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Practical epistemology of history teachers and its relationship to normative injunctions

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ABSTRACT

Over the past few decades, significant work has been done regarding the epistemic beliefs of history teachers. However, nuanced epistemic beliefs do not appear to manifest as regularly as may be expected in teaching practices (Wilke et al., 2022). While exploring the normative injunctions imposed in part by the hidden curriculum (Giroux & Penna, 1979), the "school form" (Barthes & Alpe, 2018), and the challenges that history teachers face, this article argues that explicit and implicit demands made on history teachers generate a form of practical epistemology, which goes beyond epistemological beliefs. While at times this appears at odds with their understanding of history as a discipline, it enables them to meet the diverse mandates and directives they encounter. We believe that the concept of practical epistemology (Gholami, 2017) provides avenues for reflection that deserve to be pursued. Lastly, regarding criterialist epistemology (Maggioni, VanSledright, & Alexander, 2009) and historical thinking (Seixas & Morton, 2013), we emphasize that they themselves could be subjected to a critical review by both students and teachers in their practice.

KEYWORDS

Historical thinking, Epistemic beliefs, History teaching, Teaching practices, Practical epistemology

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, an increasing amount of research has been undertaken in the pursuit of a better understanding of the impact history teachers' epistemic beliefs can have on their practices (Demers, 2011; Gholami, 2017; Olafson, Shraw & Vader Veldt, 2010; Therriault & Harvey, 2013). The work of Maggioni, VanSledright and Alexander (2009) on these beliefs has often served as a framework for analyzing teachers' discourse regarding knowledge and history as a scientific discipline. However, despite all the work done in recent years, it remains too often difficult to find empirical illustrations of a real coherence between teachers' epistemic beliefs and their practices. The focus on the concepts of historical thinking as defined by Seixas and Morton (2013), among others, does not appear to have changed this situation. Could there be blind spots in our understanding of what influences history teachers' practices? Is it possible that demands or injunctions imposed in part by the hidden curriculum (Giroux & Penna, 1979) and the "school form" (Barthes & Alpe, 2018), or that the challenges that history teachers face could contradict their epistemic beliefs? Is it possible that the model of epistemic beliefs itself is incomplete and omits important facets of teachers' professional lives in their schools?

In this article, we argue that history teachers are subjected to important and far-reaching normative injunctions or prescriptions – whether they be explicitly set out in program requirements or implicit expectations regarding student performance. These numerous demands significantly affect their practice. Furthermore, we submit that history teachers are confronted daily with prescriptions from school and government officials, for instance, that set boundaries on their possible actions and may constrain their practices. Might these expectations, which are often not explicitly grounded in the subject matter being taught, partially account for the apparent inconsistencies between the epistemic beliefs of history teachers and their teaching practices?

This article examines how these injunctions likely compel educators to favour what Gholami (2017) or Wilke, Depaepe and Van Nieuwenhuyse (2022) call a practical epistemology enabling them to reconcile the needs of their students, the nuances of their discipline, and the myriad expectations placed upon them. As several authors have found, we will also see that history as a subject matter, even in the form given to it by the concepts of historical thinking, can be used for managerial purposes or for a sociopolitical discourse difficult to reconcile with epistemic beliefs recognizing history as a social construction that is itself historically situated (e.g. Doussot, 2020). Finally, we will explore how recent reflections on epistemologies and epistemic justice could complement models put forth by Seixas and Morton (2013), King and Kitchener (2004) or Maggioni, VanSledright and Alexander (2009), for instance.

The tension between epistemic beliefs and teaching practices

Sakki and Pirttilä-Backman (2019) argue that recent curricular discourse has promoted history teaching as an epistemic practice, emphasizing the importance for students to understand how history functions as a scientific field. From this perspective, history is understood as a practice with well-defined characteristics, procedures, and processes. History can then be taught, learned, and improved. The teaching of history is therefore often seen as a discipline that must not only provide the tools for understanding the societal formation of social events but also be able to take a critical look at these events. With a strong focus on historical sources, it should further delve into the methodological discussions on what is truly deemed historical and explore the nature of evidence and how it is and should be interpreted. As outlined by Seixas and Morton (2013) and other scholars, the act of thinking historically and its related processes have become fundamental in numerous national educational standards and curricula (Mathis & Parkes, 2020).

