

**“Why learn history, no one is telling us the truth anyway!”:
A report from Cyprus on 17-18 year old Greek-Cypriot
students’ constructions of history through conflicting accounts**

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Abstract: This paper reports findings from a case study on Greek-Cypriot secondary students’ constructions of historical conflicting accounts. This research was conducted as a pilot study for the purposes of the researcher’s MPhil/PhD, which was initiated at the Institute of Education, University of London. Thus, the findings reported at this stage are only indicative and in no way suggest any kind of generalisation. The study was conducted at a semi-urban school of Nicosia, the capital of the Republic of Cyprus, in October of 2010. Seventeen students of 17-18 year old participated. The research was carried in three stages with the means of questionnaires, two sets of conflicting accounts and group interviews. Facilitating grounded theory, three thematic clusters emerged: 1) Views on history; 2) Handling of the accounts; 3) ‘Truthfulness’. Notably, a first general finding was on students’ (constructive) engagement with history. The suggestion that “everyone knows what history is, until he starts thinking about it” (Griffin cited in Barton & Levstik, 2004, p.4) could perfectly describe the general feeling that came out of the pilot study. Within the first thematic cluster and views on history, students argued strongly on the (traditional) use of history. In relation to the second cluster, and the handling of the conflicting accounts, there was a general reluctance in articulating how and why accounts might differ. The findings suggested that students often believe that different accounts might be narrating the same things but in different ways/words, or that different narrations exist due to (deliberate) bias. In relation to the third thematic cluster on ‘truthfulness’, whereas findings from the questionnaires demonstrated a general affirmation of history’s positivist use, moving through the three stages, students did not show confidence in the growth of

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historical knowledge and its capacity on reaching truthfulness. The findings in their total suggest a strong association between students' ontological beliefs and their research background, raising a series of challenges for further research and suggesting that *it should be possible* to develop historical understanding by adopting a systematic and vigilant pedagogical approach.

Conducting the research

The findings reported here were collected for the purposes of the researchers' MPhil/PhD on high school students' constructions of historical conflicting accounts in the Republic of Cyprus. This is a qualitative research with an exploratory intention (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 1997). Aim of this research is to explore high school students' understandings in the light of the current Educational Reformation in the Republic of Cyprus as well as in the light of current political negotiations; whereas, by shedding light on students' constructions, one possible outcome is that the research might encourage teachers and policy makers to develop greater understanding of students' understandings.

A sample of 17 students at the age of 16-17 years old at the time, having sciences as a major, provided data for a mainly qualitative analysis across three stages. Firstly, students responded to a personal questionnaire, and secondly, to a series of tasks on conflicting accounts designed for the purposes of exploring how students construct history through conflicting, and facilitated by the question "*Who was responsible for the War?*", referring to the Cyprus war of 1974 and WWI. This enquiry question was employed to facilitate the handling of the accounts and the questions on them following; it did not explore causation. Four accounts were selected and adapted so as to give two pairs of conflicting accounts. Students were exposed to two conflicting accounts on the Cyprus War of 1974, and to two conflicting accounts on the Second World War, which lasted from 1914 to 1918. The selection of the two pairs of accounts took place on the basis of comparing a taught at school and "neutral" event with an untaught but emotionally triggered event. The first event, the 1974 Cyprus War, was chosen as it is an event on which students are assumed to have strong feelings and be probably be opinionated, whereas they are not taught extensively on it during schooling. The second event, WWI, was chosen as an event on which students are assumed to have substantial knowledge but

would most likely, have no preconceptions. Thirdly, the written tasks were followed by group interviews conducted with the aim of clarifying or better justifying the written answers and also aiming in triangulating the data. 9 out of the 17 students were chosen on the basis of representing academic performance, forming three groups. Follow-up interviews were facilitated to triangulate data from the two first stages and in relation to the main research question. After interviews were transcribed, and thus all data were available in written form, grounded theory was facilitated so as to make sense of students' constructions.

