



LEARNING AND TEACHING HISTORICAL CONTENT IN PRIMARY EDUCATION

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Abstract/Izvlaček

This paper presents the results of a study whose primary goal was to determine the level of future teachers' knowledge of historical content taught in primary school, the ways they self-assess their abilities to organize the learning and teaching of historical content, and their beliefs about the possibilities of teaching history in primary education. The research was conducted using a survey of 157 fourth- and fifth-year students in teacher education programs. The results indicate that students demonstrate a satisfactory level of knowledge about historical content taught in primary education. They self-assess their skills for teaching of historical content as mostly developed and have positive beliefs about the possibilities of teaching and learning history at the primary education level.

Keywords:

competences of future teachers, learning outcomes, history, primary education, time comprehension.

Učenje in poučevanje zgodovinskih vsebin v osnovni šoli

V prispevku so predstavljeni rezultati raziskave, katere osnovni cilj je bil ugotoviti raven znanja bodočih učiteljev o zgodovinskih vsebinah, ki se poučujejo v osnovni šoli, preučiti načine, kako sami ocenjujejo lastne zmožnosti za organizacijo učenja in poučevanja zgodovinskih vsebin ter analizirati njihova prepričanja o možnostih poučevanja zgodovine v osnovni šoli. Raziskava, v kateri je sodelovalo 157 študentov četrtega in petega letnika programov za izobraževanje učiteljev, je bila izvedena s pomočjo ankete. Rezultati kažejo, da študenti izkazujejo zadovoljivo raven znanja o zgodovinskih vsebinah, ki se poučujejo v osnovni šoli. Svoje spretnosti za poučevanje zgodovinskih vsebin ocenjujejo kot večinoma razvite in imajo pozitivna prepričanja o možnostih poučevanja in učenja zgodovine na osnovnošolski stopnji izobraževanja.

Ključne besede:

kompetence bodočih učiteljev, učni rezultati, zgodovina, osnovnošolsko izobraževanje, razumevanje časa.

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Introduction

Historical consciousness is frequently cited as a crucial concept in historical education (Ahonen, 2005). It is defined as the ability to create a link between the interpretation of the past, comprehension of the present, and vision of the future (Jeismann, 1979). Schulz-Hageleit (2006) argues that the development of pupils' historical consciousness is only possible during adolescence. Several previous studies have shown that without a concrete understanding of chronology in a metric sense, pupils are unable to develop an understanding of historical time (Brumlik, 2005; Wilschut, 2012; Clark and Grever, 2018). Piaget (1969) emphasized that the development of a child's sense of time is only possible when they can connect it to places, people, and objects, since children aged 6 to 11 still do not have the capacity for abstract thinking. One of the earliest comprehensive reviews of the theory and research on the development of historical thinking, which supports this view and is followed by later research on this phenomenon, was conducted by Zaccaria (1978). His review showed that the capacity for formal historical thinking occurs in the middle and late teenage years, highlighting that understanding history depends on a mature sense of time and chronology. Based on such findings, some educators concluded that learning history requires a certain level of maturity and cognitive ability that is not yet developed in primary education pupils (Brumlik, 2005; Wilschut, 2012), while others advocate for teaching history in primary education with the aim of promoting faster development of historical thinking skills (Kübler, 2011; Skjaeveland, 2017). The final perspective accepted in the education system is held by those who advocate history instruction in primary education, however, less focused on complex chronologically-based insights and formal explanations of historical trends, and more on attainable goals. In this context, Levstik and Barton (2011) argue that history for younger pupils should be in the form of inspirational stories about real people, told without reference to precise measures of time. Research in this area was particularly intense in the 1980s when Levstik (1986) proposed a different approach to teaching history based on narrative, considering it more suitable for younger pupils. Furthermore, Kübler's (2011) research found that rudimentary time understanding appears at an early developmental stage and that even a child aged four to eight, in the pre-operational stage of development, can sequence the order of events in a series.

