

Inclusive History Education, Historical Thinking, and Historical Consciousness

Introduction

One of the pillars of modern educational systems is to provide education for all of its citizens. Typically, this is claimed to be crucial in order for us to have functioning societies: to participate in societal processes, citizens need to have certain knowledge and skills. A key aspect in providing this kind of education is that it should be inclusive in providing access to education for all members of society, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, religion, or social status.¹ A school subject that has been perceived as crucial in promoting and maintaining functioning democratic societies is history.² One of the key arguments in this research is that history education, often framed in national contexts, is problematic since it may exclude minorities or marginalized groups in society. In order to avoid this, there has been a move towards focusing on the disciplinary aspects of history and developing learners' mastery of cognitive skills akin to those deployed by academic historians.³ A trend in Anglo-American history educational research focusing on students with special needs, often coined as inclusive history education, is similarly to implement and assess history educational interventions aimed at developing these same cognitive skills in order for them to access the academic expectations specified in history curricula.⁴ Or in the words of American researcher Susan De La Paz in reference to history education for students with learning disabilities:

»Disciplinary skills are [...] relevant for meeting students' future needs, because it seems likely that as students learn to reason about people in the past, they will develop more sophisticated ways of reasoning about the myriad issues and viewpoints that require critical thinking today.«⁵

1 UNESCO 2016.

2 Carretero et al. 2012; Psaltis et al. 2017; Seixas 2018.

3 Lévesque 2008.

4 Ciullo et al. 2020; De La Paz 2013; Ferretti et al. 2001; Gersten/Okolo 2007; Reisman 2012.

5 De La Paz 2013, 90.

In this quotation, we can see that De La Paz associates disciplinary skills with students' ability to reason about people in the past and to develop critical thinking that can be used to navigate in today's society. A similar argument has been made by Canadian researcher Peter Seixas. He argues that in order for history education to be inclusive and to avoid excluding marginalized learners, it should focus on the development of a disciplinary approach to history, rather than rely on traditional grand narratives or post-modern fragmentation.⁶ According to Seixas, the traditional one-sided narrative is bound to exclude marginalized groups in society and the post-modern critique of history may lead to an understanding of history as subjective and unscientific that will result in social division. Instead, he argues that it is only through history education focusing on how to bring students to grapple with how history is constructed by historians and how to assess the validity of historical narratives that history education can be inclusive, since all students will come to appreciate that there are certain standards and criteria we can apply to find out what is historically accurate.

The theoretical concept that has first and foremost come to be used to specify what disciplinary skills mean in history education is historical thinking.⁷ Historical thinking as a concept relates to how historians work with sourcing and corroboration⁸ and the ability to handle the cognitive problems historians confront when writing history.⁹ It is through a focus on these aspects that history education can become inclusive and promote a democratic society, since it would allow all learners to develop critical thinking skills through developing the disciplinary skills of historians. Consequently, the development of disciplinary skills is stipulated as the primary aim of history education. In the remainder of this text I will discuss what inclusive history education is and what it could be by problematizing historical thinking as the primary aim for history education. This is an approach to history education that contrasts to those in the predominantly German research field of history didactics.¹⁰ In the following section, I will begin by engaging in a somewhat theoretical discussion of problems related to inclusive history education framed along the concept of historical thinking that have been highlighted in research.

Inclusive History Education: A Quick Glance at the Research Field

In a review of research on history education for students with special needs, De La Paz notes that there are three types of interventions that have proven successful in promoting disciplinary skills among learners: (i) historical reading and writing in the discipline of history, (ii) historical discussions and debates, and (iii) inquiry instruction.¹¹ What these types of interventions have in common is that they focus on and require learners to approach historical

⁶ Seixas 2000.

⁷ Lee 1983; Seixas 2017; Wineburg 2001.

⁸ Reisman 2012; Reisman/Wineburg 2012.

⁹ Lévesque/Clark 2018; Seixas 2017; Seixas/Peck 2004.

¹⁰ Barsch et al. 2020.

¹¹ De La Paz 2013, 91.

narratives with cognitive distance and present evidence to enforce or debunk various historical narratives. In short, the key aim is not to learn about the past but rather to learn about the extent to which we can trust various accounts of the past, that is, to develop historical thinking.

