016; Ercikan and Seixas 2015).

At the same time, Ball et al. point out that the intended top-down control does not function as intended by politicians. Policies should not only be seen as texts and ‘instruments’ (legislation and national strategies) but also as processes, which to a great extent involve local contexts and historical aspects. Ball et al. (2012) and Tanner and Pérez Prieto (2014) describe how, in practice, policy is transformed through the teacher–pupil interaction: pupils ‘enact’ policies. On the one hand, Sweden now has a system of accountability, in which tests, early grading, and performance reports are expected to improve the quality of education; and on the other hand, there are teachers and students who have to interpret and translate this policy into practice.

History and policy change for performance

The ‘instruments’ in this article are the national test in History and the grading system. The test and grades are the means by which politicians aim to enforce the standards in the syllabus. It is a central part of the delivery chain for the politicians, and test performances put pressure on schools and its pupils to perform. They become central nodes in the delivery chain between politicians and pupils.

In 2006, a series of school reforms started in Sweden that noticeably changed the conditions for History as a subject in Swedish schools. In Sweden, children start school properly at the age of 7 (although most children attend pre-school class from the age of 6) and get their first grade in the sixth school year. Previously, children were not given grades until aged 14 in Year 8. Primary education comprises the school Years 1–6 and lower secondary education Years 7–9. The Swedish curriculum for history is now divided into three levels: lower primary school level (ages 7–9 years), upper primary school level (ages 10–12 years), and lower secondary level (ages 13–15 years). In lower primary school, pupils study history with a focus on local history linked to the pupils’ surroundings. Learning outcomes were also introduced in the third year of primary school and teachers have to assess if pupils have achieved them. In the upper primary school, teaching centres on national and partly Nordic history. In addition, pupils learn basic source criticism and analyse how historical symbols can be used by different groups in society. They are also offered opportunities to understand how concepts such as change, similarity and difference, chronology, cause and consequence, sources, and interpretation can be used. They are also expected to learn about epochs such as the Viking Age, the Middle Ages, Sweden as a great power, and the Age of Liberty. At the lower secondary level, history teaching has a more modern and global focus, although mainly related to Europe (Lgr 11).

Previously, follow-up on learning outcomes in history were scarce and there were no national tests and no grade marks awarded until the eighth school year. Admittedly, pupils’ historical knowledge was expected to be reviewed in the fifth school year, but there were only three open criteria considered which mainly related to the ability to reproduce and remember parts of Swedish history (Samuelsson and Wendell 2016; Lpo 94 Syllabi 2000). History in the earlier syllabi (as well as teaching practices) was characterised by a collective memory approach (Seixas 2007)). Teachers also had the opportunity to teach on the basis of an interdisciplinary syllabus for the four social study subjects. In connection with the changes made in the 2011 curriculum (Lgr [11]), pupils’ knowledge had to
be assessed through a national test and graded in the sixth school year. The opportunity to use an interdisciplinary syllabus was abolished. The syllabus was filled with a comprehensive mandatory content, ‘core content’, which had to be taught in specific subjects. It was specified that the core subject content in history was to be tested through national tests and grades were awarded on the basis of core content knowledge. Already in the upper primary school, teaching should be subject oriented with disciplinary perspectives on history in the form of source criticism. This approach to history is close to a perspective called the disciplinary approach or Historical enquiry (Chapman [2009]; Cooper [2012]; Seixas [2007]).

Pupils’ knowledge of history became part of the state accountability system in a tangible way. As a result, teachers now report the grades earned to the municipality, from where the reports forwarded to the National Agency for Education. This means that each municipality knows how each school performs, and the state, in turn, is informed about every municipality’s performance. The results of the national tests must also be reported to the municipality and the National Agency of Education, which means that the local and state levels also have this information on performance. However, the pupil accountability system is not fully developed. The grading scale has five Pass levels (E-A) and one Fail level (F). The pupils do not need a Pass to move up to Year 7, which is the start of secondary education. As with grades pupils are not required to get a Pass on the national tests to move on to the secondary school level (Year 7). Performance is important in history also in the early school levels, but mostly in the form of symbolic performance, since only the grade earned in Year 9 is crucial to upper secondary school admission (Samuelsson and Wendell 2016).

Controlling schools through means such as standards, tests, and grades, according to Ball, results in the normalisations of these tools during the school day; much attention is paid to displaying the school’s performance (Ball 2003). In Sweden, the history subject became part of the ‘performance system’ as early as in primary education.

