

---

Research article

# Recontextualising history in primary school: discourses in the classroom

Amna Khawaja<sup>1,\*</sup>, Mikko Puustinen<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki, Finland; mikko.puustinen@helsinki.fi

\* Correspondence: amna.khawaja@helsinki.fi

Submission date: 22 March 2022; Acceptance date: 16 May 2022; Publication date: 5 July 2022

## How to cite

Khawaja, A. and Puustinen, M. (2022) 'Recontextualising history in primary school: discourses in the classroom'. *History Education Research Journal*, 19 (1), 7.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/HERJ.19.1.07>.

## Peer review

This article has been peer-reviewed through the journal's standard double-anonymous peer review, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

## Copyright

2022, Amna Khawaja and Mikko Puustinen. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence (CC BY) 4.0

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited •

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/HERJ.19.1.07>.

## Open access

*History Education Research Journal* is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

---

## Abstract

Employing Bernstein's (1990, 2000) concepts of recontextualisation and pedagogic discourse, this case study aims to identify types of discourse and forms of knowledge in primary history lessons, and to explain the observations through teachers' thinking. Two Finnish primary teachers were observed for nine or ten consecutive history lessons and interviewed twice following the observation period. The analysis is based on field notes, classroom materials and interview data. The discourses in the classrooms are discussed through the instructional aim of historical literacy. The results show that although the two teachers had different discursive profiles, substantive knowledge took precedence over procedural knowledge and second-order concepts. Students' experiences and historical culture, when present, were not deconstructed through concepts and strategies specific to history. Thus, the discursive space in both classrooms was incompatible with that required for promoting historical literacy. In the interviews, both teachers expressed their unwillingness to skip topics in the textbook, which may have contributed to the predominant role of substantive knowledge. One teacher's planning and implementation process indicated that active and intentional recontextualisation had

---

taken place. These results suggest that teacher education should equip primary teachers with more procedural knowledge and the means to deconstruct historical culture and students' everyday experiences.

**Keywords** recontextualisation; vertical and horizontal discourse; historical literacy; history instruction; primary school

## Introduction

Knowledge and knowing have received increasing attention among curriculum theorists and educational researchers in recent years (Chapman, 2021; Young, 2008). This change, described as the 'knowledge turn' (see Chapman, 2021), can be seen as a response to such curricular trends as focusing on generic competencies and twenty-first-century skills, as well as implementing phenomena-based learning. In this 'knowledge turn', researchers have argued for a close relationship between disciplines and school subjects, thus emphasising the role of disciplinary knowledge in school. The significance of disciplinary knowledge in curricula has been discussed for decades (for example, Dewey, Dewey, 1963 [1938]; Bruner, 1960). However, it could be argued that the ability to use specialised, disciplinary knowledge seems particularly relevant in the twenty-first century, when students struggle to differentiate between credible, false and biased information presented on the internet (Nygren and Guath, 2019).

There are two aspects of knowledge in schools – both theorised by Bernstein (1990, 2000) – that are of interest in this paper. The first aspect is the process by which knowledge is shaped and transformed from disciplines to classrooms. Bernstein (1990: 180) has described this recontextualisation of knowledge in his 'pedagogic device'. The other aspect of knowledge discussed in this paper is its structure, which Bernstein (2000) has conceptualised as vertical and horizontal discourses, the former being specialised, principled and context-free, and the latter context-dependent and segmentally organised. One of the things defined in the recontextualisation process is the balance between these two discourses.

Apart from purely theoretical work (Bernstein, 1990, 2000; Maton, 2014; Nordgren, 2021; Young, 2013), research on recontextualisation has largely focused on the development of curricula (Bertram, 2019; Dempster, 2021; Ormond, 2017). This may be connected to the fact that in Bernstein's (1990) 'pedagogic device', recontextualisation takes place in the 'field of recontextualisation', where the agents involved are state officials, politicians, education departments and textbook authors, who struggle for the power to define curricula. Teachers, on the other hand, are not considered agents in the recontextualisation field, but work instead in the field of reproduction, where their role is to enact a predetermined curriculum. However, Kitson (2020) and Nordgren (2021), for example, have accredited teachers with a more significant role as agents of recontextualisation.

In this paper, we view recontextualisation as an intentional and active process (Alvunger, 2018; see also Kitson, 2020) 'where teachers reframe different discourses in the practice of planning lessons and teaching' (Nordgren, 2021: 181). By making pedagogical and curricular decisions, the teacher directs classroom discourses towards a desired outcome. Beliefs are known to play a crucial role in the teaching process (for example, Priestley et al., 2015). However, if those beliefs are unconscious, their contribution to recontextualisation – as we have here defined it – may be limited.

History, unlike mathematics or chemistry, has played a key role in building and maintaining national unity (for example, Smith, 2020; VanSledright, 2016). The tension inherent in any recontextualisation process (Bernstein, 1990) may run particularly high in the case of history due to its societal dimension. The educational level we have chosen is the primary level, where the role of teachers' intentional agency in recontextualisation is especially interesting, as primary teachers seldom have a strong disciplinary basis for teaching subjects. Due to the vast autonomy of teachers, we believe that Finland provides an interesting setting for exploring recontextualisation in classrooms.

In this paper, we examine what kind of knowledge is selected, appropriated and refocused (Hordern, 2021), and what kind of role teachers have in this recontextualisation process. We investigate the shape and form that history takes in primary classrooms, and the extent to which that shaping can be traced back to teachers' thinking and decision making. Both observations and interview data on two Finnish primary teachers are utilised.

## Theoretical framework

### *Forms of knowledge*

According to Bernstein (2000), vertical discourse is coherent, systematically principled and produced by disciplines, which also determine the distribution and circulation of that knowledge. Horizontal discourse, on the other hand, represents local, context-dependent and segmentally organised strategies. This experience-based and everyday knowledge is usually transferred orally. Whereas vertical discourse enables one to evaluate claims based on the underlying epistemology, horizontal discourse allows multiple claims about reality, as there is no epistemic basis upon which knowledge discrimination could be founded (Nordgren, 2021).

