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Students' conceptions of history and history teaching in lifelong learning

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Abstract

*This paper presents analyse of lifelong learning in the context of schooling in Portugal, reflecting on the relevance of learning History in promoting historical skills, in students' own identity, and civic education as preparation for citizenship. Research was carried out in two classes of an urban school in Braga, one of which was 1st – 2nd grade and the other 3rd – 4th grade, over two academic years (2004-2005 and 2005 -2006). This study is an integral part of more in-depth research conducted for the doctoral dissertation entitled, *O ensino da História no 1.º Ciclo: a concepção do tempo histórico nas crianças e os contextos para o seu desenvolvimento*, (*The teaching of history in the 1st Cycle: the conception of historical time in children and contexts for its development*). The students involved in the project recognised that History is important for a historical understanding of who we are. History also proves to be important in establishing a more responsible and participative citizenship, since only by knowing about the past can we understand the present and plan a better future.*

This paper begins with a brief statement on the concept of life learning, the relevance of learning History in promoting historical skills, in students' own identity and civic education as preparation for citizenship. In the more extensive second part, data from a study conducted using semi-structured interviews with primary and secondary school pupils in Portugal (aged 6 – 14) will be analysed to show the nature of their feelings towards history and history teaching at different moments in their learning, and to reflect on the relevance and value of history.

Lifelong learning, citizenship and learning history

Lifelong learning takes on different meanings within different locations and discourses. Nicoll's book (2006) analyses the different discourse on sites on which the constitution and lifelong learning have been considered. She analysed the dispersions, relations and concentrations of meanings of lifelong learning as they have emerged within the discourse of policy, and scholarly and institutional sites. Lifelong learning "is often taken to denote a beneficial opening of learning to individuals across their lifespan" (Nicoll, 2006, p.3). The term lifelong learning recognises that learning is not confined to childhood or the classroom, but takes place throughout life and in a range of situations. As lifelong learning is "lifelong, lifewide, voluntary, and self-motivated", learning to learn, that is, learning how to recognise learning strategies, and monitor and evaluate learning, is a pre-condition for lifelong learning.

Knight (1996) presents three categories of aims for teaching History in schools, which reflect the concern for training for citizenship throughout life. The first set of aims is

concerned with knowledge of the past, through the learning of concepts, some specific to the subject, others common to other subject areas. The second set of aims concerns the competencies that can be developed through learning History: competencies for analysing situations, summarising, communicating and understanding other points of view. And the last set of aims concerns the moral reasoning, emphasis in valour of the History, and the research of thought and human action. These competencies are essential attributes for citizenship in a democratic society and a large part of what is learnt in History is transferred to other areas of intellectual research, enabling us to enrich our daily lives. The third set of aims involve above all the moral reasoning, emphasis in valour of the History, and the research of thought and human action.

There are several official Portuguese documents which value the importance of history teaching from elementary schooling (1st cycle) in order to shape identity, to value heritage and promote citizenship. The documents propose the teaching of history from the 1st cycle of elementary teaching, but the underlying concept of history can also be seen from these documents.

In the 1998 version of the *Organização Curricular e Programa: 1º Ciclo do Ensino Básico* (Curricular Organisation and Syllabus; 1st Cycle of Elementary Teaching) three dimensions of History's contribution are indicated: 1) *the dimension for citizenship*; 2) *for personal development* and 3) *in basic and fundamental intellectual acquisitions*. In the more recent document, *Currículo Nacional do Ensino Básico: Competências Essenciais* (2001) (National Curriculum for Elementary Teaching: Essential Competencies), the principles on which the document is based clearly give training for citizenship as one of the aims of learning History. In the section on Specific Competencies, the study of History in the 1st cycle of Elementary Teaching is included in the Study of Our Surroundings and in History. One of the three areas into which the specific competencies are grouped is *localisation in space and time*. Reference is made to both personal and family history and local and national as well as recognition and everyday use of time references: "the use of traces of other times as a source of information to reconstitute the past, understand it and organise the present" (ME-DEB, 2001, p. 82).

