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Wilschut, Arie; van Straaten, Dick

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Measuring the relevance of history to students

Arie Wilschut and Dick van Straaten

Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, Faculty of Education

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In the literature about history teaching research, 'significance' is one of the categories commonly included in lists of important concepts (e.g. Counsell, 2004; Seixas & Morton, 2013). The concept refers to the importance of historical topics for people in the past (e.g. the Black Death was significant because it had a major impact on medieval life) as well as to the importance of history for people nowadays (e.g. the impact of the slavery past on current societal debates about discrimination). In the context of meaningful history education aiming at the development of citizenship competences, this double meaning can be confusing. Therefore we developed the new concept of 'relevance in history'. Based on insights from constructivist educational science and notions on meaningful education, as well as theoretical and philosophical research into the meaning of history and the existence of people 'in time', we developed four strands of 'relevance in history': shaping identity, understanding the present, building up arguments and understanding 'the human condition' (Van Straaten, Wilschut, & Oostdam, 2016). To be able to assess the impact of experiments with novel approaches of history teaching on the degree to which students experience history as relevant, a measurement scale was developed consisting of four subscales devoted to these four elements of relevance in history. The subscales consist of eight items each with Likert-scales (varying from 'totally disagree' to 'totally agree'). This paper reports about the testing of the instrument and the results of its application. Large scale use of the instrument in the Netherlands among hundreds of students of different grades in several schools of secondary education reveals patterns in the development of relevance of history to students. The development is not linear on all four subscales and there appears to be a dip in the development around the age of 13.

References

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