

# *Teaching and learning history to students of diverse backgrounds*

What does it mean to think historically?

Promoting historical understanding in classrooms of mixed abilities and diverse backgrounds and developing channels of communication with the wider community

The Pestalozzi Program  
Cyprus Pedagogical Institute, Ministry of Education and Culture

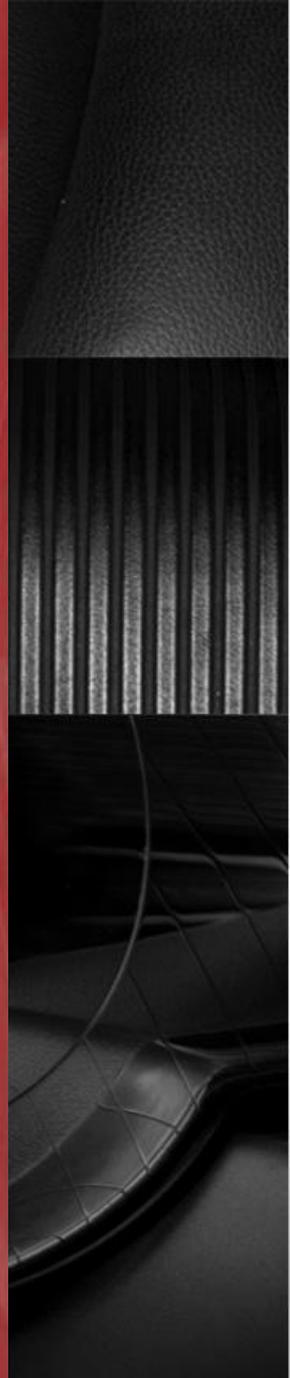
26 -28 September 2012

Nicosia, Cyprus

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- How can schools strike a balance between unity and diversity in increasingly multicultural, shifting worlds with porous borders and multiple affiliations? What, if at all, would History's role be in that?
- Should schools strive to build a national identity? And if yes, is History an appropriate subject to do so?



# History's history I

- Nation-building role during 19<sup>th</sup> century & the establishment of the nation-states
- National biography was way for citizens to identify with the collective body, the nation to which they belonged mostly by birth and to which they owed allegiance:
  - citizenship seen as exerted in boundaries of nation-states
- Challenge of nationalistic and militaristic way of teaching history became more definitive after WWII (through UNESCO, Council of Europe, Georg-Eckert-Institut) (Cajani, 2007)



## History's history II

- Ethnocentric and Eurocentric approaches to History teaching still remain dominant in many countries of Europe.

This can be achieved through:

- Positive and normative evaluation of one's own history and the negative evaluation of the history of others
- Presentation of an unbroken continuity of one's own development through time
- One's own positive development placed in the center of history while others stay at the periphery (Rüsen, 2007)



# Patriotic history in liberal states I

- Fear that diversity will lead to corrosion of social cohesion:
  - struggles for maintaining a common social thread necessary for keeping up democratic institutions &
  - danger of demoralization (a critical examination of the past may provide reasons for not liking the nation)
- Fear that if children are not made to think of themselves as part of something larger, particularistic ties in their families and communities may be reinforced, depriving them of their freedom to choose (Brighouse, 2003).



# Patriotic history II

## Liberal arguments in favor of patriotism

- Obligations to our compatriots that we do not have toward non-citizens by virtue of sharing their nationality
- Universal obligation of respect for persons yields a duty of partial concern toward compatriots
- Patriotism facilitates the stability of the liberal state. Trust is a practical necessity for stability
- Patriotism is instrumental for distributive justice which may be augmented by association (Brighouse, 2003)



# Patriotic history III: Casting doubts

- Often in many national identities lies a sense of superiority that justifies overriding the legitimate interests of non-nationals
- Can children really reflect critically on the character of their national identity in the context of a patriotic history or curriculum?
- Patriotic attachment may interfere with other loyalties and attachments which are instrumental for justice
- “Patriotism will not help us to carry out our duties to those with whom we share a scheme of social cooperation” (Cajani, 2007, p. 168)
- In practice it is hard to pursue the patriotic purposes while staying true to the discipline (of history) (Brighouse, 2003)



# Multiculturalist critiques of History teaching

- Despite the diversity within, many national educational systems mobilize monocultural ideologies to promote national identities.
  - History may serve at a national and supra-national level to shape such exclusive identities of communities and nations
- History teaching that is designed as a tool for nation-building is likely to undermine history as a tool in educating for democracy.
- Ordinary people, women, minorities, immigrants and others in society are mostly invisible in the dominant narratives
- Marginalization of disadvantaged groups favors the reproduction of mainstream society's norms and values. No room for enabling pupils to see that all cultures need to be affirmed and for critically questioning the dominant one



## Cont'd

- There is not one story or 'national history' to teach. The nation experienced from the perspective of one is not the same as that from the perspective of another
- History needs to be made relevant to minorities' lives—minority students often become disengaged from school and History in particular
- Where are people's *histories*? Events such as wars, disasters and conflicts of the past dominate over everyday life experience of ordinary people living in the past (Georgiadis & Apostolos, 2009).