History proves to be important for:

- a) *Knowing who we are*, with the aim of contributing towards shaping our personal, family, national and European identity;
- b) *Understanding others and how to relate to them*, promoting acceptance, tolerance and respect for others, for other peoples and cultures;
- c) *Understanding the present and planning paths for the future*, helping us to understand that the present is the fruit of the past, but that it can also contribute towards picturing the future.
- d) *Developing specific competencies of a cognitive nature*, in developing capacities of reasoning, inference, causality, argumentation, directly related to historical thinking.
- e) *Developing competencies of a transversal nature*, mainly related to mastering the mother tongue and new information technologies.

In this study I analyse lifelong learning in the context of schooling, reflecting on the relevance of learning History in promoting historical skills, in students' own identity, and civic education as preparation for citizenship.

The study

This study is an integral part of more in-depth research conducted for the doctoral dissertation entitled, *O ensino da História no 1.º Ciclo: a concepção do tempo histórico nas crianças e os contextos para o seu desenvolvimento*, (*The teaching of history in the 1st Cycle: the conception of historical time in children and contexts for its development*), undertaken with primary school children (aged 6 – 10) in Portugal. The study was carried out in two classes of an urban school in Braga, one of which was 1st – 2nd grade and the other 3rd – 4th grade, over two academic years (2004-2005 and 2005 -2006). Diverse teaching strategies were implemented in these groups for Social Studies and History with a view to promoting learning about the past and about history and to developing historical understanding and historical time via classroom activities presented by the teacher investigate and often continued by the classroom teachers. During the two-year period, each pupil (24 in the 1st/2nd grade group and 25 in the 3rd/4th grade group) was interviewed three times: at the beginning (b) of the 1st or 3rd grade and at the end (e) of the 1st and 2nd or 3rd and 4th grade. Almost all of the 4th grade group (22 pupils) were again interviewed four years later in the 8th grade (2009-2010). Through these interviews, especially through the final interviews with the students in the 8th grade, I intend to verify to what extent changes were noted in the explanations given in relation to the conception of the past and of history. I also intend to assess their historical knowledge throughout their schooling and how this project is reflected in their historical skills.

Initially, the interview questions analysed in this study, which are similar to those of the studies of Levstik and Pappas (1987), Levstik and Barton (1996) and Barton and Levstik (1996), were conceived with the same end as in these studies – the understanding of historical time in children – which can be seen in the analysis categories of the table presented in the following section. In relation to the question of learning history, especially with whom they learn, they are also related to the study by Hoge and Foster (2002).

This paper describes only part of the results of the study developed via semi-structured interviews, endeavouring to analyse mainly the relationship between history, the past and personal, family and collective memory established by primary school pupils, with a focus on comparing the data of the same students in their 3rd/4th school years and in the 8th grade. In another communication presented at the *Tenth Conference of Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe Thematic Network* (Solé, 2008), I compared the data in the 1st/2nd grade group (24 pupils) and in the 3rd/4th grade group (25 pupils). Content analysis (Bardin, 1994) was used to analyse and categorise the interviews, with the categories having emerged from questions of protocol centred directly round the notion of history, the past and the study of history: *For you, what is the past? What do you understand by the term 'history'? Where, how and with whom do you learn about the past and history? Do you think it is important to learn about history? What purpose does it serve?* The same protocol was used in the final interviews in the 8th grade (2009-2010),

but other questions were asked to assess how the project was reflected in these students: *How has the project about learning History, in which you participated in 2004 to 2006, been reflected in your history studies in other school grades (5th, 6th, 7th and 8th grade), and how has it promoted your historical skills? What grade did you obtain for History in the 5th, 6th, 7th and 8th grade?*

Subcategories emerged from the pupils' answers (see Table 1). To perform categorisation, we used the software support programme, NVivo 2.0.