This leads to some expectations for a coherent curriculum. Embracing historical thinking means educators should adopt a refined epistemological stance and aim to cultivate epistemic cognition within inquiry-driven lessons (Schroeder et al., 2020). It also suggests that curriculum objectives and benchmarks should resonate with history as an investigative practice, facilitating the exploration of "ill-structured problems", as described by King and Kitchener in 2004.

Furthermore, this approach assumes that educators recognize the value and relevance of students grasping history as a knowledge-seeking or epistemic practice. One would also anticipate that evaluation methods would mirror inquiry-oriented scenarios demanding nuanced epistemic understanding. Yet, in their recent work, Wilke, Depaepe and Van Nieuwenhuyse (2022) acknowledge that "having nuanced beliefs did not necessarily lead to an instructional practice that supported nuanced beliefs." (p. 211) These authors make the same observation as many of their colleagues before them (Bouhon, 2010; Demers, 2011; Gholami, 2017; Hartzler-Miller, 2001; Olafson, Shraw, & Vader Veldt, 2010; Therriault & Harvey, 2013; Voet & De Wever, 2016). A tension thus exists between beliefs about teaching history, the concept of historical thinking, and how they are applied in practice. We will explore these various elements further in the following section.

As Hofer and Pintrich (1997) noted, epistemology can be understood as the branch of philosophy that explores the nature of knowledge as well as the justifications that allow an individual to know what he or she knows and whether what he or she knows can be judged true in a particular social setting. For these authors, the study of epistemological beliefs intersects with "how individuals come to know, the theories and beliefs they hold about knowing, and how such epistemological premises are a part of and an influence on the cognitive processes of thinking and reasoning." (p. 88) In history education, Maggioni, VanSledright and Alexander (2009) propose a typology of epistemic beliefs that can be broken down into three ways of viewing historical knowledge. Their research led them to theorize that it is possible to understand the epistemic beliefs of history teachers by first analyzing their representation of the interaction between "knower" and "object".

Their framework introduces three distinct stances: copier (objectivist), borrower (subjectivist), and criterialist. Though the framework doesn't imply a sequential progression towards more intricate viewpoints, it does hint at a desired outcome (Miguel-Revilla et al., 2021). The "objectivist" stance is so named due to the tendency observed in numerous students to accept the past uncritically. Individuals with this perspective view the past as unchanging and directly observable from today's vantage point. They often perceive history as a narrative that doesn't warrant critical examination. Conversely, the "subjectivist" stance leans towards a more personal and relativistic interpretation. Aligning with the pre-reflective stance detailed by King and Kitchener (2002), individuals with this perspective underscore personal interpretations of history, placing equal importance on diverse perspectives. Historical accounts are hence seen more as subjective opinions rooted in a historian's intent. The "criterialist" stance, however, is thought to provide a more balanced, introspective approach to history. It champions the use of evidence to piece together historical narratives, harmonizing both objective and subjective interpretations. In this light, history emerges as a crafted interpretation and is therefore understood as inherently different from the past itself.

For several authors (Cariou, 2022; Miguel-Revilla et al., 2021; Schroeder et al., 2020), the criterialist approach should be preferred, and it would be beneficial to cultivate students' critical skills through the teaching of history. Since the mid-1990s, an increasing number of history didacticians have argued that history teaching may be more useful when it enables students to think more like historians. In short, curriculum and teaching practices should not aim to make students memorize other people's conclusions but help them engage in what Hirst (1973) calls a "form of knowledge" that is historical thinking. This means learning to ask and answer questions in ways that, in principle, aim to be faithful to the best practices of experts in the field.

This raises the question of how the interpretation of historical events differs between novices and experts. In a 2010 study proposed by Peter Lee (2005), Éthier and Lefrançois observed two things: on the one hand, students consider history more spontaneously as a more or less accurate copy of the past than as a way of understanding it. On the other hand, these young people are bewildered by texts formed of factual statements that are true but whose general message is false. Lee has since conducted this research with a larger sample but fundamentally with the same results. In general, novices first find an answer to the question asked. Then, these individuals seek the document or excerpt confirming this opinion (sometimes, of course, they do not seek it and

stop at the "one" answer, imaginary or true). Finally, they list the extracts or facts that seem to support them, often without presenting the author or linking them to the initial question.

In contrast, historians who question the past search for as many relevant traces of it as possible no matter how contradictory, distant, and fragmentary they may be, and no matter what forms and media they take. Historians examine if they provide clues, compare them, establish their content and value, situate them in their context, attempt to understand them and build through them the most likely interpretations of past events (Lévesque & Clark, 2018).

