

Mapping out student conceptions: An exploratory work on progression in students' understandings of historical accounts

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Suhaimi Afandi & Mark Baidon

*Humanities and Social Studies Education,
National Institute of Education, Singapore*

suhaimi.afandi@nie.edu.sg

- Many things happen in the classroom everyday: **knowledge gets 'presented, received, shared, controlled, negotiated, understood and misunderstood'** (Mercer, 1987).
- We focus a lot on our teaching but:
 - ✓ Have we considered if our teaching **causes** learning?
 - ✓ Do we 'make time' to get to know if our students have **learnt** something?
 - ✓ Is there a way to know if our students' ideas have **changed** or **developed** through our instruction?
 - ✓ Can we tell if students are (still) working with **misconceptions**?
 - ✓ Are there ways to address these misconceptions and put in place **workable** ones? How do we go about doing this?

Purpose:

- a. To share initial research work on mapping out students' (pre-)conceptions about historical accounts;
- b. To explore ways to develop students' ideas & understandings about history through 'conversations'.

Agenda:

1. 'Historical literacy': notions about reading, thinking & understanding in history. [15"]
2. Research findings on students' conceptions of accounts in history. [15"]
3. Developing students' ideas about historical accounts through 'talk'. [20"]

- *Activity 1: Read the passage below (see Handout 1)*

The representatives of the major European powers at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference hoped that World War I would be ‘the war to end all wars’. However, tensions between the powers continued to grow after the end of World War I. The League of Nations did not manage to achieve its aim of disarmament and collective security. Its weakness paved the way for Hitler to aggressively pursue his expansionist policy. It also made Britain and France convinced that they had to pursue a policy of appeasement rather than rely on the League to deal with Hitler. These factors were instrumental in leading to the outbreak of World War II.

Judy Ling & Aron Paul, Unit 2: The World in Crisis, p. 109

*How would your history students approach the reading of this text?
What ‘moves’ are they likely to make as they read the passage?*

Know *meaning* of words & comprehend what the passage is about

Recognize personalities/events and understand certain historical terms or specific *substantive concepts* related to the event

Contextualize issues described in the text to the broader time-frame/event

Compare information in the text with what reader knows about event

The representatives of the major European powers at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference hoped that World War I would be 'the war to end all wars'. However, tensions between the powers continued to grow after the end of World War I. The League of Nations did not manage to achieve its aim of disarmament and collective security. Its weakness paved the way for Hitler to aggressively pursue his expansionist policy. It also made Britain and France convinced that they had to pursue a policy of appeasement rather than rely on the League to deal with Hitler. These factors were instrumental in leading to the outbreak of World War II.

Activate 2nd order understanding of the text as an *account* of history

Recognize *status* of the text (i.e. as a primary or secondary source) & its form/function

Judy Ling & Aron Paul (2013), Unit 2: The World in Crisis, p. 109

Engage in *well-taught skills* to examine the worth of the text as *evidence* – through provenance details, the claims being made, the relevance and usefulness of the source, etc.

Activate 2nd order understanding of historical *causation* in examining the factors that led to war

A way to view 'historical literacy'

Goes beyond reading and decoding the manifest content or words and sentences
(Virta, 2007)

As tools in
thinking critically
about the past
(Segall, 1999)

Historical Literacy

May be demonstrated
through discursive
writing when explaining
or interpreting past
events (Counsell, 1997)

Involves understanding history as a discipline and
having the disposition to create frameworks for
understanding the past (Lee, 2011)

The main challenge in reading historical texts: students' failure to adopt a critical and questioning approach to reading.

- Sam Wineburg (1991): divided the process of reading historical texts into sourcing, corroboration, and contextualization – found that students were predisposed to simply absorb information efficiently.
- Jeffery Nokes (2011): identified barriers to students' reading of historical texts to their failure in using historians' heuristics (due to fundamental differences between the way they viewed historical inquiry, the reading process and the way they approach the texts).

- *Another example: (see Handout 2)*

The Singapore Pledge

We, the citizens of Singapore,
pledge ourselves as one united people,
regardless of race,
language or religion,
to build a democratic society
based on justice and equality
so as to achieve happiness, prosperity and
progress for our nation.