Table 1. Conception of the past, of history, and aims of history

Categories	Subcategories	Total number of references by years of schooling						
		1 st b	1 st e	2 nd e	3 rd b	3 rd e	4 th e	8 th
Conception of the past	Chronological past	11	17	21	19	16	10	16
	Personal past	9	9	10	3	1	0	0
	Historical past	4	5	5	6	6	13	6
Conception of history	Chronology	2	2	4	9	5	6	9
	Human past	0	0	6	9	8	8	2
	Significant past	3	0	2	5	10	20	9
	Preservation of memory/Identity	0	0	2	1	2	3	1
	Human convention /evidence	0	0	0	2	2	5	3
	Discipline	0	0	3	1	2	1	0
	Change	1	0	2	0	2	9	2
	Linear Progress	0	0	0	7	2	1	0
	Story	7	7	4	0	2	0	0
	Personal Interest	4	0	2	5	10	3	1
	With multiple meanings	0	0	0	0	0	4	0
	Purposes/Aims of history	Knowing and learning	8	18	17	18	23	18
Recounting and teaching		0	5	0	3	7	8	1
Understanding/comparing past, present and future		0	0	8	4	0	9	8
Reminding, remembering, as memory		2	3	18	3	8	4	5
Historical ambiguity		10	4	2	2	0	0	0

In relation to the past, the students expressed three different conceptions: the chronological past, the personal past and the historical past. We ascertained that most students (with the exception of the 4th grade) associate the past with the chronological past and time notions, associating the past with something that has already happened, which has already passed, particularly a long time ago.

Students from the 1st and 2nd grade and some students from the 3rd grade associate the past with different times, recent or distant. For most of the 3rd and 4th grade students, the past is something that has already happened, revealing greater awareness that the past is not only what “happened a long time ago”, but can also be recent. They already show a clear notion of time continuity, of the most distant to the most recent; others give examples of time quantification. Some students explain the past by comparing it with other times, present and future.

In the 8th year, the same students reinforce the idea of the past associated with different times, but also with an undetermined time in the past: “Everything that has happened, regardless of what year it was” (Rui Manuel). The idea of continuity of time is reinforced in this school year, associated with the idea that the present is part of the past, as Mariana, mentions: “They are things that happened but continue to influence our lives. There may be consequences of the past in the future”.

The conception of past associated with the personal past occurs exclusively in the 1st and 2nd years, and at the beginning of the 3rd year, but the latter already establish a relationship between personal and family past and historical time, and can locate the former in historical time. Only a few students associate the concept of past with historical past, the youngest with the Story of Jesus, and from the 3rd year, to some historical knowledge. However, they consider the past to be somehow deficient: “The past was a long time ago. They used to hunt for food in a lot of places. They used to go to a lot of places on foot. They didn’t have cars” (Isidro).

From the 3rd grade, but more evident in the 4th grade, they already stress what is most significant in History, both at the political level and in everyday life. A considerable number of 4th grade students see History as being part of the past, but of a significant past, constructed by historians from sources, and which is constantly being developed through new studies and research.

In the 8th grade, the notion of past is reinforced by comparison with the present; it is part of the present and contributes towards a better understanding of the present, as Bruno says: “I think past exists so that we can compare what we were like to what we are like now”. It also helps us to picture the future and avoid making the mistakes of the past, an idea stressed by Anabela: “Through the past we can take precautionary measures in relation to the future”. Only in the 8th year was the question directly asked: *What is the difference between past and History?*, no longer considering that History is directly related to chronological difference, though some students still refer to this, but not with the difference associated with the idea of History being concerned with the distant past, as we can see from Catarina’s answer: “there may be history in the present day”. This difference appears to be more closely related to relevance and significance, with reference to the past encompassing everything indistinctly, while History is concerned with the most important events for humanity, as shown in Isidoro’s answer: “The past is what has already happened. History studies the most important facts that have happened”. History contributes towards the construction of knowledge of the past through the interpretation of sources.

