Historical Thinking Skills and Cognitive Levels in Spanish High School History Textbooks

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The main purpose of this study is to check how history textbooks in Spain contribute to the teaching of historical thinking competencies. To reach this goal, there are two specific objectives. The first one is to investigate the existence of historical thinking skills in History textbooks in Spanish Baccalaureate. The second is to establish what level of cognitive difficulty there is in the textbook activities when developing historical thinking competencies. For this purpose, a sample of almost 4000 activities from five Spanish textbooks publishers has been selected. The methodology is quantitative and based on descriptive analysis. The results show that the textbooks include few activities working on historical thinking competencies and with a low-medium cognitive skill level. The most frequent historical competencies are the analysis of sources and the identification of causes and consequences of historical events. The study concludes that Spanish publishers need to increase the presence of activities that promote history learning through thinking competencies.

INTRODUCTION

History has traditionally been present since the first attempts to create national curriculums in all "Western" countries at the beginning of the 19th century. Obviously, the reasons for studying history have evolved as societies have developed. First of all, history was of great importance in the construction of modern nations (19th century) and in the justification of the new model of state-centered power. In the present day, history education must fill an extremely significant gap due to the fact that the new objectives of

contemporary society have evolved towards an understanding of current social problems, democratic values, civic engagement, racism and the environment. As Prats and Santacana (2001) have pointed out, history is useful for students to understand the society they live in and how to behave and solve social problems to become good citizens in the future (Lévesque, 2008).

In recent decades, in the field of social sciences education, there has been a growing insistence on promoting competency-based history teaching. This involves teaching students not only historical contents (dates, facts, relevant figures), but also a series of skills related to epistemology and the historical method of investigation (Alvén, 2017; Bertram, 2016; Carretero, 2019; Eliasson et al., 2015; Ercikan & Seixas, 2015; Gómez et al., 2018).

For this reason, the main objective of this study is to reveal how history textbooks in Spain contribute towards developing these historical thinking skills. According to authors such as Lee (2011) and Seixas and Morton (2013), the historical thinking skills enable students to become more critical and to base their arguments more on scientific evidence, with up to six historical thinking concepts having been distinguished: the analysis of sources and evidence, the identification of causes and consequences, the identification of changes and continuities over time, historical perspective, historical relevance and the ethical dimension of history.

THEORICAL FRAMEWORK

Learning History Must be More than a Conglomeration of Facts and Dates

Current debates in both Italy and Spain, and, indeed, in all "Western" countries, concerning democratic values such as national identity and the interests of market forces influence new political discussions on the development of curriculums (Whitty, 1989). In this sense, it is of particular relevance to turn the discussion towards new teaching and learning topics, such as the development of concepts for historical thinking, the use of practical and active methodologies such as field work and investigation and the use of sources and evidence in the classroom.

As Wineburg (2002) stated in his book *Historical thinking and other unnatural acts*, it may be the case that we are asking the wrong questions. From ancient times, all societies have lamented young people's lack of historical knowledge, warning themselves that they were being condemned to repeat the same mistakes. In this regard, authors such as Dewey (1900) at the beginning of the 20th century were already advocating the teaching of history in accordance with the scientific method, using evidence and transforming the classroom into a historical laboratory in order to enable students to work like professional historians by carrying out research and investigation via the use of primary sources.

According to García (2021) historical positivism is still the hegemonic narrative in history education today. This kind of approach is closely linked to the "official history" of countries and the concept of nation. For this reason, Wineburg (2002) considers that we, as educators, should not ask "what history do we teach in the classroom?", but rather "why is it important to learn history today". The same author (Wineburg, 2002) also states that learning history is more than learning one fact after another. Our aim as history teachers is to enable students to work like professional historians, following a method, analyzing evidence, interpreting documents and pictures and understanding the complex relationships that lie behind people and events in the past. Furthermore, it should be debated and argued how these facts are related to the present and how we must act in the future in order to solve the current problems of society.

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