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**RELEVANCE OF TRAINING PROFILES FOR HIGH SCHOOLS IN
RELATION TO STUDENT MOTIVATION**

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Abstract

The paper explores the answer formulated by Romanian High School students to a questionnaire aimed at measuring the interest in studying History. The instrument was developed within the framework of a European research, coordinated by the Groningen University and which includes five countries. We analyzed the answers of the Romanian students starting from the working hypothesis that a potential correlation between the answers and the training profile of the specific High School in which they learn (in our case, theoretical and vocational) can be identified. Starting from the initial research instrument, students' answers were organized in eight categories within three clusters, organized around their perception of the utility and interest of studying History for their professional life, for general learning, and for their personal development. In more technical terms, three testlets were developed in order to better pinpoint their attitudes towards History as a subject. The comparative analysis is useful in the context of the debate concerning the training profiles provided by High Schools (as specific stage in their compulsory education), and over the ways in which the History curriculum might be better developed. The null hypothesis, that is, there are no significant differences within the target group, will enable a debate concerning the relevance of training profiles for High Schools in relation to student motivation.

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Keywords: History teaching; student attitude; perceived utility of learning; high school profiles.

1. Introduction

History as a subject in High School has a twofold position. On the one hand, it is considered to be of significant importance in shaping critical skills for the young generation, ranging from communication skills to critical thinking, and from job-related skills to social skills and cultural awareness. On the other hand, History is perceived as being a significant element in shaping identities, local, regional, or national and beyond (Capita, 2001; Schissler & Nuhoglu Soysal, 2005). Finally, History – at least through the

elements related to the broad category of cultural heritage – is part of the daily life of each of us. Therefore, it is not surprising that the way in which History is taught in schools is a focus of educational research. The present exploratory research uses the responses given by a number of 82 high school students from Romania to a questionnaire used by a team at the University of Groningen that focuses on student perceptions on History as a school subject. While the number is not statistically relevant for the entire student population of the study conducted at the University of Groningen, it nevertheless might demonstrate several issues of methodology, as well as trends in the way in which students' motivations relate to a specific school subject.

2. Problem Statement

2.1. General Context

In Romania, the Upper Secondary School is organized around three different strands (designed at the end of the 1990s), with a curriculum that has a common core, but also elements that differentiates them in terms of school subjects and number of hours per week for individual subjects; all strands end up with a national evaluation (baccalaureate), that is also organized around commons and specialised subjects. History is a compulsory subject for all students, with a minimum of one hour per week and, for theoretical high schools classes that have a focus on Humanities, a compulsory subject for the Baccalaureate.

The interest for the last stage of the Secondary education is a significant one in all educational systems, given its importance for the active life of graduates and the relation with the labour market, but also for the continuation of the studies. The enrolment at this level has become a quality indicator for the educational systems (ISE, 2014), and the steps taken by various countries are quite diverse. At the same time, the potential of the students that has to be channelled towards the active life and or the higher education, and the specific, age-related risks they are facing has become a major issue for the stakeholders.

Therefore, there is a natural attention given to the analysis of students' attitudes towards the school and the life outside it, and to regaining through the intended curriculum the interest of students for the subjects taught in the school. The curriculum is a factor in developing the attitudes of students (Osborne, Simon & Collins, 2003). For example, Allport (1935, p. 810) defined an attitude as "*a mental and neural state of readiness, organized through experience, exerting a directive and dynamic influence upon the individual's response to all objects and situations with which it is related*".

2.2. History – curriculum and Learning in Romanian Upper Secondary School

Each time when the national Curriculum is changed, one of the questions that arise is why a specific high school strand should have in its curriculum framework a specific subject. The question was raised also in relation to History, and the answers have been varied during the last quarter of century. After a period of academic reshaping (the introduction of aspects that were neglected prior to 1989, such as the recent history, the history of marginal groups, the collective image-building, the gender dimension of history, but also the renewal of the methodological aspects), the last generation of programs adopted a

the functional principle of thematic organization of the contents. This principle has the advantage of having a more explicit relevance to the personal experiences and intellectual tools of the students. It also seems to enhance opportunities to apply the newly acquired knowledge in new, real life contexts (Programs of Study, History, Grades XI and XII).

