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Finnish high school and university students' ability to handle multiple source documents in history

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ABSTRACT: This article presents a study where the command of historical literacy of both Finnish high school students (N=18) and university students (N=11) was examined. Both groups were in their final year of study. The high school students had a strong tendency to interpret historical sources rather one-sidedly: only a few were able to “read between the lines.” These students were thus on a novice-level when it came to interpreting these sources. However, the university students showed a higher command of historical literacy. They were not only able to differentiate between primary and secondary sources, but could also evaluate the origin of the source and the effect that might have had on the reliability of the source. University students were also able to make comparisons between the different sources while evaluating their credibility. In addition, some of them could view the case in question in a larger social context as well. In this article we will reflect on these differences between high school students and university students regarding their historical literacy skills. We will also discuss how the goals of history teaching in high schools are met in the light of our findings.

KEYWORDS: Historical Literacy, Sources, Secondary School, University, Students, Finland.

Introduction

The teaching of history in Finnish schools is based on the nature of history as a discipline. In practice this is visible, for example, in the way the multiperspectivity of historical information is emphasized in the national curricula and how historical thinking skills are highlighted already in the comprehensive school. Those students who have been evaluated as having good skills in history are expected to be able to differentiate between sources and their interpretations of them after only two years of studying history.¹ During their final year in comprehensive school, when the students are 15 years old, the students are expected to be capable of using various historical sources and capable of interpreting them in order to form their own opinions of historical events. In high schools, chosen by half of Finnish adolescents as their secondary education,² the aim is to improve the historical thinking skills of these 15 to 18 year-old students. The students are expected to know how to acquire information about the past and also how to evaluate that information critically. The high school students should be able to understand that historical information is by nature multiperspectival, relative, and contains complex cause and effect relationships. Information about historical events should not be evaluated only from a present day perspective. The students' interpretations should be

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based on the given historical time period and the viewpoints of that time. In other words, students should master historical empathy.

On the level of the national curricula the aims of studying history in Finnish schools are rather ambitious: historical thinking skills, or so-called procedural knowledge, should be emphasized over content knowledge. In this study we will examine whether this emphasis on historical thinking skills is visible in the participants' interpretations. At the beginning of the study an interpretive task was given to two groups of students. The first group consisted of 17 to 18 year-old high school students, who were in their final year of study. The other group included 22 to 33 year-old students from the University of Helsinki. All the university students were studying to become either class teachers or subject teachers and they had already completed most of their studies. In our study these groups will be analyzed both separately and in relation to one another, thus making comparisons between the two groups.

The focus of our research is on historical literacy. This concept emerged originally in the United States at the end of the 1980s, when the historian Paul Gagnon first coined the term in *Historical literacy: The case for history in American education* (Gagnon, 1989). At first it was mainly used to refer to the skill of acquiring factual information on historical events from written sources. Later on, the various approaches used in historical research strongly influenced usage of the term.³ This development is partially connected to the changes that have taken place within the research community focusing on the processes of teaching and learning history. The research community has slowly reached a wide consensus on the main aims of teaching history: instead of repeating national narratives, history teaching should focus on providing tools for critical thinking. This requires combining the approaches used in history teaching with those used in historical research (e.g., Fordham, 2012; Perfetti, Britt, Rouet, Georgi, & Mason, 1994).

In our study the definition of historical literacy is based on the work of Australian researchers Tony Taylor and Carmel Young, and Canadian professor Peter Seixas. According to Taylor and Young (2003), linking history teaching to history as a science refers to the ability to interpret historical sources, to analyze historical events based on these sources, and to find the explanatory factors behind the events. In addition, they combine this with the ability to examine history from both moral and ethical viewpoints (Taylor & Young, 2003). In the historical thinking project led by Peter Seixas, historical literacy in history teaching has been defined in more detail: When using original sources the students should be able to view that information in the light of the situation and perceptions of that time. Reflecting on the intentions of different actors and comparing various sources are also highlighted (Seixas & Colyer, 2012). Even though the concept of historical literacy itself is relatively new, historical documents have been examined in history teaching for a long time. In the United States using historical sources in the classroom can be traced back to the end of the 19th century (Reisman, 2012b). However, using these sources in the classroom was only emphasized in the *Amherst History Project* in the 1960s. The following decade saw the rise of inquiry-based learning in Britain (Booth, 1994). Consequently, today the use of historical documents in the classroom is especially active in both the United States and Britain.

Using primary and secondary sources when teaching history is crucial, which is also visible in the national curricula of many countries including Finland (Brown, 1996; Cannadine, Keating, & Sheldon, 2011; Rantala, 2012; VanSledright, 2011; Wils, 2009). However, the ability of high school and university students to use and interpret these sources has not really been studied in Finland. Even on an international level the research on how young people interpret different historical sources is quite rare, despite the fact that using different sources in history teaching has gained prominence all over the world (cf. Reisman, 2012b; Rouet, Britt, Mason, & Perfetti 1996).

