

Teaching methods in history school education in Cyprus: present-day situation and future developments

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Introduction

What a broad and challenging topic! Broad, because I have to give an overview of the teaching methods currently practised in history education in Cyprus, with reference to the different perspectives of various actors; and provide sustainable recommendations for possible future developments! Challenging, because I must, in less than 25 minutes, present this to you, an audience of well-informed educators, theorists and practitioners, who, I am sure, are not only familiar with what I will be saying, but most probably have already devised unique, imaginative and creative methods to develop children's historical thinking in your classrooms.

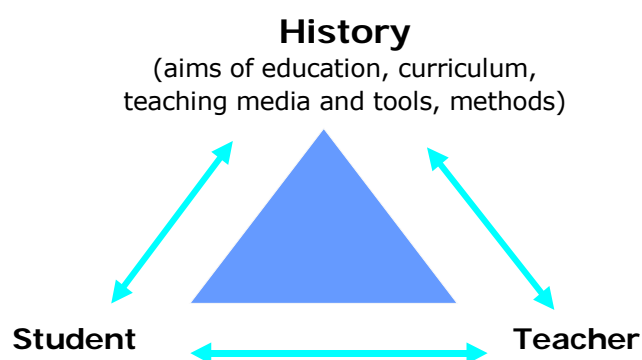
Thus, in order to make things a bit easier for me, I would like to narrow down my topic and focus on history education in the Greek Cypriot primary and secondary state schools of Cyprus. I will draw on my own experience as a teacher and President of the Association for Historical Dialogue and Research as well as on the very few relevant pieces of research that have been conducted in Cyprus. My presentation is also based on information gathered from written interviews and questionnaires with educators from all levels and on the analysis of educational publications.

Moreover, in order to give as full a description as possible of the many different perspectives of the current situation, I will firstly deal with 'the teaching methods in Greek-Cypriot state schools' as a phenomenon which is, part of a complicated and contested educational practice, through these four levels of analysis:

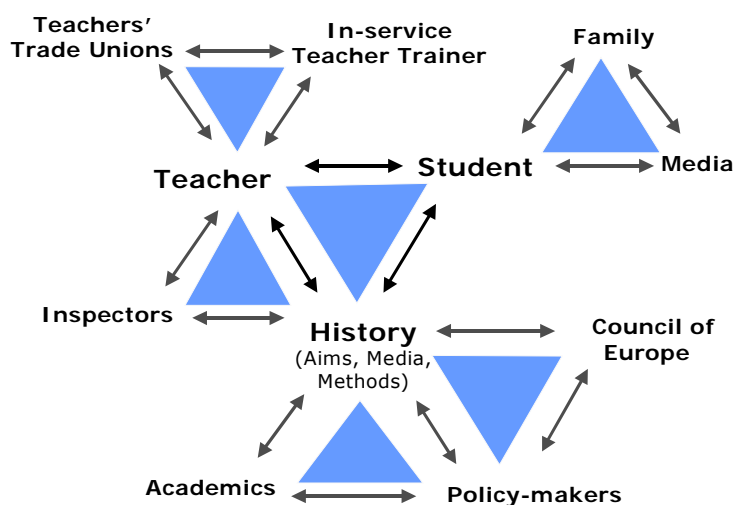
- the intra-personal level: e.g. thoughts of teacher, student;
- the inter-personal level: e.g. interaction of teacher-student;
- the positional level: differences in the social position and power of the particular actor that exist prior to the interactions with various actors prior to the interactions with other actors, e.g. inspectors;
- the representational level: system of beliefs, social representations, values and norms, which validate and maintain social order.

Interactive relations

For some, history teaching and learning are confined to the classroom, where history is communicated to a student via a mediator: the teacher. This interaction, however, is a triangular relationship. The following diagram, which illustrates this triangular relationship, will help me to illustrate the multifaceted nature of the subject of history at other levels too.



During this interaction a teacher sets constraints on a student (use of particular genre in written and oral tasks, behaviour, grades, tests, etc.), but the student also sets constraints on teachers (taking into consideration the child's cognitive and developmental constraints, etc.). Likewise, educational aims, history curriculum, teaching media and tools, and methods set constraints on both a teacher and student. Constraints, however, do not determine the learning process and outcome, since students and teachers (and other mediating actors) have, as we will see, relative autonomy. Yet, teachers and students are not alone in the history teaching and learning process, nor is this process confined to the four walls of a classroom. There are also many other actors that play an equally important role in the 'Whos', 'Whats', 'Hows' and 'Whys' of history lessons in Cyprus. Against a backdrop of shared understandings, practices, language and representations, each and every one of these actors interacts from a different stand-point with the other, regarding a particular object: in our case, History Education. Let us see, in the next diagram, some examples of this networking of interactions:



Council of Europe – History – Policy-Makers

Focusing on the particular interactive relationship between policy makers, the Council of Europe and History Teaching, it is worthwhile mentioning that the Committee of Ministers (of which Cyprus is a member) approved, on 31 October 2001, the 'Recommendation Rec (2001)15 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on history teaching in twenty-first century Europe'. The Recommendation includes specific proposals regarding the learning and teaching of history, and also suggestions on how to avoid the misuse of history, such as for example concentrating on a particular event whilst omitting others. It is expected that policy-makers will follow these recommendations and put them into practice.