Seixas and Morton (2013) argue that students can develop this form of knowledge when their teachers utilize the six historical thinking concepts that they developed in the early 2010s. Seixas (2017) shows the evolution of these concepts and how they complement the thinking of history educators from other historical traditions (German, British, and American). As Thorp and Persson (2020) wrote: "The history educational attempt to specify what the critical assessment of historical sources and patterns of historical explanations relied upon, evolved over the following decades into the notion of historical thinking." (p. 891)

Without going into too many details, it is worth noting that the six concepts outlined by Seixas and Morton (2013) are as follows:

1. establishing historical significance;
2. using primary sources as evidence;
3. defining continuity and change;
4. analyzing causes and consequences;
5. adopting a historical perspective;
6. understanding the ethical dimension of historical interpretations.

Seixas and Morton (2013) believed that these six concepts, if developed by students, could enable them to build historical knowledge that is critical and constructed. Thus, it is not a matter of teaching "*a* history", but rather of teaching history as a field of investigation. The goal is then to foster the growth of epistemic agents equipped with a discerning historical understanding, enabling them to grasp and engage with their surroundings more deeply. This perspective on teaching history resonates with a critical educational viewpoint and seeks to provide students with the resources to achieve genuine freedom as articulated by Freire (1968/2021). This philosophy embodies a rigorous vision of history education, transcending mere narration of national tales or basic understanding of the subject. Instead, it empowers students to adeptly wield critical tools, paving the way for their empowerment and emancipation.

However, as stated, empirical studies examining the actual teaching methods of history educators reveal an inconsistent alignment with criterion-referenced epistemic beliefs and the utilization of historical thinking concepts, and even significant discrepancies between beliefs and practices (e.g. Elmersjö, 2022; Bouhon, 2010; Olafson, Shraw & Vader Veldt, 2010; Voet & De Wever, 2016; Wilke, Depaepe & Van Nieuwenhuyse, 2022). Demers (2011) pointed out that history teachers often shift their epistemic stance when they teach. Furthering this observation, Therriault and Harvey (2013) commented that numerous educators choose to "voluntarily lower their level of epistemological refinement when they are in the presence of secondary school students (during teaching practice)" (p. 454).

In practice, the dominant teaching culture appears to remain focused on narrating history and transmitting facts listed in programs (Au, 2009; Gunn & Rawnsley, 2006; Voet & De Wever, 2016). Furthermore, historical "facts", presented as such without a real critical analysis, dominate curricula. For instance, subjective, anecdotal, or contradictory sources that could be put to the test of critical analysis seem to be rarely presented. This seems to contradict the criterialist posture. In many other cases, history teachers seem to navigate between subjectivist, criterialist and objectivist positions depending on the context and constraints. They may alternately narrate history or propose source-centered tasks with or without interpretive criteria (Demers & Éthier, 2013; Shroeder et al., 2021).

As Wilke, Depaepe and Van Nieuwenhuyse (2022) noted, these discrepancies could indicate "that other beliefs influence the relationship between epistemological beliefs and instructional practice" (p. 211). Like other scholars, Demers and Éthier (2013) have concluded that history teachers generally choose how they teach based on what could be called a *practical epistemology* – a *what-works pedagogy*, as defined later by Gholami (2017) – rather than their own epistemological beliefs or even their personal epistemology.

In the next section, we will try to present some explanations, or at least some interpretive frameworks, that could aid in the comprehension of this apparent tension between the epistemic convictions of history teachers, the practices they are urged to adopt, and the practices they in fact employ.

Practical injunctions and practical epistemology: from curricular imperatives to the hidden curriculum

It is generally acknowledged that the general aims of schooling, in terms of its role in socialization as an institution of a particular social order, are influenced by at least two sources: the formal curriculum and the hidden curriculum (Apple, 2004; Giroux & Penna, 1979). The remainder of this article will take up these two aspects by analyzing the injunctions and prescriptions they contain, sometimes complementing and sometimes contradicting each other.