If we accept historical thinking as the educational aim in history education for students with special needs, it follows that the central problem students face in history education is framed as mastering the ability to analyze historical source material and accounts and constructing historical narratives by applying disciplinary skills.¹² Given that disciplinary skills and historical thinking have been proven to be cognitively challenging for learners,¹³ a concern in research on history education aimed at promoting historical thinking is how to organize educational efforts to support the development of disciplinary skills among learners, rather than how to perceive the content or objective of the subject taught.¹⁴ Students with learning difficulties have been shown to be particularly vulnerable in this aspect, and inclusive history education is hence presented as a problem for these students requiring a lot of effort to help them acquire historical thinking.¹⁵

There is also evidence that students with learning difficulties show low adherence to social norms and values, which in turn affects their academic possibilities negatively, thus excluding them from the opportunity to participate in society as equal peers.¹⁶ Another aspect that has been highlighted in research is that teacher-student relationships play a crucial part in special needs education,¹⁷ but I want to argue that this relationship can also be affected by how we perceive the subject taught and its objectives, that is, what relationship we want to establish between the learner and the subject. This can be illustrated by a study by Ralph Ferretti, Charles MacArthur, and Cynthia Okolo¹⁸ with the objective of helping learners with and without mild disabilities learn historical content and historical thinking through working with historical source material covering the westward expansion in the United States during the 19th century. A recurring difficulty for students in the intervention was to understand what life in the 1800s was like. This proved to be an obstacle for students as they found it difficult to understand the historical context of the sources and thus disregarded the motives of the people living in the 19th century, made judgements from their present-day perspective, and failed to see the point of assessing the source material used and using conflicting source material to create historical narratives,¹⁹ that is, to develop historical thinking. In order to circumvent these difficulties, the teachers in the intervention chose to disregard the source material and instead tried to relate the westward expansion of the 1800s to the learners' own lives:

¹² Marino 2022.

¹³ Lee/Ashby 2000; Wineburg 1998, 2007.

¹⁴ Ciullo et al. 2020; Reisman 2012; Scruggs et al. 2017.

¹⁵ Daley 2022; Ferretti et al. 2001.

¹⁶ Jacob et al. 2022.

¹⁷ Jacob et al. 2022.

¹⁸ Ferretti et al. 2001.

¹⁹ Ferretti et al. 2001.

»Appreciating the nature of life in the 1800s presented another challenge, and we observed teachers use events from students' daily lives to help them contrast this period to their own. Thus, the immediacy and responsiveness of the classroom discussions seemed important in promoting the learning of all students.«²⁰

Through the use of historical analogy, the teachers in the intervention managed to help students make connections between their own lives and those of the people in the source material. When education was organized this way, students realized that they were studying an historical era different from their own and they started to appreciate the continuities and discontinuities between life in the 19th and 21st centuries. This, in turn, helped them analyze the source material at hand, albeit in a quite rudimentary way:

»After the intervention, compared to before, a greater percentage of students understood that bias involves the distortion of evidence to support an opinion, bias is suggested when contradictory evidence is ignored, and historians may have different opinions because they have access to different sources of evidence.«²¹

My interpretation of what this example shows is that the development of disciplinary skills in history education is facilitated when learners understand the contextual relationships between the lives of people in the past and their own lives. This may seem commonplace and self-evident, but it points toward aspects in history education and the development of sophisticated cognitive skills that I think have been disregarded or overlooked in much of the research on historical thinking: learners need to know something about the historical contexts that they engage with and they need to realize that these historical contexts matter to them.²² I hold that this problem may be connected to how we frame the history subject: is it a subject that should approximate academic ideals far removed from the learners or is it a subject that should approximate learners' needs and contexts at the expense of academic ideals?²³ It is evident that history education framed along the concept of historical thinking is closer to academic ideals than to the learners' own lives, even if we promote these academic ideals for the benefit of the learners.

There is a risk that if history education is only to be conceived according to the epistemic standards of academic history, it fails to recognize the situatedness and social hierarchies of historical knowledge and the construction thereof.²⁴ Thus, it could be argued that there is a risk that the ideal of inclusive history education through the development of disciplinary skills may work to exclude marginalized groups in society since they have historically lacked access to academic institutions and knowledge practices. A similar argument has recently

20 Ferretti et al. 2001, 68–69.

21 Ferretti et al. 2001, 66.

22 Ahlskog 2019.

23 Bernstein 1973.

24 Donnelly/Norton 2017; Keynes 2019; Thorp/Persson 2020.

been made by the Canadian researcher Sarah Reddington, who argues that incorporating the perspectives and voices of marginalized learners is key in preventing ableism and that we need to actively engage with the standards by which we approach learning situations with these learners.²⁵ If we take the arguments presented above seriously, I hold that we need to revisit and discuss the objectives with which we stipulate and approach inclusive history education. In the following section, I will try to do just that. However, due to reasons of scope, this discussion will not be exhaustive but should rather be read as an invitation to further debate in the history educational research community.

