

## **Singapore teachers' characterisation of historical interpretation and enquiry: Enhancing pedagogy and pupils' historical understanding**

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In 2000 syllabus revisions took into account the need to include the process of history. In alignment with the change in the syllabus, assessment changed and pupils were expected to answer a compulsory source-based question. This research project is constructed to study Singapore teachers' characterisation of historical interpretation and enquiry four years after the new syllabi was implemented.

Research in history education and teaching in the US show that pupils rarely get opportunities in school to practice history, 'by systematically investigating evidence, reading primary source documents, doing extensive research, and drawing their own conclusion from interpretations and arguments they generate' (Vansledright, 2002: 133) i.e. doing history or historical thinking. Instead they are more likely to memorise content from the textbook (Barton, 1996; Cuban, 1991; Goodlad, 1984; Seixas, 1999 and Vansledright, 2002). Thus the general perception of history held by most people is that it is a boring subject which requires teachers to provide a massive amount of information about the past to pupils who will then have to memorise and recall it during examinations.

For many years teachers in Singapore have been teaching history as a subject where there is a body of facts that pupils have to remember and recall during examinations. The majority of these teachers were also taught history in a similar manner. In 1998 syllabus revisions took into account the need to include the process of history. The new syllabi were implemented to Secondary One pupils in 2000 and to Secondary Three pupils in 2001. The skills objectives of history in schools aim to promote an understanding of basic historical concepts, such as cause and consequence, continuity and change, similarity and difference, encourage the development of literacy and essential study skills, including the ability to select, organise and analyse information and to construct a logical argument and to introduce pupils to the nature and uses of historical sources. In alignment with the change in the syllabus, assessment changed and pupils were expected to answer a compulsory source-based question. This curriculum design requires a shift in pedagogical practice and scaffolds for the curriculum implementers – the teachers. The question is what direction this shift should take. This reconceptualist model of curriculum requires teachers to have knowledge that differs from how they

have been taught and how they themselves have been teaching. The revised syllabus thus sets the stage for new knowledge, which requires a shift in teaching to one whereby teachers have to teach for historical understanding. This requires a shift in pedagogical approaches. However, because of the lack of lead time from syllabus implementation to the first national examinations, teachers were trained only in setting source-based examination questions and how to mark source-based questions. It is difficult for these teachers to 'know' how to teach historical understanding skills like interpretation and enquiry without first knowing what the discipline of history is and proper training given to them to teach this discipline.

This paper covers only part of phase one of a larger Doctor in Philosophy study. The research questions for the whole study are:

1. What are Singapore history and social studies teachers' understandings of historical understanding?
2. Will an intensive collaborative-researcher intervention enhance teachers' beliefs and practice in secondary history / social studies education in Singapore?
3. Will this in turn enhance pupils' historical understanding?

The research uses a quasi- ethnographic study which is divided into three phases. This paper will be a preliminary study of part of the first phase which answers the first research question.

### **Literature Review**

VanSledright (1996) and other researchers suggest that what teachers teach 'might well be shaped by forces like beliefs about pupils and curriculum mandates' (cited in Wilson, 2001). Wilson and Wineburg (1988) examined the relationship between teachers' beliefs about the nature of history and their ideas about teaching. Evans (1988, 1989, 1990) explored the relationships between teachers' conceptions of history and their teaching style as well as background factors that may influence those conceptions. Researchers like Quinlan, 1999; McDiarmid, 1994; McDiarmid and Vinten-Johnson, 1993 and Wineburg and Wilson, 1991 'attempt to explain good teaching by looking at teachers' knowledge and beliefs, as well as the myriad contexts of education - pupils, schools, policy mandates, curriculum reforms' and others (cited in Wilson, 2001).

Goodman and Adler (1985) did a study on sixteen elementary student-teachers' perspectives toward social studies. The student-teachers were students of social studies methods course and were selected from two university teacher education programmes. They were attempting to discover how these conceptions of social studies were played out—or not played out—in classroom practice. The analysis took a narrative form, using examples from the data to demonstrate the interrelationship between analysis and social reality. They claimed that presenting the analysis in narrative form reflects its ever-developing nature. In total they came up with six major perspectives:

- Social studies as a non-subject
- Social studies as human relations
- Social studies as citizenship
- Social studies as school knowledge
- Social studies as the great connection
- Social studies as social action

They concluded that official conceptions of social studies have little to do with student teacher's beliefs and actions in the classroom and that methods course should address this discrepancy.