The formal curriculum is the official, planned framework in schools. It consists of the programs and pedagogical objectives that are deliberately put in place. The hidden curriculum consists of the everyday experiences of pupils and teachers in their interactions with peers and other staff. These interactions, governed by school rules and the rights and responsibilities of pupils and teachers, have a subtle but significant impact on citizenship education. The hidden curriculum conveys implicit social norms and values that help to reinforce school order and institutional authority. The hidden curriculum would condition a particular form of knowing and citizenship that is subject to the institutions and relations of domination that characterize the capitalist economy. Some argue that the function of the hidden curriculum is in fact to maintain the power of the dominant culture and existing class relations, thus contradicting the formal statements of the curriculum about citizenship education, particularly through the pacification of conflicts inherent in intersubjective interaction and the exercise of rights (Apple, 2004; Barthes & Alpe, 2018; Bernstein, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Giroux, 1981; Giroux & Penna, 1979; Raby, 2005).

It is worth noting that while history education is frequently conceived as a pillar of citizenship education, it is also the school subject which, as a whole, appears to generate the most public controversies. History teachers often are required to balance the political nature of historical interpretation and curriculum with the understanding that critical historical thinking provides important tools for civic engagement. One might then expect history teachers to embody a profound level of epistemic sophistication and embrace the subject's complexities, striving to integrate such depth and its related subtleties into their pedagogy. However, as previously indicated, there seems to be a disconnect, with teachers' epistemic convictions not consistently reflected in their teaching practices. There is also evidence that history teachers have shifting epistemic beliefs (Elmersjö & Zanazanian, 2022). We argue that theoretical models which idealize a seamless harmony between sophisticated epistemic beliefs – such as the criterialist stance – of history teachers and their teaching practices may neglect the pragmatic realities of teaching the subject. These models might additionally underappreciate the sociopolitical weight of history teaching, to which teachers are keenly attuned.

Interestingly, educators seem to adopt a distinctly pragmatic stance towards knowledge acquisition, as observed by Gholami (2017). Given curricular prescriptions coupled with the pressures of standardized historical assessments (either of which might characterize history merely as a collection of facts, narratives, or procedures), teachers may understandably adopt teaching practices that best fulfil these requirements. For instance, do curricula present epistemic cognition and associated criteria or its equivalent as a linear series of procedural steps to follow,

or rather as an iterative, complex, intellectual process? Do curricula present content knowledge as structured and simple or rather as open-ended and ill-structured phenomena? One could posit that, in their attempt to balance a predominantly criterialist epistemic stance with these varied and often conflicting demands, teachers lean more towards a functional epistemology instead of strictly adhering to pure or formal epistemic beliefs. Wilke et al. (2022) noted that :

> According to Kuhn and Weinstock (2002), epistemic thinking should be understood as "theory-in-action" (p. 134): peoples' "tacit theories" about knowledge and knowing are activated when they are confronted with a specific claim, problem and sources of information. A distinction should hence be made between formal and practical epistemologies (Sandoval, 2005; Sinatra & Chinn, 2012). Formal epistemologies refer to general ideas about the "characteristics of knowledge and its justification in a particular field" (Sinatra & Chinn, 2012, p. 264), while practical epistemologies refer to epistemic practices that are activated, for instance, via inquiry activities. (p. 199)

We argue that history teachers may not be simply "shifting" their epistemologies. Rather, their practices may reflect their adherence to an epistemology that could be described as practical. Although this practical epistemology may appear to contradict the traditional view of the historical discipline, it has the potential to reconcile various conflicting injunctions and perspectives, including the tension between the formal and hidden curriculum. It could then be seen as a response to normative injunctions and assessment of students' cognitive skills and needs. This notion of practical epistemology has been endorsed by scholars like Au (2009), Demers (2011) and Gholami (2017). Elmersjö (2022) highlighted this aspect by describing the intricate nature of the teaching task to ensure that students had everything they needed to succeed and learn.

To gain a better understanding of this situation, it is necessary to revisit at least in part the extent of the injunctions and demands made of history teachers and their assessment of students' abilities. Firstly, shortcomings or inconsistencies in teacher training programs could undeniably affect the epistemic beliefs of history teachers. A study by Schroeder et al. (2021) analyzed the syllabi of 48 elementary social studies method instructors in the US. They found that out of these, 27 were founded on information-based systems, 11 leaned towards inquiry-based methods, and 14 were rooted in transformation-based approaches, emphasizing critical pedagogy. This disparity becomes even more troubling considering that pre-service teachers in general are known to be less likely to have constructivist epistemology or to use higher-order skills than non-education majors (Duffy et al., 2017). As a result, pre-service educators might be *a priori* ill-equipped to navigate the intricate criterialist perspective on historical knowledge.