A word on “constructions”

This research does not put forward the notion that an objective reality was being observed and reported. Neither, it shares the notion of classical relativism insisting that an objective representation of the past is impossible. Instead, this research accepts the existence of “constructed realities” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and will attempt to report on the findings of this reality. Notably, (natural) sciences utilise intervention, as they adhere to Positivism, which as philosophical and ontological position accepts and affirms that there can be something which is “positive”, “truthful” or “known”. Positivism, assumes either a realist ontology, which assumes that there are real world objects apart from the human knower - in other words, there is an objective reality; or representational epistemology that assumes people can know this reality and use symbols to accurately describe and explain this objective reality. However, where Positivism often espouses that there is an external reality which can be objectively studied and measured, Constructivism is founded on the premise that by reflecting on our experiences, we construct our own understanding of the world we live in. In any case, “struggles with the concept of reality are as old as humankind... And what is real?” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 70). Accordingly, this research shares the view that our actions and perceptions are, to large degree, constructions, and at the same time, accepts that these constructions as phenomena in existence, can be observed, measured and explained.

Absolute validity thus, is out of discussion in social settings and frameworks. Alternatively, what one could suggest and adopt as a measure of validity is a frame of “contextual variability”: “this means approaching belief systems as dynamic and contextual rather than a static attributes of

individuals” (Wertsch, 2000, p. 45). The data collection and analysis will take within this contextual validity.

Cyprus’ context

Cyprus’ history can be seen as “a conflict between the East and the West” (Canefe, 1998)⁽¹⁾. The two communities have been de facto living separately since the war of 1974. Borders only opened in 2003, allowing the contact of the two communities. Today it is anticipated that “Cyprus *could* be a united island by the time it takes over the EU presidency in the second half of 2012”⁽²⁾. Due to the situation, the two communities have being

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- (1) Cyprus is the third largest island in the Mediterranean Sea. It is located 200 kms northeast of Israel, 380 kms north of Egypt, 800 kms west of the Greek mainland and 40 kms south of Turkey. It has a population of 780.000 with the Greek-Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots being the biggest minorities of the island. Originally, Greek and Phoenician colonies were established in the island due to trade. Following, Cyprus comes under the Persian Empire, then under Alexander the Great. The Roman occupation follows, then conversion to Christianity and the Byzantine Empire. During the expansionist age of Islam, Cyprus is frequently targeted by the Arabs, whereas in the Middle Ages Cyprus will experience the Crusades, and then will come under the French and the Venetian Rules. In 1571 the ‘West’ loses Cyprus to the ‘East’ with the Ottoman occupation (Kitromilides, 1990), whereas in 1878 the Ottomans offer Cyprus to the British. The Greek-Cypriot movement of ‘Enosis’ (Union with Greece) escalates, and the aim of ending the British rule on the island with the goal of unification, erupts into armed rebellion in April 1955. The Turkish Cypriots object to ‘Enosis’ and demand “Taksim” (separation of the two communities) instead. The British employ them as auxiliary police in the fight against the Greek-Cypriots. The struggle ends in 1959 and in 1960 Cyprus gains its Independence and Constitution, with the latter establishing Britain, Greece and Turkey as Guarantor powers. In the 1960s intercommunal conflict breaks out, resulting to the gradual physical separation of the two communities. In July 1974 a military coup driven by the Athens’ Junta aims in killing president Makarios and unifying Cyprus to Greece; Turkish military intervention follows five days later. President Makarios escapes death and leave for London and Washington seeking help, whereas at the same time the Athens’ Junta collapses due to public and political fury and democracy in Greece is restored. In the meantime, with a second invasion the Turkish troops occupy 37% of Cyprus. In 1983 the ‘Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus’ is declared, which is however only recognised by Turkey. In 2004 the two communities are asked to verify with two separate referenda the Annan Plan on a bi-communal state; the Plan is rejected. Since October 2008 the two communities are again in negotiations.
- (2) Declaration by the EU Council President Herman Van Rompuy (Cyprus Mail, April 14, 2011).