Evans (1988, 1989 and 1990) probed into teachers' conceptions of history in three different studies. The first study (1988) described and analysed teacher and student conceptions of the meaning of history and explored factors which shape conceptions of the meaning of history and the relationship among teacher conceptions, the curriculum and student conceptions. The sample included three high school history teachers and nine student informants. Data collection included in-depth interviews and classroom observations. The study revealed that teacher conceptions of history varied and teacher conceptions were influenced by varied factors. The study also indicated that teacher conceptions shaped the transmitted curriculum and student conceptions were influenced by teacher conceptions. This finding is significant as it revealed the teacher's conceptual base as the most important determinant in guiding curriculum decisions and suggests that history teachers serve as a potent forum for imparting the discipline.

The findings led Evans (1989) to conduct a follow-up study to further clarify teacher conceptions of the meaning of history. This study combined survey and interview data to develop a comprehensive portrait of each teacher's conception of the meaning of history. The findings were similar to the previous study, but this study added another layer to the previous study by classifying teacher conceptions into five broad categories of:

- storyteller,
- scientific historian,
- relativist/reformer,
- cosmic philosopher or
- eclectic.

Evans feels that these typologies combine an approach to pedagogy and an epistemology but the dominant factor seems to be a conception of purpose and each category emphasises a distinctly different conception of the purposes for the study of history. Though the conceptions and purpose vary, these are not exclusive categories. Evans concluded that teacher conception of history seem profoundly related to teacher background, teacher belief, and teacher knowledge. However, he cautioned that the impact of organisational constraints and traditional models of teaching may have a greater impact and thus may result in the lack of relationship between a teacher's conception of history and teaching style. In his 1990 study, Evans further explored on the typologies and also the effects of each teacher's conceptions of history on the transmitted curriculum. Data was collected on five teachers, each representing one of the five typologies developed in the earlier studies. The findings revealed that teacher conceptions of history have profound impact on the transmitted curriculum but the impact of teacher conceptions may vary. He speculated that the reason for such variation could be related to teacher efficacy.

One study in Singapore that is relevant to this study is Yeo's (2002) master's thesis. She did a study examining ten teachers' perceptions of the meaning of history, teachers' perception of their roles and functions in history teaching, as well as their pedagogical practices. Her findings revealed that while teachers generally share the same perception of the meaning of history, there are still

differences in the specific definitions of the subject. Yeo categorised the teachers' perception of history as:

- History is about the past, present and future
- History as a story
- Value of History

Like Evan's study, Yeo concluded that these understandings of the subject are not exclusive. Teachers can have more than one understanding of what history means. She also discovered that the teachers were committed to their professional development and attend in-service courses in IT skills, thinking skills and the like to help them in their teaching. However, she failed to note that most of the courses attended by the teachers were courses that teach generic skills and the history course that they attended was for setting and marking examination papers and that none of the courses they attended relates to the teaching of the discipline of the subject. There is also indication in her research that teachers' perception of history teaching may be incongruent to their pedagogical practices. This is because of the teachers focus on achieving good grades in the subject as all view this as their main role as history teachers.

What is lacking in Yeo's research is research on what the nature of history is about. To fully analyse teachers' perceptions of the meaning of history there needs to be a comparison of their perceptions with the nature of the discipline itself. This lack is where the first phase of my research hopes to address.

From the above studies made by Goodman and Adler, Evans and Yeo, it can thus be seen that teachers' conception of history and /or social studies may impact on their teachings and therefore pupils understanding but as Evans contends there may also be no co-relation to teachers conceptions and their practice as other forces may be at work which would impact on teachers' attempts to bring across their understandings in the classrooms.

The current Singapore syllabus has as its orientation one of the scientific historian as the skills objectives emphasised the skills of historical interpretation and enquiry and this is supported by the assessment which requires the pupils to answer a compulsory source-based question. The question

therefore would be whether the interviews conducted in Phase One of this research would show a strong leaning towards the scientific historian.

## **Method**

The first phase of this study is divided into three parts for triangulation purposes. Triangulation is necessary to gain the needed confirmation, to increase credence in the interpretation and to demonstrate commonality of an assertion (Stake, 1995). According to Kirk and Miller (in Silverman, 1993), the use of interviews as well as observations within the same time-period for triangulation purposes tests for synchronic reliability.