Most scientific studies, however, conclude that children of primary school age are not yet capable of formally thinking about history in a mature sense, that is, dealing with multiple cause-and-effect relationships and statements of probability related to social trends and events that cover long periods of time, occurring hundreds or even thousands of years ago (Wilschut, 2012; Tok, 2016; Nordgren; 2016). Despite this, primary education pupils can recognize simple cause-and-effect relationships, constructing visual and verbal descriptions of events, generalizing, and identifying similarities and differences in all types of phenomena. These abilities can be successfully applied in learning and teaching historical content (Levstik and Barton, 2011; Kübler, 2011; Skjaeveland, 2017). Levstik and Barton (2011) believe that children can understand historical time and have a sense of chronology even if they do not experience time as a measurable unit, and Kübler (2011) highlights narratives and a child's life story as essential for a child's understanding of chronology. He even argues that the emergence of historical consciousness can be observed as early as in five- or six-year-old children. Debates on this topic continue, but a conclusion on the existence or non-existence of historical consciousness in younger children has not yet been reached.

An overview of the developmental characteristics of children and their implications for history teaching shows the importance of their active and personalized participation in such instruction, which allows the development of a wide range of intellectual and social skills as part of such teaching (De Zan, 2005). For history learning at an early age, the development of chronological thinking is considered a necessary standard. This means that pupils should be enabled to distinguish between past, present, and future time, identify the temporal structure of historical narratives or stories (beginning, middle, and end), establish the temporal sequence in constructing their own historical narratives, interpret data presented on a timeline, create their own timeline, and explain changes and continuities over time (Reeken, 2011). Content that is emotionally close to pupils can serve as motivation and inspiration for more complex endeavours in teaching, such as projects about local history (Husanović-Pejnović, 2011). However, Koren and Najbar-Agičić (2007) caution that teaching the most notable events in the history of Croatia in the 4th grade can still be a significant challenge for pupils if they do not understand the content they are learning and merely memorize it mechanically without grasping the basic concepts. On the other hand, overly simplifying the curriculum can be harmful

to the development of pupils' skills and abilities. Therefore, teaching should be organized in such a way as to lead to the achievement of learning outcomes that stimulate pupils' desire for and interest in learning historical content.

Strandling (2005) states that pupils must understand that historians and others attempting to reconstruct the past are limited by the number of available sources and that they can interpret and use the same evidence in diverse ways. Therefore, one of the most important tasks in teaching historical topics is the analysis of sources and the study of multiple perspectives to arrive at more accurate conclusions. Inquiry-based teaching related to historical content should be planned with regard to data sources that could be interesting and useful for pupils. Lack of literacy can be considered a limiting factor in the comprehension of history at an early age (Balun Derganc and Braičić, 2022). Written sources are extremely important for history instruction, and this is a period in which pupils' reading abilities are still insufficient (Reeken, 2011). However, this limitation can be effectively compensated for by using historical images (De Zan, 2005). For effective teaching of history, Yilmaz (2008) emphasizes that teachers must have considerable knowledge about historical content, as well as generic and subject-specific methodological competences that enable the transformation of subject matter knowledge into effective learning experiences for pupils. Taylor and Young (2003) also emphasize three characteristics of effective history teaching: understanding theoretical and conceptual foundations, the process of historical reconstruction, and teaching in line with the psychophysical characteristics of pupils. However, Lee et al. (2009) caution that a high level of knowledge about history alone does not make someone an effective teacher; it requires a combination of subject matter knowledge with other variables, such as preparing effective methodological scenarios, setting clear learning outcomes, enthusiasm in teaching, and well-developed methodological competences.

Research Methodology

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study were to determine the knowledge of students, future teachers, about the historical content taught in primary education, investigate how they self-assess their ability to organize the learning and teaching of historical content, and examine their beliefs about the possibilities of teaching history in primary education.

Research Questions

The following research questions stem from the stated research objectives:

1. What is the level of knowledge among students in teacher education programs regarding the historical content taught in primary education?
2. How do students in teacher education programs assess their skills required for organizing the learning and teaching of historical content?
3. What are the beliefs of students about the possibilities of teaching history in primary education?
4. Is there a correlation between students' level of knowledge about historical content, self-assessment of their skills to organize the learning and teaching of historical content, and their beliefs about the possibilities of teaching history in primary education?
5. Is there a statistically significant difference in the a) knowledge, b) self-assessment of skills, and c) beliefs of students with respect to their grade in the course Croatian History and their year of study?