According to the CHATA (Concepts of History and Teaching Approaches) project – which was implemented in Britain and aimed at investigating the historical thinking of young people – the adolescents classified as novices approached historical documents as stories containing true, factual information about the past (VanSledright & Afflerbach, 2005). The adolescents who were one stage higher in their thinking did not perceive the information as one-sidedly as the novices, but rather deduced that the information they had about past events could not be considered as being completely reliable because they had not been there themselves to witness the events. However, according to Bruce VanSledright and Peter Afflerbach (2005, p. 15) even these young people believe in the existence of a true past. It is characteristic of this group to perceive all historical sources as equal and as narratives that are more or less biased (a naïve relativist position). As a result of such perceptions, the comparison between different sources and their credibility can be completely neglected. In contrast, the young people representing higher-level cognitive historical thinking understand that the interpretations depend on the interpreters and the choices they make. These students comprehend that the various interpretations stem from the processes of choosing or interpreting sources. They can also compare and evaluate sources (VanSledright & Afflerbach, 2005).

There are still different views among researchers regarding the age when children are capable of carrying out challenging interpretive tasks. So far the researchers have not been able to define categorical age limits (cf. Lee & Ashby, 2000; Ofsted, 2011; Coté & Goldman, 1999). According to VanSledright and Afflerbach (2005), children in primary school are not yet capable of interpreting difficult historical sources (also cf. Brophy & VanSledright, 1997). They state that with young children it is insufficient literacy skills that will hinder the interpretation of sources. Furthermore, Sam Wineburg (1991) has proven that even high school students have difficulties in understanding and interpreting historical sources. However, many researchers, including VanSledright and Afflerbach, believe that even young children are capable of using historical sources if they have been tailored for the age group in question (e.g., Barton, 2008; Lee & Ashby, 2000; Petri, 2010; VanSledright & Afflerbach, 2005). Keith Barton and Linda Levstik (2010) are also convinced that using historical sources in the classroom can be made familiar to children already in primary school. They state that meaningful study of history is not possible if the nature of historical knowledge is not introduced to the students right at the beginning of their studies.

In addition, using historical sources in the classroom has other valuable benefits. It is considered to develop, for example, the general information-processing skills that are crucial in the modern information society. If students are to be raised as active and participating citizens, then educators should also provide them with tools for critical thinking so that they can assess and evaluate different types of present-day information. In this light, moreover, it is important to keep in mind that the tools for critical thinking do not develop on their own. Hence, the question as to how and when these critical thinking skills should be introduced and taught is of crucial importance.

It should be kept in mind that the development of interpretive skills is also linked to the student's linguistic abilities in his or her native language, especially when it comes to textual skills. We can make two assumptions concerning the textual skills of our student groups. Firstly, Finnish high school students in the final phase of their studies should be able to understand the complexity and multiperspectivity of historical information as they have been familiarized with that from primary school onwards. They have also focused on polishing their textual skills in Finnish classes. Secondly, the competences of the university students regarding the critical processing of information could be assumed to be more highly developed than that of the high school students, given that they have had to familiarize themselves with various text types during their studies. However, as the critical reading of

texts is heavily emphasized in high schools, our hypothesis was that there would not be major differences between the two groups regarding their historical literacy skills.

Implementing the study

The empirical part of the study began in autumn 2012. The interpretive task that was our tool for gathering information about the participants' historical literacy skills was then given to the high school students.⁴ The data regarding the university students was collected in 2013.

In order to gain knowledge on the participants' abilities to understand the multiperspectivity of historical information we examined their ways of interpreting different documents. As our first group we chose third-year students from the Normal Lyceum of Helsinki. 13 girls and 5 boys from two ongoing history courses were randomly selected in this group. The other group consisted of both class teacher and subject teacher students from the University of Helsinki. The class teacher students (8) were studying to become primary school teachers (grades 1–6) with educational science as their main subject. The subject teacher students (3) were doing their pedagogical studies in the Normal Lyceum of Helsinki 2013–2014. Even though this study is not representative of average high school students or university students,⁵ we can draw some conclusions on the differences between these two groups.

The participants were given the same documents of a court case from the early 19th century, which had been abridged in the same way for them (cf. Reisman, 2012a). The implementation was similar for both groups. Before the actual interpretive task Marko van den Berg introduced the details of the case to the participants. The case which was used for measuring participants' historical literacy concerned a parish clerk Matias Saxberg who assaulted and killed a young girl, for which he was then later condemned to death. However, in his case the highest court commuted the sentence to a fine. This caused quite a stir and it gave rise to a lampoon, in which the parish clerk was described as a depraved man who mistreated the poor. In addition to this lampoon, court records about the case were preserved. After going through the case with the participants they were told about the Finnish judicial practices at the beginning of the 19th century. The different sources concerning the case were also introduced. This was done to make sure that the participants could view the information in a larger context. At the same time their knowledge of the historical context was assured, being made familiar with the concepts related to a Finnish agrarian community in the 19th century and their understanding of the social roles of the different historical actors.

The court case in question should be a typical way to learn history, if teachers follow the National Core Curriculum for history. According to the curriculum (Finnish National Board of Education, 2003, p. 180) instruction in history should concentrate on the “critical analysis and interpretation of information and aim to take the diverse perspectives on different phenomena into account.” The court case itself was not significant but the way it was implemented was expected to be typical for history teaching at high school. The case gave us an opportunity to evaluate students' historical literacy in a context unfamiliar to them.