What Is the Purpose of History Education?

Departing from the challenges I have highlighted above, this section will try to do three things: (i) briefly outline a variety of legitimate aims for history education, (ii) make an argument for the need to reflect on these aims when teaching history, and (iii) propose a theoretical perspective that will encompass these aims and modestly suggest how we could approach this theoretical perspective in history education. Let us begin with the aims of history education.

From what has been written above, we can perceive one aim of history education as that of developing and promoting epistemic practices in the form of historical thinking. As I have tried to show above, history education that aims at promoting epistemic practices takes as its departure the knowledge practices of historians in academia. This is what could be called a closed framing of the history subject since the object of what is to be taught is stipulated without concern for differing educational contexts or individual learners.

Another aim is proposed by the German philosopher of history Jörn Rüsen. He argues that human beings construct and make use of history because we have a need to orientate ourselves in time.²⁶ Through history, we are able to find our footing not only in our present day lives, but also in the vastness of time, both past and future. Without historical narratives and knowledge of them, we would have no means to make sense of ourselves and the world we live in. According to my interpretation there are two aspects at play here: we use history to understand ourselves in accordance with the various categories that go along with being a human being, and we use history to understand the society we live in. From this we can glean two aims for history education: that we need to study history in order to gain individual orientation and that we need to study history in order to gain societal orientation. If the aim of history education is individual orientation, the focus of the educational effort would be to enable the individual learner to see him- or herself as a historical subject, and the point of departure for history education would be the interests and needs of the individual learner. Hence, this is an open framing of the history subject since what the subject contains can only be formulated in relation to individual learners and their contexts. History education that

²⁵ Reddington 2022.

²⁶ Rüsen 1989.

aims for societal orientation would still need to take the interests and needs of the learners into consideration but only in relation to how they can understand the development of their societies and their places in them. This framing of the history subject is thus less open.

Another aim of history education is that of establishing and upholding civility. This view has been promoted by, among others, the English philosopher R. G. Collingwood.²⁷ To Collingwood, the end of any educational effort is to establish moral behavior through self-consciousness, and he regards history as the pre-eminent subject that allows us to do that in any educational system. Through studying history, we become aware of the moral principles that underlie any civil society, and through this we will acquire moral behavior and civility.²⁸ This aim for history education could be called an ethical orientation. History education that aims at ethical orientation would relate to individual learners as moral subjects and strive to develop ethical skills among them through the study of historical examples. Learners in this mode of history education should also become self-aware in the sense that they can regard themselves as moral and rational agents in contemporary and future society. This framing is thus open in relation to learners as moral agents, but more oriented toward developing cognitive skills, albeit in a different sense than historical thinking. Perhaps the table below can illustrate how we can regard these four aims of history education:

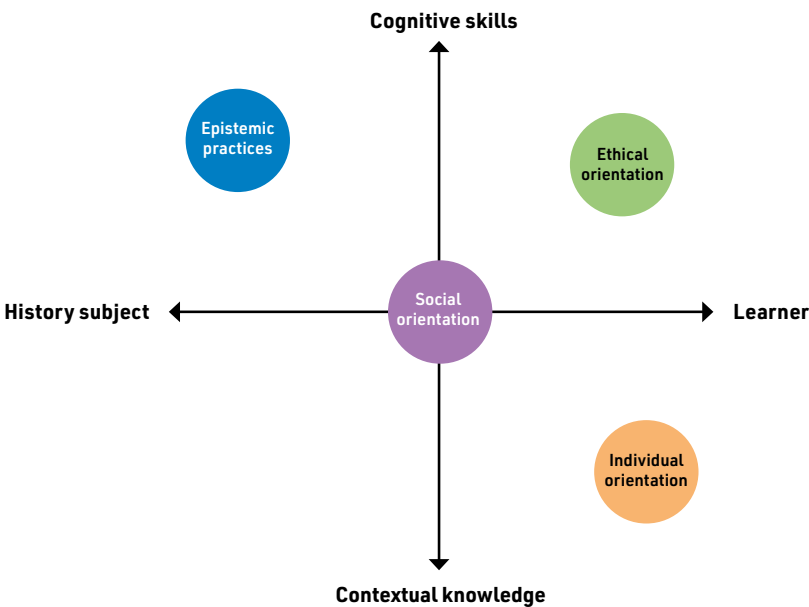


Fig. 1: Aims of history education.