What was expected to happen, according to the investigations and proposals that preceded the implementation of the 2011 curriculum? The intention was, to put it bluntly, that pupils should ‘shape up’; in other words, that the new demands would lead to increased will to improve. This was clarified in the government bill that led to the reforms (Proposition 2008/09:87 Tydligare mål och kunskapskrav [Clearer objectives and knowledge requirements]). The combination of increased focus on grades, and clear standards and tests, would lead to more ‘pressure to perform’ or education as performance (Ball et al. 2012; Tanner and Pérez Prieto 2014).

Defining the problem and aims

Biesta (2010) claims that we live in the ‘age of measurement’. Schools have to show measurable results via syllabi, grades, and national tests to be ‘held accountable’ by principal stakeholders. As mentioned above, the system also rests on the idea that pupils should ‘shape up’ and perform in line with curricular intentions. It is also possible to argue that schools are in ‘the age of performance’ (Ball et al. 2012).

VanSledright (2011, 2014) asserts that narrative-oriented teaching with clear, assessable content is well suited to this context. There is, however, an inherent risk in the testing system, according to VanSledright. For example, easily reproducible knowledge is tested. That would mean that even if politicians intend pupils to develop more analytical and reflective skills in History, a collective memory approach is rewarded by the testing system.

When looking at the Swedish syllabi for upper primary school, the required skills include critical analysis and a reflective approach to historical knowledge (Lgr 11, 169). In line with the logic of demanding accountability, these and other forms of historical knowledge should be coming to the fore, but, as shown above, History as a school subject is strongly traditional. Irrespective of curricular intentions, society has expected the subject to have a narrative form and a national content (Carretero 2011). The article argues that policy is created through pupils’ enactment thereof (Ball et al. 2012). History education is, therefore, currently faced with different areas of tension: the subject’s historical role in establishing an idea of the nation state is confronted
with syllabi preferring critical perspectives of history, as well as a system demanding accountability through tests and early grading.

The article will look at pupils’ interpretations of history as a subject, partly in relation to the national test in History and grading, and partly in relation to what they experience as the core of historical knowledge. Specifically, the aim is to analyse pupils’ perspectives on the relation between their views on historical knowledge and the national test in History and grading in the ‘age of performance’. The article is also concerned with pupils’ perspectives on historical knowledge.

**Historical thinking in history**

Traditionally, reproducing and remembering the national past in a narrative form has been emphasised in history education. In reproducing the past, pupils must be able to use facts (e.g. years, events) and concepts (e.g. continuity and change) to structure their narratives. The ability to place events and changes in a temporal sequence is also of importance (Stoel, van Drie, and van Boxtel 2015; VanSledright 2011). The role of school History, in a collective memory approach, is to tell a Grand National Narrative in which different events, ideas, and persons are part of the development from the past to current society. This is usually done through a linear narrative (Burke 2002; Carretero 2011; Ludvigsson 2009; Seixas 2007; VanSledright 2011).

However, historical knowledge also involves a form of complex thinking and it requires skills such as analysing, critical thinking, and synthesising. These skills can be manifested in various contexts; for instance, critical discussion of different perspectives on important events and analysis of how history can be used in different contexts. These skills encompass both understanding of how historical knowledge is created and the use of historical methods. The latter refers to pupils’ ability to draw conclusions from historical sources, evaluate those sources, and put together a range of evidence into coherent narratives (Breakstone 2014; Counsell 2011; Lee and Ashby 2000; VanSledright 2011).

Seixas also emphasises that pupils should be taught conceptual tools and methods that are used in the discipline, such as strategies for criticising and evaluating sources. Pupils should be able to ask critical question about past events, persons, and institutions. They should also learn how to investigate differences and similarities between different groups. According to this approach, there is no simple ‘right or wrong’ in history (Seixas 2000, 2007). This article’s analyses of pupils’ answers are inspired by the reflection on historical knowledge in schools detailed above.

There is also a critical discussion on the disciplinary aspects accentuated in the Historical Thinking tradition. Critics point out, for instance, that the History subject must contribute to equipping students for successful future citizenship. Obviously, disciplinary tools are useful but they should not be an end in themselves. Students’ experiences and identities should be the starting point rather than the disciplinary perspectives (Barton 2009; Harris and Burn 2016; Eliasson and Nordgren 2016).

Seixas (2000, 2007) also brings up the problem of only focussing on analytical and disciplinary teaching perspectives. There is a risk that the important identity-creating aspects of the History subject are underrated and that many historians’ practice of interpreting the past while maintaining the difficulty of reaching the truth about the past is overrated. This approach may in the long run lead to a naive relativism.