After going through the above-mentioned material together as a group the participants analyzed the documents individually. They read the given texts, stopping at marked points in the text to think aloud. After each document the participants answered questions related to the credibility of the documents and to the intentions of the different actors involved. At the end of the task, participants evaluated the evidentiary values of the documents. In the think-aloud method they attempt to verbalize their thoughts as accurately as possible (cf. Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995; Wineburg, 1991). This method was not familiar to the students so they were instructed on it during the task. Many of the high school students seemed to be shy of

verbalizing their thoughts after reading the texts and they had to be instructed during the entire exercise. In some cases the high school students were able to use the method without any further instructions from the interviewer. The university students were able to complete the task with considerably less help from the interviewer.

With both student groups the time used for the interpretive task was 45 minutes. Some of the interviews were done immediately after the interpretive task, but some of them were conducted as late as two weeks later. However, according to the participants they did not have difficulties in remembering the details of the case. We recorded the process and, accordingly, we used this data to evaluate their abilities to interpret historical evidence and to understand the complexity and multiperspectivity of historical information.

Our aim was to find out whether participants were able to “read between the lines” and to reflect on the credibility of the different actors, as well as their intentions and motives (cf. Bertram, 2012; Wineburg, 1991). A skilful reader takes into account the information provided by the sources but also notices what is left unsaid, which we call reading between lines. In practice this means that the interpreter takes into account, for example, the social background and status of a certain actor as well as the general operational environment of a certain era. Our study borrows the framework of VanSledright and Afflerbach (2005), which they used in order to study students' abilities to interpret historical sources. According to VanSledright and Afflerbach, there are four cognitive activities related to evaluating sources: 1) attribution, 2) identification, 3) perspective, and 4) reliability. The first two activities are related to defining the origin and nature of the source whereas the activity requiring the highest cognitive skills shows whether the student is able to take the original context into consideration. We used this division by VanSledright and Afflerbach as a framework for our own analysis by examining how we could place the participants on the above-mentioned scale.

According to VanSledright and Afflerbach, historical skills are related to age. For example a primary school student has not yet developed the ability to “read between the lines” and draw conclusions based on historical evidence. Some students are, for instance, unable to differentiate between evidence and information (cf. also Shemilt, 1987). In order to understand the origin and nature of different sources as well as the motives behind them requires understanding the intentions of the creators of these sources and the ability to make comparisons between sources (cf. Wineburg, 1991). The latter is usually considered to be characteristic of higher-level historical thinking. An expert is capable of “reading between the lines,” reflecting on the intentions behind the sources and evaluating the credibility of the sources, whereas a novice tends to understand historical evidence as information.

In a previous study of US 8- and 9-year-old children's historical literacy it was shown that children have the tendency to view the information provided by historical sources as neutral, not as contextual or as an artefact produced by someone (VanSledright & Afflerbach, 2005). This takes us to the the first cognitive activity related to historical understanding: *attribution*, which refers to understanding that historical sources have been created by someone for a specific purpose. On the scale by VanSledright and Afflerbach the person reaching the second level (*identification*) is able to identify the nature of the source and can distinguish between primary and secondary sources. Reaching the third level (*perspective*) requires understanding the historical context and the other possible sources related to the case. In order to reach the highest level (*reliability*), a person must be able to compare different sources regarding their credibility; something which can be considered challenging even for historians. It is possible to distinguish between these different levels of cognitive understanding, even though the same person might show signs of several levels at the same time (VanSledright & Afflerbach, 2005). As VanSledright and Afflerbach have noticed, especially *attribution* and *identification* appear to work together. Sometimes an interpreter of the documents begins by identifying the

documents, other times he or she starts with attribution. The whole think-aloud process, however, reveals which category the interpreter can be placed.

The interpretive task used to collect data

The students were given three documents related to the case: 1) an extract from Lydia Hällfors' memoirs of her mother, 2) the testimony of the parish clerk Saxberg from the district court and 3) an extract from the lampoon about the case, written in the 1840s. The extract from Lydia Hällfors and the lampoon are secondary sources whereas the witness testimony from the court is a primary source.

The participants started by reading the extract from Lydia Hällfors' memoirs. Lydia Hällfors was a daughter of a clergyman and her autobiographical work was published in 1924. In it she tells about the killing of the girl and the court case after that. The murder had happened before Hällfors was born but she heard a story about the case when she was little, unsurprisingly since the case had caused quite a stir. According to the story, the parish clerk Matias Saxberg had been angry at a servant girl who had brought her cows to graze on his field. Saxberg had threatened to kill the girl if she ever brought her cows there again. The following day the girl was again in the field and the parish clerk had his hired man catch the girl. The story tells that the parish clerk threw the girl to the ground, broke her chest with his knees and tore the hair off her scalp. The girl died in the process and the clerk reported to the rural police chief.

The extract contained marked points, in which the students were supposed to stop to think aloud about what they had just read. At the end of the extract the participants were supposed to think about the purpose and aim of the text. After this they read the witness testimony of the parish clerk Saxberg. According to the testimony, the clerk had pulled the servant girl's hair and smacked her on the face, which had caused the girl to fall on her knees. After this the clerk claimed that he had asked his hired man to check that the girl was not harmed.

This witness testimony contradicted the information of the first source. This should promote argumentative reflection from the interpreter of the source (cf. Rouet et al., 1996). When a student received a contradictory source, he or she recognized a conflict between the accounts. Proceeding in the task required him or her to reconcile disparate accounts and that was implemented at the think-aloud process. We had also marked the second source with points where the students were supposed to think aloud. We made it clear to the participants that the origin of this source was directly after the incident whereas this was not the case with the first source. After reading this second document the participants answered questions regarding the purpose of the document and the intentions of the writers of the document.