Participant Sample

The research was conducted on a sample of 157 students in the fourth and fifth years of the Faculty of Teacher Education at the University of Zagreb. The sample included seventy-six fourth-year students and eighty-one fifth-year students. Regarding the grades in the course Croatian History which students attended in their first year of study, after taking the exam two students achieved a passing grade (2), 18 students achieved a good grade (3), 66 students received a very good grade (4), and 68 students received an excellent grade (5).

Research Instruments

For the purposes of this study, a special questionnaire tailored to the needs of the study was constructed. In the first part of the questionnaire, demographic information about the participants (gender, year of study) and their grade in the course Croatian History were collected. The second part of the questionnaire contained twenty questions aimed at assessing the students' knowledge of the historical content taught in primary education. The third part of the questionnaire consisted of a list of 20 skills required for organizing the learning and teaching of historical content in primary education, divided into four subscales (skills related to

the application of teaching strategies and methods for active learning, skills related to organizing outdoor activities related to historical content, skills related to the application of historical knowledge and generic skills related to history teaching). Students self-assessed their proficiency in these skills on a five-point Likert scale (1 - not developed at all, 2 - poorly developed, 3 - partially developed, 4 - mostly developed, 5 - fully developed). The fourth part of the questionnaire contained twenty statements about learning and teaching historical content in primary education, divided into three subscales (students' opportunities for learning historical content, the importance of using active learning strategies and methods, and the importance of teacher competences for teaching historical content). Students evaluated their level of agreement with these statements on a five-point Likert scale (1 - strongly disagree, 2 - disagree, 3 - neither agree nor disagree, 4 - agree, 5 - strongly agree).

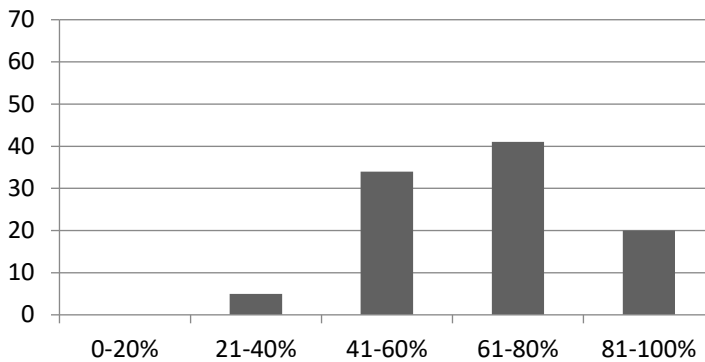
Data Processing Methods

Statistical analysis of the data was conducted using the SPSS 20.0 statistical software package. Descriptive parameters, such as mean and standard deviation, were used to determine the descriptive indicators of individual items and scales. Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to determine the intercorrelation of different variables, while ANOVA was used to determine the statistical significance of differences among the subscales used to assess students' skills and beliefs. The t-test was employed to determine differences in respondents' answers based on their grade in the course Croatian History and year of study.

Results

The participants achieved an average score of 15.29 points out of a possible twenty-two on the knowledge test, which corresponds to 69.51% correctly answered questions, indicating a moderate level of knowledge. Graph 1 shows that none of the students scored between 0% and 20% on the test. Most students, 41%, answered between 61% and 89% of the test questions correctly. Only 20% of students scored between 81% and 100% on the test. Based on these data, it can be concluded that most students have a moderate level of knowledge of historical content, followed by those with a basic level of knowledge, and then those with a high level of knowledge. While the students' level of knowledge is satisfactory, the results suggest room for

improvement in developing this aspect of student competences to concentrate the knowledge level above 80% and aim for a higher level of knowledge.



Graph 1: Correct answers achieved on a historical content test

Further analysis confirmed that there is no statistically significant difference in the knowledge of students in the fourth and fifth years ($t = 0.548$, $p = 0.584$), nor in the level of knowledge about historical content among students based on their grade in the course Croatian History ($t = 1.944$, $p = 0.054$).