Policy-Makers – History – Academics

Let us now concentrate on another particular triangular relationship: between academics and policy makers in relation to the history teaching. Currently in Cyprus, there is an underlying tension and debate for the proposed Educational Reform of the Republic of Cyprus. The reason for this being the very recent Educational Reform Report, which has been prepared by a group of academics at the request of the Government of the Republic of Cyprus. In various discussion panels and articles in the press regarding the Educational Reform Report, two main lines of argument have emerged.

On the one hand, there is the Educational Reform Committee, and those who support it, who argue for an 'ideological re-orientation' and 'restructuring of the aims of the Cypriot education', maintaining that the general orientation and ideology in Cypriot education remains to a large extent 'Greek-Cypriotcentric', 'ethnocentric' and 'culturally monolithic'. The Committee suggests, among other things, that narrow ethnocentric,

mono-cultural elements should be removed from education, that a European dimension and the principles of 'inclusive democracy', which will also embrace the Turkish Cypriot community, should be incorporated. There are also suggestions to restructure and modernise school pedagogy and educational context (school knowledge, national curricula, teaching and learning process); textbooks should be reviewed from an intercultural education point of view. Regarding history textbooks in particular, the Education Reform Committee proposes that they be revised by an impartial, joint committee of Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot academics.

On the other hand, there are those who argue that the political orientation and aims of every educational system are intertwined with its particular state of potential relations, both interior and exterior. Thus, this group argues, no educational reform should be put forward in Cyprus, particularly regarding history teaching, without taking into consideration the current situation and not before a solution for all Cypriots is found; one that will guarantee restoration of human rights and safety issues, such as the withdrawal of Turkish troops and the issue of settlers.

Teachers – History – Students

Coming back to the triangular relationship of teachers – students – history, we will now concentrate on the current educational aims, which, along with the teaching means and methods, set constraints both on teacher and students:

The general aim of the Greek Cypriot Education is the creation of free, democratic and autonomous citizens, with on all sides developed personality, intellectually cultivated, respectable, healthy, active and creative, that would contribute with their work and conscious action in the social, scientific, economic and cultural progress of our homeland and in the promotion of collaboration, understanding and love between the persons and the peoples, aiming at the predominance of freedom, justice and peace and with explicit orientation to the idea of a free homeland, our Greek identity and our Orthodox Christian delivery. (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1994, p.17).

Regarding history in particular, the national curriculum for primary education states:

The aim of the subject of history is to help students to become familiar and appreciate the historical life and cultural heritage of Cyprus and Greece and construct a national consciousness as members of the Greek nation and as citizens of a semi-occupied Cyprus. (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1994, p.133).

The national history curriculum for Secondary Education (in press) states:

The subject of History is mainly a humanitarian subject and its general aim, that is the construction of a historical consciousness and the development of historical thinking, is in absolute harmony with the wider aim of Cypriot education that refers to the preparation of fulfilled/whole and active citizens. (Ministry of Education and Culture, in press, p.142).

These aims are broken down to more specific objectives and activities. Who strive to meet these aims? The Greek-Cypriot educators. Educators, who are now active European citizens, yet continue to live on a divided island with the unresolved Cyprus Problem that creates insecurities and concerns for the future. Within this context, in order to successfully implement these aims, teachers can choose from a variety of resources and tools, some of which are provided for them, but most are assembled at their own initiative: Secondary sources such as history textbooks, history books and encyclopaedias, and primary sources such as maps, cartoons, letters, notes, official documents, diaries, newspapers, pictures, photos, paintings; archaeological and historical findings, monuments and sites; oral accounts and other. Allow me to remind you that in both primary and secondary education, the single-textbook policy applies; that is, teachers have to use the specific history textbooks approved by the Ministry of Education and Culture of Cyprus. The history textbooks, which follow a spiral content structure, are prepared and published in Greece by OEDB (Organisation of Greek Didactic Books, Ministry of Education), and also in Cyprus by the Department for Developing Programmes, Ministry of Education and Culture.

Generally speaking, the Ministry's guidelines emphasise that in order to have the most productive and successful implementation of the aims and objectives of history education, it is vital that the teacher adopts active, cooperative learning methods such as: enquiry-based methods, problem-solving, taking decisions on moral dilemmas, dramas and role plays, debates, as well as the use of various modern teaching tools such as videotapes, educational CD-Roms, and other. It is worth mentioning that, through information technology, there are online databases with lesson plans and materials for enquiry-based approaches for primary school. Secondary education has concentrated more on the production of CDs on the History of Cyprus with encyclopaedic information, activities and visual material on archaeology.

Guidelines in both primary and the secondary history curriculum recommend that, during his/her lesson, a teacher should make good use of school history textbooks and other books, maps and modern visual aids. Lessons need to be organised in a pragmatic way so that a student is given an opportunity to analyse, judge, compare, become aware, discuss and try to find solutions to problems, to promote creative thinking and to develop particular skills and abilities. A cross-curricular and

diachronic approach of topics is encouraged whenever the teacher thinks appropriate, as well as visits to museums and archaeological or historical sites, once the teacher feels the pupils are adequately prepared.