The third document given to the participants was an extract from the lampoon written in the parish where the murder incident happened at the beginning of 1840s. Apparently the local tailor had written the lampoon. The lampoon depicts how the hired man was supposed to obey the parish clerk and how it was the clerk who murdered the servant girl. This lampoon with its poem-like structure turned out to be difficult to read for many of the high school students. The lampoon contained footnotes with explanations that helped the students to understand it better. This was visible in the way students would return to these explanations when they had to think aloud. After reading the lampoon the students reflected on the purpose of it and the aim of the writer. At the end of the task the participants were asked to evaluate the reliability of all the three sources.

Our process of collecting the data should be taken into account when analyzing the results of this study. Even though the students were familiar with working with historical sources, especially the high school students were nervous about thinking aloud and being recorded. It

has been noted in similar studies that readers tend to slow down their reading pace when the text is demanding (cf. Wineburg, 1991). However, we did not notice any differences between the students' reading of the instructions and the documents. They seemed to be familiar with the language of the documents (cf. Coté & Goldman, 2004), the only exception being the lampoon whose structure required the students to read it differently. We can assume that especially the high school students would have concentrated more on their reading if they had not been recorded, which could have then influenced the interpretation as well.

The results: high school students and university students as interpreters of historical sources

We analyzed the recordings looking for the four cognitive activities of VanSledright and Afflerbach (2005). In addition to these four classes of activities we added an activity characteristic of interpreters on a beginner's level, in which the interpreter cannot distinguish between evidence and information (cf. Shemilt, 1987; Wineburg, 1991). In our search for the different activities we focused on the think-aloud parts of the recordings. We selected extracts from the data that were characteristic of each activity and then holistically classified each high school student as representing one of the four activities. As the basis for our interpretation we used the findings of earlier studies regarding the characteristics of novice and expert-level interpreters (e.g., Rouet et al., 1996; Shemilt, 1987; VanSledright & Afflerbach, 2005; Wineburg, 1991). These characteristics are visible in our analysis. In the following paragraphs we explain the classification of the data and how the students interpreted the documents.

Cognitive level	High school students	University students
Novice	7	-
Attribution	3	2
Identification	6	6
Perspective	2	2
Reliability	0	1
All together	18	11

Table 1. The high school students and the university students and their the cognitive levels.

Beginner's level: Novice interpreters (evidence understood as information)

To a novice interpreter of historical information it is typical to focus on the information of the documents without reflecting on the intentions of the person or persons behind the document. The novice interpreter is unable to recognize the purpose of the source and considers the information to be a fact.⁶ None of the university students were seen to represent the novice level. However, several high school students were classified as novice interpreters. Some of these students did not recognize the conflicting information of the sources whereas some did, but considered the source containing more information as more reliable than the other ones. It was also typical of these students to evaluate the documents from the modern perspective without considering the historical context.

According to our analysis, seven high school students – Terhi (F),⁷ Riku (M), Raija (F), Elina (F), Heli (F), Matti (M) and Armi (F) were classified as novice interpreters. Most of them showed some characteristics of other cognitive activities as well but not enough for them to be classified as anything but novice level.

The “purest” form of novice interpretation was shown by Armi, who interpreted the historical documents consistently from her modern perspective. She was for instance unable to understand why the parish clerk had been so angry about the cows in the field. When she was pondering about this she said that “the cows weren’t probably doing any harm there.”⁸ She also thought it was bizarre that the clerk had killed the girl because of cows. According to her the violence would have been more understandable if the field had had more value for the clerk. Thus she was unable to understand the financial and the symbolic value of a field in an agrarian community in the 19th century.

With the first document it also surprised Armi that it was a church employee who acted violently: her perception of church employees was that they are good and kind people. The student did not really reflect on the motives of the parish clerk. She noticed the conflicting information in the sources, for example the information regarding the actions of the hired man, but did not speculate on them any further. When two of the sources framed the events approximately in the same way, she considered them to be more reliable than the third, conflicting source. Another novice interpreter, Terhi, also interpreted the sources as straightforward and factual accounts of the incident. She did not recognize the purpose or the aim behind different sources nor did she differentiate between the sources. Hence she evaluated the case directly based on the information provided by the sources without reflecting on their reliability.

This was similar to the interpretation of Riku, who thought Lydia Hällfors had written her memoirs simply to maintain a record of her memories. He had a narrow view of other documents as well and he did not really understand the lampoon. He saw the lampoon as being openly mocking and did not consider it to have any function more complex than that. “It’s like the 1840s then they wouldn’t have had any developed hidden agendas at that time.” Like Terhi he also saw the lampoon as depicting reality literally.

It was characteristic of this group that they identified the documents’ different approaches of telling the same story but could not analyze the reason behind that. However, some of the students like Heli for instance, did not really pay attention to the conflicting information provided by the documents. They viewed a new document as containing more current information and thus replacing the old one.

In the think-aloud processes of some of the students we could identify thinking related to the different cognitive activities. However, we still classified these students as novices as they only showed traces of other cognitive activities. For example Elina was able to analyze the nature of the lampoon and the testimony with a few phrases at the end of the task. Otherwise she only focused on the information in the documents. She analyzed the lampoon as aimed at pitying both the servant girl and the hired man as the lampoon had instances of “poor hired man” and “poor servant girl” in it. Even though the parish clerk Saxberg is described as a murderer in the poem, Elina did not see the connection between that and the purpose of the lampoon. Her weak understanding of the evidence is also visible in the way she analyzed Lydia Hällfors’ memoirs and their relevance to the case. She analyzed the text as possibly being written by Saxberg’s mother, which shows that she had not really understood the text and did not think about the motives of the writer.