Also Retz (2016) comment on the issue of a too narrow disciplinary perspective. Interdisciplinary and overriding theory of science perspectives has gained ground in the history field, which also undermines the notion of a specific historical knowledge domain. The issues and challenges facing young people today, such as migration and environmental destruction, can only be addressed through a diversity of perspectives and concepts.

A more discipline-based History subject is also challenged by other perspectives. Berger (2015) points out that a wave of a ‘new nationalism’ now has hit the world. Issues of national identity and the preservation of a national heritage are gaining importance in schools and museums. These perspectives also challenge the notion that students should deconstruct the past with the help of disciplinary perspectives and methods.
The categorisation used in the analysis is inspired by theorists close to the tradition of Historical Thinking, including VanSledright (2011), Seixas (2007), and Stolare (2017). The article’s argument is based on the premise that history is taught in schools using a collective memory approach that often finds expression in a nationally focused narrative about the genesis and development of the nation state. There is here a strong link between specific events and rulers (often kings) to the national narrative. This is arguably the traditional perspective of History as a school subject and has long-dominated teaching in Sweden and other parts of the world (Berger 2015; Englund 1986; Seixas 2007). Historical knowledge also relies on structuring concepts and perspectives for the organisation of the historical narrative. These concepts and perspectives may, for example, include notions of cause and effect or continuity and change. Furthermore, historical knowledge includes strategic principles (or procedural knowledge) more concerned with the different ways in which historical knowledge is created, as for example through the analysis of sources. But, as the analysis shows, the educational sociological perspectives introduced by, among others, Ball et al. (2012) were also used.

The development in Swedish education towards greater emphasis on pupils’ ability to, for instance, reason about the value of a source, should be seen as part of a general trend. For example, Lee and Ashby (2000) show that in the UK, efforts have long been made to develop a more ‘disciplinary’ view of History as a school subject. This does not mean that the aim was to ‘produce miniature professional historians’ (200); it was rather to enhance pupils’ analytical abilities and focus less on the content. However, according to Lee and Ashby, this did not mean that content was deemed irrelevant. According to Stoel, van Drie, and van Boxtel (2015), the general trend in history education is towards developing pupils’ analytical skills.

Pupils’ perspectives on history in school

As an example of the above-mentioned analytical skills, Stolare (2017) claims that working with sources may well be a part of the education of younger children. Yet he also shows that even though upper primary education explicitly focuses on source evaluation and critically reviewing historical symbols, pupils have difficulty escaping a view that history is about the communication of a national narrative. Stolare ascribes this in the main to the strong position of the narrative tradition in Swedish education, which is also shown in the analyses of Englund (1986) and Ludvigsson (2009). This is further supported by the results of [Author:b], but even if the narrative element is strong, it can be combined with the ability to reason about cause and effect. Barton and Levstik (2008) show that national traditions are central in education in the United States. In their study of younger children, the ‘origin of the nation’ is emphasised when important aspects of history are discussed. This may pertain to actual places (Ellis Island), traditions (the first Thanksgiving), processes (migration), or concrete events (the American Revolution). The development of the United States into an independent nation, and its basic national identity may be connected to these aspects of history. Pupils repeatedly use ‘our’ and ‘we’ when discussing American history, irrespective of their ethnic background, gender, or the length of time their family has been in the United States. Barton (2008) also shows that younger pupils prefer structuring history into relatively uniform, linear narratives.

British research on history education has amongst other things focused on pupils’ views of historical knowledge. For instance, Lee and Ashby (2000) studied the development of understanding how knowledge about the past is obtained among children. In their investigations, pupils from Years 3 to 9 were presented different stories about the same event, but with divergent content. The overall question the pupils were asked to answer was: why do the stories differ? From the pupils’ answers, Lee and Ashby (2000) identify several levels of quality in how pupils view knowledge. Younger children have the idea that sources directly correspond to the past. Different accounts result from someone having misunderstood what really happened in the past. Older children are more aware that the creator of the account may have influenced the picture of the past. Differences between accounts are due to the fact that the creators have, for some reason, applied a specific perspective to them. According
to Lee and Ashby, history is not seen as a copy of the past in this view. In this more sophisticated
understanding, sources become more negotiable and relative. Sources can have fluctuating value,
depending on the questions one tries to answer. The lower levels of understanding are more
gear towards a reconstructionist view of history, while the advanced levels rather point towards
a constructionist view.4

Cooper (1995, 2012) also shows, with reference to previous research and developmental psychol-
ogy that also younger pupils can think historically and have an understanding of phenomena such as
cause and effect. She argues that historical thinking must include content knowledge as well as
process thinking.