*Written in 1966 by Mr. S. Rajaratnam, a long-serving
Minister and one of the pioneer leaders of newly-
independent Singapore.*

*How would your history students approach the reading of this text?
What 'moves' are they likely to make when reading the text?*

Historical literacy proposes that students...

Historical Literacy

...know and can access content about the past

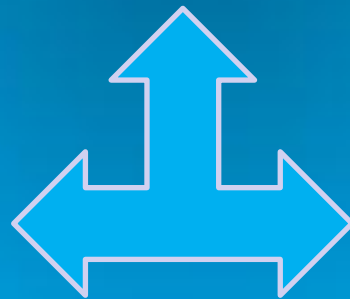
SUBSTANTIVE HISTORY

...have the tools and the disposition to think historically about the past

HISTORICAL THINKING

...possess a sound grasp of the methodological & conceptual underpinnings of the discipline

HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING



Dynamic Interplay

...is for students to know something about *history* (as a discipline), and understand how knowledge about the past is constructed, arbitrated & evaluated.

- This involves not only guiding students in the reading (and writing) of historical texts, but also equipping them with a **conceptual apparatus** to come to grips with the nature of the discipline:

- *how we come to know something about the past;*
- *how accounts about past events are written;*
- *why there are different claims made by history;*
- *how these can be tested against each other; etc.*

“[it is] absurd ... to say that schoolchildren know any history if they have no understanding of how historical knowledge is attained, its relationship to evidence, and the way in which historians arbitrate between competing or contradictory claims. The ability to recall accounts without any understanding of the problems involved in constructing them or the criteria involved in evaluating them has nothing historical about it. Without an understanding of what makes an account historical, there is nothing to distinguish such an ability from the ability to recite sagas, legends, myths or poems.”

P.J. Lee (1991, pp 48-49)

1. What kinds of ideas do students in Singapore have about the nature and status of accounts in history?

- a). How do students view differences between historical accounts?
- b). How do students decide between rival historical accounts, and what are the range of ideas they are likely to hold when asked to choose the 'better' account?

2. What can we say about teachers assumptions regarding their students' ideas about accounts?

- a). What can we say about the way teachers view students' ideas?
- b). What sort of assumptions do teachers have about students' understandings of accounts?

School type, gender, academic band, educational level

TABLE 1: DISTRIBUTION OF STUDENTS

School	Type	Intake	Sec 2	JC1
School A	Secondary (co-ed/mixed)	Express	06	
School B	Secondary (co-ed/mixed)	Express	06	
School C	Secondary (co-ed/mixed)	Normal Academic	06	
School D	Secondary (co-ed/mixed)	Express	06	
		Normal Academic	06	
School E	Secondary selective (boys)	Special/Gifted	06	
School F	Secondary selective (boys)	Special	08	
School G	Secondary selective (girls)	Express	06	
School H	Junior College/Pre-U	Middle-band		10
School I	Junior College/Pre-U	Middle-band		09
Total in each year group			50	19

N = 69

Mean average of year groups: Secondary 2 (14 years 2 months); JC1 (17 years 1 month)

Based on a purposeful sampling of nine teachers for the study

- Research instruments (students):
 1. Two written task-sets: pencil-and-paper cognitive tasks around specific themes –
 - the Ming naval expeditions in the 15th C
 - the effects of British rule in Singapore
 2. Follow-up group interviews (all students; three-in-one)

- Research instruments (teachers):
 1. Postal Questionnaire (51% response rate out of 182 schools)
 2. Face-to-face interview (purposeful sampling of nine teachers)

Categories for explaining '**Differences**'
& '**Deciding**' between accounts:
Viewing **progression** in students' ideas
through a **Factual-Multiple-Criterial**
continuum

(see Handout 3 for details of response categories and distribution)

Viewing 'shifts' in student ideas

see Handout 4

Students' ways of thinking about accounts in history

	How students think about accounts
Factual	Accounts are 'copies' of a fixed and objective past – accounts exist as a collection of facts (that are correct or incorrect representations of a singular reality).
Factual-Multiple	Accounts are multiple versions of a past that is complex and multi-faceted; they are constitutive of the legitimate opinions of their authors, which are accountable only to their owners.
Multiple-Criterial	Accounts are selective interpretations of events, (re-) constructions that can be evaluated according to a set of standards or criteria – like evidence, argument and story parameters.