In previous studies (Demers, 2011; Demers et al., 2016, 2020; Demers & Éthier, 2013), we observed that curricula often depict epistemic cognition and historical thinking as mere step-by-step procedures. Additionally, assessment tasks meant to attest to students' proficiency in the subject sometimes incorporate directives that seem tangential to the core content. To meet expectations of enhancing students' test performances, teachers occasionally resort to teaching practices narrowly geared towards test content. Our findings suggest that, although certain aspects of epistemic cognition are evaluated, exams often force students to simply reproduce a "recipe" for sourcing information, as noted by Au (2009) and Stoel, Logtenberg, & Nitsche (2022). This means that students are graded on their personal interpretation and not on their ability to devise, structure, or debate criteria within reflective judgment in epistemic forums. How then can the idea of the complex and open-ended nature of knowledge be reconciled with information or procedure-based assessment?

The effects of high-stakes testing not only on schools and school systems but also on teaching practices and teachers' practical epistemology should also be questioned. The impact of high-stakes testing on teachers' practices is well-documented (Perez-Mugg, 2022; Wilson, 2022). Au (2009) for instance notes that high-stakes tests often have the consequence of trivializing history and its practice. He writes: "social studies teachers operating in states whose social studies tests

focused on the rote memorization of historical facts both added and cut curriculum content to align with the information on the tests" (Au, 2009, p. 47). These assessments – and the associated high-stakes testing – divert and often subsume history teachers' critical aims as they may very well have a major impact on the students' career path and, in some cases, on the teachers' career and the whole of school systems (Perez-Mugg, 2022).

In the current context, one needs to acknowledge the impact that capitalism and results-based management have on educational systems (Fabre & Gohier, 2015; Biesta, 2009; Maroy, 2021; Perez-Mugg, 2022). As Davies (2008) noted, history education and history research are as much a part of the labour market preparation dynamic as other academic fields.

> History teaching and research are therefore increasingly articulated in the bureaucratic or technical-managerial jargon of the "administered world" – there are frameworks, productivity targets, objectives that are calibrated according to value drivers, optimized delivery, benchmark performance, indicative measures, sector outputs and cost-effectiveness scores. (Donnelly & Norton, 2017, p. 651)

These same authors add that "[t]he current cognitive conventions of historical research and university history teaching through their normalization of teleological and identitary thinking produce and compel complacency, affirm social conventions and instantiate dominant ideologies" (Donnelly & Norton, 2017, p. 653). The sociopolitical role of history as a subject matter and the political influence of the history educator as an intellectual should not be underestimated (Davies, 2008; Donnelly & Norton, 2017).

The pedagogical aims of history teaching, even in their most commendable forms, cannot be isolated from the various political purposes it is (implicitly) asked to serve. Some believe that its purpose is to preserve (or diversify) and bequeath a heritage. Variations of this outlook aim to recover, replace, renew, or even rediscover this heritage. Others view history as a conduit to foster values like decency, civic responsibility, national pride, or alignment with a specific ideology, moral stance, or socio-political agenda. Others feel that history should present a sequence of definitive events that either challenge and debunk alternative historical interpretations or highlight the significance of these events, drawing inferences about their ensuing outcomes.

In 1993, Cohen wrote about historians: "Our calling is to read others intimately, as texts; but the 'job' carried out is mostly to politicize in the name of the reigning construction of the standard of living (including the symmetry of opposition)." (quoted in Davies, 2008, p. 464)

This idea that history and its teaching serve purposes that go beyond the disciplinary framework is not surprising. One could even argue that the concepts proposed by Seixas and Morton (2013), or any civic skills, themselves go beyond the scope of traditional history teaching in the sense that it should not only be about imparting knowledge of past events and developments. History teaching serves a greater purpose. In fact, in our opinion, the importance of critical civic skills in the teaching of history cannot be overstated. By encouraging critical thinking, deliberation, agency, and solidarity, students are better equipped to navigate complex societal issues and engage in meaningful discourse. These skills are coherent with the tenets of historical discipline and have far-reaching implications for the development of epistemic agents and responsible citizens.

If history teaching cannot be dissociated from the broader social reproduction function that is assigned to schools within the capitalist system, it would therefore be unwise to attempt to understand the practices of these educators solely through their epistemic beliefs. Normative injunctions or prescriptions that are imposed upon them, both in terms of the aims of schooling and the management of the educational system, must also be taken into consideration.