Swedish studies of pupils’ understanding of sources show that they can adopt a source-critical
approach at a young age, even though this does not in any way apply to all pupils (Samuelsson
and Wendell 2016).

On the whole, current research shows that pupils of different ages have the cognitive ability to
approach history in line with the Historical Thinking tradition, although no clear picture is available.
Nevertheless the representation of Historical Thinking seems to increase with pupil age. Often History
as domain appears to younger children to centre on the reproduction of a given, static past. Even if
this is not spelled out in the studies, one can assume that the reason for this is that history education
in schools generally has been based on a collective memory approach. The role of History as a subject
is to create identity by connecting the contemporary world of pupils to a national past, aided by nar-
rative-oriented teaching (Rüsen 2002; Seixas 2007; Stolare 2017). Historical Thinking perspectives,
such as working with sources and problematising the past, appear to come to the fore more in
older pupils’ views of history.

**Method**

This article is based on material from a larger research project studying national testing and grading
policies in Year six. The project focuses on pupils’ experiences of and views on assessment in social
studies and science subjects. In other words, the emphasis is on the pupils’ perspective on the curri-
culum. In Sweden, pupils are tested in Swedish, English, and Mathematics during the spring term of
Year 6. Pupils are also tested in one of the science and technology subjects (Biology, Physics, or
Chemistry) and in one of the social studies subjects (History, Geography, Civics, or Religion).5

The questions on which this article rests concern the pupils’ views on history and if they had the
opportunity to show this in the national tests. The questions on grading involved the criteria used to
award grades in History and what it would take to get a higher grade. Pupils were also asked ques-
tions about their perspectives on historical knowledge, their school, and how they envisaged their
future.

Grade 6 (aged 12–13 years) pupils participating in the study were thus at the end of their upper
primary schooling. They have studied history according to the new syllabi since 2011 and have just, as
mentioned above, completed a national test. The interviews were carried out in 2014 with pupils who
had studied according to the new curriculum throughout their time in upper primary school, which
means that historical thinking (including source criticism) was part of their curriculum.

The sample is based on pupils from four different social settings, see Table 1 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social setting</th>
<th>Interview about test</th>
<th>Interview about grading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In middle-class setting School 1</td>
<td>n = 8</td>
<td>n = 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In upper middle-class setting School 2 and 3</td>
<td>n = 25</td>
<td>n = 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In rural setting School 4</td>
<td>n = 7</td>
<td>n = 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In suburban setting School 5</td>
<td>n = 11</td>
<td>n = 17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A purposive sampling was used, with the ambition to include schools representing different socio-
economic settings. The study was undertaken as a sub study of a major project in which other pupils
were interviewed (no. 298) by other researchers. The project as a whole aimed at achieving an equal representation of schools from different socio-economic settings. The individual pupils have not been asked about their background. Other studies belonging to the project have used the socio-economic context to a higher degree in the analysis. In this particular study, the basis was too small, and the similarities between student answers too great, for it to be a major aspect of the analysis. The same holds for aspects of ethnic diversity. This article is based on the interviews the author himself conducted. The idea of this approach was to ensure a greater familiarity with the context. Although there is an over-representation of city school in this study, there is a diversity of social environments. The least represented area is rural areas, but this at least reflects the demographic distribution in Sweden. Five schools are included in this substudy.

The study was carried out through a stimulated recall method. In the research project, pupils were interviewed in groups immediately after taking the national tests in History. During the interview, pupils had access to the test, and they were asked to reflect on how they solved the problems and whether they felt they had had a chance to demonstrate their historical knowledge. They were given 5–10 minutes to look at the test and were instructed to think about in what way the test could measure historical knowledge. The idea was that looking at the test would make it easier for them to reason about historical knowledge. There is no guarantee that stimulus material will yield more valid interview responses but based on Bryman (2016) and Haglund (2003), who argue that stimulus material can serve to trigger respondents’ reasoning, we expected that a concrete and visual example would help them think more deeply about historical knowledge and their performance on the test.

The pupils were also interviewed in connection with the grading process for the whole History course. This was done approximately three months after the first interview (which centred on the tests). The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the pupils are anonymised in the article. Pupil answers were preliminarily categorised in relation to theories of history education using the computer programme Nvivo. They were then reread and reclassified based on these initial categories in search of possible new themes and perspectives overlooked in the first analysis. A number of readings were made and different thematisations were tested against previous research and empirical material. The thematisation was based on recurring themes/topics identified in the analysis. The initial thematisation was informed by the previously presented theoretical perspectives and concepts (e.g. Seixas 2007; VanSledright 2011), in line with the procedures suggested by Ryan and Berhard (2003) and Bryman (2016). In selecting categories, the ambition was to include both recurring themes and less frequent themes to obtain variation in the character of themes.