relying to their motherlands on various levels. Education was no exception⁽³⁾. “It is not by accident”, Canefe (1998) argues, that the Greek-Cypriots and the Turkish-Cypriots have started replicating different collective memories since the coming of British in 1878; identifying in this way the British as the foreign conspirators, reflecting the ‘goodies’, the ‘baddies’ and the ‘uglies’ (Papadakis cited in Education for Peace II, 2002) discourse that is very much prominent in the both the collective memories of the island and history education discourses (who are the ‘goodies’ and the ‘baddies’ depends on whose side you are!).

The seven foci that drove the research:

Driven by Cyprus’ context, as well as the main research question of this study *“In what ways students approach and make sense of conflicting historical accounts?”*, and how this rest within the current literature, seven foci were identified in relation to historical understanding and more specifically on historical understanding based on conflicting accounts.

1. First focus of this research is the necessity of context when handling conflicting accounts; whereas it is also investigated whether giving a context/introduction to the accounts, entail the danger of contaminating the sources brought into classroom later on.

(3) Two important key-dates in history education where when in 1895 the Education Law introduced two separate boards of Education, one Christian and one Muslim; and following, when the 1960 Constitution of the Republic of Cyprus then transferred all the authority in education, cultural and teaching matters to the two Communal Chambers, resulting thus to the production of separate collective memories. Until recently, the only textbooks were from the ‘motherlands’ - Greece and Turkey. In recent years, books were also written within the two communities in Cyprus. In both communities, these books on Cyprus’ History are written by academics, researchers and teachers appointed by the relevant authority. The history curricula nonetheless, do not stop being ethnocentric. The Turkish-Cypriot curriculum elementary school program which is provided by the Ministry of Education of Turkey (Irkad, online) states that: “The main aim of the national Education is to educate all members of the nation to unite in the common destiny becoming indivisible organs of the [Turkish] nation”. In the RoC, the purpose of the elementary history curriculum before the implementation of the Educational Reformation in 2011-12 was to facilitate students to “speak freely” and “think critically” and at the same time to develop “children’s fighting spirit for the liberation of the occupied territories” and “understand the miseries that disunity brought to the Greek nation”²². The philosophy of the two curricula is very well reflected in the two communities’ textbooks³.

2. Secondly, as often the accounts' content might limit their use as tools, it is questioned whether students dismiss specific accounts or sources because they consider them to be against their own knowledge or beliefs. What is more, and in relation to the above, it is also questioned, whether students can equally take into consideration two conflicting accounts.

3. Third focus, is the extent to which students can understand that accounts are based on historical evidence; as well as to what extent students understand that accounts are based on other (primary) sources or accounts.

4. Fourth focus, is whether students can recognise that an account by itself is not complete, and that it can only be provisional as representing its time.

5. Fifth focus, and in relation to the above, are students' claims on 'truthfulness'.

6. Sixth focus, is the negative and positive use of preconceptions and cultural baggage which is closely embedded to the research questions of this study and to the heart of historical enquiry.

7. Seventh and final focus, is the ethical considerations and implications arising; on one hand in relation to the idea that there is no correct answer and that history might actually be a "mass of uncertainty" (Levstik & Barton, 2005, p. 148) leading to students dismissing history, and on the other hand, when operating in times of educational and political transition.

Presenting and Discussing the Findings

A first general finding was on students' (constructive) engagement with history. The suggestion that "everyone knows what history is, until he starts thinking about it" (Griffin cited in Barton & Levstik, 2004, p. 4) could perfectly describe the general feeling that came out of the pilot study. Those students, who were very strongly opinionated, started re-thinking their statements (e.g. on the use and source of knowledge of history), whereas those who were rather reluctant, gradually started engaging with the sources, as well as asking questions about the task questions, the terminology and the accounts themselves and were also very participative in group discussion in general. Even the two students who declared from the beginning of the group interviews that "*Miss, you know... I don't like history*" and "*Miss I don't like history, I shouldn't be here, I won't be of any*

help” were actively engaged in the group discussion and also debated with the other members of the group. There was only one out of the seventeen students who did not engage actively with the questionnaire and the written tasks; however, when it was announced to the students who of them were selected to participate in the group interviews she asked *“What about me?”*.