²⁷ Collingwood 1989.

²⁸ Hughes-Warrington 1996.

Inclusive History Education, Again

If we return to the notion of inclusive history education with these four aims of history education in mind, we may be able to approach the problems highlighted in research in a different way. In the section above I engaged in a discussion that highlights some of the problems that have been encountered in research when we stipulate that epistemic practices in the form of historical thinking should form the aim of inclusive history education. Instead, I will propose that inclusive history education first and foremost should engage learners in building identities and strive to empower them through an acquisition of knowledge that enables all students to engage in social discourses on history and to further their place in a pluralistic society,²⁹ something that requires both substantive and disciplinary knowledge. This means that we should reflect on history education aiming at individual, social, and ethical orientation as well as cognitive skills. Thus, history education should aim at making learners see themselves as historical subjects with moral agency who can appreciate the historical dimension of our societies. However, we also need to build an awareness that any approach to history is contingent on the historical cultural context in which it occurs and we need cognitive tools and skills to deal with this cognitive problem.

As the keen observer may have already noted, these four approaches to history education are not mutually exclusive and it may be hard to analytically separate them. Where, for instance, would we draw the line between individual and ethical orientation? This is a formidable theoretical and analytical problem if we want to argue that we should stipulate the aim of history education in relation to only one of these four aims. That, however, is not what I am trying to do here. Instead, I think we can use these four aims to reflect on what may be called the complexity and, perhaps, the fluidity of history education and to envision alternate approaches to implementing, for instance, inclusive history education in the classroom. My concern is that historical thinking may be too narrow a concept to encapsulate this complexity and we may need other concepts to guide us when we stipulate the aim of history education. Therefore, I will argue for a reframing of inclusive history education that engages with the inescapable historicity of our being in the world,³⁰ inspired by Hans-Georg Gadamer's view of historical consciousness.³¹ In the following sections, I will strive to make sense of this.

If we look at history education specifically, we can assume, from the discussion above, that there are two aspects that are particularly salient if we want to promote an understanding of history to all learners: (i) students need to develop knowledge about history to be able to participate in social discourses and make sense of the world and themselves, and (ii) students need to develop disciplinary skills, that is, knowledge of how history is always a reconstruction of past events that needs to be scrutinized according to certain standards. Let us begin with the first of these aspects: to develop knowledge of history and to participate

²⁹ Körber 2021.

³⁰ Thorp/Persson 2020.

³¹ Gadamer 1975.

in social discourses. German researcher Andreas Körber recently argued that any history educational endeavor must take as its point of departure the establishment of a relationship between the learner and the history subject.³² If we accept the notion that history education always takes place in a contemporary context and that learners are always positioned in and affected by that context, it makes sense to try to establish some kind of meaningful connection between the learners' contemporary context and the historical content being taught (which by the way is, of course, also always taught and re-enacted in that same contemporary context). Hence, history has to make sense to learners in order for them to appreciate it as something valuable.³³

From this line of reasoning it follows that social context plays a crucial role in history education: if we want history to engage learners and seem useful to them, which could be assumed to be a prerequisite for inclusive education, there needs to be some kind of connection to the learners' lived experiences and needs. If we take my country of origin, Sweden, as an example and we assume that we have a need for inclusive history education in Sweden, then it would seem appropriate to try to identify what threats to inclusion there are in Swedish society at present. Of course this could be a rather long and potentially contentious list, but for the sake of argument we can take increasing segregation and poverty to be just that, as was highlighted in a recent editorial in *The Lancet Regional Health – Europe*.³⁴ Now, even if segregation and poverty is something that affects Swedish society as a whole, we should not assume that it means the same thing to all Swedish citizens. As an example, my view of Swedish society and my needs as an academically and socially privileged member of that same society will probably differ from those of, let us say, a struggling learner of history in a Swedish primary school. Furthermore, we should not assume that what I think is meaningful and engaging about history education in Sweden would (or perhaps even should) be equally meaningful to the learner above. The point I am trying to make here is that we should be hesitant in assuming that all learners have the same interests and needs in relation to history education initially, and that in order for history education to be engaging and stimulating to all learners we need to pay close attention to their actual interests and needs instead of assuming that there is merely one legitimate approach to history education.