This procedure was inspired by a reflecting interpretative approach (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2009). This approach requires having an open mind and letting the empirical material inspire and develop theoretical concepts and perspectives. This is not tantamount to categorising pupil comments deductively into pre-set categories. Rather, theory is used to inspire the interpretation but not to control it. The themes and subthemes identified are presented in the result section. The analysis was, therefore, ‘abductive’ in the sense that it proceeded from the views presented above (e.g. Seixas), while the empirical material influenced the categorisations and thematisations (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2009; Boolsen 2007).

In line with qualitative approach practice, attention has been paid to coherence patterns as well as variations in the answers (Larsson 2009). Typical examples represent the different perspectives in the presentation. The examples are related to theoretical perspectives and previous research, which means that the article has the ambition to make theoretical and not statistical generalisations (Yin 2014).

The test that the pupils took was designed to test all required abilities from the syllabus. The tasks mainly consisted of multiple choice questions, construct response tasks, and document-based questions. The tests are designed on the basis of the national curriculum and the results are expected to be taken into account in the overall assessment and grading. Summing up, the aspects that pupils are expected to have knowledge of concern, the use a historical frame of reference that incorporates different interpretations, the ability to critically examine, interpret, and evaluate sources as a basis for creating historical knowledge, and the ability to reflect on their own and other’s use of history
in different contexts and from different perspectives, and to use historical concepts to analyse how historical knowledge is organised (Lgr 11, 163).

The pupils in the present study (2014) took the tests when they were mandatory and part of the assessment and grading.

Results: performance or historical thinking

As indicated previously, Ball et al. (2012) argued that politicians naturally wanted things ‘to happen’ in schools to put their policy into practice. National tests and grades are tools for this, and it is the pupils’ reasoning about history in relation to such tools that is presented here.

According to the politicians involved, previous grades and national tests are expected to change the views within schools. Firstly, grades are expected to change pupils’ motivation to study (efforts pay off) and secondly, grades are expected to facilitate the follow-up to improve their content knowledge level. Grades combined with national tests are expected to reinforce content knowledge as the primary school objective (Proposition 2008/09:87 Tydligare mål och kunskapskrav [Clearer objectives and knowledge requirements]). The importance of accountability in improving education also reflects a general international trend (Biesta 2010). The knowledge acquired can be described as a form of analytical and discipline-based knowledge, and as the development of subject-specific forms of knowledge (see above). In short, disciplinary rather than generic knowledge should be developed (Counsell 2011; Young 2013). However, the pupils’ view of History partly deviates from these perspectives as shown in the results below as the disciplinary perspectives were relegated to the background in the pupils’ views.

Primarily, three main perspectives emerge from the material regarding views on historical knowledge, namely history as memory, strategic principals, and performance. There are also subcategories presented in greater detail in the result section. The three themes are contextualised in the conclusion in relation to a societal level and pupils’ average school day. The result section starts with pupils’ views of the national test in history and is followed by their views of grading.

History as memory: pupils’ perspectives on historical knowledge in relation to test

In the pupils’ reasoning, History emerges primarily as a knowledge domain of remembering as much as possible of the past, usually the national past. This is not surprising in one sense as it is consistent with previous international research. At the same time, the pupils have taken a national test, which in theory has the ambition to test other aspects of historical knowledge.

The reproduction of the past in the test answers can, however, contain different perspectives. This is usually connected to different kinds of comparisons. These comparisons are usually about placing persons and events in the correct chronological order.

There are different aspects within this category, but the basic understanding of historical knowledge is that this knowledge is about the past. Historical knowledge in school becomes an absolute phenomenon where the students know only a specific aspect of the past, usually the national past. The quotes below illustrate this idea:

**Jonna:** Here you have to know more. And for the other one, you don’t have to … It’s not the case that you have to know very much. That is, you have to know about the historical trials …

**Max:** You know, the thing is, it’s very important to know all the answers … That is, when you, because that’s the point when you’re in ninth grade for example, then you’re supposed to know most things because you’ve been practicing for six years, from third grade and onwards. But, so, you’ve practised so you’ll be, feel certain about all these things and questions you get, so … Right now in sixth grade you’re only halfway, and then you might not know everything.