Viewing 'shifts' in student ideas

Students' ways of thinking about historical knowledge

Implicit view of historical knowledge

**(Factual)
Static and
binary**

Historical knowledge is fixed and given and exists as exact representations of the past; the knowledge is 'there' to be acquired but may not be directly accessible, producing false or distorted stories.

**(Factual-Multiple)
Subjective &
perspectiveful**

Historical knowledge is produced by human minds, based partly on individual dispositions, experiences and perspectives. The knowledge is uncertain, and largely corresponds to the owner's personal conception of the past.

**(Multiple-Criterial)
Dynamic &
multi-
dimensional**

Historical knowledge is constructed by human minds, based on an interpretation of available evidence. The knowledge is tentative and is open to questioning and evaluation based on standards and criteria used by a community of scholars.

Do Singapore teachers think about students ideas?

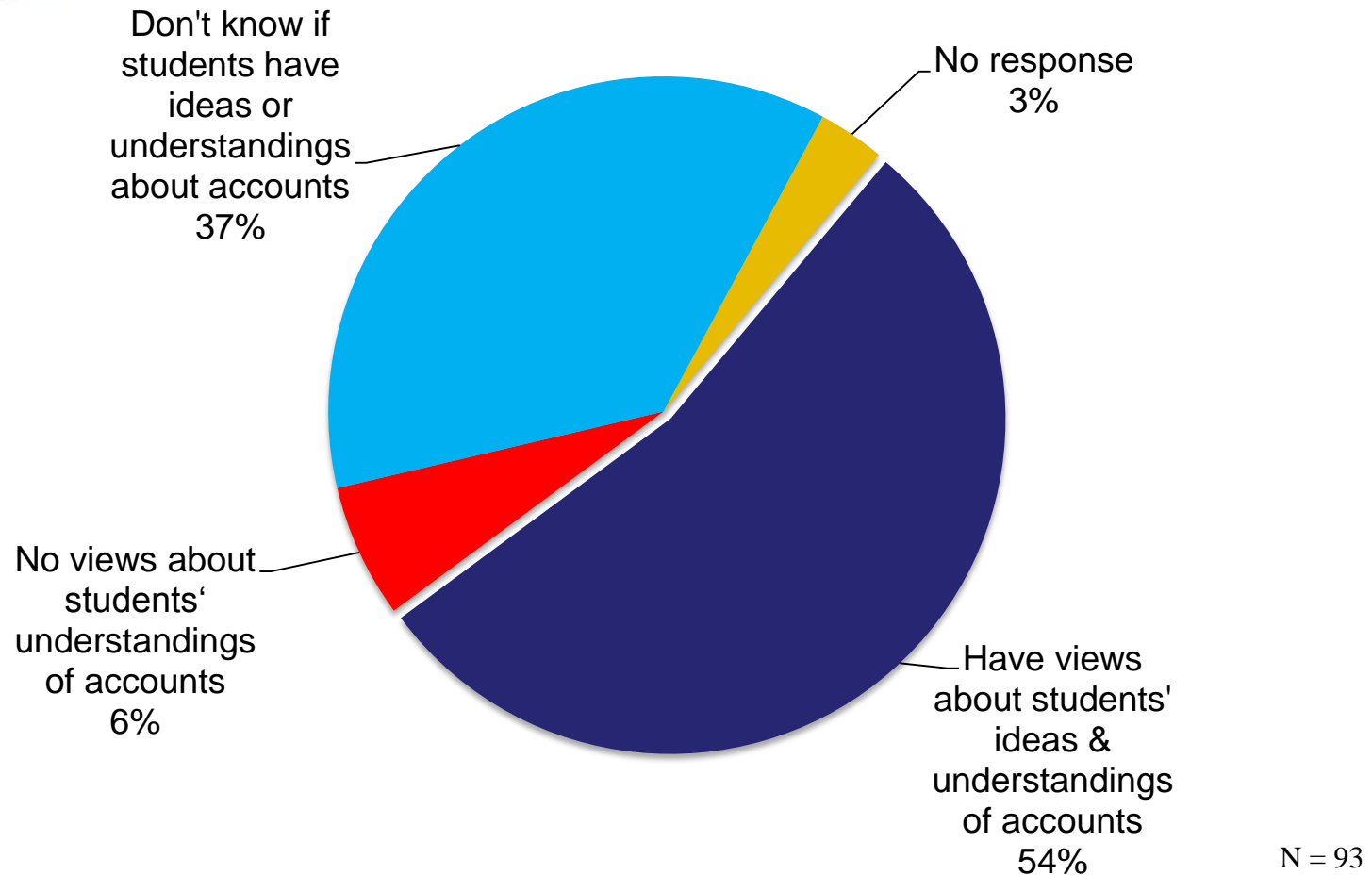


Fig 1: Distribution of teachers' survey response regarding their views about students' ideas and understandings about the nature of accounts in history (by percentage)

Do Singapore teachers think about students ideas?