Levels

When data were being analysed they indicated to three rough categories in relation to how sophisticated students’ answers were. These categories could be seen as ‘levels’ suggesting a model of ‘progression’. The term ‘levels’ will be employed here, without however, putting forward and arguing on the progression and operation of conceptual leaps. Alternatively, within the purposes of this research, these three ‘levels’ were seen as an indicator on where we stand in relation to students’ understandings, that is to provide the ‘borders’ of students’ understandings of conflicting accounts, and not to put forward any kind of assessment. Findings suggest that the first ‘level’ of historical understanding mainly lies in insisting in preconceptions and misconceptions, whereas students on the second level seemed to be consciously or unconsciously to be moving from those⁽⁴⁾. A

(4) Students at level one also seemed to strongly be defensive of their answers: *“Miss I don’t like history, and anyway only Greece and Cyprus concern us”*. One of the boys, after answering *“it is not important [to learn about history]”*, was asked *“why not?”*; he answered back: *“we are screwed anyway”*. Moreover, answering both and in the group interview on what was the most important thing he had learned from history, his answer once again was *“that we are screwed...”*. (Notably, this notion of ‘helplessness’ raises important challenges for further study in relation to facilitating the use of conflicting accounts. Avoiding leading the students to conclude that *“absolute truth does not exist anyway”* and that *“we are screwed anyway”*, is an extremely difficult task to undertake, especially when students are for the first time exposed to concepts such as reliability and evidence, concepts that if not carefully utilised might easily lead to deconstruct any usefulness of history. Consequently, here lays not only a challenge for the research but an ethical responsibility of the research as well). Data that emerged from the specific student throughout the three phases are somehow problematic in categorising the student in a specific level: On the other hand, the student pointed out the helplessness of history; a conclusion however, that did not necessarily arrive from a sophisticated historical thinking and processing of historical enquiry. These findings rather argue in favour of being cautioned about the “idea of a level which is (loosely) tied to the idea of progression” (Lee et al., 1996), and that “progression” does not happen simultaneously in all the elements of historical understanding.

student's response was very illustrative in that direction: "[the purpose of history is] to learn about the past... but I don't know why that's important" and "we can learn... I don't know history is for us to learn things... but I don't know why people cannot learn". Another characteristic of 'level' two is the students' endeavour to make further connections and draw analogies, even though this did not always take place⁽⁵⁾. The actual achievement of making connections and drawing analogies is a characteristic of the third 'level'. Notably, the findings could be arguing that a distinctive feature of sophisticated understanding at 'level' three is consistency, a notion that was demonstrated thoroughly and throughout by the single (female) student who fitted in within this category. This finding is indicating to the possibility of further exploring negative consistency – that is, what students repeatedly *do not do*.

Again, it should be pointed out that this was not a class that had a history as major, although we are not really in a position to say how this would affect the results. Although the current data are a result of the main study's piloting and it is thus difficult to make firm arguments, both the preliminary study (June 2008) and the second pilot study (April 2011) rather confirm these three suggested levels, as well as the soundness of the patterns that emerged from this case study. As already illustrated, the identification of 'levels' does not aim to put forward the existence of any model of 'progression'; 'levels' were here facilitated in understanding where on students stand and were consequently used to facilitate the selection of students for the group interviews.

