



Όμιλος ιστορικού διαλόγου
και έρευνας **association**
for historical dialogue
and research tarihsel
diyalog ve arastirma derneği

Association for Historical Dialogue and Research

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PROPOSAL BY THE ASSOCIATION FOR HISTORICAL DIALOGUE AND RESEARCH ON THE REFORM OF HISTORY EDUCATION

The ideas described below comprise our vision for a reform of history education that aspires to transform students' understanding of the world through the teaching of *how* to study the past and think historically. Understanding the past helps students become aware of how the world works, gives meaning to their present and helps them to have a glance to the future, not in the sense of predicting it, but 'preventing it from abusing them' (Lee, 1992). In this sense history cannot teach what Oakeshott (1983) calls a 'practical past' to serve contemporary, social and political goals. This kind of past, which aims at promoting contemporary ideas and values, rapidly becomes useless. When the time passes students who learned this 'practical past' are helpless in front of the new situations they have to deal with. Cyprus is a good example in point. Cypriots, across the divide, who were taught through the promotion of official narratives that their own group was always the victim and the 'others' the cause of their problems, feel today discomfort in communicating and discovering these 'others' and have difficulties in accepting ideas of reconciliation and cooperation. History education, the way the Association for Historical Dialogue and Research envisions it, can help students to develop the knowledge and mental tools that are necessary to understand the contemporary, and future world in which they are going to live as adults.

In our understanding of history education, political and ideological agendas should not distort history teaching, nor should history be used as a tool to consolidate division. Historical thinking not only enables us to understand the people distant in the past, but also contemporary people living next to or far away from us. In other words, by learning to think historically, we also learn to understand one another, accept and cooperate with each other. This does not imply, in any case, that history education should become a means to overturn one political agenda (promotion of national pride and blind patriotism) in favour of a new one (reconciliation). History is not about endowing a group with prestige and common purpose, or transmitting exclusive myths of origin and continuity. On the contrary, history is disinterested and universal, conforms to accepted tenets of evidence, is subject to debate and is always altered by time and hindsight (Makriyianni & Psaltis, 2007). History is also about trying to understand the past through its various versions in order to comprehend the way the world works.

Most of our students will finish school and still be ignorant of huge parts of factual knowledge. After all not even expert historians can possess the knowledge of everything that happened. Also, as events of the present happen, there is not guarantee that the factual knowledge they possess will connect meaningfully with those present events. But we can be sure that, if they learned something about historical enquiry, they will not be helpless in the face of competing stories and they will be able to use the tools which history offers to look for answers to new questions.

In the following paragraphs we present our proposal with regards to four areas of action:

- (1) Research
- (2) History curricula
- (3) Textbooks
- (4) Initial and in-service teacher training and support.



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(1) Research

The present situation

Currently a very limited amount of research exists on history education in Cyprus, mostly concerned with socio-political issues of identity formation and national representations. There are also some studies regarding school textbooks, which, however, focus solely on the books' content and not on the methodology used. There is complete absence of research on methodological issues (i.e. concept development, teaching practice). Moreover, the educational system does not seem to be informed about international research on history education.

Our proposal

Educational research is a valuable tool, which informs educational systems and guides their development. Especially in the area of history education, an under-researched area in Cyprus, the necessity of innovative studies is essential. Towards this direction, we propose the following actions:

- a. The reform of history education in Cyprus to be informed by evidence from the international arena of research.
- b. Research initiatives to be promoted in the area of history education in Cyprus (especially on methodological issues)
- c. Research to be pursued involving teachers and students in Cyprus to obtain a baseline of rich data (quantitative and qualitative) on what teachers and students think about historical issues or topics; which topics would be more open or resistant to intervention; which ones do they consider as most important when organising seminars or producing materials.¹
- d. Projects looking into ways of promoting historical understanding in Cyprus to be carried out by organisation, institutions and universities.