The level of the historical knowledge is not determined by the ability to use source-critical principles, for example, which is emphasised in the curriculum (Lgr 11). It is rather the amount of knowledge that the pupil can remember that decides the level of knowledge. The ability to integrate
different kinds of knowledge as stressed in the curriculum and the Historical Thinking perspective (Cain and Chapman 2014; Counsell 2011) is not emphasised by the pupils either.

As already mentioned, the general understanding of historical knowledge as something reproducible contains a number of subcategories.

**Knowledge about important persons and historical epochs**

In the pupils’ reasoning, the recurring aspect is the knowledge of historical persons (nearly exclusively male royalty) and the nation. Often specific persons are linked to the founding of the nation in their reasoning about historical knowledge. In Swedish historical culture, Vasa is usually portrayed as an important ‘founding father’ of the nation:

Fia: Yes, a little, about Gustav Vasa and sort of.
Emanuell: The kings

The curriculum does not mention any persons explicitly, but it is possible to see, especially Gustav Vasa, as part of a foundational history of the emergence of a nation, which can explain why pupils, regardless of context, mention him. His importance is highlighted as a central aspect of history by pupils in multicultural school settings as well as in homogeneous classrooms. This is probably a reflection of the preserving function of textbooks.

The student perspective on historical knowledge is closely connected to a collective memory approach or narrative approach. The way to emphasise dynastic families (Vasa) and the national narrative has also a long European historiographical tradition (Berger 2015). The result supports previous studies on teaching in Sweden (Stolare 2017), as well as international studies in, for example, Latin Amerika and USA (Barton and Levstik 2008; Carretero 2011)

**Sequencing the events and chronology**

A further aspect of history, according to the pupils, concerns transforming a constant and non-changeable past into a reasonably chronological narrative from then into now. The pupil sees history as way of ‘knowing’ about generic time orientation (albeit a particular one) where history moves from ‘then to now’. In this context, historical knowledge is first about remembering what has happened, but it is also about being able to sort these events into sequences or a chronology. This should be viewed as a form of knowledge connected to what the Historical Thinking tradition calls ‘continuity and change’ (Seixas 2007). Even though the students do not explicitly express ideas about continuity and change, it is reasonable to connect some of their statements to this.

Sequencing as knowledge can be about the ability of the students to place events in a generally correct order.

Pelle: I think chronology is very important
Tova: Great events, and to be able to see how this has evolved and stuff; that the kings had formerly giant huge power

Regarding the chronological aspect of national development, important events and ‘great men’ such as kings are nodes in the chronological understanding. The national narrative is the key to the understanding of the meaning of chronology.

**Concepts, time, and method**

The students’ views of what conceptual knowledge in history is varies somewhat. One perspective emphasises knowledge of concepts associated with periods of time.

Muhammed: I thought, then we must have knowledge of the Stone Age, Bronze Age, and Iron Age and stuff like that. The thing is you never know what’s coming so you like to have everything in your head

Another perspective emphasises concepts that can be associated with history as a specific form of knowledge. In this perspective, access to a set of methods and concepts is a prerequisite for knowing
history. In the responses below, the student reasons about an assignment designed to test the ability of students to evaluate the quality of sources. Even though the assignment thus is designed to test Historical Thinking, the student expresses the notion that the knowledge tested by the assignment is a form of reproductive knowledge, since the concepts are not explicitly connected to a specific use. For example:

    Arvid: What a source is and what an interpretation is. What the differences are

In relation to the perspectives on history described above the core is above all History with a *nation-focused narrative*, together with *structuring concepts*. There is then a certain variation in the understanding of what knowledge of historical concepts can be, but the pupils do not generally see concepts as integrated parts of other kinds of historical knowledge.

There is then a certain variation in the understanding of what knowledge of historical concepts can be, but the pupils do not generally see concepts as integrated parts of other kinds of historical knowledge. *Integration of different aspects of historical knowledge is what the Historical Thinking perspective emphasises* (Chapman 2009; Stolare 2017).

**History as strategical principles**

In the pupils’ reasoning about historical knowledge, the *strategic* perspective is almost absent. The pupils did not really deliver any direct reasoning about history being a form of knowledge created and merged by historical sources.

The aspects of historical knowledge that have the character of strategic knowledge were indirectly expressed by the pupils. Generally, all subject content requirements involving their ability to ‘reason’, ‘argue for’, and ‘draw conclusions from’ can be seen as a type of performance ‘invitation’ (Ball 2003). Such aspects can be regarded as a form of strategic knowledge, but the curriculum specifies that the pupils should link reasoning, conclusions, and arguments to specific subject content. In History, for example, they are supposed to reason in relation to historical facts. The interviews hardly display any of this. The pupils do not use any disciplinary perspectives in so much that they do not link their reasoning ability to a subject-specific reasoning (Young 2013).