The results of student self-assessment of skills required for organizing the learning and teaching of historical content are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Self-assessment of skills for organizing the learning and teaching of historical content

Skill groups	N	M	SD	F	p
Application of active learning strategies and methods	157	3.79	1.02		
Skills related to organizing outdoor history learning	157	3.60	1.11	3.21	0.051
Skills related to the application of historical knowledge	157	3.61	0.97		
Generic skills related to history teaching	157	4.02	0.94		
Self-assessment of skills (total)	157	3.76	1.01		

The average self-assessment score for skills is 3.76, with an average deviation from the mean of 1.01. This indicates a high level of positive self-assessment (3.76 / 5.00; 75.00%). Students gave the highest rating to their generic competences for organizing the teaching and learning of historical content, such as communication skills ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 0.91$) and openness to diverse opinions and attitudes ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 0.88$). On the other hand, they assessed their skills for organizing outdoor history learning as the least developed ($M = 3.60$; $SD = 1.11$).

They self-assessed their skills at applying historical knowledge almost equally ($M = 3.61$; $SD = 0.97$), with the weakest self-assessment in the ability to establish cause-and-effect relationships in historical content ($M = 3.15$; $SD = 1.07$). Although students assessed their generic teaching-related skills as more developed compared to other skills, ANOVA did not find a statistically significant difference in the self-assessment of individual groups of skills for organizing the teaching and learning of historical content ($F = 3.21$; $df = 156$; $p = 0.051$) (Table 1).

Further analysis shows that there is no statistically significant difference in the self-assessment of skills between students in the fourth and fifth years ($t = 0.914$, $p = 0.362$), nor in student self-assessment of skills based on the grade obtained in the course Croatian History (t -value = 0.199, $p = 0.843$).

The third scale in the questionnaire assessed student beliefs about teaching historical content in primary education. Fifteen statements from the third scale of the questionnaire reflected positive beliefs, while five statements reflected negative beliefs. When calculating the average value of respondents' answers, the results for negatively oriented statements were decoded to obtain a valid insight into the results obtained. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Student beliefs regarding teaching and learning history in primary education

Subscales	M	SD	F	p
Pupils' capacity to learn historical content	3.51	0.94		
Importance of using specific strategies for active learning	3.94	0.94	1.04	0.375
Importance of teacher competences for teaching historical content	3.93	0.80		
Beliefs (total)	3.79	0.89		

The findings reveal that participants have a positive attitude toward the potential for teaching and learning historical content in primary education ($M = 3.79$; $SD = 0.89$). This reflects a high level of positive beliefs ($3.79 / 5.00$; 76.00%).

Students show the highest level of agreement with statements related to the importance of using active learning strategies and methods when teaching historical content at the primary education level ($M = 3.94$; $SD = 0.94$). They express extremely positive opinions about implementing inquiry-based teaching ($M = 4.40$; $SD = 0.70$) and museum visits, which provide pupils with a better understanding of the past ($M = 4.46$; $SD = 0.68$). Moreover, they believe that teachers should possess well-developed methodological competences required for teaching historical content suitable for the pupils' age.

Students strongly agree that a teacher can significantly influence pupils' interest in learning historical content ($M = 4.69$; $SD = 0.51$) and that teaching and learning historical content can be organized in many engaging ways for pupils ($M = 4.57$; $SD = 0.59$).

The students also generally believe in the potential for pupils learning historical content in primary education considering their psycho-physical characteristics, but there is a slight tendency towards indecision in this respect ($M = 3.51$; $SD = 0.94$). They mostly disagree with rote memorization of historical content without understanding ($M = 2.02$; $SD = 1.06$) and with the use of frontal teaching methods ($M = 2.41$; $SD = 1.17$). However, students are uncertain about whether pupils in primary education find historical content difficult to understand ($M = 2.98$; $SD = 1.07$), and whether historical content in the school subject Science and Social Studies is underrepresented ($M = 2.90$; $SD = 0.94$). Interestingly, students are also uncertain about whether pupils in primary education are capable of finding information related to historical content on their own ($M = 3.42$; $SD = 1.00$), despite having an extremely positive view of inquiry-based learning and the need for its more frequent application when learning historical content ($M = 4.40$; $SD = 0.70$).

Further data analysis based on Table 2 did not reveal any statistically significant differences in student beliefs regarding the potential for primary education pupils to learn history on the above-mentioned subscales ($F = 1.04$; $df = 156$; $p = 0.375$). Additionally, there was no statistically significant difference found between the beliefs of students in the 4th and 5th study years ($t = 1.298$, $p = 0.196$), nor were there differences based on the grades students achieved in the History of Croatia course (t -value = 0.176 , $p = 0.86$).