(2) History curricula

Present situation

Today, history education curricula, in both primary and secondary education, aim primarily to promote national identity and pride, and appreciation of our heritage. The vehicle to promote these goals is an official monolithic, highly didactic narrative,² which focuses on the moral (and often military in terms of heroism) superiority of 'our just nation' over that of immoral 'others'. This monolithic narrative is dominated by past political events with 'great' men as the main agents of change. In addition, this narrative focuses on 'national' history with very little attention to Cyprus, European and international history. Although history curricula contain general references to critical historical thinking, they are not substantially concerned with historical, methodological parameters. As a result, the history lesson is approached and taught as a language or literature lesson, without students becoming aware of history's unique characteristics. Moreover, students' personal encounter with other stories³ is not acknowledged.

¹ See also: Council of Europe Report, 2004, p. 48.

² Beside the obvious incompatibility between history (which demands impartiality and objectivity) and official versions of the past (which are usually partial and subjective and this also applies to the case of history education in Cyprus), research shows that the use of one official version of the past in many cases cannot even promote its contemporary patriotic aims (Wertsch and Rozin, 1998) and in addition it can create serious problems in historical understanding (Wertsch and Penuel, 1998).

³ Research evidence emphasise the importance of stories students encounter outside school (from family, media, friends etc.) and affect the way they see and understand school history (Wertsch and Rozin, 1998, Wineburg, 2000; Levstik, 2000, 2001).



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Our proposal

The total reform of history curricula in Cyprus is essential and as such it should focus on 3 categories of aims: (a) substantive knowledge, (b) concepts and (c) dispositions.

(a) Substantive knowledge

Acquisition of factual knowledge is vital in history education; history is also about what happened in the past. Of course, describing knowledge of the past as merely the knowledge of what happened is simplistic and problematic. Not everything that happened can be learned and there is not always an agreement as to what happened (Lee, 1991). What substantive knowledge should we teach then? The answer does not lie in identifying facts to be taught, but, first and foremost, in deciding upon criteria for selecting content. These criteria should encompass the degree in which the selected factual knowledge assists students understand the past from local, Cypriot, European and international perspectives and the degree in which it develops students' historical thinking.

Students should also be able to place themselves in time to see their present and future in the context of the past. Just the knowledge of the past is not enough in this case. They need a past they can use which means a past they can remember (a past worth to be remembered). According to research evidence, students do not have a coherent picture of the past to use to make a sense for the present and the future (Lee, 2004). Instead, they possess fragmental knowledge of events and people much of it is forgotten soon after it is studied (Lee, 2004; Shemilt, 2000). Students are not able to integrate new factual knowledge with the one already possessed. The result of this is usually the displacement of older knowledge in favour of the new one. In order to achieve orientation in time students need to develop 'big pictures' of the past to function as usable historical frameworks. In other words they need to find the ways to connect these pieces of knowledge in bigger groupings, expand their understanding of human development and identify elements of change and continuity over extended periods of time. These historical frameworks are not in any case fixed versions of the past, but more like developmental narratives of change and flexible knowledge frameworks, as they are always open to debate and new evidence.

In this line, we propose the substantive (factual) knowledge to be offered through the history curriculum to:

- a. Give equal emphasis to local, Cypriot, European and international histories.
- b. Abandon the monolithic, monoperspectival nature of factual knowledge, currently offered, and include multiple perspectives from the local, Cypriot, European and international context, so that students become aware of them and learn to assess sources and narratives in relation to contrasting accounts.
- c. Give equal emphasis to aspects of history other than the political and military, like every day life and work conditions in rural and urban areas, science, education, social changes, technological development, minorities, religious groups, migration, women, children.
- d. Include provisions to work with students' personal and oral stories.
- e. Combine teaching of outlines of historical periods (e.g. outline of middle ages in Cyprus), thematic studies over long time spans (e.g. medicine in Cyprus from ancient times until today, draught) and depth studies of events and short time periods (e.g. 1963-64 and 1974 events, Cypriots in World War II) to assist students in developing coherent historical frameworks.