### Part 1 – Pre- Intervention Teacher Interviews

The first part investigates what Singapore history teachers' characterisation of historical interpretation and enquiry are through semi-structured interviews and whether history teachers are aware of historical understanding. (For the purpose of this study the area of historical understanding that will be studied will be narrowed to the use of sources as evidence). If so, what are their understandings of historical understanding? It will also look at how teachers teach school history at the secondary level and whether there are attempts to facilitate the development of historical interpretations and enquiry in their pupils. Research by Levstik and Gregg has shown that learners and teachers come to their classes with a sense of history. Research in other subject areas has shown that we cannot hope to prove a meaningful educational experience for teachers or pupils unless we have some sense of these other understandings (Leinhardt, 2000). Thus the following questions will frame this part of my study for the teachers:

- What are the beliefs of our history teachers about education and teaching?
- What are their beliefs about history, history teaching, and learning?
- What do they understand by historical understanding in particular historical interpretation and enquiry?
- What are their beliefs and attitudes towards the enquiry approach?
- How do they teach these historical skills?
- How comfortable are they in teaching historical interpretation and enquiry?

- What are their educational backgrounds?

Eighteen history teachers have been chosen for the interview to discover what teachers' characterisations of historical understanding are. The teachers interviewed are fairly representative of the population of history teachers in Singapore and of the range of schools across the country. Table 1 summarises the background information of the teachers interviewed. Four of them are Heads of Department (Humanities). As Humanities Heads give the direction in the department and vet the examination papers, it is thus necessary to have some in the sampling to see their conceptions and characterisation of history. The choice of teachers interviewed took into account the number of years they have been teaching, so there is a spread of teachers who have just joined the teaching force to one who has taught for thirty-five years. This diversity in terms of teaching experience of the teachers interviewed is to study whether number of years in teaching, or new entrants into the profession would share the same conception of history and historical enquiry.

Eight of the teachers interviewed are males and ten are females and their racial composition includes thirteen Chinese, one Indian, two Malays and two Eurasians. As a researcher I tried to cover a representation of Singapore's racial composition for the interviews.

All except one of the teachers interviewed have a basic degree of which five read history in their honours year and one has gone on to do his Masters in Education. Of the eighteen history teachers interviewed fourteen of them have taken history as a subject at the University level and fourteen of them took history as Curriculum Studies 1 in the NIE.

The teachers teach in a range of schools: seven from neighbourhood schools, four from aided schools (these are classified under the neighbourhood schools category), four from the autonomous schools (these are government schools who have been given the freedom to run their schools with less restrictions from the MOE), one from a Special Assistance Plan school (these are schools that teach both English Language and Chinese Language at first level) and two from an Independent school (these are schools that have been given the freedom to move away from the MOE structure).

All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed and will be coded according to pre-planned categories of informants and organised by their relevance to the research questions.

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**Table 1: Teachers Interviewed - Background Summary**

No.	Teacher#	No. of Years in service	Highest Level History taken	Highest Academic Qualification	CS 1	CS 2	CS3	Pilot Phase	Phase 2	Pupils' interviewed	Type of School	Stream	HOD
1	Kelvin	1	Uni (minor)	BA	PE	HY		x		x	Neighbourhood	Normal (A)	
2	Kalsom	16	Uni	BA	PE	HY		x	x	x	Neighbourhood	Express / Normal (A)	
3	Mary	18	Uni	BA	GE	HY		x		x	Neighbourhood	Express	
4	Alice	2	A level	BA	HY	EL					Neighbourhood		
5	Edmundi	4	Sec 2	BA	HY	GE		x	x	x	Autonomous	Special	
6	Lay Yoke	35	A level	A level	EL	PE	HY				Autonomous		
7	Jimmy	6	Uni	BA (Honours) (NIE)	HY	LI					Independent		
8	Kah Wai	9	Uni	BA (Australia)	HY	EL					Independent		
9	Sye Lai	2	Uni	BA (Honours)	HY	EL					Autonomous		
10	Eng Wah	2	Uni	BA (Honours) (Australia)	HY	EL			x	x	Aided	Express	
11	Selvi	1	Uni	BA (NIE)	HY	EL			x	x	Aided	Express	
12	Bok Cheng	11	Uni	BA	HY	EL			x	x	Aided	Normal (A)	
13	Soon Beng	8	Uni	BA (Honours) (UK)	HY						Neighbourhood		Humanities
14	Jessica	25	Uni	BA	HY	EL					SAP		Counselling
15	Kim Lian	21	Uni	BA (Honours)	HY	EL					Aided		Humanities
16	Seth	13	Uni	MEd	HY	EL					Neighbourhood		Humanities
17	Siti	9	Uni	BA	HY	EL					Neighbourhood		Humanities
18	Mohammed	11	Uni	BA (Honours)	HY	EL					Autonomous		Humanities
	Uni - University			LI - Literature									GEP
	BA - Bachelor of Arts			GE - Geography									
	MEd - Masters in Education			HY - History									
	EL - English Language			(A) - Academic									
	PE - Physical Education			HOD - Head of Department									