To these practical concerns, one should also add, as highlighted by the work of Voet and De Wever (2016), the constraints related to the classroom context, the lack of time, and the ever-present and pressing need to cover the entirety of the curriculum within prescribed durations, without genuinely taking account of student learning. Moreover, it is worth noting that history teachers set objectives for themselves. Once again, the study by Voet and De Wever (2016)

provides illuminating insights in this regard. They observed that history teachers tend to pursue five distinct goals in their practices: history should help better understand the present; history is part of a general education granting access to culture; history should promote critical thinking; history contributes to citizenship; and history should be engaging and interesting.

Considering that these injunctions, demands, and concerns are piled on to teachers' fears – whether justified or not – about students' actual ability to meet standards, it is possible to better understand the posture adopted by many of them in favour of a "what works" approach rather than a strictly criterialist epistemology. History teachers probably note, as Kim (2020) did, that students' personal epistemology may be somewhat confused. Similarly, Maggioni (2010) notes that change in students' historical thinking can be modest and does not consistently suggest skill progression, while Barton (2009) finds that students tend to simplistically "use history as a source of identification" (p. 275). That may in part explain why, for many teachers, students are seen as inherently incapable of sophisticated epistemic cognition (Demers & Éthier, 2013) and why a pragmatic approach seems a legitimate stance. One could argue that there are significant discrepancies between students' perceived beliefs or abilities and what the curriculum demands. These differences, coupled with the challenging requirements and conditions of teaching, can understandably result in what appears to be contradictions in teachers' practices.

Even though one could have hoped that history education "would encourage our students not simply to acquire work-based skills, but to challenge normative customs and reified practices and to ask not how society got the way it is, but how we can change society and make it better" (Donnelly & Norton, 2017, p. 653), it's understandable that history teachers may not always perfectly align their acknowledged epistemic beliefs with their instructional methods. History educators must juggle curriculum mandates, standardized assessment protocols, as well as the civic and sociopolitical imperatives linked to their subject, all while gauging their students' capabilities. Put simply, there can be a dichotomy between what teachers perceive as beneficial for students and what institutional and societal structures dictate.

Navigating these nuances is undoubtedly a challenging endeavour for history educators. Furthermore, historians themselves appear divided about the focus of history education, even at tertiary levels, and can be sceptical of students' actual capacities (Davies, 2008; Donnelly & Norton, 2017). Given these varied directives, it's hardly surprising that many educators seem to mould their practices around what they perceive as their primary duty, as outlined by Demers (2011) and Wilke et al. (2022). The evolving or "shifting" epistemology of educators, as highlighted by Elmersjö and Zanazanian (2022), might therefore lean towards a pragmatic approach that adeptly reconciles these diverse formal and practical expectations.

We believe that the concept of practical epistemology is particularly promising when addressing the practices of history teachers and their relationship with epistemic beliefs. It seems to offer a more nuanced understanding of the practices of these teachers and what drives them. By taking a critical look at everything that is asked of them, it becomes easier to reconcile their actual classroom practices throughout the year with their declared practices, as well as with epistemic beliefs and all the other aspects of teaching history.

Furthermore, we believe that recognizing the importance of teachers' practical epistemologies and what shapes them should also involve acknowledging that if interventions are needed to allow a better adaptation of history teaching in line with a more criterialist epistemology (or King and Kitchener's reflective judgment model), these interventions cannot be limited solely to changing teaching practices or re-informing teachers about best practices in this area.

Teaching practices are the result of a multitude of factors and pressures at all levels of education systems, from teacher training and resources to curricula and class sizes. To enable a change in the teaching practices of history teachers, it would be necessary to consider taking action to ensure greater coherence throughout the educational system. Expectations directed at history teachers – whether they involve high-stakes testing, social cohesion, or national pride – need to be reexamined to allow teaching practices that align more closely with a nuanced vision of history and the past.

That said, we believe it may be worth investigating the notion of practical epistemology for an additional reason: perhaps embracing a more flexible framework concerning epistemic beliefs could address overarching questions about the nature of historical knowledge itself. In the ensuing section, we explore these issues and provide preliminary insights into the potential role of perspectives like feminist or decolonial epistemologies in the realm of history education.

Should historical thinking be revisited?

In recent years, it has been widely acknowledged that history teaching should be anchored in a rather criterialist perspective. In this respect, it's important to acknowledge the significant contribution of Seixas and Morton (2013). The six concepts of historical thinking they propose have been a source of inspiration for many recent works in the field of history education. These six concepts, as we have seen, should indeed facilitate a history education that aligns with the characteristics of a criterialist epistemology.