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(b) Concepts

This category of aims refers to second order (disciplinary) historical concepts⁴ used by historians when studying history and substantive concepts⁵ used by historians to describe the past. Students need these concepts in order to be able to think about the past. Historical thinking is about understanding the way the discipline of history works (*how we know about the past*). Students need to understand something of the discipline of history (perspective, logic and methods) in order for historical knowledge to seem reasonable and therefore worthy to be learned and remembered (Shemilt, 1980).

Concepts cannot be ignored since students 'do not come to their classroom empty-handed; they bring with them ideas based on their own experience of how the world works and how people are likely to behave' (Lee, 2005:31). Failing to identify and understand students' preconceptions may result in severe difficulties of comprehending the nature, form and structure of the historical knowledge we offer. Children begin to develop understandings of the world in a very young age. These initial understandings have a powerful effect on the integration of new concepts and understandings (Bransford et al. 2000). Students' ideas 'can be helpful to history teachers but they can also create problems because ideas that work well in everyday world are not always applicable in the study of history'⁶ (Lee, 2005: 31). If students' 'initial understanding is not engaged, they may fail to grasp the new concepts and information that are taught, or they may learn them for purposes of a test but revert to their preconceptions outside the classroom' (Bransford et al. 2000:14-15). Also, the idea of learning about how we know about the past is closely linked with the development of meta-cognitive skills.

Understanding concepts is a difficult task and not in any case an all- or- nothing situation. Our aim is to keep helping students to develop more powerful ideas. In this line, we recommend new history curricula to:

- a. Include provisions for identifying students' preconceptions about substantive and second-order (historical) concepts;
- b. Identify clearly the concepts and the relevant abilities (e.g. using sources, evaluating accounts etc.) that should be developed;
- c. Include aims that explicitly address the issue of developing students' ideas about historical concepts.

(c) Dispositions

The last category of aims refers to the development of dispositions that are a fundamental part of the discipline of history. In order to try to interpret and understand the past we need to be respectful towards evidence and ready, to provide impartial accounts (even if these evidence and accounts produce stories we do not want to know or tell). We also must be able to appreciate well grounded judgments and make every effort to achieve them. A respect for the past, its people and their achievements and acknowledgment of the distance between us and

⁴ These concepts include understandings and ideas about historical accounts, evidences and interpretations, change and continuity, cause and effect, empathy, time etc.

⁵ These are concepts historians use to describe political, social, economic and cultural phenomena (e.g. trade, democracy, king, slavery, constitution etc.). They are numerous and are referred to various areas of human activity. The selection of which substantive concepts are to be developed in classrooms needs to be based on the relevance of the factual knowledge to be taught.

⁶ For example the every day idea that we can only be sure about an event only if we witness it cannot work in history, since in many cases we study about events that happened before any living person was born. If this everyday idea remain history will seem impossible for the students.



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them⁷ is crucial in order to study history. All these dispositions are not present in students' ideas⁸ thus need to be developed.

Overall, each one of the three, above-mentioned categories of aims is necessary for the others to be effective, meaningful and successfully pursued. For example, conceptual understanding has no meaning without substantive (factual) knowledge to think about, and without coherent historical frameworks to orientate us in time⁹. Historical thinking is meaningless without the dispositions that regulate it. Similarly, the offer of various perspectives to students is useless, confusing and even dangerous, without the development of the necessary conceptual tools and abilities, which will help them to work with these different and in many cases competing stories.

(3) Textbooks

Present situation

The majority of the history textbooks used today present a monolithic, monoperspectival and ethnocentric official narrative. 'The textbooks also tend to give safe and uncontroversial accounts acting as a filter that ignores the different perspectives... [within 'our' community] and choose to exclude views and perspectives that may reflect badly on the nation' (Karayianni, 2005: 73). In addition to this monolithic narrative, which occupies a large and dominant position in the textbooks, the sources provided serve only as supplementary (and often poor) material to support it. Consequently, school textbooks do not include any methodological tools that facilitate concept developing, acquisition of abilities or dispositions (beyond the appreciation of 'our glorious' past and culture). What is more disturbing is that in many cases textbooks, instead of contributing to the development of students' ideas, they reinforce misconceptions and increase prejudice and stereotypes.