#All names have been changed



## **Findings**

This section will discuss Singapore teachers' conception of history and historical enquiry and see how these are characterised in their teachings and pupils' understanding of history. Below will be the analysis of pre-intervention interviews of the eighteen teachers, base line lesson observations and pre-intervention pupil interviews with special focus on four of the teachers who were involved in phase two of my research. These four teachers are Kalsom, Edmund, Selvi and Bok Cheng.

Data will be analysed by qualitative analysis of interview transcripts. Data will be coded according to pre-planned categories of informants and organised by their relevance to the research questions. Patterns and themes which emerge will then be developed in an effort to create a portrait of teacher conception and characterisation of history and historical enquiry and whether these two impact on pupils' historical understanding. The triangulation of these findings will then act as the *raison d'être* for Phase Two of this research.

The analysis of the interviews as mentioned earlier is divided into the four main themes of the semi-structured interview questions.

- Teachers' educational beliefs and beliefs about teaching
- Teachers perception of what is history
- Teachers beliefs about history teaching and learning
- Description of a typical history lesson

Each theme will investigate the interviews along the lines of commonalities and differences found. More time will be spent analysing the teachers' beliefs about the subject matter as this is the focus of the first phase of the study. However, the first theme was added in this phase to measure whether teachers' teachings are governed by their educational beliefs and beliefs about teaching.

### Teachers' educational beliefs and beliefs about teaching

From the interviews of the eighteen teachers certain themes emerge. When it came to discussing their beliefs about education, most of them were able to articulate their educational beliefs without hesitation and were vociferous in sharing their thoughts. Generally all the teachers interviewed believed that besides the fundamentals, education should be broad based, teaching the correct moral

values, build character and prepare the children for working life. Below are some of their responses which highlight their beliefs.

- Kalsom strongly believes that education is about the fundamentals of ensuring that the child learns the 3 Rs, to read, to write and to count. She also strongly believes that inculcating moral values and that being a teacher means imparting pupils with the '*pragmatism of life*' so that they can make the correlation with schooling.
- Edmund believes that education is about: '*informative training, character training, imparting of values and imparting in the pupil a passion for life long learning*'.
- Bok Cheng believes that education is about the '*acquisition of knowledge and values, the inculcation of the right habits and the preparation of pupils for working life through socialisation and giving them the option to make more informed choices.*'
- Selvi feels that education is:

*'about development and fulfilment...What I mean by development...I think to help the person make maybe more informed choices about the way you choose to love life or to make you think about the way you choose to live your life...I think for people to be useful to society.'*

From the interviews and observations of these eighteen history teachers certain themes emerge. When it came to discussing their beliefs about education, most of them had no problem articulating it, even though there is some cynicism as to whether their beliefs can be carried out, many of the teachers interviewed came into teaching because they believe they can make a difference to the lives of their pupils. However, they find out in practice that they ended doing a lot of busy work like administrative duties, co-curricular activities and having to attend to many meetings. What suffers in the end is their lesson preparation.

- Selvi states that administrative chores '*eat*' into her time so she does not have much time for lesson preparations; as a consequence she stays '*longer hours*' in school to do the latter.
- Kalsom thought that she would have more time to interact with her pupils in the informal level but find that '*it's so sad, you just go to the classroom and you teach and ...er after that*

*you know you have CCA you have to be there and after that you just move to...go home and rest, because you are very tired.'*

- Bok Cheng felt that the preparation for teaching should take priority and that *'ideally we would like to minimise the ad..the admin side lah, but the way things are run now I guess, you know, it doesn't allow...'*

It can be seen that in the area about beliefs about education and teaching, teachers interviewed believed that education is beyond looking at the results. However, in reality when they try to put their beliefs into practice they become so swamped with administrative work and the pursuit of short term good academic results that they have very little time for preparing for their Instructional Programme.

#### History teachers perceptions about what is history

When the teachers were asked what history is, many gave the general public belief that history is:

- a study of the past,
- studying the past so we can understand our present,
- about knowing ourselves
- learning from the past.