    Tilde: ‘There is much reasoning.’
    Hanna: ‘Reasoning good.’
    Fatima: ‘You draw conclusions.’
    Sara: ‘Yes, exactly.’
    Fatima: ‘Motivate.’
    Sara: ‘Yes, motivate and write understandably.’

The pupils are relatively used to using curricular concepts but have difficulty transferring the common concepts to History as a subject.

The integration of different aspects of historical knowledge is central in the Historical Thinking perspective; it is also something that is emphasised in the syllabus. But according to the pupils, it is a ‘either or’ story. Few examples exist where integration of knowledge is emphasised.

On the whole, History emerges as a knowledge area where reproduction of the national past is central, and the disciplinary content specified in the curriculum takes a back seat. When more strategic knowledge is highlighted, it is of a generic character. This approach to historical knowledge with a strong leaning towards combining reproduction and generic knowledge has also been identified in other countries (Counsell 2011).

**History as performance and memory: pupils’ perspectives on historical knowledge in relation to grading**

After the grades had been awarded, interviews were conducted which centred on the pupils’ understanding of the grade criteria used in relation to grading and assessing in the history subject. The
questions were typically phrased like this: ‘What do you think your teacher has based the grading of you on?’, ‘What knowledge do you have to demonstrate to earn the grade X?’. As mentioned above, the History-specific teaching perspectives were inadequate to understand the pupils’ accounts of History in relation to their grades. Below, certain educational sociological perspectives (especially Ball et al. 2012) are applied to the empirical data.

**History as performance**

When pupils reason about historical knowledge in relation to grades, a slightly different picture is revealed and the aspects concerning ‘performing’ are given more importance. One aspect is to perform well on the test:

Pia: I you can … Because there’s the stuff of the different criteria, you know. You should be able to compare and say something about why and stuff and [show] if you can do it. Because sometimes he just asks a question like that during the lesson. It’s pretty good if you can answer that. And then the national tests are pretty important.

According to the pupils, it is also very important to show that they behave and work hard in different contexts. It can also involve showing that they do their homework. Below are examples of pupils displaying this aspect:

Cristin: No. No, they must note how we work in the classroom, behave and do homework and that kind of things also.
Interviewer: So what do you need to know then?
Bernard: Work harder.
Christin: Listen more
Interviewer: When he is sitting there, thinking about which grade to set, how does he do that?
Micke: He thinks about how we work in the classroom and then he checks [results on] the national test and then he compares so that we get

Performing can also be linked to the generic knowledge of ‘writing skills’:

Carl: Yes, exactly. Perhaps writing, like.
Interviewer: What do you think? When you got the grade, what do you think, in History then? What do you sort of think that it was based on? What had you done to get the grade you got?
Bernard: If you wrote about the right things, I think.
Carl - Yes, and I wrote.

Overall, the pupils linked different forms of general performance activities to the knowledge of history. In a sense, this is in line with the general idea that pupils should ‘shape up’ with more assessment criteria and grading (Proposition 2008/09:87 Tydligare mål och kunskapskrav [Clearer objectives and knowledge requirements]). However, the pressure to perform might lead to less historical knowledge as the result of pupils focusing on generic skills performance without connection to historical knowledge skills.

**Historical knowledge as memory and reproduction of national history**

When pupils reason about the historical content knowledge and abilities on which grades are based, aspects directly linked to historical knowledge also emerge. These are close to the views expressed when the pupils reasoned about History and national tests, namely that History is a form of knowledge to which remembering and reproducing the national history is central:

David: You know history.
Interviewer: Yes. How are you thinking? What is knowing history, I wonder?
Anna: Like this, if I ask you, when was the Vasa period, you must answer. Then I say that’s right and then you know a bit of history.
The grade is based on how much of history is remembered:

Emma: What should be able to do? Well … You should be able to remember. Specifically very much …

Even if reproduction knowledge dominates, there are variations. Reasoning about similarities and differences between then and now is a requirement commonly stated, for example:

Dan: Many facts. Then you should reason about how … well, draw conclusions and [discern] similarities and differences between then and now

As shown above, most pupils emphasise the importance of ‘reasoning’ in regard to the national tests. In regard to grades, however, reasoning has a weak relation to historical content:

Eva: And even if you know all the facts and really cram it’s still nearly as if only the reasoning ability counts on the tests
Danira: You could say that you should be able to reason along different lines of thought. That you sort of start reasoning about one thing and then slide into something else. And a bit sort of …
Elsa: A lot about reasoning, kind of. And other types of perspectives, like

When the pupils interpret/enact the new policy for History in relation to grading, two main aspects emerge. One refers to performance and the other to reproducing and remembering history. According to the pupils, in other words, the grade is determined by how active they are and how much they can recall, which is not in compliance with the intention of the curriculum.