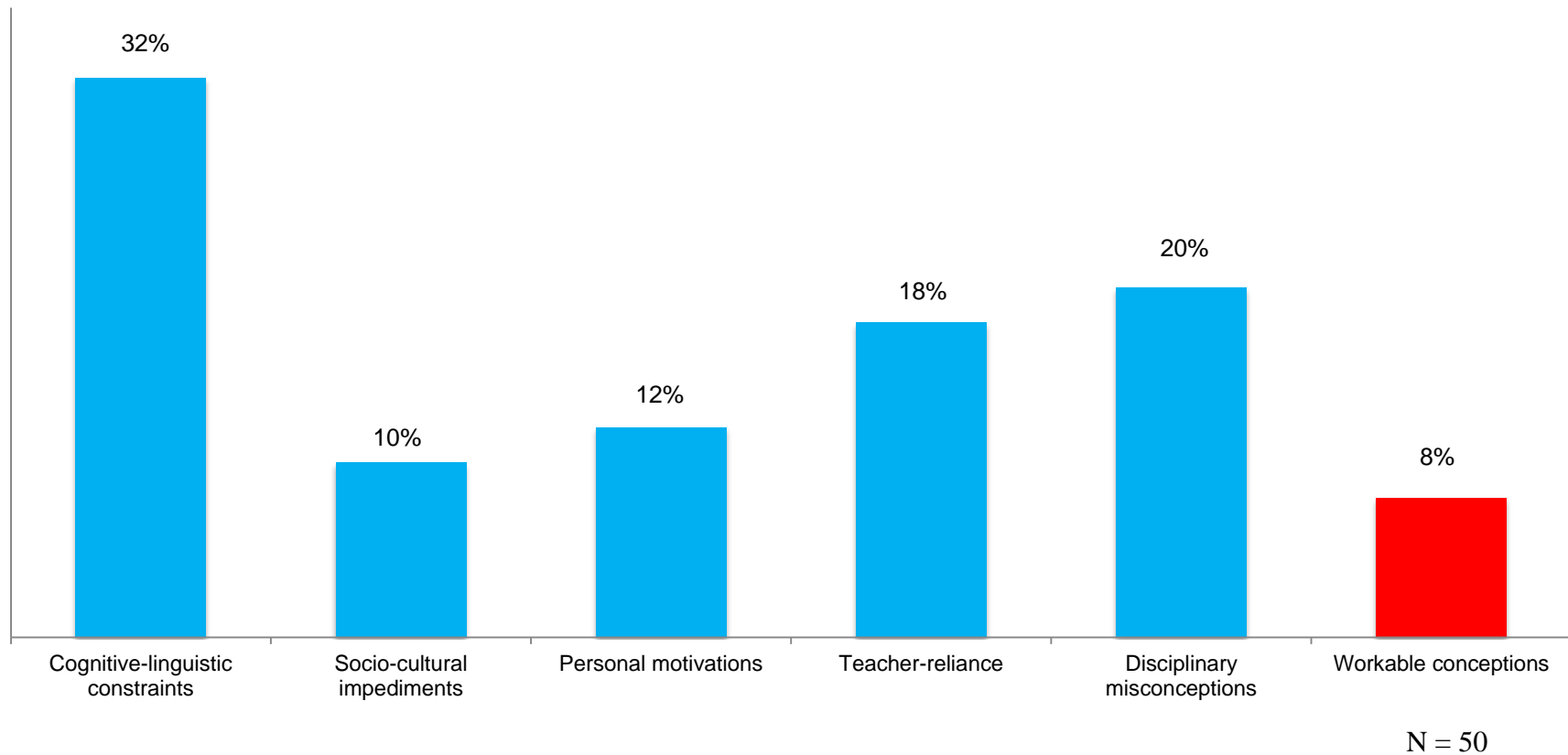


Fig 2: Distribution of teachers' survey responses regarding their views about students' ability to understand the nature of accounts in history (by percentage of respondents who affirmed views)

Do Singapore teachers think about students ideas?

- Many teachers were predisposed to viewing students' preconceptions as problematic to history teaching and learning. There was a tendency to disregard students' prior ideas as a means to develop better understandings.

Possibly due to:

- The belief that students' preconceptions or prior ideas are not helpful in developing proper understandings about history;
- A belief that developing historical understandings may not be directly useful for assessment purposes;
- Teachers' lack of familiarity with a teaching approach that focuses on engaging students' prior ideas. As such, many simply did not know how to deal with prior ideas.

Being 'responsive' to students' ideas in history

Research evidence from *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School* (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 1999)

- Important starting point for teachers: to recognize that students bring into the classroom pre-existing ideas and initial understandings that must be engaged if they are to make sense of new knowledge & develop deeper understandings about the subject.
- The key is to know where students 'are at' (in terms of their assumptions/ideas/beliefs/understandings, etc.), view these as potential 'seeds of understanding' & devise possible ways to move their ideas forward (**progression**).

A 'responsive pedagogy' in history

A possible step-by-step approach in engaging students' ideas:

- a) **Provide students with a rich task** where they explore and examine a concept/issue in history (e.g. adjudicating between claims; deciding between accounts; etc.) to see 'where students are at' based on their responses.
- b) **Closely observe and pay attention to what students are saying or writing.** Note key 'starting points' and map these out in terms of a range of ideas from low-level to more sophisticated understandings.