The following were some of the teachers' responses:

- Bok Cheng: *It's to make us understand more about everything.*
- Selvi: *It's about events in the past*
- Kalsom's beliefs are slightly different. that:

*'there is an overlap between history, sociology and anthropology as you need to know some historical background information to understand how society functions...that one should do history to become an informed human being otherwise you live in a vacuum'.*

She continued by saying that:

*'...only when you understand...the time, the background information well... when you understand each issue well, and when you put all the pictures together, you come, when you see how the trend develop and how it affect our present...present state of affairs, then you begin, waah this is the big picture!'*

She thus shows some characteristics of what Evans (1990) identifies as the relativist/reformer, which emphasises how present problems have links to the past and that history is the *'background of understanding current issues'*.

When asked whether history is a discipline a number of the history teachers could not give an answer. There were long pauses before they either said it was not a discipline or that they were not sure what I meant by 'discipline'.

⊙ History is not a discipline

Two of the history teachers interviewed said history is not a discipline. Siti was one such case. She said *'I think it's not a discipline... it's alive for all these'*. When I made the analogy of the discipline of science and mathematics, she was still uncertain and when I asked whether it was unique, she said it was but that

*'it's unique, in the sense because it's the life experience of people. But when it comes to people, I'm not very keen to put it as a discipline. Because it's like er people are so unpredictable, you know, that's why I say it's alive rather than...it is a discipline'*.

However, she went on to say, *'a lot of interpretations can be erm sort of like er you can give a lot of interpretation just by looking at an incident or an event.'* And she went on to say ask her pupils whether they questioned why they are learning a certain kind of history is school and not others or that as pupils of history they cannot take facts based on the textbooks, that it's too narrow because of biasness. From this it can be deduced that Siti has some idea of what history is but did not comprehend the term 'discipline' in terms of subject disciplines.

Alice, like Siti does not think history is really a discipline. She said that history is about life and about learning about the past, life stories and lessons from the past. When asked whether there is a discipline called science – she said yes but did not agree that history is a discipline because science and mathematics *'there is a standard thing...but I don't see that in History. Ya, I think it goes beyond...the book. Sometimes. Ya.'* When asked to clarify she said that in history,

*'you don't take things at face value. I mean there're certain things where you have to evaluate and analyse to see whether what this person is saying is true...You got to do further studies and further research...to analyse the evidence that's given to you'*.

However, she admitted upon further probing that that these beliefs only came about as a result of the new syllabus, when she was in school, all she did was '*memorise facts and give it back to the teachers*'.

© Not sure whether history is a discipline

From the interviews with the history teachers, it can be inferred that eleven of them do not fully understand what the discipline of history is about and this was supported by the fact that when the question 'what is the discipline of history?' is asked, many of the teachers paused for a considerable period of time and said they were 'not sure'. Unlike the previous theme on beliefs about education and teaching, the teachers had difficulty articulating what they think discipline of history is over and above the general beliefs that were shared by the public in general. A number of probing questions had to be asked and analogies drawn to Science and Mathematics before the teachers could come up with some answers.

Thus another common trait that came across very clearly in the interviews is the lack of subject matter knowledge that teachers have about the discipline of history. Many of them were not able to give a clear answer. They had to spend some time thinking about it and when they were able to respond it was clear that it had never occurred to them, unlike science and mathematics, that history is a discipline. It was only when probing questions were asked, like:

- What is history?
- What is 'doing' history?
- What do historians do?

were they able to come up with some kind of response. In fact some of them believe that history is not a discipline and some even say that it shares commonality with other subjects like literature which has practical criticism, not being able to see the difference between source interpretation and practical criticism for literature. Kelvin for example said that the discipline of history is not unique as practical criticism also requires people to comprehend and make inferences. When questioned further, he could not make the distinction between historical interpretation which puts the context of history at its centre and literature. However, it was heartening to hear Jimmy say

that *'the literary devices for literature are different from the historical devices'* when asked whether history and literature share the same skills. When asked for examples he said that *'literature uses devices like imagery, personification whereas history is more evidence based'*. Unfortunately he then went on to show that his comprehension of the discipline of history is still very vague when he then went on to say that: *'history is a bridge between geography and literature... in a way a little bit more scientific, literature tends to be more artistic...'*

© History is a discipline

Five of the teachers believe that history is a discipline. Mohammed feels that what makes the discipline of history distinctive is the content. For him content is very important because without a strong content foundation you cannot move on. However, he also mentioned that history is about research, making sure that the information received is accurate and reliable and in the case of history the concern with accuracy should be checked against the primary sources.