# Coming clean...

- Making of history is complex; questions of power and differing interests and perspectives are central
- Historical narratives are not fixed but changing. History and collective memories change as historical research develops with each era developing new interpretations of the past
- Historical knowledge is not value-free; it is subjective and theory-laden, as such it inevitably reflects a particular point of view.
- Students should be encouraged to critically examine competing truths and accounts
- Historical skills and historical content cannot be separated. Both pedagogical *and* history backgrounds are important for history educators (Virta, 2009)



## Cont'd

- Teaching is a political act: teachers should have a clear vision of what purposes history and education in general should serve within the society in which they live
- Diversity does not inevitably imply a lack of solidarity or pose a threat to national identity
- Young people do not identify primarily or exclusively with the nation-state but have multiple and shifting identities
- Rather than preach about the nation-state, teachers need to engage students in a dialogue about the challenges it faces; build on respect for human rights values; & prepare citizens of the world rather than of a particular nation (Osler, 2009)



# Approaching History from a multicultural perspective

- The idea of cultures as being units or entities subscribes to reified and essentialized constructions of culture and, by implication, difference
- “Ethnocentrism is theoretically dissolved if the specifics of a culture are understood as a combination of elements that are shared by all cultures” (Rüsen, 2007, p. 30)
  - The self in the other and the other in the self: otherness as a mirror of self
  - “what is different about the other is composed of elements that also belong to oneself” (Rüsen, 2007, p. 34)



# Overcoming ethnocentrism:

- Principle of equality—challenging the master narrative of one's own group enables one to recognize otherness
- Applying the idea of historical development: importance of historicity; allows for ruptures and discontinuities in historical experience; the past loses its inevitability
- Multiperspectivity and polycentrism (Rüsen, 2007)
- World vision of history: a vision encompassing the human experience as a whole vs. from an ethnic center
  - Makes intercultural approach possible (multiperspective approach to social issues)
  - Compatible with ideal of cosmopolitanism (Cajani, 2007)



# What kind of society do we want to have?

- If the vision is for students through History learning (and schooling in general) to become responsible, critical, reflective and active citizens acting both at the level of the local and the global (Virta, 2009), *and given that*
- identity is more effectively conceptualized as a process in-the-making, rather than a fixed entity, *then:*
- Culturally responsive teaching may be an appropriate means “to promote the academic achievement and cultural competence of students of students of color, as well as to support their abilities to critique power relations and promote equality and social justice” (Epstein, Mayorga & Nelson, 2011, p. 4)



# Culturally responsive teachers:

- Are socioculturally conscious
- Have affirming views of students from diverse backgrounds
- See themselves as agents of social change to make schools more equitable
- Understand how learners construct knowledge and are capable of promoting knowledge construction
- Know about the lives of their students
- Build on what their students already know and also help them move beyond the familiar

(Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 21)



# Some final thoughts or suggestions

- Engage in western self-criticism & deconstruction of western historical thought
- Non-western forms of historical thinking and historical culture need to be made visible to avoid narrow-mindedness
- Disrupt the mainstream narrative & make histories and views of the marginalized 'others' an essential dimension of the curriculum; do so from their own perspectives
- Not just integrate their histories in the curricula, but re-frame them as agentic, individual and collective actors in history and society, and as a diverse group.
  - Inclusion of others' stories can assist young people in developing positive attitudes toward the group of study, dissolve misconceptions and engage minorities in learning and schooling

# Cont'd

- Realize that racism changes and what works in one context may not work in another
- Present race and racism as terms which connote a complex set of relationships, can take individual or institutional form, working at the macro and micro level of interaction.
  - Include in teaching subtle as well as blatant aspects of oppression
- Make race a legitimate topic of discussion both historically and in contemporary society, encourage questions, concerns, experiences; organize debates to present multiple perspectives, watch documentaries, do simulations, role play, conduct oral history studies
- Promote reading, discussing, and interrogating primary sources of multiple perspectives of the past in a way that would reveal the social and racial dynamics contributing to minorities' marginalization
- Apply constructivist, project-based and collaborative approaches to learning



# Cont'd

- Challenge preconceptions and stereotypes of marginalized groups, acknowledge the complexities in relationships among historical actors and groups in complex ways, acknowledge the existence of multiple causes and consequences
- Critically examine the 'default' group: examine diversity within as experiences may vary according to ethnicity, gender, class, and other social markers within the same sociocultural group
- critically examine teachers' own sociocultural affiliations and perceptions
- Realize that teaching history (or any other discipline) is a political act: some topics, themes or interpretations are emphasized over others.
- Pursue discussions with migrant students and families
- Reflective teaching
- Pursue authentic experience of teaching in culturally diverse classrooms

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