Just as Levstik and Pappas (1987) and Hoodless (1998) ascertain, also by analysing students' answers, it can be seen that, from the 2nd grade, students make a perfect distinction between history and past in chronological terms, considering that History is concerned with what happened a long time ago and the past is a more recent time. This idea is gradually replaced by relevance, selection and significance of the historical facts that characterise history, as opposed to the past, which is everything.

Eleven categories arose from the analysis of the students' answers to the question: *What do you understand by History?* (Table1). Some of the younger students associate History with the story/narrative, which is due to the ambiguity of the term *história* in Portuguese, meaning both history and story. However, similarly to Levstik and Pappas (1987), we saw that some younger students, from the 1st and 2nd grades, already associate History with chronology, using terms related to time to explain what History is and its relationship with the past, such as, history is "the past" and "from a long time ago". The 3rd and 4th grades continue to use similar expressions, but some highlight dating as being essential in History, as Roberto states: "History deals with what has happened over the centuries". In the 8th grade, the students already have a clear definition of History, explicitly involving the dimension of diachronic time associated with historic events, as we can see in some students' answers: "It is what has happened throughout the life of humans, from pre-history to the present day. It is the various events that have occurred" (Carolina). The concept of human past is watered down in other conceptions, but much more evident in the definition given by Tiago: "It studies the past since man came into existence, since the existence of writing".

It is from the end of the 3rd grade and mainly in the 4th grade that the association of History with the significant past is more evident. Students identify what is really important in History, highlighting and giving examples of important events in the History of Portugal, not only associated with political History, but also with everyday life, which was worked on throughout the project. In the 8th year, several students even highlight some important facts studied by history, integrated into themes that they had already studied or were studying, as can be seen in the justification given by Guilhermina: "History is when there was something like the industrial revolution, the Renaissance era, the discovery of fire, which were all small things that were important for history, that were important for humanity".

Before History is studied formally, some students in the 2nd and 3rd grade understand History as the preservation of the memory and personal and family identity, mentioning words and expressions such as "souvenir", "reminder", "what happens from generation to generation". After studying History, the students recognise History as important for preserving not only personal, but also national memory, and as essential for constructing individual and collective identity. Historical awareness in the 8th grade is expressed more in defining the past and in the purpose of history rather than in defining history, as Rui Miguel states: "History helps us to understand the past better, so that we can understand the present and the future. So that we can be better than we were".

While some 4th grade students recognised the importance of constructing historical knowledge from interpreting sources, from the search for facts to produce historical inferences, in the 8th grade, they tend to stress History as a science, because of the

concern with the scientific rigour through the methods used, as can be seen from José Marco's statement: "It is what happened all the same, but proven scientifically. It's what is scientifically proven".

As for the function of history, analysed from the answers given by the students to the question: *Do you think it is important to learn History? What purpose does it serve?* all the school grades under analysis note that it is important to know, understand and learn about History, which shows the role of History as school knowledge as part of general knowledge. In the 4th grade, there are students whose commentaries reflect on the importance of the study of History as a preparation for later learning throughout their school life, in their academic and then professional options. In the 8th grade, most students consider that History is important for "general knowledge", "keeping informed as to what happened" (Bernardete). History is a source of knowledge, of knowing and one should therefore seek knowledge about the past.

The younger students' value history for its function of preserving memory and identity associated mainly with the past and history of the family and in transmitting the family heritage. Although the older students (3rd and 4th grades) state the importance of preserving family memory, they already show an awareness of the importance of history for personal, family but also national identity. In the 8th grade, the students value collective and national identity, which contributes towards shaping the national identity of a people, as expressed clearly by Bruno: "we have to know what our country is like, and know what we were like before. Also living in a country and not knowing how we evolved, what we were like before and are now.