In the case of history education, vertical discourse can be defined as consisting of three elements: (1) substantive knowledge; (2) knowledge about second-order concepts; and (3) procedural knowledge. Substantive knowledge (also referred to as first-order knowledge; see Chapman, 2021) can be seen as knowledge about events, places, people and their actions in a temporal context (Bertram, 2019). Second-order concepts refer to concepts such as time, change and continuity, significance, cause, consequence and evidence (Counsell, 2011). These concepts help to organise, structure and explain the who, when, where and what questions answered by substantive knowledge. Procedural knowledge includes epistemological aspects of history, namely the interpretational nature of historical knowledge, how historical knowledge is constructed, and how evidence is used and evaluated. In addition, procedural knowledge includes history-specific reading and argumentation strategies (Downey and Long, 2016).

Horizontal discourse consists of everyday experiences, stories, family histories and products of historical culture, such as films and books that communicate about the past, and thus form the everyday knowledge of history (Bertram, 2019; Puustinen and Khawaja, 2020). While these common-sense and everyday experiences address history, they are not grounded in disciplinary history and are thus not subjected to the same evaluation of knowledge.

### *Interaction between discourses and historical literacy*

Bernstein (2000) is doubtful about 'inserting' horizontal discourse into vertical discourse in subject education. Many scholars, however, view horizontal discourse as a way to approach the vertical one, and to make it more accessible to students (Bertram, 2019; Dempster, 2021). For example, when studying the role of legends in history, students can be introduced to the topic through films about Robin Hood, instead of directly turning to primary sources and discussing the trustworthiness of legends. Conversely, many social realists argue for using vertical discourse to interpret everyday experiences, which would then be reconceptualised through disciplinary lenses (for example, Vernon, 2020).

Nordgren (2021: 184) suggests that through conscious and active pedagogic recontextualisation, the two discourses can and should be interrelated because 'history as a school subject must refer actively to the contemporary world to make sense'. Nordgren (2021) does not claim that the discourses are equal, but highlights the importance of systematically using both to make history meaningful.

The interaction between the discourses can also be approached through the aims of instruction. Many history educators consider historical literacy or historical thinking as the key aims of school history (for example, Counsell, 2011; Downey and Long, 2016; Lee, 2011; Nokes, 2010). Historical literacy can be defined as understanding the nature of the discipline, and as having a command over reading and writing strategies specific to history (for example, Downey and Long, 2016; Lee, 2011; Nokes, 2010). Thus, one aspect of historical literacy involves vertical discourse through grasping the epistemic basis of history and having the ability to use historical knowledge for building interpretations (Nokes, 2010). To become historically literate, students also need to understand and take a stand on contemporary texts and issues, as in Nordgren's (2021) model. Bringing horizontal discourse into the classroom gives students tools for viewing personal experiences, historical culture and contemporary phenomena through disciplinary lenses. Thus, a historically literate person would grasp the difference between discourses and forms of knowledge, and would be able to use disciplinary understanding for interpreting horizontal discourse.

## Recontextualising in Finnish classrooms

The challenge of studying recontextualisation lies in its dependency on educational systems. As the origins and a substantial part of the further development of recontextualisation theory (for example, Hordern, 2021; Kitson, 2020) can be traced to the United Kingdom, the vocabulary reflects the British educational tradition. However, concepts such as curriculum making (for example, Deng, 2020; Hordern, 2021; Kitson, 2020) are not directly applicable to the Finnish educational system, where the *didaktik* tradition has been more prevalent.

While curriculum making and 'institutional curriculum-making' (Deng, 2020) are central to teachers' recontextualisation process in some educational contexts, this is less so in Finland. Although Finnish municipalities and schools follow the guidelines stated in the National Core Curriculum (NCC; Finnish National Board of Education, 2014), designing the local curricula takes place only once every decade. Not every primary teacher participates in curricular work (Salminen and Annevirta, 2016). Thus, if Finnish teachers recontextualise, they do so during planning and when implementing the lessons.

In Finland, both the national and local curricula give teachers the freedom to choose their methods and organise their instruction as they see fit. Furthermore, the NCC defines content only in broad terms, expecting teachers to choose the topics and materials they will use in the classroom. Thus, Finnish teachers are not expected to implement a tightly prescribed curriculum, but rather to make independent curricular and pedagogical decisions, as in Scotland and New Zealand for instance (see Hordern, 2021; Ormond, 2017). Teacher autonomy is reflected in the absence of school inspections and other external control over teachers. Moreover, there are no large-scale national tests in the basic educational system.

For the purposes of this study, our research questions are:

1. What kind of discourses exist in primary history lessons?
2. How does teachers' thinking explain the observed discourses, and the ways in which teachers recontextualise history?

## Materials and methods

### *The educational context of the study*

The educational context of our study is Finnish primary school, which comprises Grades 1–6. Pupils typically start school at the age of 7, which is relatively late compared with other countries. Thus, when pupils begin to study history in the fifth grade, they are typically 11 years old. Although in many other countries, pupils at their age are taught by subject teachers in secondary school, in Finland, primary teachers are responsible for teaching all the subjects during those six years.

The NCC (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014) defines historical thinking and historical literacy as learning objectives, even at the primary level. Primary teachers are expected to have a disciplinary approach to history, for example, through teaching the interpretation of primary and secondary sources and introducing the interpretative nature of historical knowledge to students. The content areas related to these objectives cover themes from prehistory to the early modern period.

Finnish primary teachers are required to have a master's degree in education. They major in educational sciences instead of individual school subjects. During the five years of their studies, the student teachers normally take one compulsory course (3–5 European credit transfer system, ECTS) in history didactics. Some specialise further in history education, completing either a 25 or a 60 ECTS course. The latter also qualifies them as history subject teachers at lower secondary school level.

### *Data collection*

The data used in the present paper were drawn from a larger observational study, where nine Finnish primary teachers were observed and interviewed during 2018/19. We collected numerical data through an observation instrument, field notes, teacher interviews and classroom materials. In this paper, we focus on two teachers, Amy and Eve (pseudonyms), using field notes, interviews and classroom materials to explore how history is recontextualised in primary history lessons. Our case study of two teachers neither seeks nor makes generalisations. Nevertheless, the results are helpful in identifying some discursive features and aspects that affect primary teachers' recontextualisation of history.

During data collection, we advised the teachers to teach as they normally would, albeit realising that our presence as researchers might affect the teachers. By observing several lessons, we hoped to reduce the risk that the lessons would be atypical. Amy was observed for nine and Eve for ten consecutive lessons (45 minutes per lesson). The first author of this paper (A.K.) was the primary observer, and was present in every lesson. The second author attended one of Eve's lessons.