However, Thorp and Persson (2020) note that these six concepts and the underlying premises guiding them and their implications warrant examination. Firstly, according to these researchers, historical thinking is too often championed as the key to a true comprehension of history. It is presented almost as a set formula or blueprint leading to an impartial truth. Such a prescriptive approach seems at odds with the tenets of the criterialist perspective, especially when acknowledging the significance of collaborative discourse within epistemic communities (Dewey, 1916/2018) for deciphering the past and more broadly what should be understood as knowledge. Thorp and Persson (2020) write that:

> it is the individual student that, through conquering a subject-specific way of thinking, is considered to be enabled to organize and make coherent her understanding of the world. Moreover, from a student's point of view, historical thinking utterly seems to rest upon your individual cognitive ability to think correctly according to a pre-conceived model of thinking. (p. 895)

The criterialist stance suggests that students should be equipped to establish criteria for assessing the validity of their knowledge. While the six concepts of historical thinking provide tools for analysis, they don't inherently promote critical examination of their own merits or constraints. These concepts are introduced as tools to be learned and applied. They are not necessarily to be problematized, critiqued or debated. It's thus worth considering not only the benefits of historical thinking but also its limitations. How could the gap between the idea of knowledge as intricate, socially derived, and ever-evolving and the teaching and assessment approach rooted in specific procedures or information be bridged?

The issue becomes more pressing when we recognize that even historians don't have a unanimous view on what it truly means to "think like a historian". Is historical thinking truly the sole avenue to understanding history? Moreover, some claim that the concept of historical thinking does not do enough to acknowledge the idea, as put forth by Marx (1852/2002), Gadamer (2004) and Ricœur (1986) in their defence of hermeneutics, that historians, or any individuals interpreting historical traces, are themselves intrinsically part of the history they seek to comprehend. Elmersjö (2022) writes that:

> teaching history as a form of interpretation from multiple perspectives includes some measure of explaining how there can be more than one perspective, and what that means for our understanding of the difference between the history of an event and the event itself. (p. 833)

Accepting moreover that historians are inherently embedded within the fabric of history even before their analysis begins suggests that their interpretations can only be provisional and evolving constructions. This suggests an iterative method where the interpreter must acknowledge their own historical positioning. Historical thinking seems to neglect that aspect of any interpretative science as well as to deny its own sociohistorical situatedness.

One could also argue that the work done in recent years on the concept of epistemic justice (Anderson, 2006; Dieleman, 2015; Fricker, 1999; Medina, 2013) can only have serious implications on historical thinking concepts. Epistemic injustice is understood as an epistemic vice that hinders the complete understanding of a phenomenon due to the low importance given to a group's experience or the description of that experience. Fricker (1999) identifies two types of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice is an unjustified deficit in credibility given to the testimony of a group that is often marginalized. Hermeneutical injustice is an injustice arising from the impossibility of making sense of experience or expressing it in all its complexity due to the limits of dominant theoretical frameworks.

Medina (2013) believes that while epistemic injustice is undoubtedly a facet of oppression and its associated processes of marginalization, it does allow for a better understanding and naming of a type of injustice that is often less visible in structures of oppression. In that respect, recent works on the impacts of colonization, including in scientific disciplines and on the most common representations of what knowledge is and should be (Castro-Gómez & Grosfoguel, 2007; de Oliveira Andreotti et al., 2015; Gautier & Zancarini-Fournel, 2022; Marim, 2023; McKeon, 2019), are equally likely to induce a reexamination of the concepts of historical thinking if we hope for this framework to remain current and truly relevant for history education. This should also be true ~~for in the field of~~ feminist epistemologies (e.g. Brunet & Demers, 2018; Demers, Brunet, & Bachand, 2022).

History education should probably ensure that its focus is not only on the biases that certain sources carry – as do the six concepts of historical thinking –, but also on the absence of certain sources and the relative importance given to ancestral narratives and indigenous knowledge, for example.