Level 1: Attribution

We classified three high school students and two university students in this upper level. These interpreters were capable of seeing the purpose of the sources and were also able to reflect on the different contexts related to each document. The high school students, Laila (F), Kerttu (F) and Ari (M), could also identify the nature of the sources but could not analyze the differences between primary and secondary sources on a deeper level.

Laila focused on the function of the sources and she was also able to place the authors of the sources in a historical context. She recognized Lydia Hällfors' memoirs as a secondary source and could think about the problems related to secondary sources. She considered primary sources to be more reliable than secondary sources and she also saw authenticity as a synonym for reliability, which is visible in the way she analyzes the testimony of Saxberg: she described the testimony as reliable because it had been "written down during a court session."

On the other hand, Laila was able to analyze the use of the sources quite precisely. She understood that the effect of the lampoon was related to its structure and the way it was supposed to be performed: this rhythmical poem had easily been transformed into a song that was then performed in different gatherings. According to her, this made the lampoon easy to remember and this had then caused people to see Saxberg as an evil man. She could also recognize the function of both the memoirs and the testimony. However, she did not "read between the lines" nor did she focus on the motives of the different actors.

In a similar fashion Kerttu was able to understand the characteristics of the lampoon and the court testimony: the lampoon was effective because it was exaggerated whereas the testimony was an official record from the authorities. The possibility of Saxberg having lied while giving the testimony weakened the reliability of the testimony for Kerttu, and she also understood that the memoirs and the memories of the case itself might not be very accurate. She also pondered on whether the time between the source and the incident itself had any effect on the reliability of the sources. Even though both Laila and Kerttu also showed instances of identification in their interpretations, it was clear that they should be placed in the category of attribution, since their interpretation of the sources was fumbling and they were unable to distinguish between the natures of the different sources. From the university students we classified Helena (F) and Pia (F) as belonging to this category. Both understood the difference between primary and secondary sources but, on the other hand, both fumbled in their understanding of the natures of the different sources. Helena for example considered the Hällfors memoirs and its account of the case as some kind of a warning and a moral story on how the lower classes were not allowed to defy the higher classes in the society of that time. Pia saw the mockery in the lampoon directed at the servant girl, not at the parish clerk.

Level 2: Identification

We identified the high school students Mira (F), Irma (F), Peppi (F), Linda (F), Pilvi (F) and Vappu (F) as belonging to this level. For example Mira identified the difference between primary and secondary sources and reflected on the problems related to different types of sources. When analyzing the memoirs she took the time gap between writing the memoirs and the incident into consideration and also the possible unreliability of a second-hand source. She did not necessarily consider a primary source as more reliable than a secondary source. She understood that the authors of the sources must have had certain aims in mind but she did not focus on what these might have been. Consequently, she did not reach the perspective level.

Linda was also able to differentiate between primary and secondary sources and to take the time gap into consideration. However, her interpretation of the events was on many accounts quite straightforward. As an example of this she considered Saxberg's testimony to be quite

reliable. She did not view the violent punishing of the servant girl in the historical context but considered it somewhat understandable that the parish clerk “wanted to keep his lands untouched.”

Similarly Irma focused first on the information provided by the sources without stopping to think about the motives behind them or the nature of the sources. As the task continued she started to interpret the sources more profoundly. She recognized the sources as being different in nature and could differentiate between primary and secondary sources. She attempted to “read between the lines” to some extent, which showed in the way she analyzed the objectives of the lampoon: “He has wanted to sort of tell what has really happened and to say something about the power relations.” However, reflecting on the intentions of the different actors remained narrow, as did the evaluation of the reliability of the sources.

Peppi, on the other hand, represented a more profound interpretation of the sources as, in addition to the information, she pondered on the different possibilities for interpretation and the characteristics of the sources. She identified the authors of the sources and their function, although she mistook Saxberg’s witness testimony as an account of the events provided by the district court. Peppi noticed the contradictions between the sources and was able to see the differences between the memoirs, lampoon and the testimony and their functions. However, Peppi did not consider the intentions of the authors of the sources. She did think about why Saxberg’s actions were exaggerated in the memoirs and in the lampoon, but to her the explanation lay in the nature of these sources: in a memoir events can be dramatized and the aim is to appeal to the reader’s emotions whereas a lampoon is meant to be entertaining. Despite this she did not think about why Hällfors or the writer of the lampoon would intentionally smear Saxberg’s character. Therefore Peppi’s thinking cannot be classified in the category of perspective, since she did not “read between the lines” or reflect on the intentions behind the sources.

Pilvi was also able to differentiate between the memoirs, the witness testimony, and the lampoon as well as the different characters of these sources. She also thought about the differences between primary and secondary sources. She saw Saxberg’s witness testimony as reliable but doubted the truthfulness of it.