By now you are probably wondering what this has to do with inclusive history education. The argument I am trying to make is that as members of society we have different resources, beliefs, hopes, worries, and needs and this is exactly why we need to think of inclusion in relation to history education. If everyone were equal in these respects it would not make sense to even postulate the need for inclusive education in history. Now, if we want history to engage learners it seems prudent that we should try to adapt the history subject and topics we cover to the context they are being taught in and my guess is that this is something that any teacher of history will be well aware of.

³² Körber 2021.

³³ Körber/Pearce 2021.

³⁴ The Editorial Board 2023.

Instead of viewing the development of historical thinking as the only legitimate aim of history education, we should try to adapt the aim of history education to the students we are teaching, perhaps according to one or more of the four aims I proposed above. This is exactly what the teacher in the quoted passage above does: since the students have a very limited understanding of the historical context they are engaging with and consequently find it hard to make sense of what is happening and what the historical sources they have been given have to do with this, the teacher connects the historical context to a context they will be familiar with: the contemporary one in which they are leading their lives. Through this connection, then, students are able to construct a meaningful relationship between themselves and the historical context and they are then able to understand that life in the 1800s was different from life today regarding some important aspects. Cognitively you could argue that there are (at least) two things happening here: (i) students become aware that there are some enduring issues that go along with being human and (ii) the context in which people live their lives affects how they go about dealing with these enduring issues, and this is true for people living in both past and present time. This means that how we go about constructing these relationships will be contingent on the context in which we are teaching history and that we should strive to adapt the historical content to this context. This argument does not imply that our understanding of, and our relationship to history, is and should be insular, atomistic, and unique, but rather that we have to pay attention to the differences and similarities and adapt the aim of history education accordingly if we are to help students create meaningful relationships to history.

The other aspect I highlighted above deals with the development of disciplinary skills to promote an understanding that history is always constructed. As we have seen above, a common way of doing this is to introduce historical source material in the classroom. The argument is that through working with these sources, students will become aware that history is constructed and that we always have to pay attention to the sources of historical narratives. This is how we go about assessing narratives in history departments across the world. While this is, of course, an important aspect of acquiring complex disciplinary skills, it is also a cognitively challenging one. One reason for this could be that the historical narratives most people come into contact with look quite different from academic publications. In textbooks, historical fiction, computer games with historical content, films, public history media, et cetera, history is usually presented without references to source material and it is written in third- or first-person narrative form. Many learners, and especially those with limited knowledge of history, will take this to be the 'normal' form of historical exposition.³⁵ From that perspective, working with source material might fail to make sense to all learners.

One way of approaching this problem is to return to the reason why students need to develop disciplinary skills. Usually this is because we want them to become aware that history is something distinct from the past and that we construct history through interpretation of the sources that past people have left behind. In order for us to know anything about what life

35 Rantala 2012.

was for people living in the age of the Vikings, we need to have access to sources that tell us something about that life. In one sense, this is how we generally go about getting knowledge about things: through our experiences with the world, we construct knowledge of it and, if we come to doubt what we know, we need some kind of source to support our knowledge. As much as we can ask the question ›How do I know that?‹ in our normal present-day lives, we can also ask the question ›How do we know that?‹ about historical narratives.³⁶ Students with little or no disciplinary understanding of history will soon come to realize that most of the ways in which we acquire knowledge of the world in our present-day lives will not work with history, because the past is gone and will never come back.

Although this may seem to be a rather trivial approach to developing a disciplinary understanding of history, my argument is that this could be a good starting point, especially with students that find source work difficult or unappealing. Once we have established this understanding, we could deepen it with more complex activities related to source work. Another aspect that is also important to history from a disciplinary perspective is that our view of the past is always limited to the sources we have available and the perspective from which we approach these sources. As little as we can have a complete understanding of the world today, because of the constraints our own perspective places on us, we can never have a complete understanding of the past for the same reason, no matter what form of historical exposition we choose to use. Historical narratives are always contextually contingent.