At the end of the study, it was necessary to investigate whether there was a correlation between the examined variables (knowledge, self-assessment of skills and beliefs) (Table 3).

Table 3. Correlation between the examined variables (knowledge, self-assessment of skills and beliefs).

	Knowledge	Self-assessment of skills	Beliefs
Knowledge	/	0.183	0.179
Self-assessment of skills	0.183	/	0.299
Beliefs	0.179	0.299	/

The strongest correlation exists between student beliefs in the potential for teaching and learning history in primary education and their self-assessment of skills for it ($r = +0.299$). The correlation coefficient indicates a weak connection, and the

respondents who expressed more positive beliefs rated their skills for teaching historical content at a higher level. There is also a slight correlation between student beliefs and their knowledge ($r = +0.179$), as well as between their self-assessed skills and knowledge ($r = +0.183$).

Discussion

Teaching historical content in primary education is of immense importance because it equips pupils with the ability to understand the concept of time, recognize cause-and-effect relationships between events, understand significant historical events, and place them within specific time periods. Therefore, in the formal education of future teachers, it is crucial to emphasize the development of adequate competences for organizing the learning and teaching of historical content and implementing related curriculum learning outcomes. While this is a relevant area of education, only a limited number of studies have focused on teaching history in lower primary school grades (Skjæveland, 2017; Dixon and Hales, 2014; Kübler, 2011).

The results obtained in this study show that knowledge among teacher education students about historical content is developed at a moderately high level. Since only a small percentage of students (20%) demonstrated a superior level of knowledge, it is evident that there are opportunities for further improvement in the development of this aspect of student competence. Indeed, a high level of knowledge about historical content, coupled with well-developed generic and subject-specific pedagogical and methodological competences that enable teachers to transform subject knowledge into effective learning experiences for students, is considered essential for the successful organization of teaching and learning about historical content in primary education (Yilmaz, 2008; Taylor and Young, 2003). Therefore, it is recommended that during the formal education of future teachers, more emphasis be placed on achieving a higher level of knowledge among students. However, since effective teaching of historical content involves multiple interrelated variables, this study also encompassed students' self-assessment of their skills for the organization of historical content teaching.

Previous research has shown that student perceptions of effective history teaching are associated with four fundamental areas: knowledge of historical content, general pedagogical knowledge, knowledge of the psycho-physical characteristics of pupils,

and skills in teaching historical content, including adequate methodological competences (Boadu, 2015). However, Lee (2011) emphasizes that a high level of historical knowledge alone does not make someone an effective teacher. It requires a combination of subject knowledge with other variables, such as lesson planning and preparation focused on the pupil, setting clear learning outcomes, and the abilities and skills of effective teaching, i.e. transforming concepts into learning formats acceptable to pupils. In this regard, future teachers assessed the skills required for organizing the learning and teaching of historical content as generally well developed, with the highest ratings given to their generic abilities related to history teaching, such as communication skills and openness to diverse opinions and perspectives. Additionally, they gave high ratings to their skills in applying various teaching strategies and methods to the teaching of history, especially those aligned with the psycho-physical characteristics and cognitive abilities of pupils.

When teaching historical content in primary education, the emphasis is on practical learning experiences in history, the utilization of local historical sources, and the direct involvement of pupils in interpreting, researching, and personalizing history (Reeken, 2011). Teaching history at the beginning of schooling should not burden pupils with historical facts; instead, it should prioritize their experience of the past and methods for its understanding (Reeken, 2011). Methods and approaches for teaching local history do differ significantly from those in higher grades because of the need to adapt instruction to the cognitive abilities of younger pupils (Reeken, 2011). Therefore, effective teaching strategies, methods, and approaches are considered to include visits to local museums (Govenkar Okoliš, 2022), interviews with authentic individuals about past ways of life, exploring local history through the study of cultural and historical monuments, photographs, and historical artefacts, simulations of historical events, and project-based learning related to historical content (Balun Derganc and Braičić, 2022).