We had seen that the occasional student in the 2nd grade already seemed to have a feeling of historical awareness even without having studied History. This probably has more to do with repeating expressions that they hear rather than a real awareness of the aim of History to contribute towards studying the past to better understand the present and envisage the future. The idea conveyed by the 4th grade students that History can help prevent us from making the mistakes of the past is stressed by some of the same students in the 8th grade. They even give examples of mistakes made in the more distant past (e.g. Slavery, Inquisition) as well as the more recent past, even associated with natural disasters, as Ricardo Manuel mentions: "These things that are happening in Haiti and in Madeira, most of them may be natural, but others might be due to human error in the past". We ascertained that when some of the students identify mistakes in the past, such as slavery or the Inquisition, they already show a high level of empathetic understanding in accordance with the progression model of ideas on historical empathy proposed by Ashby & Lee (1987). In this way, they seek to question and relate these practices in the context of the time, as we can see in Anabela's statements: "for example at the time of the Inquisition, certain things we now think are absurd, we have to understand that at that time they made sense".

This inter-relation between the past, present and future also implicitly reflects values of citizenship, in as much as if citizens know about the past, they will have a better understanding of the present and who we are and will strive to be better and act in a better way in the future. These ideas are verbalised by Ricardo Manuel: "History serves to understand the past better, to be able to understand the present and the future. So we

can be better than we were". The idea suggested by the 4th grade students that History contributes towards perceiving and understanding changes is reinforced by the same students in the 8th grade, with one student even stating that History is important "for us to know the History of Portugal and therefore know the History of our country and be able to see the differences between the past and now" (Paula), or even going from the present to the past, identifying similarities as well as differences, ideas of change, which is clearly explicit in Silvia's speech: "We are the reflection of the past, (History), it is important for us to know ourselves through what has happened and see the differences, what has changed". What prevails among these students is the notion of History associated more with change than with progress. This notion is similar to that of Irish children (Northern Ireland), according to the study carried out by Barton (2001) in which they show a conception of History associated with the idea of change. In contrast, American children have a conception of progress.

In relation to learning about History and the past, the younger students referred to Catechism classes (up to the 2nd grade), those in the 3rd grade mentioned museums and, before the 4th grade, few mention school as a privileged place for learning History. This is because the younger students do not have any formal studies in this subject and the older ones assume that school is where they learn History and therefore do not mention it directly. In contrast, its relevance is highlighted in the 8th grade (80% of the students) since it is mainly at school, and in the subject of History, that they say they learn History from the subject teachers. Up to the 4th grade, the family (parents and grandparents) is one of the main agents for transmitting historical knowledge, often associated with family stories contextualised in different historical eras (in the Salazar era, in the colonial war, during the 25th April Revolution). In the 8th grade, little reference is made to the family, but when it is mentioned, the students talk about interesting conversations they have had with their grandparents, whose stories contribute to preserving family memory and individual, family and even national identity. Up to the 4th grade, visits to museums and monuments, when they are mentioned, are made mainly with the family, while students in the 8th grade value the learning achieved through these visits, but in a school context, on field trips, as well as during holidays both in Portugal and abroad. We also saw changes at the level of the media and resources used for acquiring knowledge about the past. Among the youngest, there was a certain tendency to prefer the use of books, photographs and visits to museums and monuments to the use of the media. In the 8th grade, the students indicate mainly books, some specifically history books, encyclopaedias and historical fiction; television, films and historical documentaries. Use of the Internet to research historical matters was also stressed, though, interestingly, they say they prefer to consult books as they contain more rigorous and detailed historical information. There are even students who say they prefer computer games on consoles related to historical eras, which indicates that these 8th grade students, who had been subjected to a History teaching project in the 3rd and 4th grades, value and are interested in learning history even in their leisure time. These would appear to be indirect reflections of the project in which they took part over the two years.

