Democratic citizenship through historical thinking?
A cluster randomized controlled intervention study.

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Traditionally, history education is expected to introduce students to history as a discipline but also to prepare students for their participation in society. These goals are not always easy to reconcile, among others because they require different stances from students towards past and present.

Since the 1990s historical thinking has been established as a central goal for history education in several western countries. Historical thinking aims to provide students with knowledge about the past and with an understanding of how historical knowledge is constructed (Lee, 2004). Several scholars are convinced that historical thinking may be able to contribute to democratic citizenship, specifically through the promotion of students' historical inquiry competences. These competences refer to students’ skills and procedural knowledge related to generating a substantiated historical representation, based on a critical evaluation of evidence (van Boxtel et al., 2021) as well as underlying epistemological beliefs. Scholars argue that fostering these skills will enable students to take up a reasoned position towards a public issue based on evidence and considering multiple perspectives (democratic skills), but also to foster an inclination to do so (democratic dispositions) (e.g. Barton & Levstik, 2004, Monte-Sano, 2016; McCully, 2012; Nokes, 2013; Reisman, 2012; Van Boxtel et al., 2021). While some research has been conducted on the societal benefits of historical thinking in post-conflict or divided societies (e.g. McCully, 2012) research on this relationship in a more general context remains limited. The present study aims to examine this potential contribution of historical thinking to democratic citizenship.

A cluster randomized controlled intervention study was set up in Flemish history education (control group: N = 226; intervention group: N = 402). A lesson series (12-14 classes) was designed aimed at fostering students’ historical inquiry competencies. Effects were measured via a pre- and posttest examining changes in (1) students’ historical inquiry skills, procedural knowledge and epistemological beliefs, and (2) democratic skills and dispositions. Essay tasks were used to measure historical inquiry and democratic skills, open-ended questions assessed students’ procedural knowledge and validated scales examined epistemological beliefs and democratic dispositions.

Multilevel and linear regression models showed that the lesson series was effective in enhancing students’ historical inquiry skills (B=4.79, p=0.007) and procedural knowledge on inquiry (B=2.06, p=0.003). No effects were found on epistemological beliefs. The lesson series overall did not significantly improve students’ democratic skills and dispositions. However, students’ changes in historical inquiry competence did significantly predict their democratic skills at posttest (B=0.16, p<0.001). These results point to a limited transfer from historical to democratic skills.

This research makes an important contribution to the study of effective design principles for fostering historical thinking among students and on the relationship between historical thinking and democratic citizenship. The data support the existence of a transfer from historical inquiry skills to democratic skills, albeit in a limited way. The research allows for a further reflection on the potential
contribution of historical thinking to democratic citizenship and provides implications for further research on this relationship.

References


Time: Tuesday 5.4, 09:30, room E610