Each lesson generated 1–2 pages of field notes focusing on the teachers' actions, practices, instructions, questions and interaction with students. Teachers' and students' talk was documented as authentically as possible. Our aim is not to make inferences at the level of individual words, but at a more general level. Since the focus of the study is on the teacher, the students are not identified individually. In addition to capturing interaction, the field notes also contain inferences, questions and comments made by the researcher during observations, marked in parentheses. When the excerpts from the field notes contain words in brackets, they are explanatory, and were added while writing the manuscript. The classroom materials comprised textbook materials, assignments, tests, and non-textbook materials such as videos and online sources that the teachers used during the observed lessons.

The teachers were interviewed twice, once immediately following the observation period and once during the initial analysis, for clarifying questions. Pre-observation interviews were omitted, as the interview questions might have influenced the teachers' instruction. Amy's interviews lasted for 54 and 20 minutes, and Eve's for 105 and 17 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured, which provided leeway for new ideas and directions during the interview. The questions dealt with the teachers' familiarity with the discipline of history, planning and implementing instruction, and their views on ideal history teaching practices. We also used the results of Fogo's (2014) Delphi panel survey on teaching practices in history classrooms, and asked the teachers to rate the importance of ten practices on a Likert scale (from 1 to 5). In addition to their value in general, we asked the teachers to estimate the extent to which they used these practices.

### **The participants**

Out of the nine teachers participating in the larger observational study, two teachers were selected for the present case study. We used three criteria in the selection process, which led to Amy and Eve being selected. First, as the aim of the study was to explore how primary teachers recontextualised without a close connection to the academic discipline of history, all teachers who had specialised in history (three out of nine) were excluded. Second, we sought teachers who taught sixth grade and had several years of teaching experience. Third, we were interested in comparing teachers who differed in their level of interest in teaching history.

At the time of data collection, Eve and Amy taught Grade 6 (11- to 12-year-old students) in different but similar-sized schools in the Helsinki metropolitan area. Eve and Amy had 18 and 9 years of experience respectively, and both held a master's degree in education. Whereas Amy had completed only one compulsory history didactics course, Eve had taken a short additional course in history didactics (2 ECTS). Neither Amy nor Eve had participated in any professional development programmes for teaching history. This was important for our study design, as our focus was not on expert teachers.

### **Data analysis**

In order to answer the first research question, concerning the nature of discourses in the classroom, we analysed the field notes from the observed lessons. A theory-based content analysis (Gläser-Zikuda et al., 2020) was conducted as we looked for predetermined discourses and their subtypes, while appreciating that not all data would fall under those categories. We analysed manually each five-minute period, and determined whether vertical (V) or horizontal (H) discourses could be detected. We further determined the subtype of the vertical discourse, namely whether it was substantive, second-order or procedural knowledge (see Table 1). Some subcategories of horizontal discourse (contemporary phenomena, historical culture) were formed based on the data.

We also identified incidents where horizontal discourse led to vertical discourse or vice versa (see Dempster, 2021). However, as the analysis progressed, another category (H+V) was created to describe situations where a discourse consisted of vertical and horizontal elements, but where the direction between the two discourses was not apparent.

**Table 1. Coding scheme for the observation data (Source: Authors, 2022)**

Code	Explanation
Hpe	Horizontal discourse, personal experience
Hhc	Horizontal discourse, historical culture
Hcp	Horizontal discourse, contemporary phenomenon
Vsk	Vertical discourse, substantive knowledge
V2oc	Vertical discourse, second-order concepts addressed specifically
Vpk	Vertical discourse, procedural knowledge
V→H	Vertical discourse used for understanding a horizontal discourse
H→V	Horizontal discourse used for understanding a vertical discourse
H+V	Two discourses existing in close proximity to each other, but lacking a clear direction

Many of the coding periods did not meet the criteria for either vertical or horizontal discourse, but concerned practical life at school (for example, use of the school library, deadlines). Although this type of discourse, which we call school discourse, is beyond the scope of the present paper, its presence suggests that the observed lessons were typical. Had the teachers planned the lessons specifically for our benefit, these non-history-related elements would have been less visible.

In order to investigate the teachers' role in recontextualisation, we analysed the interview data using qualitative content analysis (Gläser-Zikuda et al., 2020). Again, in this theory-driven analysis, the themes and subthemes were identified based on the theoretical background of the study. As shown in Table 2, the first theme addresses teachers' familiarity with the vertical discourse (for example, substantive knowledge, nature of historical knowledge, central concepts), namely the potential for conscious recontextualising. The second theme deals with the teachers' planning process, and the way in which they considered the curricula or planned the pacing of instruction. The third theme of the interview is concerned with the way that the teachers thought about teaching practices.

**Table 2. The framework used for analysing the interviews (Source: Authors, 2022)**

Themes concerning recontextualisation	Subthemes
Starting point for recontextualisation	Familiarity with substantive knowledge
Planning process	Familiarity with the nature of historical knowledge
	Familiarity with concepts (historical literacy/historical thinking)
Teaching practices	Pacing and sequencing
	Choice of materials
	Role of curriculum (national, school)
	Employing historical evidence
	Use of history concepts, big ideas and essential questions
	Modelling historical reading skills
	Selecting and adapting historical documents
	Explaining historical content
	Facilitating discussion
	Connecting to personal/cultural experiences
Use of history textbook	
Conducting re-enactments and simulations	
Test preparation	

## Results

We start by analysing the discourses in Amy's and Eve's classrooms as a whole, and analyse one incident relating to each teacher in more detail. These examples were chosen to illustrate incidents where the discourses coexisted. In the last part of the analysis, teachers' thinking is used to explain the recontextualisation process.

### *Discourses and historical literacy*

Substantive knowledge in the form of textbook narratives comprised most of the discourses in Amy's classroom (Table 3). Typically, these incidents consisted of reading the textbook chapter out loud, copying keywords from the teacher's guide, or asking close-ended, content-related questions. Lecturing and other ways of engaging with substantive knowledge without the textbook were rare. Amy introduced procedural knowledge only four times on its own, but she also used procedural knowledge once to access horizontal discourse and vice versa. Both of these incidents closely followed the activities suggested in the teacher's guide.