The first studies of children's understanding of historical time emerged in the early 20th century, with psychologists showing that children can begin to maturely understand and learn about historical time at around 11 years of age (Groot-Reuvekamp et.al, 2017). However, some empirical studies provided evidence that children as young as six have some understanding of historical time and can differentiate concrete changes over time in images and stories (Harnett, 2007; Levstik and Barton, 2011).

Given the conflicting views of various scholars on teaching history in primary education, this study examined the beliefs of future teachers about the potential for teaching history in primary education. The results show that teacher education students express the highest degree of agreement with statements related to the possibility of using active learning strategies and their importance, especially the application of inquiry-based and outdoor teaching. Their beliefs align with contemporary insights into pupil-centred instruction and their active role in the educational process (Balun Derganc and Braičić, 2022).

Ali et al. (2017) emphasize that pupils are less interested in learning history if the focus is solely on facts and knowledge acquisition with the exclusive use of memorization methods; thus, the application of active learning methods becomes one of the key success factors in teaching. Additionally, the research results show students' awareness of the teacher's role and the methodological competences required for teaching historical content suitable for pupils of this age. However, when assessing the potential of primary education pupils to learn historical content, there is a mild tendency toward indecision among respondents. Students, probably because of their lack of practical experience in working with pupils, are uncertain when evaluating whether historical content is interesting and fully comprehensible to primary education pupils. They are also unsure whether primary education pupils can independently find sources related to historical content. Given the existing contradictory views, with some experts believing that studying history requires a certain level of maturity and cognitive ability that primary education pupils may not possess (Brumlik, 2005; Wilschut, 2012), while others advocate for early history education in the hope of accelerating the development of historical thinking abilities, the inclination of students toward indecision can be understood to some extent. This finding underscores the need for further development of positive beliefs among teacher education students regarding teaching history in primary education, in a manner that aligns with the cognitive abilities of pupils in middle childhood. Unadapted learning and teaching of history in primary education, with abstract tasks disconnected from concrete activities, can be perceived by pupils as a burden, separate from the context, and primarily focused on mechanical and routine knowledge acquisition. It becomes devoid of the potential for deeper understanding and the application of acquired knowledge (Wilschut, 2012).

Indeed, history education at the primary level aims to develop pupils' interest in and motivation for learning history and to provide them with a realistic view of its inherent limitations. It enables pupils to assess how people, events, and decisions from the past impact the present and future (Clark and Grever, 2018). Ultimately, historical content helps pupils recognize their own relationship to history, understanding that their actions and lives are potentially part of history yet to be written. Therefore, it is crucial that teacher education students, as future participants in the education system, are aware of the importance of teaching history in primary education. History helps develop pupils' understanding of diversity and cultural environments, fosters logical and creative thinking, allowing pupils to develop skills that are useful in other subject areas (Fru, 2015). It enables pupils to develop specific skills that help them understand society (Cruse, 2011; Nordgen, 2016; Straaten et al., 2016). Some studies consider history as essential in developing and fostering children's sense of identity (Cruse, 2011; Bowen et al., 2012; Fru, 2015; Straaten et al. 2016). According to Tok (2016), history contributes to children's moral understanding and helps children become active citizens, encouraging their curiosity and enthusiasm (Straaten et al., 2016). This implies that inquiry-based learning in history education will show pupils that history is crucial for understanding the past, present, and future. Considering all the above, it is essential to equip future teachers to introduce pupils to navigating through time and to teach historical content effectively while developing beliefs positively aligned with this goal.

Conclusion

This study on the knowledge of future teachers about historical content, their self-assessment of teaching skills, and their beliefs about teaching historical content in primary education provides valuable insights for the development of the concept of preparing future teachers for teaching historical content in primary education. The acquired knowledge, combined with pedagogical, didactic, and methodological competences, an understanding of pupils' cognitive, emotional, and social needs, and the adaptation of teaching approaches accordingly, planning teaching that is tailored to the developmental stages of pupils, as well as a good knowledge of appropriate teaching strategies and methods, are key components of teacher readiness for teaching historical content and should be part of initial teacher education. Furthermore, this research suggests that the further development of curricula for initial teacher education, as well as the provision of educational resources and programs for their professional development in the field of history teaching, are of paramount importance.

Only through the efforts and dedication of teachers, along with the support of educational institutions, can we ensure that history is taught in a way that promotes understanding, interest, and a deeper connection of pupils with the past.

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