The Ministry of Education and Culture has done a great deal of work on visits to archaeological and historical museums and sites. For Secondary Education there is a series of educational booklets that can be photocopied by teachers and used for work on site. There are also museum packs that can be borrowed and used at school. For Primary Education there are museum educational programmes conducted and organised by teachers on secondment, in Archaeological and Social History Museums and Art Galleries in Larnaka and Non-Occupied Famagusta, Limassol, Paphos and Nicosia. It should also be noted that the participation in educational programmes organised by semi- or non-governmental organisations with museum collections, is also encouraged.

The realities of everyday school life

The existence of such a variety of methods, teaching means and tools is very encouraging. However, there is often a gap between the theory and the practice of everyday school life. This gap is due to the following constraints, which we must acknowledge, in order to overcome them in the future:

- A lack of research regarding history and history teaching in Cyprus.
- A highly centralised and bureaucratic educational system.

In the Greek-Cypriot educational system, which is both highly centralised and bureaucratic, policy makers place rigid constraints (via the National Curriculum and Circular Letters) on Directors of Education, who in turn place constraints on inspectors, and they then place constraints on head teachers and, finally, numerous demands and duties are placed on teachers.

- Quantity of the subject matter.

The quantity of the subject-matter, as determined in the syllabus, is the basic cause for stress and various other problems for secondary and, to a lesser extent, primary school teachers and, of course, secondary school students who have to pass their history exams. The stress and tension reaches its peak in the third year of Lyceum, where the test-based system centres on knowledge and, therefore, creates an imbalance between knowledge and skills. It should be noted that, despite the fact that the history curriculum allocates roughly 20% to the teaching of the history of Cyprus, many educators fail to teach the most recent events because there is rarely enough time. Teaching methods and approaches which promote dialogue, enquiry, multiperspectivity are either avoided, seldom

used or inconsistent. We often hear: how much can you teach in 40 minutes especially if you are not the regular teacher of the class? By the time pupils enter, sit down, open their books, and can finally begin to concentrate, time is up.

- A lack of pedagogical training of teachers.

Teachers are usually neither familiar with, nor trained to, teach history using new technologies or the most updated methods and approaches. As a result, there is no confidence, and instead a rather justified resistance, feelings of insecurity and even prejudice against the use of such methods in history teaching.

And, finally, something that I consider as the biggest problem, something that is directly related to teachers such as:

- Fear, dilemmas, insecurities, lack of trust in the 'Others'.

This concerns the fear that any opening, which would allow the voice of the Others to be heard, which could give a forum to other histories, like the histories of the religious minorities or other ethnic groups, might damage morale and the national identity of young people.

In my opinion, the problem with history education in Greek-Cypriot schools has as much to do with the teaching methods as with our more general approach to history and our representations of history. We have to acknowledge and accept that:

- A history lesson is a place where you learn to tolerate uncertainty;
- History is contentious; there is not just one history, but many and often conflicting accounts;
- As Christine Counsell said in her address to the Association for Historical Dialogue and Research at the February 2004 seminar in Cyprus: 'When we learn history we encounter all the time. We encounter the Other, we encounter otherness. We encounter the strange (and we discover it is surprisingly familiar). And we encounter the familiar (and discover how it is strange).'

It might indeed be the case that the Republic of Cyprus' highly centralised system of education reproduces certain constraints on the subject of history. These, in conjunction with the Cyprus problem being still unsolved, create many more dilemmas, tensions and complications. Yet, we are all here today. Why? Because we want to learn more about how to become better history teachers, because we want to overcome our fears and dilemmas, because we really want our children, our pupils, to learn to think critically and historically through dialogue, as equals.

It is time to end the 'trend', which places a teacher at the centre of every negative criticism regarding history education in Cyprus. I believe that after a series of successful events organised by our Association and with a lot of effort, personal sacrifice, steadfastness and confidence in our cause, I can say with certainty today that: with your help and that of our members, in cooperation with various educational bodies and institutions in Cyprus and Europe, such as Euroclio, and with the continuous support of the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Council of Europe, we can and we will play a vital role in the improvement of the quality of history teaching in our island.

Via constructive dialogue and well-planned research of the Cyprus situation, with productive cooperation between history teachers who love history and those with a special interest in the teaching and learning of history, beyond linguistic, religious or ethnic backgrounds, and through well-organised and consistent teacher-training courses, we can pave the way for more creative, responsible and democratic European citizens.

I would like to end my presentation with some questions that can place some constraints on but, at the same time, raise some issues for discussion:

- What do we want to teach?
- Do we want our pupils to conform to a particular perspective *OR* to come to grips with multiperspectivity?
- Do we want our pupils to memorise 'significant' historical events *OR* to evaluate historical significance?
- Do we want a monological *OR* a dialogical approach to teaching the history of Cyprus?
- Do we want to promote tolerance, justice, peace, and human rights?

Thank you.

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