**Table 3. Vertical and horizontal discourses in the classrooms (Source: Authors, 2022)**

Type of discourse	Number of incidents (5-minute coding periods)	
	Amy	Eve
Vertical discourse		
Substantive knowledge	32	40
Use of second-order concepts	0	2
Procedural knowledge	4	8
Horizontal discourse		
Personal experience	2	–
Contemporary phenomena	2	–
Historical culture	9	4
V→H	1	
H→V	1 Hcp→Vsk	–
	1 Hpe→Vpk	–
	1 Hpe→Vsk	–
	1 Hpe→Vsk	1 Hpe→Vsk
V+H	4 Vpk + Hpe	7 Hhc + Vsk
	1 Vsk + Hpe	
	1 Vsk + Hcp	

During the nine lessons, there were three sequences (one lasting for 20 minutes, and the other two for only 5 minutes) where horizontal and vertical discourses coexisted, in that one discourse was not used for accessing the other. The following excerpt from the field notes represents one of these sequences:

*(Amy asks students to draw a world map in their notebooks.)*

Amy: Which country or continent did you draw first? How many of you drew Finland or Europe?  
*(Students raise their hands.)*

Student: I started from Australia because it was easy to put it in the corner, at the bottom of the page.

Amy: From which perspective is your map drawn? [question to all students]

*(This question baffles some students, as they seem confused. The teacher takes a globe and shows that it can be looked at from several perspectives. She shows examples of Europe, Asia and the Americas as centre points. This seems to bring about 'aha' moments.)*

Amy: What kind of maps have you seen before?

Student: I've only seen ones like this (*Europe centred*).

Amy: Exactly. You've only seen maps like this, so you also draw maps like this. Who drew Finland too big compared to other countries? (*Many raise hands, spontaneous discussion emerges.*)

Amy: Look at page 25 in the textbook. (*Teacher leaves the classroom, as another teacher wishes to speak to her; teacher returns some minutes later.*)

Amy: Why are there mistakes on the map? Did they make the wrong kind of maps back then on purpose? [*On page 25 in the textbook, there is an eighth-century map, the so-called Beatus Map or Beatine Map, originally drawn by a Spanish monk, Beatus of Liébana. The students have looked at the map for some minutes.*]

Student: Well, no.

Amy: Why then?

Student: Because people just didn't know.

(*Students ask questions about the map, comment on things such as the map not having east, west, south and north marked. Students are intrigued by symbols and texts written in Latin, but the teacher soon says that they have to move on to the next chapter in the textbook; students object.*)

The excerpt illustrates how Amy introduces horizontal discourse, where the students' own perceptions of the world play a key role. Amy then questions the students' intuitive way of drawing maps. After a while, Amy brings in the vertical discourse by asking about the mistakes on the medieval map. It appears that she was aiming to show that historical maps are products of their time, and depict the views and biases of the people who created them. However, there is a disconnect between the horizontal and vertical discourses, as Amy does not make an explicit link between the students' maps and the historical maps. Thus, the relevance of the horizontal discourse to the vertical one does not become clear.

Eve's lessons were also content-driven (Table 3). Most of the incidents where substantive knowledge was at the forefront consisted of reading the textbook. However, Eve used three textbook series, and spent a considerable amount of time explaining the content without paraphrasing the textbook.

Compared with Amy, there were four distinct differences. First, Eve introduced second-order concepts. Even though this happened only twice, concepts of cause and consequence and multiperspectivity were given special attention. Second, procedural knowledge was present more often and for longer periods than in Amy's case. This included descriptions of historians' work, and remarks on the interpretation of historical sources. Third, horizontal discourse played a minor role in Eve's classroom, both as an independent discourse and in interaction with vertical discourse. Fourth, interaction between the two discourses was almost non-existent in Eve's lessons.

A rare incident where the two discourses coexisted was a project where students were asked to draw a cartoon about the Club War (1596–7), a power struggle for the Swedish Crown (see Pikkanen, 2018). During the project, students looked for information from three sources (YouTube video, Wikipedia and textbook) and produced a cartoon describing the events. The following excerpt depicts a 10-minute sequence where horizontal discourse in the form of historical culture was presented:

Eve: Now we'll watch a YouTube video [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JJzibYqBRE>] that will last approximately ten minutes. You already have some kind of idea about the Club War.

Student: Why is the music like this? (*Soon after the start of the video*)

Student: Yeah, why does the music have to be so epic? (*Teacher does not react to students' comments*)

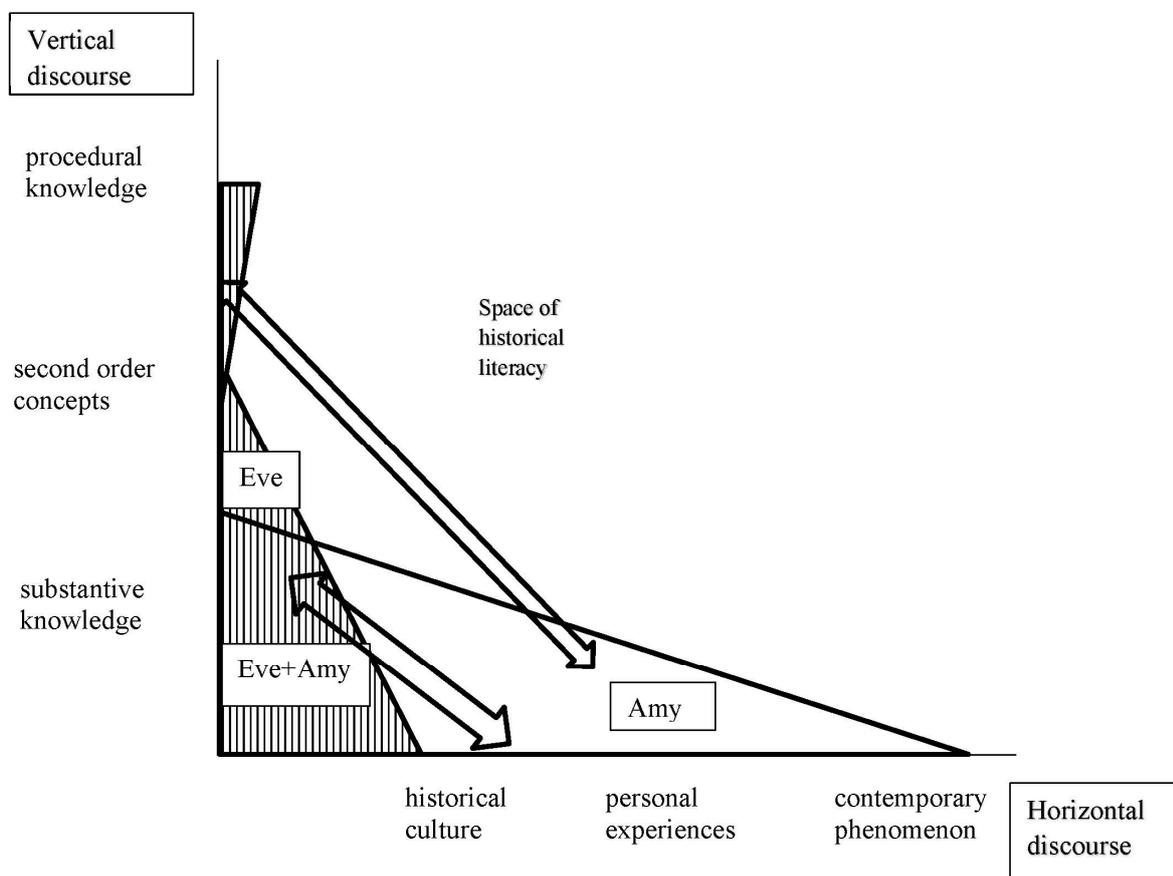
(*Video continues for another 5 minutes*)