The learning trajectory proposed by the History programs is as follows: the lower Secondary School is regarded as the level at which the fundamentals of historical literacy are acquired by the students: the development of skills necessary to operate with historical data, the development of a historical culture necessary to the continuing study of history and to make sensible link with other subjects. At the level of contents, there is a dominance of the chronological approach. At the high school (Upper Secondary level, age 14 to 18), the thematically oriented approaches are dominant, with a specific focus on European History, although the balance between European, World (50% of the allocated time) and Romanian (50% of the allocated time) history is maintained. There is an increase in sensitive and controversial topics that ask for personal approaches and the development of higher level cognitive skills, and a more significant attention given to the field of attitudes. The contents are organized in accordance with five domains: people and historic spaces; people, society and the world of ideas; state and politics; international relations; religion and religious life. The selection was made taking into consideration the fact that these are areas that are relevant also for the understanding of the contemporary world. Another advantage is that they offer a cross-cutting approach, thus giving much more leeway to teachers to select the topics to teach. The programs of study contain themes that enhance different approaches: ethnographic (habitat, urban life), sociological (relations between groups, family history), economic (transportation, the development of agriculture and industry), and political (institutions, forms of government, ideologies). In accordance to the competences selected to be trained, the teacher chooses among these perspectives. At the same time, there is a strong focus on developing democratic behaviour, on the transfer of values that are characteristic for a democratic society. That facilitates the training of critical thinking skills, active participation to the public life. The teacher, then, has to select topics that enable students to research and debate elements that are relevant for the contemporary world, and to accept and actively participate in diversity as a key democratic value.

3. Research Question

The present study is a spin-off of a larger project organized by the University of Groningen. The Groningen study will look at perceptions about History as a school subject from a (international) comparative perspective. The authors of the present study, however, wanted to see if a national perspective might also be of interest. The research question was if significant differences appear between perceptions on History as a subject of students enrolled in vocational or theoretical high schools. Given the differences in selection, and the fact that the Upper Secondary School is critical for the students in choosing a professional career, the existence or lack of differences between students enrolled in different types of high schools might inform about the degree to which student attitudes concerning History are influenced by the formal educational setting.

4. Research Instrument and Sample

The instrument is based on the *Attitude Scale Towards Mathematics*. This subject-specific interest questionnaire was developed by the Dutch Centre of Educational Measurement (1987) and comprises 32 items representing four subscales: 1) Pleasure, 2) Fear and Difficulty, 3) Effort and Interest, and 4) Usefulness and Relevance. All subscales consist of both negative and positive statements and all items are scored using a five-point Likert scale ranging from “I do not agree at all” to “agree completely”. The original questionnaire was validated for reliability and validity by Martinot, Kuhlemeier & Feenstra (1988). Kuhlemeier, Van den Bergh & Teunisse (1990) showed that the questionnaire could also be used for other school subjects, such as English. Logtenberg, Van Boxtel & Van Hout-Wolters (2011) translated the original questionnaire to the school subject of History. A higher score on this questionnaire represents higher students’ individual interest in the school subject of history. They used the adjusted questionnaire among 174 Dutch secondary school students (16 years old) and found good internal consistency of the 32 items ($\alpha = 0.94$). Wilschut (2013) also used the translated questionnaire to examine how students’ view the school subject of history. His study confirmed the good internal consistency of the instrument.

Given the fact that the present study wants to identify possible differences in attitudes towards History as a school subject between students enrolled in different types of high schools, we regrouped the 32 questions in 8 categories: epistemological beliefs (5 items), enjoyment of History as a school subject (6 items), the History class (6 items), assessment and self-assessment (4 items), the significance given to the subject of the (future) professional life (3 items), the significance given to the subject for the daily life (4 items), the importance of History for leisure (3 items), and if History as a subject is considered useful or not (1 item). The resulting (new) clustering is summarized below (Table 1)