Our proposal

History textbooks should provide opportunities to achieve the curriculum aims, as described above, by:

- a. Including primary and secondary sources of a variety of kind (written, visual, audio);
- b. Incorporating sources that vary in perspectives;
- c. Providing material for studying outlines, thematic studies and depth studies;
- d. Providing carefully designed tasks and activities that aim to develop substantive (factual) knowledge, specific historical concepts, abilities and relevant dispositions.

Furthermore, on the stage of *production* and in order to create high-quality, history textbooks that substantially contribute to the advancement of historical thinking and understanding, we propose that the production of textbooks¹⁰ is:

⁷ '[By] viewing the past as usable, something that speak to us without intermediary or translation, we end up turning it into yet another commodity for instant consumption' (Wineburg, 2001: 6).

⁸ For example, research show that students have an idea of a deficit past populated by people less clever and less civilised than us (Barton, 1996; Lee and Asbhy, 2001). This idea is the natural way of thinking, since students encounter past behaviours and institutions that seem strange and peculiar if we see them by present codes of behaviour (Lee, 2005). Unfortunately this misconception is even present in our history textbooks in some cases.

⁹ Orientation in time and disciplinary knowledge are, according to Lee (2004), not sufficient by there own. Only when they are combined can lead to historical literacy. Similarly Shemilt (2000) claims that when students don't have a big picture of the past (a satisfactory historical framework), the benefits from the disciplinary approach of history education are not sufficient.

¹⁰The chance to produce textbooks and teaching material should be given to other organisations or private initiatives too (as long as these productions satisfy criteria of quality).



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- a. Assigned to joined groups of educators specialised in history education and historians, aided by social and developmental psychologists and curriculum designers.
- b. Informed by educational research on history education and the experience of producing textbooks in other educational systems.
- c. Informed by the experience and expertise of organisations, such as the Association of Historical Dialogue and Research, EUROCLIO, Council of Europe.
- d. Pursued in dialogue with other organisations and private initiatives.

(4) Initial and in-service teacher training and support

The present situation

Today, a significant part of teachers' population has never had formal education on history education¹¹. Extremely limited opportunities for training on history teaching and learning have been provided by educational authorities. This lack of formal initial and in-service training has left teachers with old methods and static epistemologies; feeling insecure and reluctant to use new approaches; unable to work with sources and handle multiple perspectives, and resistant to changes in history education.

During the last five years the inter-communal Association for Historical Dialogue and Research in cooperation with the Council of Europe and organisations like EUROCLIO, supported by Teachers' Trade Unions across the divide provided a variety of opportunities for training in history education and initiated the production of a number of publications and supplementary, educational material, in order to fill this gap. Much more, of course, can happen and such initiatives need to be supported on a systematic basis.

Our proposal

Successful teachers' teaching is affected by teachers' skills to organise their classes and convey clear goals to students, their knowledge about the content and the discipline of history and the available methodological tools of history education (Wineburg and Wilson, 2001; Husbands et al., 2003). Effective teaching is also shaped by knowledge of social-psychological theories and concepts, like prejudice and stereotyping, as well as ways to recognise and avoid such types of thinking. It is obvious that 'even the "ideal" textbook, would not be of much use in the hands of a teacher that misapprehends the nature of historical knowledge thus failing to promote historical understanding' (Makriyianni and Psaltis, 2007). In order to equip teachers with these tools and knowledge, certain actions should be taken:

- a. Include the subject of history education in initial teacher training, taught by educators specialised in history education.
- b. Offer systematic in-service teacher training about current developments, research findings and best practices in history education from all over the world.
- c. Employ the experience and expertise of the Association of Historical Dialogue and Research, and other organisations such as the Council of Europe and EUROCLIO.
- d. Offer post graduate university degrees in the field of history education.
- e. Form history advisory groups, comprised by teachers specialised in history education, under the auspices of educational authorities (similar to the groups that already exist for other subjects) to provide support to teachers who teach history (visit schools to guide teachers, organise training seminars, gather, produce and disseminate high-quality supplementary material etc.)