(*The video includes lots of direct quotations. Where are they from? There are references at the end, but they are not introduced or mentioned to the students. After the video has ended, Eve, sitting next to me [A.K., at the back of the classroom, watching the video with the teacher] whispers that the video portrayed quite a romanticised version of the war, but this is not shared with the students.*)

The YouTube video is an example of historical culture where history is guided by everyday beliefs. It portrays a nineteenth-century interpretation of the Club War, looking at the event through national lenses, and presented in an entertaining and visually stimulating way. The horizontal discourse of the video was not deconstructed through vertical discourse, which would have entailed discussing the video's author, background, motives and credibility.

We constructed Figure 1 to illustrate the differences between Amy's and Eve's instruction. Rather than representing the exact number of discourses, it describes the different discursive emphases of the teachers. The interaction between the discourses in Amy's classroom is shown with arrows. Eve's profile largely represents vertical discourse and, as with Amy, substantive knowledge is the most predominant feature. Although use of second-order concepts is rare, procedural knowledge is introduced more often, resulting in an upward widening profile.

**Figure 1. Teachers' discursive space and space of historical literacy (adapted from Nordgren, 2021). The striped shapes depict Eve's instruction; Amy's instruction is depicted with unfilled shapes. The arrows portray the interaction between the discourses, which took place only in Amy's classroom (Source: Authors, 2022)**



The common space that both profiles share is that of substantive knowledge, which represents vertical discourse, but at its lowest conceptual level. Both teachers, albeit for different reasons, failed to create a space big enough to encompass historical literacy, namely an interaction between vertical and horizontal discourses (see Nordgren, 2021).

Next, we analyse the teachers' thinking through the interview data, with the aim of understanding the extent to which Eve's and Amy's instruction was a result of active and intentional recontextualisation.

## The nature of teachers' recontextualisation

### Starting point and planning

Amy described her relationship with history as a distant one, and rated her mastery of substantive knowledge as poor: 'I couldn't manage without the textbook. I mean regarding all the substance, I just wouldn't cope.' Amy had some difficulties in defining concepts central to teaching history. When asked to define historical literacy, she described skills such as understanding the meaning of texts and finding relevant things. However, she also pointed out that identifying bias in a text was important. Amy perceived historical knowledge as being less absolute than in the natural sciences, and emphasised the meaning of interpretation and varying perspectives.

Amy's lesson planning started by going through the textbook chapter, and continued by estimating the time needed to cover the chapter. She considered whether more than one chapter could be addressed within one lesson. Amy checked the textbook assignments, and went through the additional materials in the teacher's guide.

Choosing diverse materials was not a priority for Amy, as she mostly made use of the textbook. She did not mention any curriculum (school, city or national) when describing her planning process. When specifically asked to comment on the NCC for history, she showed uncertainty about its aims.

We also asked the teachers what they would do if they were pressed for time, and had to decide which content to skip; namely, if they had to prioritise some content over other content:

Researcher: So if you think about this observation period, if you had to leave something out, what would it be and why?

Amy: [8-second pause] Well, if I really had to leave something out, then maybe . . . well, actually I did omit this revision spread and this introduction spread as well. So these introductory things because they're not really chapters.

R: These? [Showing the textbook]

Amy: Yeah. But on the other hand, they're actually really good as well, so I wouldn't like to leave them out either. So I would just probably combine these chapters on medieval Finland, for instance, and we would just go through them in one lesson.

R: Right.

Amy: So, by summarising but . . .

R: OK.

Amy: But I couldn't just skip stuff, leave something out completely.

As can be discerned from this excerpt, Amy's active decisions in the planning phase mainly concerned the pace at which to proceed. She did not question the choice of topics or their sequencing in the textbooks. Her need to cover content resulted in a fast pace, to which her students objected. In addition, choosing and sequencing the content were absent. The planning process did not stem from the curriculum, and it was limited to the affordances offered by the textbook and the teacher's guide. As recontextualising refers to active and intentional decision making, Amy's planning process bore more similarities to reproduction than recontextualisation.

Eve, unlike Amy, had always been interested in history, and she considered her substantive knowledge of the subject to be better than that of an average class teacher. During the interview, she showed a deep understanding of the nature of history, including historical thinking and literacy. Although Eve's definition of historical literacy included comparing a variety of historical documents, such as maps, pictures and written texts, unlike Amy, she did not bring up the issue of bias in texts. In addition, she pointed out that 'in the primary context, these things are still being practised and not at a particularly deep level'.

Eve explained that she started her planning by creating an overall plan for the study unit, reviewing what she had done previously, and determining whether there might be an opportunity for a project. Only then did she turn to the textbook. Like Amy, she familiarised herself with the topics, and decided what kind of notes students should make. Finally, she tried to make sure that the study period had 'something else as well, like a writing or a reflective assignment, or drama – something'.

Although Eve spoke about a more versatile approach in choosing teaching materials, she largely used textbooks. She was not satisfied with the most recent textbook, and therefore used two older textbook series alongside it:

I rely mostly on ready-made materials, simply because there is no time. I just don't have the time to create my own things. First, I always try to find good stuff in the textbooks because it makes my work a lot easier.

When Eve expressed her views about using non-textbook historical sources, she brought up the issue of the time available for planning, and concluded that 'It's just not realistic'. She also mentioned the NCC when talking about choosing topics for the study unit. Eve explained that, although she followed the curriculum, she had decided to start from local histories and emphasise them in her teaching, because students would find it easier to relate to local histories. Like Amy, Eve was also reluctant to omit content if pressed for time. She said that rather than 'leaving things out', she might give more homework, or replace another subject's lesson with a history lesson.