- c) **Open discussions with students:** demonstrate how student responses (are likely to) differ using a mapping of the range of ideas. Deal with the misconceptions (the 'blockers') and identify preconceptions that can work (the 'builders').
- d) **Build on new knowledge:** provide opportunities for students to apply new concepts/ideas learnt based on something that they are able to relate.

The focus of the final part of this session:

c) Open discussions with students: demonstrate how student responses (are likely to) differ using a mapping of the range of ideas. Deal with the misconceptions (the 'blockers') and identify preconceptions that can work (the 'builders').

- Activity 3: Read the conversation between three students on the nature of historical accounts in Handout 5.

As you read, consider:

What ideas about historical accounts do students demonstrate?

What ideas are likely to hinder their understandings about history and historical accounts?

What ideas can be developed/advanced?

How might they be developed/advanced?

- Demonstration (see Handout 6)

Activity 4: Consider a conversation that can take place in a classroom where a teacher guides his/her students in a discussion about historical accounts and how we can establish historical knowledge about past events.

Provide suggestions as to how we can move the conversation forward to build understandings...

Conclusion: Towards a responsive history pedagogy

Knowing about students' ideas matter if teachers want to help students develop better understandings about history and the past.

In developing students' ideas by using conversational prompts and moves that aim to engage, challenge and sharpen students' disciplinary thinking, teachers become **'designers of reflective learning experiences'** in their own classrooms.

Having good conversations about history can help students think critically about what they know and offer opportunities for them to come to grips with the nature of the discipline.

Thank you & Questions