As regards the university students, we classified six participants in this category. All the students belonging to this group could easily see the difference between primary and secondary sources. All of them also took into consideration the time gap between the incident and the origin of the sources. For example Ella (F) viewed Lydia Hällfors’ memoirs as less reliable since they included detailed information of events that the writer had not witnessed herself. With the exception of Heidi (F), all the university students in this category considered the memoirs to be the most reliable source. Ella and Tuulikki (F) were wondering why the sources did not depict the events leading to the situation itself in more detail, since they thought those might have explained the clerk’s strong reactions. This can be considered as a sort of reading between the lines. However, the university students classified in this category had difficulties in explaining the motives of the different actors. For example Sanna (F) thought about the relationship between the clerk and the tailor who had written the lampoon but did not consider this in a larger societal context. Tuulikki saw the case as “horror story-like” and that was why she thought it had been so strongly memorized by the writer. Taru (F) was unable to see the dispute concerning the field in the historical context as she wondered why the clerk got so upset over a field. This lack of understanding of the motives of the actors and the inability to see the historical context influenced our decision to categorize these students as belonging to identification, even though their interpretations also included some characteristics of perspective.

Level 3: Perspective

Timo (M) and Ossi (M) were the only high school students that we categorized in this group. They identified the nature of the sources and were able to distinguish between primary and secondary sources. They also reflected on the motives behind the sources. Timo for instance understood that the aim of the lampoon was to get justice for the common people that had not received that justice in court. He also reflected on the motives of writing the memoir, although his motives reflected a modern perspective as he thought Lydia Hällfors wanted to become famous or to increase the sales of her book. He did not think whether she had any reason to write negative things about Saxberg. Timo's interpretations were also naïve to some extent. The clerk's testimony contained details of the clerk reporting to the police about the incident, which Timo thought was a sign of the clerk seeing nothing wrong with his actions. He did not consider the fact that the case had several eye witnesses and that the clerk might have reported only because he had to; the police would have been notified about the case in any case.

Ossi also viewed the lampoon as a reminder for the community concerning Saxberg's violent act. He also evaluated the content of the documents by focusing on the motives of the actors. The fact that the hired man verified the clerk's story in court could be explained by the hired man being financially dependent on the clerk. Ossi thought that the man had been afraid of losing his job if he had witnessed against the clerk. Thus Ossi is showing signs of "reading between the lines."

Undoubtedly Timo and Ossi qualify for *attribution* and *identification*. They recognized the authors of the sources and the nature of the documents and were able to distinguish between primary and secondary sources. They also attempted to understand the motive behind the case which is typical of interpretation with perspective. Of these two high school students, only Ossi showed signs of "reading between the lines." However, Timo compensated for this by focusing on the motives behind the sources and using comparisons to do so.

However, both Timo and Ossi and all the other high school students had limited skills when it came to comparing the different sources regarding their reliability. Timo understood the reliability problems with the memoirs, that being a secondary source. In contrast he viewed the witness testimony of the clerk in the light of authenticity: "It's been done in the district court, then it's a bit more reliable. Then it has ... all the dates and stuff." Ossi, on the other hand, compared the reliability of the sources quite narrowly by making a distinction between primary and secondary sources.

From the university students two were placed in this category, Tuomas (M) and Diana (F). They did not have problems in distinguishing between primary and secondary sources. They both showed developed interpreting skills when evaluating the reliability of the sources by comparing the sources to each other. They were also able to deduct the function of the sources. Tuomas' interpretation could, however, be seen as containing naïve characteristics as well. At first he thought that the memoirs of Lydia Hällfors could be seen as a quite objective account of the events. When he was thinking about the motives of Hällfors, he suggested that the writing process could have been a personal process to help Lydia deal with the traumatic event. This stems more from modern day context than historical thinking. However, during the interview Tuomas evaluated the sources in a more critical fashion and showed that he could make a difference between primary and secondary sources. After familiarizing himself with the other sources he took a more critical viewpoint of the memoirs as well. He paid attention to the date when it was written and that the writer had only heard about the incident, not witnessed it.

Although Tuomas' interview contained signs of many categories, we decided to place him in the third category as he showed the ability to interpret the sources from different perspectives, especially towards the end of the interview. He also paid attention to the

contradictions between the witness testimony and the memoirs' account of the events. With the lampoon he also recognized another, communal function: the depicted poem as being "told around the campfire." Thus he did not consider the lampoon as factual information about the events but rather a story. On the other hand, he was able to take into account the historical context. He pointed out the tensions between different social groups at the time and he depicted the lampoon as the "common people" in a poorer social standing getting compensation for the clerk not being properly punished. Diana also noted the social status of the actors and how that might have influenced the events. She depicted the village as most likely being "controlled" by the influential parish clerk.

Level 4: Reliability

No high school students were analyzed as fitting into this category. Only one of the university students, Leila (F), was classified in this category. What made her different from the other participants was that, not only was she able to reflect on the motives of different actors in a versatile manner, she could also question the different accounts of the events by comparing them to one another. She also consistently showed signs of "reading between the lines," which is characteristic of highly developed historical interpreting skills. She reflected for example on why the sources left some things unsaid and with the way other things gave too narrow a picture of the events in question. Leila pointed out that as the lampoon and the memoirs talk about the clerk in a negative manner, the same sources also depict the servant girl and the hired man as passive victims. Leila was interested in the earlier actions of both the hired man and the servant girl. She thought it would have been interesting to know how much the servant girl provoked the clerk during or before the incident. Even though Leila did not view the hired man's testimony as completely reliable, she understood that the testimony was linked to the power relations of the time. This hired man did not probably have a chance to question his master. In other instances as well Leila showed the ability to take into account the historical context. She understood for example the importance of the field and the power relations related to owning land at that time.