Memory and performance: discussion about pupil perspectives on history in the age of ‘pressure to perform’

Because of falling grades in international tests, Sweden’s education policy has gradually assumed a ‘performance’ (Ball et al. 2012; Tanner and Pérez Prieto 2014) perspective. Standards, grading, and tests are, therefore, important in Sweden, and the impact of ‘the pressure to perform’ has also affected the History subject. The focus of this study is the aspect at the end of the ‘delivery chain’, namely the pupils’ views on History in relation to national tests and grades. In Sweden, a shift towards a more standard-based curriculum has taken place, which means that subject knowledge is central and that procedural knowledge should be developed through the subjects (Wahlström and Sundberg 2015). In History, this involves causality reasoning, concept analysis, concept application, and source assessment. When the pupils in this study – directly after taking a national test in History – were asked to reason about what historical knowledge is, another subject partly emerged: a collective memory subject.

This tradition of focusing on memory and reproducing national history in primary education has also been well documented in previous research and can be seen as a subject’s selective traditions (Barton 2008; Carretero 2011; Englund 1986; Seixas 2007). This perspective prevails among pupils today, favouring a national chronology of actors, especially kings, who led the development of the nation into the present day. Even if there are strategical or procedural components of the subject in line with a disciplinary-related view of history, these are partly separated from the subject History. Rather, it is generic skills development arising from the study of history that is emphasised.

This trend has been highlighted and criticised by, for example, Counsell (2011) and Young and Muller (2016). They show that a disciplinary perspective has been challenged by another curricular trend, in which generic knowledge and subject-integrating perspectives are advocated by politicians.

A more discipline-based History subject is also challenged by other social changes. Berger (2015) points out that a kind of ‘memory boom’ and a wave of a ‘new nationalism’ now have hit the world. Issues of national identity and the preservation of a national heritage are gaining importance in schools and museums. By extension, it is reasonable to assume that this social change will affect the teaching of history in Europe (including Sweden), making it more politicised and the object of Curriculum Wars and History Wars. This is not a new phenomenon, which Evans (2004, 2012), for
instance, has shown. However, the current social changes may well lead to new challenges of a History instruction that aims to develop disciplinary knowledge.

History as ‘performance’ emerges most clearly in connection with the pupils’ discourse on grades and History, which has an emphasis on ‘working’, ‘listening’, ‘writing’, and ‘doing homework’ to get a better grade in History. In a sense, pupils have interpreted the policy correctly; in the new system of accountability, pupils must make a greater effort. At the same time, however, historical knowledge, as specified in the national curriculum, takes a back seat in the pupils’ accounts.

Irrespective of school context, the pressure to perform is constant. The socioeconomically strong schools stand out from other school settings in respect to knowing how to translate the pressure to perform into good school results.

While test results and grade statistics are a part of the ‘monitoring’ system, the logical question is what kind of conclusions different national actors can draw from the results. Judging by the pupils’ answers in this study, it is reasonable to assume that the statistically presented results do not reflect the intended knowledge. This means that the disciplinary knowledge content specified in the curricula does not correspond to pupils’ experiences of what the central historical knowledge is in national tests and grading. Rather, a subject emerges in which reproducing a statically national past is central, and a subject in which grading is linked to performance qualities such as working hard, writing more, and doing homework. It is also very apparent that subject-specific, disciplinary knowledge content is ‘under pressure’ in the age of performance.

Notes

1. Even though different parts of historical knowledge can be connected to the syllabus, the intent is, according to the authors of the Swedish syllabus, that these competencies together will support the development of pupils’ historical consciousness, which is the overall perspective in the syllabus (Nordgren and Johansson 2015).
2. Subsequent to the collection of the empirical material, the mandatory national tests were abolished. Instead, there are now optional support tools for assessing pupils’ knowledge, which, albeit less regulated, still function as a way for the state ‘to make things happen in schools’. The previous mandatory tests are also available and can still be used by the teachers.
3. However, these perspectives have recently been challenged in England.
4. It should be noted that Lee and Ashby (2000) base their research on pupils aged 7–14 years; thus, they can conclude that the progression of understanding is uneven, with different skills being acquired at different times.
5. There is a government review of the whole testing system in progress.

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