¹¹ For at least a decade the subject of history education was not taught by Universities of Cyprus. Also most of secondary school historians also do not have formal education in history education.



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Conclusion

In conclusion, the Association for Historical Dialogue and Research sees history education as a means in itself; it helps students navigate their lives in an informed and critical manner with an enhanced sense of agency and critical thinking. History education is by no means a tool to convey a fixed version of the past, or to promote political and ideological agendas.

In order to promote students' historical thinking and understanding, a complete reform on history education in Cyprus, informed by educational research, is needed. This reform should be based on the understanding that history education is primarily about developing concepts and dispositions that are essential part of the discipline of history. The need for new curricula and textbooks is urgent. Initial and in-service teacher training in history education and the support of their everyday practice is also an essential element towards reform.

Achieving historical literacy is not an easy mission. History is an 'unnatural act' (Wineburg, 2001) in terms of ways of studying the past, but also in terms of dispositions. It's an achievement of combining substantive and disciplinary knowledge, both regulated by dispositions. It is also a developmental process in all levels and not an all-or-nothing situation. We do not aim to create mini historians, but to help our students have a better understanding of the world.



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APPENDIX 1

The Association for Historical Dialogue and Research

Values, mission and aims

The Association for Historical Dialogue and Research of Cyprus recognises the *values* of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights, the covenants of Human Rights issued by the United Nations, and the UNESCO recommendations relevant to history teaching. The Association's *mission* is to defend and promote productive dialogue and research in issues regarding history and history teaching to strengthen peace, stability, democracy and critical thinking.

Past, present and future

It was on April 21, 2003, that a number of educators and researchers, with an active interest in the teaching and learning of history, decided to establish in Cyprus a non-governmental, non-profitable, multi-communal organisation called The Association for Historical Dialogue and Research. The birth of the Association almost coincided with a historic change that took place on the island when on April 23, 2003 travel restrictions between the two sides of the Green Line in Cyprus were eased and several thousand Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots had their first chance since 1974 to cross the divide. For an Association which recognises the values of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as the UNESCO recommendations relevant to history teaching, and which seeks to defend and promote productive dialogue and research on issues regarding history and history teaching, the time was right. It was evident that, more than ever before, the Association for Historical Dialogue and Research had to actively begin to realise its shared aims, and in doing so the AHDR established cooperation with Teacher Trade Unions across the divide and organisation at a local, European and international level.

In line with the UNESCO and the Council of Europe recommendations, the Association for Historical Dialogue and Research, since its foundation, has enlisted members from various ethnic, linguistic, and professional backgrounds working at various educational levels in Cyprus, making the first steps of a greater effort: an effort to maintain a continuous, productive dialogue about enhanced pedagogic practices that would encourage the values of the discipline of history. Its Board, comprising Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot educators and historians, is a brilliant example of how productive collaboration; creative ideas and respect can blossom across the divide.

The Association has held a number of events, beginning with a two-day educational seminar in February 2004 entitled '*What does it mean to think historically? Approaches to teaching and learning history*'. The event received very positive written and oral feedback from the 250 academics, researchers and educators who came together from all over Cyprus, across disciplinary and linguistic boundaries to discuss ways in which historical thinking could be advanced. Many other educational events followed after this first opening to the public. The Association has set as one of its priorities the teacher training on the epistemology and methodology of history teaching and learning. Many inter-communal educational discussions, seminars, workshops and projects have been organised in collaboration with civil society and teacher trade unions across the divide in Cyprus and organisations abroad, such as EUROCLIO, CDRSEE, University of Oxford, Council of Europe. The greatest, current project-vision of the Association is the Home for Cooperation: the establishment of a **Research and Educational Centre** (Centre for young people and educators, multi-functional Conference room, Centre for Exhibitions and Archives, Library and work place for non-governmental organisations) in the UN Buffer Zone which will revitalise the 'dead zone' and create prospects for peace and stability in Cyprus.

For more information, please visit the Association's website at:

<http://www.hisdialresearch.org/activities.htm>