In comparison to the other participants, Leila also had a more profound interest in the relationship between the clerk and the writers of the other sources. She was interested for example in the relationship of the writer of the lampoon, most likely the local tailor, and the parish clerk and whether there might have been any old grudges in the background. When she was analyzing the overall view of the events, she continued pondering on the nature of the sources and also compared them to one another. Even though she considered the view that the sources gave of Saxberg as being one-sided, she did not think the clerk's testimony was very reliable. She stated that the testimony itself had probably been written down exactly as it was said. However, she noted that when evaluating the reliability of the statement the position of Saxberg should be taken into consideration: the aim of the clerk was to defend himself, not necessarily tell the truth. All in all Leila's interpretation included taking into consideration the historical context and the circumstances, comparing the sources to one another and reading between the lines (cf. Seixas & Colyer 2012). Thus we decided to place her in the highest category.

Discussion: the challenge of historical literacy

In our study, most of the high school students had either beginner's or novices' interpreting skills. None of them reached the expert level. This is understandable, given that this level is demanding for historians as well. The results of the university students were considerably higher than those of the high school students but some of them struggled with the critical

reading of the texts as well. However, none of the university students were placed on the novice level. VanSledright and Afflerback (2005) as well as Wineburg (1991) have all studied the interpretive skills of different age groups using the think-aloud method. Although the results of these studies are not widely applicable due to the small number of studies and their small samples, they offer an interesting level of comparison for our study. Our results are similar to that of Wineburg (1991), when he studied American high school students. Similar results have been found in other studies concerning this age group (e.g., Britt, Perfetti, Van Dyke, & Gabrys, 2000; Monte-Sano, 2011; Reisman & Wineburg, 2012).

Sam Wineburg, Daisy Martin and Chauncey Monte-Sano (2011) criticize the way in which American high school students read written documents, such as diaries and letters. They state that the young people do not have the ability to consider the intentions of the writer of the document and to place the text in the context in which it was written. According to Wineburg (1991), the young do not see the hidden information in the text because they are so focused on the direct information provided by the text. This was clearly visible in our research as well. Especially the high school students viewed the documents as sources of information without paying sufficient attention to the status of the authors. In this respect the university students were more sophisticated.

Wineburg has studied the different ways of interpreting documents by experts and novices. By comparing high school students and historians he has come to the conclusion that the students lack the ability to interpret sources like historians. Wineburg states that the high school students are like the jury in a court of law: they listen to the witness statements but are unable to cross-examine the witnesses. Historians, on the other hand, are like the prosecutor: they pose questions concerning the documents, compare different documents to each other, and reflect on the motives behind them (Wineburg, 1991; see also Wineburg et al., 2011). This was visible with our students as well: only a few high school students compared the documents with one another and attempted to understand the reasons behind the conflicting information. Both of these activities were more prominent in the interpretations of the university students.

The high school students' way of thinking is probably linked to the idea of historical information being constant and unchanging. According to the curriculum, the students should have a good command of historical information but they should also understand the origin of the information. Historical thinking, which is one of the goals of history teaching set by the curriculum, requires mastering both content knowledge and procedural knowledge, the ability to "make history." Procedural knowledge in history refers to historical thinking skills, such as historical perspective, historical significance, empathetic understanding, cause and effect, change and continuity, in addition to primary source analysis (Bertram, 2012; Lee & Ashby, 2000; Seixas & Morton, 2013). The high school students seem to have a good command of the content knowledge, since that has traditionally been taught in schools. In comparison, history teaching focusing on historical skills does not have a long tradition in Finland, which has been visible in the students' poorer mastering of procedural knowledge (Rantala, 2012). This is also reinforced by this study. The better results of the university students can be explained by the fact that they have had to evaluate many different types of texts in seminars and other studies. Studying at a university also includes a systematic orientation toward the basic principles of scientific thinking. Even though our participants majored in educational sciences instead of history, we can assume that studying these bases of scientific thinking has given them tools for the critical interpretation of information as well.

In earlier studies there have been promising results from introducing document-based methods in the history classroom. Avishag Reisman recently conducted a wide-ranging study which was based on the approach *Reading like a historian*. In Reisman's (2012b) study

American high school students were taught to work like historians for six months while studying the normal topics introduced in the curriculum. The results of the study were compared to the national average in the United States. The results of the high school students participating in the experiment had improved but they had also surpassed the national average both in general text reading skills and in the command of historical information. It is worthwhile to note that also the poorer students' results were considerably improved.

The skills required for interpreting sources can thus be developed with systematic training that includes giving the students several, conflicting documents on the same topic. Without the teaching being particularly aimed at teaching these interpretive skills the students will not benefit from the texts (Stahl, Hynd, Britton, McNish, & Bosquet, 1996). However, are students given enough opportunities to become good interpreters of sources? According to American studies, the average high school student rarely uses other material besides the textbook in history lessons (cf. Britt et al., 2000). Presumably the situation is the same in Finland (Gullberg, 2010). The publishing houses offer some extra material but there is no evidence on how much that is used. We can also assume that the teachers consider using documents as time-consuming and only adding to their workload, especially when they have to proceed quite quickly in the lessons to cover all the topics required by the curriculum. Avishag Reisman (2012b) emphasizes that in order to adopt new methods we also have to train the teachers. In the above-mentioned study, the high school history teachers had several days of training before the actual study started.