We aimed to gauge the contribution of the project, carried out between 2004 and 2006, to history studies throughout the students' school career, by asking them two questions:

How has the project about learning History, in which you participated in 2004 to 2006, been reflected in your history studies in other school grades (5th, 6th, 7th and 8th grade), and how has it promoted your historical skills? What grade did you obtain for History in the 5th, 6th, 7th and 8th grades? As for how the project has been reflected in their learning of History throughout their school career, all the students were unanimous in recognising the enormous benefits that this project brought them in relation to the learning of History. These were seen not only at the level of the historical knowledge they acquire, but also through the capacities developed at the level of historical and time understanding, as well as in the benefits, interest and motivation they feel in studying for this subject. They showed that in the 5th and 6th years, in the subject of History, they already had historical knowledge about what was being taught and had a better understanding of the themes and historical issues because of this prior knowledge. They also applied this prior knowledge and related it to new contents taught, showing themselves to be better prepared in relation to their classmates, which was evident at the level of historical understanding. Several students said that the teachers were surprised not only at the historical knowledge they possessed, but also at their capacities for historical understanding. In her interview, Gabriela says just that: “It helped me because I related the things we had already learnt in the 3rd and 4th grades (...) I already had a term of comparison and a different way of interpreting ...”

Several of the experiences and pedagogical strategies are mentioned, such as the use and construction of timelines, genealogies, use of pictures, narratives and visits to museums. They remembered these as contributing towards developing specific competencies in History, related to historical understanding at the level of contextualisation, spatiality and time, but also competencies in interpreting sources and at the level of communication, in constructing reports and summarising historical ideas. Rui Manuel stresses the didactic-pedagogical component of the importance of various strategies used, stating: “Because we were children, the way in which the issues were approached was very important (...) for instance, it was important to use timelines, to put pictures on them in chronological order”. Other students stress the role of timelines in developing time comprehension.

These 8th grade students proved to be participative in history classes, playing an active role in the lessons, asking questions, discussing, arguing and counter-arguing. They were students who were always interested and motivated, as Catarina points out: “We were more interested, sometimes (the teacher) was surprised because we always had our hands up, we would compare it with what we had learnt before”. Several students said that History was one of their favourite subjects and that the project had influenced them and helped them enjoy history, which they would continue to do throughout their lives regardless of their future academic and professional choices.

With regard to academic success, we were able to ascertain that the impact of the project was also reflected in the students' grades, particularly in the two years following the project, with a slight drop in these in the 7th and 8th grades. Most students obtained a grade of 4 (Very Good) diminishing slightly from the 5th grade (64%) to the 6th grade (60%), and more noticeably from the 7th grade (41%) to the 8th grade (27%). The students justified this fall in grades mainly for two reasons: 1) greater quantity and complexity of the historical contents to be studied; 2) pedagogical differences in the

teachers, which are also reflected indirectly in their school performance. A significant number of students proved to be excellent at History, with a grade of 5, which they maintained throughout the four years, and in the 8th grade, 4 of the 6 excellent students obtained this grade in the 1st term, which effectively proves the high academic performance of these students. Only two of the students obtained a negative grade in History, one of them in the 5th and 7th grade and the other in the 7th and 8th grade. The grade of 3 was only the dominant grade in the 8th grade among this group of students. We were satisfied with the impact of the project, not only because of the students' academic success, which was confirmed by the good grades they obtained in History, but also because of the ease and enthusiasm with which the students talk about History, the capacities that the project gave them not only at the level of historical understanding, but also in developing competencies of a transversal nature.

Final Considerations

The students involved in the project recognised that History is important for a historical understanding of who we are. In order to shape our identity at various levels, it is important to know about the past in order to understand the present and plan paths for the future. It also contributes towards developing specific competencies of a cognitive nature directly related to historical thought, as well as promoting transversal competencies. History also proves to be important in establishing a more responsible and participative citizenship, since only by knowing about the past can we understand the present and plan a better future. Thus, the way in which time in History is conceived and how History interrelates time can be reflected in historical awareness and in decision-making.

This study allows us to conclude that it is important to develop competencies in children at the level of historical and time understanding from an early age, since these competencies are reflected in sound learning abilities in History in the future. We proved that the teaching of History can and should be taught from the early years of schooling, so that children can develop capacities and competencies at the level of historical understanding, through the use of strategies, experiences and good pedagogical practices. These were reflected throughout their school career as an advantage in developing the learning of History and in the students heightened interest in and appreciation for History throughout their lives.

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