Although we do not have the opportunity to do this work within the context of this article, it would also be relevant to ensure that the precepts of historical thinking allow for the consideration of historical questions in all their diversity and not only the questions that most often serve as drivers for history education. By doing so, a strict criterialist stance would probably be easier to mobilize than the concepts of historical thinking, not to mention that for some authors, decolonization of historical knowledge also requires questioning the very foundations of current epistemological stances (de Oliveira Andreotti et al., 2015; Mignolo, 2003). It is worth noting again that history teachers generally think there is a notable difference between "real" knowledge and what should be taught and learned in schools. Wilke, Depaepe and Van Nieuwenhuyse (2022) write that "[w]hile teachers might acknowledge the constructed and incomplete nature of disciplinary knowledge, they sometimes consider 'school knowledge' (the knowledge students encounter in school) as fixed and complete." (p. 200) Epistemic injustice may indeed be an issue if this paradox underlies teaching practices.

Drawing on Gadamer's hermeneutics, Mignolo (2003) suggests a form of interpretation he describes as "pluritopic". According to this author, traditional hermeneutics allows the interpretation of a subject only through a corpus of texts from a relatively homogeneous tradition, typically the European tradition. Mignolo (2003) believes that if historical interpretation is to genuinely respect the plurality of voices and the complexity of historical phenomena, it should allow for interpretations that combine artefacts, texts, and rewritings from a multitude of traditions.

Acknowledging the full complexity of historical knowledge, of history as a field and of its political implications should not be bypassed. As Elmersjö and Zanazanian (2022) articulated, "If teachers acknowledge history's political nature, the chances of adopting a form of reflexivity regarding their teaching may increase, thereby enabling them to make sense of the subjectivity involved in the construction of historical knowledge." (p. 191)

These latter reflections lead us to reaffirm the importance for history teachers to promote a complex and open conception of knowledge through their teaching practices (Muis et al., 2021). However, they also call for teaching conditions and what is asked of history teachers to be adjusted so teachers may truly adopt epistemic beliefs and practices that reflect our understanding of the intricacies of historical knowledge. Moreover, we believe that such reflections could lead to a deeper insight into addressing the emotional effects frequently tied to history education.

Concluding remarks

While it is acknowledged that teaching history as a practice requires us to teach how to think historically, what this entails remains to be (re)defined or refined, given the paradoxes we have identified. We must question whether teaching historical thinking as a fixed linear procedure rather than as complex, iterative, collective and open-ended epistemic work is truly an improvement on teaching history as an assemblage of facts or as a narrative.

Further, we must continue to question whether teachers have the necessary conditions to teach history as a complex epistemic practice. Teachers' work is bombarded with often contradictory injunctions, with high-stakes testing being one of the most problematic. With teachers being increasingly stripped of their professional autonomy (Biesta, 2010; St.Pierre, 2006), history didactics research must step away from prescription and make room for listening to teachers and helping them develop context-relevant tools to subvert normative injunctions where they are contrary to student learning and well-being.

Finally, we reassert that, if teachers are to change their epistemological stance, they must engage in classroom situations in which they and their students learn to investigate history, including thinking about how history is made (Éthier & Lefrançois, 2016) and about the tools used by historians. Students should be helped to see for themselves that the virtues associated with historical thinking (including humility, thoroughness, rigour, tolerance, openness and curiosity) can be fostered as they investigate complex problems. This process can in turn enhance their capacity to frame social problems, gather evidence, establish criteria, express and defend interpretations, and do so based on all available evidence and criteria, even if incomplete or conflicting.

Cultivating these virtues is consistent with the best collaborative practices of historians, who must engage evidence and construct arguments through careful analysis and interpretation when addressing historical issues, and debating on criteria. We emphasize the importance of cultivating students' scholarly virtues in action and having them practice how to think, not only about history, but also about how history is made and what criteria can be used to determine the accuracy and validity of a historical interpretation.

Our wager (Demers, Bachand, & Leblanc, 2016; Éthier, Lefrançois, & Demers, 2018) is that a collaborative process in which both teachers and students learn from each other through dialogue and critical thinking focused on students' lived experiences and social realities will empower both to analyze the world, to question and challenge dominant power structures and social inequalities, to encourage them to become agents of change in their communities and to create a more just and equitable society. Without this critical consciousness as defined by Freire (1968/2021), the prospect of transforming the world for the better is bleak . However, even if schools were intrinsically incapable of teaching it, and even if all reforms (in healthcare, education, housing, etc.) under capitalism were inherently cosmetic or ephemeral, the practice of social transformation educates people who practice it. Furthermore, the call for democratic and quality education for all points to the limitations of the current educational system and the need for a complete transformation of society in the hope of changing education, rather than the reverse.

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