(5) There was only one female student who reflected this kind of a sophisticated thinking at the third level: "WWII and Renaissance had a big influence on our world, the expression of the ideals of Renaissance can be an influence and example of how ideals are born in certain contexts". The student also demonstrated a sophisticated understanding on the nature of historical enquiry. In relation to the issues of neutrality and reliability she said: "It is difficult to find a neutral person, we could call neutral a source that was not constructed with a motive... The source by itself cannot be really neutral, but it helps us to shape a neutral opinion". In relation to the truthfulness of history and how this could be achieved she answered: "We should find common information, different kind of sources that will triangulate the events, both from primary and secondary sources". When asked which on her opinion could be seen as the most useful she answered: "Well... primary sources are included in the secondary, so secondary could be seen as more useful... but I could never fully trust a historian".

Patterns indicating to three thematic clusters

Within and across the three suggested levels, several patterns of students' views of history, ideas on how and why accounts might differ as well as on truthfulness emerged. Facilitating grounded theory, these patterns gave three thematic clusters: 1) Views on history, 2) Handling accounts, 3) 'Truthfulness'. From these thematic clusters further patterns emerged implying different positivist or relativist, and/or objectivist or subjectivist approaches in regard to the handling of accounts.

1. Views on history

The use and usefulness (or not) of history was a topic introduced in the questionnaires and followed up in the group interviews. It was made clear that students are almost not conscious that history *is not* "a done deal" (Lee & Ashby, 2000). The development and acquisition of skills and understandings on how historical enquiry results in history were rarely mentioned by the students in the questionnaires (for example on the question *“How could we reach ‘truth?’”*), whereas data demonstrated that a more constructive and articulating approach took place during the written tasks.

In terms of why young people should be taught history in school, three main patterns of answers came up. In the first pattern, most of the students, in specific 13 out of 17, spontaneously responded that the use of history is directly related to one's country, ancestors, the past and the 'enemies'. Students demonstrated notions: 1) on the country (4 out of 17), such as *“so as to know about and love our country”*, *“to learn about our country and other countries”*, *“to learn the truth about Cyprus, and not Greece”* and *“to know what we have done and to love our country”*; 2) on identity (3 out of 17): *“to learn who we are”*, *“to know what we have done and who we are”* and *“because it is part of our identity”*; 3) on the enemies (3 out of 17): *“where we came from and so as to know how to act in the future or in regards to our enemies”*, *“so as to be careful because our enemies might trick us”* and *“we learn what the interests of each country are”*; 4) on the past (2 out of 17): *“to learn things that have happened in the past and tortured our country”* and *“to learn about the past... but I don't know why that's important”*; and 5) on the ancestors (1 out of 17): *“to know the actions of our ancestors”*. These findings are supported by the findings of the *Youth and History Study* (Angvik & von Borries, 1997, p. 254) pointing out to the “traditional views of history”. As it is illustrated, there appears to be a simple pattern for the differences between

“traditional” and “critical” use of history: Scandinavian (except Icelandic) and North-western European adolescents are less “traditional” and more “critical” than the average... Just the opposite is true in several Eastern (Croatia and Bulgaria) and some Mediterranean (Portugal, Spain, Greece and Turkey) countries [there are no data on Cyprus], along with the remote Iceland... There is much evidence that these are more traditional, religious, collective and pure societies (again in a completely descriptive sense).

The rest of the patterns indicated a more critical view on history. Data demonstrated students’ uncertainty about the use of history (2 out of 17): one student stated that *“it is important [to be taught history]”*, whereas one student stated that *“it is not important [to be taught history]”* without further illustration. When the former was asked to justify on her answer she said *“[so as] to know about our ancestors”*; the latter shrugged her shoulders. A second pattern within the critical views on history, focused on human and historical understanding (2 out of 17): *“so as to understand the world and avoid mistakes”* and *“so as to watch the relations and the effects of the events and understand our world”*. This notion came in contrast to most of students’ beliefs suggesting that what is important in history is what affects us either geographically or chronologically. Thirdly, students pointed to the hopelessness of history (2 out of 17). In this pattern, students expressed their frustration about the pointlessness of history, with one student suggesting that *“it is not important; we can never find out the whole truth anyway”* and another, *“why learn history? No one is telling us the truth anyway!”*. It is worth mentioning, that the same notion of ‘disgust’ at history was observed at Palestinians students as well (Awwad, 1997), matching Greek- Cypriot students’ outrage: *“we want to be taught the Cyprus’ history but [we want to be taught] the truth”*.