### Teaching practices

In the interviews, Amy and Eve rated the importance of different teaching practices in a similar way, as shown in Table 4. Some of the practices were unfamiliar to both teachers and, as a result, these practices did not induce many reflections. Below, we provide examples of those practices that did shed light on Amy's and Eve's thinking.

**Table 4. The values given by Amy and Eve to the teaching practices identified in Fogo (2014) study (Source: Authors, 2022)**

Classroom practice	Values given by teachers (1, not important – 5, very important)	
	Amy	Eve
Employing historical evidence	5	5
Use of history concepts, big ideas and essential questions	4	4
Modelling historical reading skills	4	5
Selecting and adapting historical documents	2	3
Explaining historical content	3	5
Facilitating discussion	5	5
Connecting to personal/cultural experiences	4	4
Use of history textbook	3	4
Conducting re-enactments and simulations	3	3
Test preparation	2	3

One of the most significant differences between Eve and Amy was the inclusion of horizontal discourse. Both acknowledged the importance of making connections to personal and cultural experiences (Table 4), but they differed in how they perceived what it means to make these connections. For Amy, the connection meant building bridges between the past and the present:

That you would imagine living in the Middle Ages. Or if your parents had decided who you should marry. The kinds of things that students are interested in, and linking them to history, it's important in the sense that they [students] will remember things better. And they learn to relate to people and eras other than their own.

For Eve, the connection to students' lives was relevant largely for sequencing topics:

That's what I meant when I said that I always start with Finnish history and not something general ... so that they could think that where we're living now, people have lived before, there has been life here, or that this area was covered with water, nobody could live there. I think that's interesting because it's connected to their lives.

As noted, procedural knowledge played a minor role in both classrooms. Modelling historical reading processes, a form of introducing procedural knowledge, was omitted by both teachers, but for different reasons. As Amy explained:

I don't think I've done much modelling. I've never actually really thought about it. But it is important, like learning to read texts critically, in general as well. I gave it a 4, but I don't think I've done this.

Eve emphasised the availability of 'appropriate sources', suggesting that she viewed only certain types of sources as suitable for modelling. It seems that Eve did not regard YouTube videos as such 'appropriate sources' as she did not help the students to interpret the Club War video. When Eve was asked why she did not guide the students to detect the bias in the YouTube video, she replied:

Sure, the way the music and everything had been constructed, it had a sense of drama – things that get students interested in the topic, I guess. Of course, one can explain and teach a lot to students, but maybe at their age one doesn't need to reduce everything to atoms. Maybe that was what I thought.

Although Eve's knowledge base would have allowed for a critical analysis, the response suggests that she considered deconstructing the bias and sources of the video not possible or relevant for 12 year olds. Rather, it seems that Eve used the video for motivational purposes.

In respect of the use of textbooks, Eve commented: 'It's good that students learn to approach the knowledge on their own, that the teacher doesn't spoon-feed them.' However, when putting forward her argument for the key importance of 'explaining historical content' (see Table 4), Eve stressed the teacher's role in approaching knowledge:

It's important to teach and explain it [content] because I think it's wrong that a student, young students, should have to figure everything out by themselves and see all the perspectives they haven't come across before.

In the light of the observation data and Eve's answer, her teaching mostly focused on explaining substantive knowledge with more of the same: she lectured around the topic, and introduced more details, and she used several textbooks to access more information. Paradoxically, even though Amy felt unable to skip topics in the textbook, she said that explaining historical content (Table 4) was not 'a priority'. Substantive knowledge played a predominant role in both teachers' classrooms. In Eve's case, this could be explained by the importance given to substantive knowledge (see Table 4), as well as her enthusiasm and ability to incorporate substantive knowledge into her lectures. Neither teacher viewed test preparation as important (see Table 4), which suggests that the need to cover textbook chapters did not stem from assessment pressures.

One can conclude that Amy's deliberate recontextualisation is best described as limited. She relied heavily on the textbook, and its narratives were the history that she passed on to the students. Hence, many of her actions could be considered reproduction, rather than recontextualisation of knowledge. Amy's intention to recontextualise became evident during the lessons, where she included elements of horizontal discourse. However, these horizontal elements often seemed spontaneous, because Amy seldom introduced materials concerning contemporary phenomena or historical culture.

It appears that Eve's planning process involved more active, intentional recontextualisation than Amy's. Eve looked for different materials, made an overall plan for the study unit, and drew on both the national and city-level curricula. Pacing and sequencing of the content were evident in Eve's planning process, but content selection was absent. Although Eve invested time in introducing diverse historical accounts from different textbooks, she felt that there was no time to look for primary sources. Eve's teaching was mostly aimed at providing students with substantive knowledge. She did not prioritise giving students access to procedural knowledge that she herself possessed, as the example of the Club War video shows.

## Discussion

In this study, we have explored the role of two class teachers in the recontextualisation process. Although the two teachers had different discursive profiles, substantive knowledge took precedence

over disciplinary knowledge and second-order concepts. Although segments of horizontal discourse were included in the teaching in one of the classrooms, vertical discourse was not used to deconstruct and discuss these everyday conceptions. The discursive space in both classrooms was incompatible with that required for historical literacy.

The analysis of the interviews indicated that both teachers were unwilling to skip textbook content. In addition, they found it unrealistic to use historical sources that did not originate from the textbooks. Modelling procedural knowledge was new to Amy, and Eve considered some procedural knowledge too difficult for sixth-grade students, which explains the predominant role of substantive knowledge in both classrooms.

The results of this case study underscore the potential that the concepts of recontextualisation and reproduction of knowledge hold for understanding teachers' role in determining the direction of instruction. For example, both the observation and interview data in Amy's case show that the routine of going through the textbook was an essential part of her planning and implementation process. If recontextualisation is considered as an active, intentional and conscious process (Alvunger, 2018; Nordgren, 2021), where content is selected and appropriated, and knowledge is refocused (Hordern, 2021), Amy's case could rather be described as reproducing what has already been recontextualised by the textbook authors. Thus, in this case, the struggle for power between the official (state curriculum) and the pedagogic (textbooks) recontextualisation (Bernstein, 2000) is won by the latter.