Sye Lai said that history is about what happens in the past, the knowledge, *'about rethinking that knowledge'*. When asked why there is a rethinking of knowledge she said: *'because when we talk about evidence, evidence always comes out, new evidence forces you to rethink about things...your whole perception changes.'*

When Selvi was asked about her beliefs about history she said that when she was in school, she said that it was about events in the past. Now she said it is quite interesting. *'It's about perspectives, interpretations of things...every side can be justified you know and it can be quite reasonably justified as well, I think it applies to life.'*

When asked whether there was a discipline called history, she sought clarification: *'as in if I think there is any set thought, ideas or whatever that defines history?'* She then answered by saying that she looks at history as different from the other humanities. She then made a brief comparison between three humanities:

*'geography is the relation of time and the environment around you, the natural environment, and history is more time relating to man and how we define our environment around us rather than the natural one, history is the human kind of aspect and literature is just sitting down and musing about this environment.'*

However, whichever category they belonged to after some probing questions one can conclude that several of the history teachers personifies some of the characteristics of what Evans (1990) identifies as the Scientific Historian. This is one who suggests that historical explanation and interpretation make history interesting.

- Kelvin for example sees history as a subject *'that trains pupils to analyse, to be discerning as well as life skills'*. His belief that history is not just a recall of facts was formed during his university days when he had to write essays for his political science and history modules. Though not overtly taught, the process of writing essays for these two subjects made him realise that he had to search for information, interpret and analyse the information and come to a considered conclusion.

When asked: 'what is history?'

- Edmund laughed and said that *'this is a tough question'*. Upon further probing he said that he remembered:

*'reading something about it being difficult to be a history teacher because you need a wide coverage of the world to be able to draw relationships'. The history teacher also need to have the ability to stretch and come in together and, do a lot of analysis and ... maybe a lot of cross referencing, in one minute before you talk to your pupils, This is the discipline of history. The mental...'*

- Selvi sees history as *'events in the past, about perspectives, interpretation of things...every side can be reasonably justified'*.

The typology which emerged could be the result of the compulsory source-based questions that was introduced into the history syllabi in 2001.

It can thus be seen that the majority of teachers interviewed had difficulty conversing about the subject they teach. They had no problems on the questions of educational beliefs or teaching in general. This could be because there was little opportunity for them to conduct intellectual discourse on the educational aspects of their subject.

The same problem occurred when the question on historical understanding was asked. Many have not heard of historical understanding and so would either say *'never heard of it'* or *'have never thought about it'* and so gave very generic definitions on what they think understanding is.

Eng Wah is an example of this group of teachers who had problems with answering the question on historical understanding. However, when given the analogy of mathematics and science he said: *'history doesn't seem to have to have a very clear cut discipline in that sense'*. But she adds that with the *'current source-based question and structured essay question with the LORMs and all that it seems to have given history a more defined sort of structure'*. When asked to explain how a historian does his work, he said: *'Basically from primary source materials right? and secondary source materials and then looking at it from different perspectives and then coming to conclusions'*. It then occurred to him that this was what history was about too - the process. Thus even though there is a compulsory source-based question, a number of the teachers interviewed do not make the correlation to this as being history.

However, there was at least one teacher who was able to articulate some form of understanding of historical understanding. Jimmy started off this part of the interview with a very promising:

*'If you talk about historical understanding in the long term, ... the enquiry based learning is the best...it would mean that you would carry this with you for the rest of your life. Not something that is learned behaviour where after the artificial construct of school and...for assessment is removed...'*

However, he then went on to say:

*'It's really hard to pinpoint historical understanding...this awareness that...no matter which surroundings you go, no matter which...there's always a story behind it and the story always contributes to what it is presently and people are expected to suspend judgement and look at it at a more objective scale'*.

It can thus be seen that some teachers do have vague conceptions of what historical understanding is.

When the teachers were queried about their understanding of historical concepts, many of them again had to think for a very long time before attempting to answer the question. Some asked whether it had to do with words that are frequently used in history, but some could not bring out the processes of change and continuity, causation and the like. It was only when queried whether they have used these concepts as organising principles did they then agree that they have used these principles. There was only one teacher, Kelvin, who was quite hesitant when it came to these stating



that he had heard about them when he was at NIE, but has not really focused on these concepts when teaching his lessons.

On the other hand there were others who have been using the processes for some time and said:

- Kalsom: *'maybe the identification of cause and effect, long-term, short-term consequences, similarity and differences and major trends was what marked history as unique.'*
- Kah Wai: *History is basically about change and continuity, cause and effect...'*

It was thus be seen that these aspects of second order concepts have sunk into the schema of our history teachers as it was something that was introduced in the last syllabus change and they were trained for it. However, because they did not share the vocabulary of history education, they had problems articulating their thoughts.