Table 1 – Regrouping of items in the research instrument

No. of item in the instrument	Category	Item
3	Epistemological beliefs	I do not put more energy into history classes than is absolutely necessary
5		I am especially glad when a history lesson is over
7		I refuse to spend a lot of time on things that are connected with history
12		Most of the time I do not feel nervous in history lessons
16		What is discussed during history lessons is of no particular interest to me
8	Enjoyment of learning	Our history lessons are often fascinating and interesting
10		History is useful with a view to other school subjects I take
14		I enjoy history lessons
18		School would be more fun if there were no history lessons
19		I find history a very boring subject
31		I would rather not do history at school
20	The History class	I enjoy doing homework for history
22		I usually understand what is covered in history lessons
25		I am confident when my history teacher asks me a question
26		Time flies during history lessons
28		Most of the time, I do not understand what is discussed in our history textbook
32		I enjoy doing a history task all by myself
2	Assessment & self-assessment	Somehow, I do not think I can be successful in history classes
4		I am pretty good at history

9		Generally speaking, I am more nervous for a history test than for tests in other subjects
23		Generally speaking, I am more afraid of making mistakes in history than making mistakes in other school subjects
6	Utility for the professional life	I think history is only useful in a few occupations
11		History is important to get a job in the future
15		In the future, I would not mind doing a job for which knowledge of history is required
21	Utility for the daily life	I think that history is of little use
24		In the world outside school, you have little use of what you learn in history lessons
27		Most of the subjects that are covered in history lessons will be useful in the future
30		History is useful in my daily life
1	Utility for the leisure time	To have history as a hobby does not appeal to me
17		In my spare time, I enjoy doing activities that are related to history
29		In my spare time, I sometimes undertake activities that are connected to history
13	Uselessness	In my personal future, I can do without knowledge of history

The regrouping of the items in the questionnaire was determined by the following factors: the educational aims of the Upper Secondary level of schooling, as they are stated in the training profile of High School graduates; the repertoire of psychological and physical developmental traits that are relevant for that specific age-group, in particular elements of moral development, of self-regulated learning and their relation to knowledge acquisition (Schommer, 1998); the didactic practices in implementing the curriculum at classroom level: the program of study encourages teachers to focus on introducing students to historical methodology, to promote activities that are run as projects, and the production of personal or imaginative texts (Program of Study for History, Grades XI and XII); the increased relation with the professional world: during this stage in their schooling, students have the opportunity to link their school-based activities with experiences more related to the world of work, and with possible professional careers (Potolea, Toma & Borzea, 2012).

The initial number of responses given by Romanian students was 104, out of which 22 were excluded as non-responses; therefore, the number of valid questionnaires taken into consideration for this particular research was of 82 (n = 82), 46 from a vocational high school (National College Dimitrie Cantemir in Breaza, Prahova County, a military high school) and 36 from two theoretical high schools (National College George Coșbuc and National College Gheorghe Lazăr, both in Bucharest).

5. Main Findings

As a whole, the two groups of students responded significantly similar (see Table 2). In all cases, the equal variance hypothesis is infirmed, but several significant elements seem to indicate both differences and similarities between the two groups (students in a vocational High School, and students in a theoretical, i.e., general High School). The item that seems to be positively valued by most of the students is item 22 (*I usually understand what is covered in history lessons*: mean score 4.54; SD 0.76), followed closely by item 14 (*I enjoy history lessons*: mean score 4.40; SD 0.77). The two answers are linked, because the pleasure in learning is a result of understanding; at the same time, the psychological "distance" from the subject is the result of not coping with the challenges proposed by the school subject.

At the opposite end of the scale, the question that seems to have the least approval is item 19 (*I find history a very boring subject*: mean score 1.57; SD 0.82). This is relevant, since the latter falls in the same category with item 14 (*I enjoy history lessons*: mean score 4.40; SD 0.77), and indicates a strong opinion concerning the degree of satisfaction or disapproval of students. The students seem to have a split opinion over the overall utility of History.

