A Transnational Study of Criticality in the History Learning Environment

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Akademisk avhandling

som med vederbörligt tillstånd av Rektor vid Umeå universitet för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen framläggs till offentligt förvar i Hörsal 1031, Norra Beteendevetarhuset, måndagen den 12 december 2016, kl. 10:00. Avhandlingen kommer att förvaras på engelska.

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Abstract
This study examines conceptions of criticality and its instruction in the History learning environment in Sweden, Russia, and Australia as evidenced in one sample upper secondary class in each country. To achieve this, data were collected at macro, micro and meso levels. At the macro level, elements of curriculum theory were used to analyse the policy framework provided to develop students’ criticality in the upper secondary History classroom and to identify the conceptions of criticality as manifested in the policy documents. At the micro level, a content-based, thematic analysis was used to examine how the teachers and student focus groups conceptualise criticality and the ways of its teaching and learning. At the meso level, the conceptions of criticality and its instruction modes identified in the policy documents and interviews were used to analyse the classroom data collected in the selected classes.

The combined findings from the three levels of analysis provide a transnational account of criticality and its instruction. They suggest that criticality is conceptualised as a generic skill of questioning at the overarching curriculum level, whereas it is reconceptualised as a discipline-specific skill at the subject level. Discipline-specific conceptions include criticality as source criticism, as meaning making from historical evidence, as questioning historical narratives, and as educating for citizenship. The findings indicate that the visionary criticality objectives of the curricula might be obstructed at other policy levels and by the interviewees’ conceptions of criticality as well as the classroom practicalities.

Based on the transnational findings, it is proposed that harmonisation between the curriculum contents and time allocation might contribute to the promotion of narrative diversity. As argued in the study, narrative diversity is a prerequisite for criticality as questioning historical narratives. To nurture this form of criticality, the policy makers might consider a shift of attention towards the lower stages of schooling that could equip upper secondary students with necessary background knowledge. Further, harmonisation between the teaching objectives and learning outcomes of basic History courses might help avoid excluding certain groups of students from receiving criticality instruction on unclear grounds. This might ensure the equity of education with regard to criticality instruction for all upper secondary students, as required in the national curricula in Sweden, Russia and Australia.

Keywords
criticality, transnational, comparative, History, learning environment, upper secondary school, policy, curriculum theory