Reisman (2012a) has also paid attention to the general learning abilities such as the poor literacy skills of American teenagers that then challenges the reform of history teaching. In Finland this should not be a hindrance for teaching historical thinking skills, especially when it comes to high school students in their final year. Finnish teenagers do very well in the international literacy tests, such as the PISA studies (cf. OECD, 2010, 2013). According to these assessments the Finnish adolescents are able to understand what they read and to answer questions about the texts. But how critical are the Finnish readers? In the light of our research this still leaves room for development. Gaining more profound interpretive skills would require adopting methods focusing on skills rather than knowledge, such as the ones introduced in the American *Reading like a historian*.

What can we then conclude from the high school students' results? Partly the explanation might lie in what Will Fitzhugh (2004) pointed out when studying American high school students: the students have not been familiarized with any other text besides the textbook and they have not conducted any historical research of their own. Similar explanations to the differences in the thinking skills of university students and high school students have been offered by Jean-François Rouet, Anne Brit, Robert Mason, and Charles Perfetti (1996). According to them, the high school students gain their information from textbooks that shy away from conflicting information whereas the university students focus on different types of sources in their studies (also Rouet, Favart, Britt, & Perfetti, 2009). This probably explains some of our results as well.

When it comes to teaching we should think about the correlation between the novice-level interpreting skills and the teaching material used in classrooms. The danger lies in the material depicting history as a ready-made mass of knowledge rather than a research process. It is difficult to develop critical reading skills if the texts offered by the textbooks are static and the origin of the information is not clear. Hence other sources besides the textbook should be introduced in the classroom, thus familiarizing the students with the multiperspectivity of historical information. We should also pay attention to training the teachers and developing good-quality exercises based on different sources. We should also be ready to consider

changes in the curricula: using different source-based material requires sufficient time resources which could mean having to cut back on the contents of the courses.

However, simply working with historical sources in the high school classroom will not help the students in becoming critical readers. The students should be familiarized with different text types as well. Practicing text-related skills and especially the critical evaluating of information is needed in school on a more general level as well, as shown by the study of Carita Kiili (2012). Practicing text-related skills should first start with introducing the typical text types of the given discipline (Moje, 2008; see also Monte-Sano, 2011). In the American *Reading like a historian* orientation the focus of teaching is on developing the literacy skills of the students alongside the contents studied in history (Reisman, 2012a). American researchers have stated that this developing of text-related skills cannot be done solely in the language and literature classes as the students are trained to understand the complex texts required on a university level (cf. Reisman, 2012a). This should be emphasized more in Finland as well.

Even though the critical thinking skills have been clearly visible and emphasized in the curricula since the 1990s, there is not enough time to practice them in the classroom. In the Finnish system the matriculation exam, which is the final nation-wide exam at the end of high school, strongly guides the teaching. Thus it is obvious that it requires more than changing the curricula to develop critical thinking skills in high school. The content of the teaching has to be changed in practice as well. In order to reach this goal we should pay attention to developing the matriculation exam as well.

The issue of developing the text-related and interpretive skills in history teaching can also be linked to a larger societal context. In Finland young people have a very good command of societal knowledge according to international studies. In contrast the same studies show that the attitudes of the young people towards societal issues are passive and indifferent. This is then visible in the poor enthusiasm for voting and general passiveness in society (see Eränpalo & Karhuvirta, 2012). Critical reading skills are an essential part of active citizenship, which makes it even more crucial to practice these skills in schools.

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Endnotes

¹ In Finland students usually start studying history in the 5th grade when they are approximately 10 years old.

² High school is not compulsory in Finland (not part of the Finnish comprehensive school system). Students must make formal applications to a high school of their choice, if they wish to attend. Acceptance to high school in Finland is based on merit (grades) and motivation and can be turned down, which resembles the application process for college/university in the United States.

³ After the linguistic turn in historiography during the early 1970s, historians began using sources of a different kind, for example memory data. Moreover, the texts used by historians have become more visual than earlier as a result of technological development. Historians have started to use multimodal texts to achieve, express and evaluate historical knowledge. Today historical literacy practically means the same as multiliteracy.

⁴ The analysis of the high school students is based on Rantala and van den Berg (2013).

⁵ The students in the Normal Lyceum of Helsinki differ from average upper secondary school students. The Normal Lyceum has long been ranked among the top ten upper secondary schools in Finland. In addition, the Finnish class teacher students are among the best in their age group. Only 7 % of the applicants are admitted annually to the class teacher program at the University of Helsinki. Thus it is as difficult to get into the class teacher program as it is to get into programs to study law or medicine.

⁶ This is typical of novice interpreters (e.g., Afflerbach & VanSledright, 2001; Monte-Sano, 2011). Similar types of interpretations occurred also in Wineburg's study. Some of the upper secondary school students in Wineburg's study considered the textbook to be more reliable than other sources, as it "reports facts." They also preferred sources containing "neutral information" to those that expressed a certain viewpoint (Wineburg, 1991).

⁷ The names used here are not the students' real names. F and M are used here to show the gender of the participants (F=female, M=male)

⁸ All the interviews were originally in Finnish and translated into English for this article.