It can be deduced from the interviews with the teachers that many of them still have a traditional view of what history is. This could be because many of them were taught history as a body of facts even at university level and were not offered courses on the nature of the discipline.

#### On the teaching of skills

All the teachers interviewed said that they were teaching skills, but upon further probing, many of them agreed that they were just teaching for the examinations. They were unsure as to how to teach the skills as they themselves have never undergone this process of reading sources and historical interpretation and enquiry when they were pupils nor were they trained in how to teach pupils how to read sources and how to do a historical enquiry into an issue.

On the question of whether they find it difficult to teach the skills most of them vehemently agreed that it was really difficult for them to teach the skills at first as the only training they had were three half day workshops on setting and marking examination papers. Many of them claim that they were now more comfortable in imparting the skills of source interpretation (the interviews were held in the first half of 2004, four years after the implementation of the syllabus at the lower secondary level and three years after its implementation at the upper secondary level). This comfort came from the fact that they have undergone several rounds of Cambridge reports, cluster sharings, as well as further workshops on setting and marking papers. They thus infer from these workshops, sharings and

reports of the types of skills they need to teach their pupils, but the skills is very examination bound and many of them use the Levels of Response Marking (LORMs) scheme to teach their pupils.

Another proof of teachers teaching for the examinations came from anecdotal reports from teachers who said that the Cambridge examiner's report for the Year 2002 examination stated that for source-based questions teachers have trained their pupils to answer questions at the highest level to include in their answers the purpose of the source and tone even when these cannot be found in the source. It can thus be inferred that teachers themselves do not fully understand the process of historical interpretation and enquiry and thus could not separate the skills for their pupils to identify

Thus teachers' conceptions of the use of sources have been shaped by the way the present syllabus has been implemented. Having been taught the use of sources via how their assessment papers have to be set and marked, many teachers thus teach the skills of history mechanistically, without fully understanding the nature of the use of sources and this will impact on their pupils understanding thus defeating the skills objectives of the syllabus.

#### How do pupils learn history

When asked how pupils best learn history these are some of the responses:

- Kim Lian: *'..it comes to content, ...they must first have a skeleton. They still need to know the details, we give them notes, ...or we give them mind maps...we even prepare the answers as models...I don't think this is spoon-feeding. A lot of modelling is important...As for skills, they need a lot of practice.'*
- Selvi feels that learning history now with the new syllabus has placed more importance on the process rather than the content. Pupils best learn history by talking to each other about the issues but they must know something about the topic. She feels that the *'spoon feeding method of learning history doesn't make them think and they do not learn anything.'*
- Kalsom said that they tried many ways. For her weakest class she will insist on rote learning. For her graduating classes, she will explain the content to them first and get them to see the big picture by using mind maps and graphic organisers.

- Edmund believes that the pupils ability to learn must come from their own attitude towards learning but he also believes that different pupils have different learning styles and is a strong believer in Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligence.

Believes about History Teaching, Description of a typical history lesson and Pre-Lesson Observation/s

Kalsom

When Kalsom was asked about her beliefs about history teaching she uttered: *'You mean if you don't have to sit for exam, or or...'* When I affirmed that it was her own personal beliefs she went on to explicate that she believes that pupils should choose one topic to study for the year and keep a portfolio of that topic. The teacher will then guide them along as the year progress and grade them on their process.

However, when she was asked to describe a typical history lesson that she conducts this was her reply:

*'So you summarise the .. the notes for them first, ...and you show them the question, ... then you can go back to the textbook. . all highlighting because I will ask them question, ok, tell me erm, what are the reasons for merger? And then they will.. because the textbook also they have use both words they will shout out the answer. Ok I say, now these are the three words. Now tell me what are the supporting detail.'*

- Kalsom's lessons were highly teacher-centred. In her first lesson she used the textbook and visuals. As she taught pupils to refer to the textbook. Pupils took down notes as teacher lectures. Pupils were given a worksheet with 3 sub-headings and asked to identify the features of the 3 religions they had just learnt as homework.

In her second lesson started, Kalsom checked on her pupils work. She then asked pupils for the answer to the homework assigned and wrote the answers on the board. She then continued with the lesson on religion by reading selected text from the textbook. She then assigned the class to read the new sub-topic on philosophies for homework.

In the third lesson, she revised the key aspects of the lesson on religion. She then highlighted to the class the key aspects of the new sub-topic on philosophy from the textbook. Pupils completed the lesson by doing individual work from the history activity book.