The dominant elements seem to be the questions related to the categories "History class", followed by "epistemological beliefs" and "enjoyment of learning". The fact that the highest rate of approval is related to the classroom experiences and the teaching and learning processes indicates not only a stronger influence of the learning activities than the more discreet conceptual aspects of teaching and learning, but also the fact that temporal distance influences the rate of approval. It also demonstrates the rather limited influences of out-of-school activities, a situation that can be the result of both weak links between the school and the life experiences of students, and of a tight schedule for the students (which are preparing for the final examinations at the end of High School), who have less time for extracurricular activities. Students' responses seem to be more related to their present experience than to plans for their future careers. Also, it demonstrates the influence that teaching style can have on students' perception of a subject. The other two categories are significantly linked to the other categories of questions. The category that was least approved by the students is the one regrouping items related to assessment and self-assessment. This indicates that students perceive a certain distance between their learning and the assessment or, to be more precise, between grade-based assessment and an assessment focused on providing them with the feed-back they need in order to develop their learning to learn skills.

The item referring to the perceived usefulness of History (item 13) poses a certain problem. While the numbers are in the same range, the fact that students from the theoretical high school seem more inclined to consider History a useless subject (an opinion that is shared commonly by the group) indicates the fact that they take into consideration careers and or further education that is not related to that field of knowledge. It is relevant that they also score low on the items related to the enjoyment of History learning. One possible explanation is visible when taking into consideration also the items listed under the heading "utility for the leisure time", where students from the vocational school score somewhat higher. The data seems to demonstrate that enjoyment of a particular subject may be influenced by the fact that it is regarded as not being important for a future career (actually, that might demonstrate that students resent being forced, whatever the reasons, to learn "seriously" a specific subject). However, there is one category for which the students of the theoretical high school score significantly more than their counterparts. In terms of epistemological beliefs, students from the theoretical high school tend to value more History as a subject, although they are not convinced by its usefulness; the situation might be the result of the competitiveness that characterizes theoretical high schools (the students from this type of high school tend to dominate the enrolment in higher education, and the grades contribute significantly to the admission).

Table 2 – Responses to the questionnaire, with items regrouped on categories (shaded the best average for each question and the least dispersal of answers)

Item	All questionnaires		Vocational high school		Theoretical high school	
	Mean score	Standard deviation (SD)	Mean score	Standard deviation (SD)	Mean score	Standard deviation (SD)
Epistemological beliefs						
	Mean score 2.46; SD 1,30		Mean score 2.46; SD 1,31		Mean score 2.49; SD 1,25	
3	2.70	0.17	2.70	1.23	2.92	1.18
5	2.10	1.08	2.10	1.09	1.92	0.84
7	2.27	0.93	2.27	0.93	2.36	0.87
12	3.44	1.66	3.44	1.66	3.39	1.69
16	1.79	0.80	1.79	0.80	1.89	0.75
Enjoyment of learning						
	Mean score 2.87; SD 1.53		Mean score 2.91; SD 1.60		Mean score 2.81; SD 1.45	
8	4.15	0.92	4.28	0.91	3.97	0.91
10	3.83	0.95	3.93	1.00	3.69	0.89
14	4.40	0.77	4.46	0.86	4.33	0.63
18	1.60	0.81	1.59	0.86	1.61	0.77
19	1.57	0.82	1.54	0.89	1.61	0.73
31	1.66	0.91	1.67	0.94	1.64	0.87
The History class						
	Mean score 3.37; SD 1.31		Mean score 3.46 SD 1.35		Mean score 3.26; SD 1.26	
20	2.88	1.15	3.09	1.19	2.61	1.05
22	4.54	0.76	4.52	0.86	4.56	0.61
25	3.57	1.07	3.78	0.96	3.31	1.14
26	3.73	1.04	3.80	1.17	3.64	0.87
28	1.91	0.97	1.85	1.05	2.00	0.86
32	3.59	1.18	3.70	1.15	3.44	1.21
Assessment & self-assessment						
	Mean score 2.26; SD 1.28		Mean score 2.49; SD 1.31		Mean score 2.35; SD 1.23	
2	1.93	1.07	2.00	1.05	2.17	1.11
4	3.53	0.91	3.91	0.94	3.64	0.87
9	1.59	0.92	1.76	0.97	1.64	0.87
23	1.99	1.05	2.28	1.09	1.94	0.98
Utility for the professional life						
	Mean score 3.00; SD 1.00		Mean score 3.09; SD 0.99		Mean score 2.89; SD 1.00	
6	2.60	1.05	2.70	1.13	2.47	0.94
11	3.13	0.86	3.33	0.87	2.89	0.78
15	3.28	0.95	3.26	0.83	3.31	1.09
Utility for the daily life						
	Mean score 2.82; SD 1.20		Mean score 2.86; SD 1.29		Mean score 2.76; SD 1.09	
21	1.88	0.95	1.89	1.04	1.86	0.83
24	2.44	1.06	2.35	1.12	2.56	0.97
27	3.71	0.91	3.76	0.99	3.64	0.80
30	3.26	0.99	3.46	1.00	3.00	0.93
Utility for the leisure time						
	Mean score 2.76; SD 1.17		Mean score 2.82; SD 1.17		Mean score 2.67; SD 1.16	
1	2.35	1.26	2.21	1.18	2.50	1.36
17	2.99	1.07	3.20	1.09	2.72	1.00
29	2.93	1.06	3.04	1.03	2.78	1.10
Uselessness						