A concept that I think captures these aspects of history and our understanding thereof is that of historical consciousness. While there are different approaches to the concept, I hold that Hans-Georg Gadamer's approach is the most viable one from the present perspective. According to Gadamer, historical consciousness deals with our awareness of historicity: »We understand historical consciousness to be the privilege of modern man to have a full awareness of the historicity of everything present and the relativity of all opinions.«³⁷ In relation to history, Gadamer claims that this awareness enables us to have an understanding that forces us to deal with the contextual contingencies I have stressed above:

»Historical consciousness no longer listens sanctimoniously to the voice that reaches out from the past but, in reflecting on it, replaces it within the context where it took root in order to see the significance and relative value proper to it. This reflective posture towards tradition is called *interpretation*.«³⁸

I take these quotations from Gadamer to mean two things: (i) we always stand in a relationship to history in the sense that our being is shaped by history, and because of this (ii) historical consciousness requires an understanding of reflexive perspective-taking due to the contextual contingencies in the historical narrative, its narrator, and our meaning-making of

³⁶ Körber 2016.

³⁷ Gadamer 1975, 8.

³⁸ Gadamer 1975, 9.

history as it is presented to us. In my understanding, this view of historical consciousness encapsulates the four aims of history education that I proposed above and (at least theoretically) circumvents the problems of inclusive history education that I have presented. If we accept that we are historical beings, we should pay close attention to the continuities and discontinuities of history in our present lives in order for us to appreciate the importance of the historical perspective on ourselves and the world around us. This is, however, not enough, which is painfully displayed by the various conflicts around us that stem from irreconcilable historical narratives. We also have to reflect on the provenance of these historical narratives and appreciate that they were constructed in certain contexts that influenced what problems were thought to be significant and what perspectives were applied when constructing these narratives. Furthermore, we in turn need to reflect on the significance and meaning we give to these historical narratives in our present time; why does it matter to us today that Lenin granted national independence to the Ukrainian SSR a hundred years ago and how are we to make sense of this historical fact? The answers to these questions will of course differ depending on context, but reflecting on them can hopefully make us a bit more hesitant in using history as a blueprint for understanding present-day society while simultaneously remembering that we have to use history when seeking to understand the present, due to the inherent complexity of history and our encounters with it. We must know and use history to create meaning and we have to be aware that our knowledge of the past is never complete. This is what I perceive to be a potentially viable approach to inclusive history education since it asks teachers to construct a history education that will enable and motivate learners to engage with the historical topic at hand. It strives to give learners individual, societal, and ethical orientation.

Finally, I also want to argue that this has relevance to how we perceive historical thinking and the development of disciplinary skills, both in relation to history education in schools and in the academic discipline of history. Historians have, like all students of history but possibly to a lesser degree, grappled with learning history in school. Having found the subject meaningful to them, they have come to acquire the vast amount of historical knowledge along with disciplinary training required to perform their trade. So, what it is that historians cognitively do, which sets them apart from the rest of the general population. My view is that (i) they have knowledge of history and can create meaningful relationships to and within the historical past, (ii) they have a complex awareness of the importance of perspective in history, meaning that the past always reaches them from a certain context and perspective and that their own perspective both as members of societies and research communities affect the history they construct, and (iii) they know how to assess and interpret sources to construct historical narratives. I hold that in order to do (iii) well, you need to have developed (i) and (ii).

Concluding Remarks

What I have presented above is my view of how historical consciousness can work as a theoretical concept to form the basis of inclusive history education. If we take the requirement of a relational approach to history seriously, we need to establish ways of making learners develop a relation to history. As such, we need to take the context of the learners into consideration in history education. Historical thinking, as it is generally presented, is not context specific but rather constructed as a generic skill that requires a lot of cognitive resources (both substantive and disciplinary), and this is what makes it potentially exclusive. Marginalized learners' needs should be taken into consideration in history education and historical consciousness as presented here would direct us toward initially allowing students to construct meaningful relationships to the historical past according to their own contextual needs, and then be presented with tools that make them appreciate how history is always a construction contingent on perspective. The view presented here argues that this is what could make history education inclusive and enable learners to participate in social discourses on history in a complex way. How we go about constructing the relationships to history that I have argued to be so crucial in order for this to happen is, however, an empirical and contextually contingent matter. If we take the notion of inclusive education and social pluralism seriously, we need to acknowledge the fallacy of stipulating a history subject and history education that disregards the social realities and needs of its learners.

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