It can thus be seen that Kalsom's teaching style is not in consonance with her believe about history teaching. She pragmatically focuses her teaching on the end result – the examinations.

### Edmund

Edmund believes that history teachers should use the enquiry approach. 'I want to teach my history students to be tenacious, er learner and then re-learner, I think the word tenacious has to come in, ot be fearless, in, in, challenging er, the content.

In describing a typical lesson, Edmund talks about giving them a frame for the topic or chapter, telling them the objectives. Sometimes he asks them to read the textbook during lessons but more often he uses metaphors to bring the lessons across to them as he has pupils of higher ability. He will then question them on the values and lessons learn by making them stand in different parts of the classroom depending. They will then need to debate their stance. He will then get them to complete a workbook exercise from the history workbook.

- Edmund lessons were eclectic in nature. In the first lesson observed he used the lecture presentation style with powerpoint. He showed pupils a map to locate the places they would be studying for the topic.

The next lesson was a gallery walk by pupils based on the work they had done as homework. Pupils having studied features of early civilisations were done to make a comparison of Singapore with that of the early civilisations. The class walk around the gallery to view each others work and comment on them.

The third lesson observed was an enrichment lesson in the computer laboratory. Having studied the early civilisations of China, India and Southeast Asia, pupils were to use the computers to do research on the civilisation of Egypt and draw parallels.

The last lesson observed was another enrichment lesson which built on the previous lesson. Pupils were to use sources they have come across in the previous lesson, ask 'thinking questions' of the sources and make a presentation to the class.

### Selvi

Selvi believes that history teaching is to

*'bring across the idea of appreciation of things that happened and how people work in the past and the appreciation of perspectives, different ways to look at an issue and of course the other thing exams skills.'*

A typical lesson described by Selvi is one whereby she either shows a video or content teach and then *'throw in the sources'* to illustrate the points she is trying to bring across.

In the lesson that she was observed, Selvi was preparing her pupils for the new topic for the next term. She thus showed a video on the topic and pupils took notes from the video screening.

### Bok Cheng

When queried about her beliefs on history teaching Bok Cheng said: *'History teaching. Of course firstly is to is for the results. Pragmatic yah. And then interest in also important.'*

Of a typically lesson that she teaches, Bok Cheng said she often uses graphic organisers, divide the class into groups, give each group several pages to read based on the categories she has in her graphic organiser, get them to summarise their readings and present their answers.

In the four lessons observed, three of her lessons were based on the above description. Her fourth lesson saw pupils doing individual work on structured questions whereby the teacher gave the pupils a worksheet to help guide them on how to answer a structured question. Teacher then showed pupils the model answer and peer marking of completed worksheets occurred.

### Pupil Interviews

- All pupils interviewed see history as a study of the past, and that we need to learn from the past so that we would not make the same mistakes again
- When asked about how we know about the past most of them were able to say that they can interview people who have lived through an earlier era or find artefacts. Very few mentioned the use of sources
- When asked how they could find out about the past all mentioned doing research by going to the library, surfing the internet or reading their history textbook
- Most of them liked history as they like the stories that they were told, many pragmatically answered that they liked it because they do well in it.

- Asked whether their teachers use sources, many answered in the affirmative, but the sources were only used as an exercise at the end of every chapter in the examination format. Hardly any of the teachers used sources to do an investigation into an issue for the sake of learning more about a particular period.
- The majority described their teachers' lessons as being mostly teacher-centred

### **Conclusion**

The preliminary analysis of data from Phase One of the study thus confirms my hypothesis that teachers have very general understanding of what history is, but most do not teach for historical understanding, only for what Goodman and Adler calls 'School Knowledge' and the examinations. This is thus reflected in the lesson observations and pupil interviews.

The preliminary analysis also supports Goodman and Adler and Evans conclusions that teacher conceptions of the subject knowledge impact on their teachings and pupils learning, but is also governed often times by what they consider to be organisational and administrative structures as well as the need to produce good grades.

This data also shows that in Singapore, though the skills objectives and assessment has changed to include source-based questions, most teachers interviewed in phase one of the research teach content followed by followed by an examination style exercise. This is confirmed by observations made during the Digital Curricular Literacies Project 1, which studied classroom interaction in secondary one history and science in eleven schools in Singapore in 2004. Researchers found that history teachers are 'pre-conceptualising the material - abstracting, explicating, explaining – and presenting it to students essentially in a lecture-based format, with a strong tendency for the teacher to be the arbiter of authoritative knowledge' (Freebody, Hedberg and Guo, 2005).

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