Mean score 2.50; SD 1.07			Mean score 2.30; SD 1.11		Mean score 2.75; SD 0.97	
13	2.50	1.07	2.30	1.11	2.75	0.97

Table 3 – Averages and standard deviation for responses to the categories in the questionnaire (LV: vocational high school; LT: theoretical high school)

Categories	n	Mean Score	SD
Beliefs LV	46	2,43	0,69
Beliefs LT	36	2,49	0,67
Enjoy LV	46	2,91	0,34
Enjoy LT	36	2,81	0,30
H Class LV	46	3,46	0,59
H Class LT	36	3,26	0,47
Assess LV	46	2,49	0,51
Assess LT	36	2,35	0,51
Profess LV	46	3,09	0,44
Profess LT	36	2,89	0,45
Daily LV	46	2,86	0,38
Daily LT	36	2,76	0,37
Leisure LV	46	2,83	0,63
Leisure LT	36	2,67	0,72

6. Conclusions

The present study wanted to identify possible differences in attitudes towards History as a school subject between students enrolled in different types of high schools, as revealed by an online questionnaire. The students that participated in the study are taught in accordance to similar programs of study (learning outcomes and contents), and have a similar number of History classes per week (1 class per week). When comparing the results, both differences and similarities became apparent.

First, the fact that the students from two quite different types of high schools seem to have similar perceptions on History as a school subject, a situation that might indicate that the age group is more influential than individual decisions concerning a future professional career. Nevertheless, the significant elements are relevant for the sources of students' perceptions; the vocational high school group seems to enjoy more History (see the category Enjoyment of learning in Table 1), while the theoretical high school group seems to have a perception more related to epistemological beliefs (see the category Epistemological beliefs in Table 1) linked to their future career options. Given the difference in size between the two groups (the group from the vocational high school has a greater number of answers, ten, which means almost 30 % more than the group from the theoretical high schools), the relative weight of the answers for the two categories (epistemological beliefs and enjoyment of History) seem to support this finding. This might be the result of the fact that the latter group has many more options concerning the future professional career than the group from the vocational high school, but these options are linked to their assessed performance during their studies. Given the fact that the curricula of the two types of high schools are supposed to have a different impact in terms of utility for the professional careers of the graduates, the fact that the students have similar perceptions might indicate that, at least for some subjects, student perceptions are strongly influenced by factors others than professional options, such as teaching style, and the relation with the possible careers taken into consideration by the students.

In terms of the curriculum that is proposed to the students, the research demonstrates the need to increase differences between the curricula for each type of High School in order to increase its relevance in relation to the chosen educational trajectory of the students. It also shows that the relation between assessment and learning is quite strong, and that grade-based evaluation can significantly change student perception and attitudes towards a specific subject. Finally, it seems to indicate that the lack of a strong link with the out-of-school experiences of students can alter their attitudes towards a school subject.

Further research, for example, case study and thinking aloud research has to be done to more accurately point to the factors that make students appreciate a specific school subject. One possible direction of research would be to use similar instruments for other school subjects. The differences between student attitudes towards different subjects could help in better designing the curriculum.

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