In other studies, teachers have been described as agents of recontextualisation (Kitson, 2020; see also Alvunger, 2018), who take steps to conceptualise, organise, sequence and explain knowledge. Kitson (2020) suggests that the main factors affecting teachers' role in recontextualisation, at least in the case of expert teachers, are their knowledge base and the level of teacher autonomy. We suggest, however, that even teachers who have great autonomy – as Finnish teachers do – may not be able or willing to utilise that autonomy. In this study, content selection proved to be difficult, even for a teacher well acquainted with the aims and nature of the school subject.

On the other hand, our results do not entirely support a purely Bernstein (1990) take on the teacher's role either. In the strict Bernsteinian sense, recontextualising takes place outside the classroom in the 'field of recontextualisation', and the agency of the teacher is restricted to only enacting a predetermined curriculum in the 'field of reproduction' (Bernstein, 1990). We perceive teachers on a continuum between these two fields, and some teachers may move along that continuum within a study unit or even a single lesson, sometimes being the medium of reproduction and sometimes working as recontextualising agents. Thus, teachers' beliefs may contribute to either reproduction or recontextualisation of knowledge, depending on how conscious those beliefs are. Some primary teachers, such as Eve, are able to make decisions and direct the instruction towards their desired objective, although in this case recontextualising did not result in developing students' historical literacy.

One of the teachers in this study hesitated to include interpretative elements in her lessons because of the pupils' young age. These reservations are not uncommon among primary teachers, as shown by James's (2008: 182) study, where prospective primary teachers were reluctant to introduce interpretative history because it was 'not developmentally appropriate for young children, who need facts'. History subject teachers may also postpone interpretational elements until they feel that students have acquired enough substantive knowledge (for example, Hartzler-Miller, 2001). We have reservations about this approach. As Kitson (2021: 39) puts it, postponing disciplinary history 'until students know "enough" [substantive knowledge] could potentially postpone it indefinitely as whoever knows "enough"?' (see also Downey and Long, 2016: 109–10).

Several studies have shown that history instruction can successfully include procedural knowledge at the primary level (Hughes, 2021; Johansson, 2019; Nokes, 2014; VanSledright, 2002). A feature common to all of these studies was establishing classroom routines based on procedural knowledge. A third-grade teacher in Hughes's (2021) study had a routine for reading primary sources, which included asking the sources a set of questions. These kinds of explicit strategies were absent in our classrooms. In terms of historical literacy, this means that students do not learn to engage with texts in a history-specific way. Further, evaluating the reliability of interpretations made by others would be difficult without knowing the steps involved in knowledge construction.

In our view, the observed ratio between the forms of knowledge is largely a result of both the quantity and the quality of textbook use. The teachers found that looking for historical sources was not realistic due to lack of time. For the most part, textbooks convey substantive knowledge in the form of recounts, where the interpretational aspect, the procedures and uncertainty regarding historical

knowledge remain hidden (Coffin, 1997). Thus, if teachers mostly go through textbooks chapter by chapter, and are unable to select content, the focus is likely to remain on substantive knowledge.

Of course, not all textbooks are the same; some provide documents for historical enquiry and some convey procedural knowledge. If teachers invested time in analysing visual texts, as well as written primary sources provided by the textbook, it might increase the role of procedural knowledge and the use of second-order concepts. A critical scrutiny of textbook narratives themselves can be a fruitful way to improve historical literacy (Downey and Long, 2016). Thus, our concern is not the use of textbooks *per se*, but rather the manner in which they are used.

In the Finnish context, the NCC and textbooks seem to have recontextualised history differently. While the NCC underscores historical literacy and interpretational processes, without a strong emphasis on content coverage, the majority of textbooks offer detailed substantive knowledge. This discrepancy can be problematic for primary teachers in particular, who cannot draw on their knowledge and experience of the academic discipline of history in the way that history subject teachers potentially can (Kitson, 2020). Thus, when encountering differently recontextualised history in textbooks and curricula, primary teachers may struggle to recontextualise from within the discipline. Instead, they may have to rely on what they know about the school subject of history.

One important finding from our study is that horizontal discourse was not analysed with disciplinary tools and concepts. Undoubtedly, recontextualising these discourses systematically is challenging, even for expert teachers (see Nordgren, 2021). Hughes (2021) found that an expert primary teacher, who was consistent in teaching a disciplinary approach to analysing primary sources, failed to use the same strategies when introducing historical fiction. Similarly to the YouTube video in Eve's lesson, pupils were not advised to think about the perspective and motivations of the author, the intended audience or the reliability of the text.

Reservations about introducing horizontal discourse (see Bernstein, 2000) are understandable in the light of our and Hughes's (2021) results. If segments of horizontal discourse are presented but not analysed, it does not benefit disciplinary subject education. On the contrary, students might build their historical knowledge on historical fiction (Hughes, 2021; Wineburg et al., 2007).

Yet there are clear disadvantages in not encouraging interaction between the discourses. If artefacts of horizontal discourse, such as YouTube videos, books and films, as well as students' experiential worlds, are excluded from history lessons, students are unlikely to learn to deconstruct their meaning on their own. Thus, the inclusion of horizontal discourse seems advisable, if the aim is the kind of historical literacy that takes into account the ability to also interpret contemporary phenomena and all types of accounts of the past. In a recent study, Finnish student teachers did not view knowledge of historical culture as an important factor for successful history instruction (Rantala and Khawaja, 2021). Therefore, becoming aware of the surrounding historical culture, and including it in history teaching, should already be addressed during teacher education.

As research on primary teachers' recontextualisation is scarce, we hope that this paper will serve as a starting point for studies improving our understanding of history teaching at primary level. Further research is needed on the way in which structural preconditions may affect primary teachers' opportunities to recontextualise history, as well as other school subjects.

## Funding

This work was supported in part by the Academy of Finland (grant number 294491).

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Jukka Rantala for many helpful discussions.

## Declarations and conflicts of interest

### Research ethics statement

The authors conducted the research reported in this article in accordance with the ethical guidelines defined by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK).

## Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

## Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

## References

- Alvunger, D. (2018) 'Teachers' curriculum agency in teaching standards-based curriculum'. *The Curriculum Journal*, 29 (4), 479–98. [CrossRef]
- Bernstein, B. (1990) *The Structuring of Pedagogical Discourse*. London: Routledge.
- Bernstein, B. (2000) *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity*. Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Bertram, C. (2019) 'What is powerful knowledge in school history? Learning from the South African and Rwandan school curriculum documents'. *The Curriculum Journal*, 30 (2), 125–43. [CrossRef]
- Bruner, J. (1960) *The Process of Education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Chapman, A. (2021) 'Historical knowledge and the knowledge turn'. In A. Chapman (ed), *Knowing History in Schools: Powerful knowledge and the power of knowledge*. London: UCL Press, 1–31.
- Coffin, C. (1997) 'Constructing and giving value to the past'. In J.R. Martin and F. Christie (eds), *Genres and Institutions: Social processes in the workplace and school*. London: Pinter, 196–230.
- Counsell, C. (2011) 'Disciplinary knowledge for all, the secondary history curriculum and history teachers' achievement'. *The Curriculum Journal*, 2 (22), 201–25. [CrossRef]
- Dempster, E. (2021) 'Power and control in science: A case study of a syllabus for science and technology'. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 42 (1), 113–26. [CrossRef]
- Deng, Z. (2020) *Knowledge, Content, Curriculum and Didaktik: Beyond social realism*. Oxford: Routledge.
- Dewey, J. (1963) *Experience and Education*. New York: Collier: [originally published 1938].
- Downey, M.T. and Long, K.A. (2016) *Teaching for Historical Literacy: Building knowledge in the history classroom*, 1st ed. New York: Routledge.
- Finnish National Board of Education. (2014) *National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014*. Helsinki: Finnish National Agency for Education. Accessed 15 March 2022. <https://www.oph.fi/fi/koulutus-jatutkinnot/perusopetuksen-opetussuunnitelman-perusteet>.
- Fogo, B. (2014) 'Core practices for teaching history: The results of a Delphi panel survey'. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 42 (2), 151–96. [CrossRef]
- Gläser-Zikuda, M., Hagenauer, G. and Stephan, M. (2020) 'The potential of qualitative content analysis for empirical educational research'. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 21 (1), 17. [CrossRef]
- Hartzler-Miller, C. (2001) 'Making sense of "best practice" in teaching history'. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 29 (4), 672–95. [CrossRef]
- Hordern, J. (2021) 'Recontextualisation and the teaching of subjects'. *The Curriculum Journal*, 32 (4), 592–606. [CrossRef]
- Hughes, R.E. (2021) 'Apprenticing third graders in disciplinary literacy in history'. *Literacy Research and Instruction*, 60 (2), 127–51. [CrossRef]
- James, J.H. (2008) 'Teachers as protectors: Making sense of preservice teachers' resistance to interpretation in primary history teaching'. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 36 (3), 172–205. [CrossRef]
- Johansson, P. (2019) 'Historical enquiry with archaeological artefacts in primary school'. *Journal of Humanities and Social Science Education*, 9 (1), 78–104. Accessed 8 June 2022. <https://journals.lub.lu.se/nordidactica/article/view/19950>.
- Kitson, A. (2020) 'Teachers as Recontextualization Agents: A study of expert teachers' knowledge and their role in recontextualization process across different subjects. PhD thesis, UCL, London, UK.
- Kitson, A. (2021) 'How useful is the theory of powerful knowledge to history educators?'. In A. Chapman (ed), *Knowing History in Schools: Powerful knowledge and the power of knowledge*. London: UCL Press, 31–52.

- Lee, P. (2011) 'History education and historical literacy'. In I. Davies (ed), *Debates in History Teaching*. London: Routledge, 63–72.
- Maton, K. (2014) *Knowledge and Knowers*. New York: Routledge.
- Nokes, J. (2010) 'Observing literacy practices in history classrooms'. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 38 (4), 515–44. [CrossRef]
- Nokes, J.D. (2014) 'Primary students' roles and epistemic stances during document-based history lessons'. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 42 (3), 375–413. [CrossRef]
- Nordgren, K. (2021) 'Powerful knowledge for what? History education and 45-degree discourse'. In A. Chapman (ed), *Knowing History in Schools: Powerful knowledge and the power of knowledge*. London: UCL Press.
- Nygren, T. and Guath, M. (2019) 'Swedish teenagers' difficulties and abilities to determine digital news credibility'. *Nordicom Review*, 40 (1), 23–42. [CrossRef]
- Ormond, B.M. (2017) 'Curriculum decisions – the challenges of teacher autonomy over knowledge selection for history'. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 49 (5), 599–619. [CrossRef]
- Pikkanen, I. (2018) 'The emergence of a story space: The image of the Club War (1596–1597) in Swedish and Finnish historiography, 1620–1860'. *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 43 (4), 515–38. [CrossRef]
- Priestley, M., Biesta, G.J.J. and Robinson, S. (2015) 'Teacher agency: What is it and why does it matter?'. In R. Kneyber and J. Evers (eds), *Flip the System: Changing education from the bottom up*. London: Routledge, 134–48.
- Puustinen, M. and Khawaja, A. (2020) 'Envisaging the alternatives: From knowledge of the powerful to powerful knowledge in history classrooms'. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 53 (1), 16–31. [CrossRef]
- Rantala, J. and Khawaja, A. (2021) 'Prospective primary school teachers' confidence in teaching disciplinary history'. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 107, 103492. [CrossRef]
- Salminen, J. and Annevirta, T. (2016) 'Curriculum and teachers' pedagogical thinking when planning for teaching'. *European Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 3 (1), 387–406. <http://pages.ie.uminho.pt/ejcs/index.php/ejcs/article/view/126/63> Accessed 8 June 2022.
- Smith, J. (2020) 'Community and contestation: A Gramscian case study of teacher resistance'. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 52 (1), 27–44. [CrossRef]
- VanSledright, B. (2002) *In Search of America's Past: Learning to read history in primary school*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- VanSledright, B. (2016) 'The continuous threat of excess? A cautionary tale about heritage celebration and object veneration in the U.S.A.'. In C. Boxtel, M. Grever and S. Klein (eds), *Sensitive Pasts: Questioning heritage in education*. New York: Berghahn, 40–58.
- Vernon, E. (2020) 'Teaching to the epistemic self: Ascending and descending the ladder of knowledge'. *The Curriculum Journal*, 31 (1), 27–47. [CrossRef]
- Wineburg, S., Mosborg, S., Porat, D. and Duncan, A. (2007) 'Common belief and the cultural curriculum: An intergenerational study of historical consciousness'. *American Educational Research Journal*, 44 (1), 40–76. [CrossRef]
- Young, M. (2008) *Bringing Knowledge Back In: From social constructivism to social realism in the sociology of education*. London: Routledge.
- Young, M. (2013) 'Overcoming the crisis in curriculum theory: A knowledge-based approach'. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 45 (2), 101–18. [CrossRef]