With regard to Cypriot and Greek history, answers such as *“it is a shame not to know [about Cyprus]”* and *“it is unfair to know about everyone else and not us”* were indicative of students’ perceptions on the relationship between history, identity and memory. One of the boys explicitly said *“we should never forget what they [the Turks or/and possibly the Turkish Cypriots] have done to us”*, whereas a girl said that the teaching on the revolution against the Ottomans in 1821 was what affected her the most: *“for me it was the most important event we have been taught. It really affected me emotionally- we saw how barbaric our neighbouring people can become”*. As it is illustrated by the *Youth and History Study* (Angvik & von Borries, 1997), the interest of “own country” here, matches the high interest shown

to Greece and Turkey, with both marking higher than the European average.

One of the interview groups also touched upon history as a paradigm for future generations; students stressed how history can be an example – usually to avoid – and that people can learn from their mistakes. This discussion took place with the second group, comprising three girls. As it was an idea that was spontaneously initiated and was carried with lots of enthusiasm, further discussion was encouraged. The students seemed troubled by the possibility of history functioning as a paradigm, as there was a general feeling that history *can* have a role in educating people: on one hand this seemed to be quite a valid function, whereas at the same time it was stressed that *“it is very difficult for people to learn from their mistakes”*. One of the girls argued that *“history can teach us...but it is difficult for people to learn”*, the second suggested that *“history could teach us, but people never learn anyway... I mean.... it is easy to draw example from other situations... but when it comes to your thing, you will not take these [examples] in mind – you will do whatever it is you will do”*, whereas the third girl said *“we can learn... I don’t know history is for us to learn things... but I don’t know why people cannot learn”*. Notably, this was the same girl who said that we should learn history so as *“to learn about the past... but I don’t know why that’s important”*⁽⁶⁾. Interestingly, it is reported that Turkish students have demonstrated similar notions having “extreme scores in agreeing that ‘history provides instructive examples of right or wrong’ and the backdrop to ‘today’s problems’” (Silier, 1997, p. A311).

The notions that emerged about the use of history were not alien to the notions demonstrated on the source of historical knowledge. Students focused on oral transmission of information or on school (textbooks and teachers) as the principal source of historical knowledge, findings also supported by others (Seixas, 1993; Barton, 1997; Wineburg, 2000, 2001; Levstik, 2001). When asked how people find out about the past, nearly all of the students suggested *“through people that were there”* and that the

(6) This specific impulsive response can be seen as one of the highlights of the students’ answers: on one hand the student spontaneously gave the typical answer fostered throughout Cyprus’ schooling and a necessary goal in history teaching according to the primary and secondary curricula. On the other hand, it was quite impressive that equally spontaneously and with no intervention or guidance from the researcher, the student herself engaged in critical thinking and to what could be seen as deconstruction of her own answer without even realising.

information was handed down by word of mouth. When asked how they knew what happened in regards to the Cyprus war, nearly half of the students responded immediately indicating family stories and adult conversations (9 of 17). Next came textbooks or teachers (6 out of 17) television and documentaries (2 out of 17). With regard to WWI, the answers were either that their teacher had told them, or that they had read it in books.

The relation between the displayed notions on the sources of history and the declaration on the knowledge of the events was an interesting one. Although students have been taught both events quite extensively in year 9, this was not reproduced in their answers: the declared knowledge given on the 10 point scale was not reflected in the students' answers, especially for WWI. Also, oral transmission seemed to overcome school as a source of knowledge on the Cyprus war. Students emphasised the fact that they "*were never taught*" Cyprus history or that they were "*barely taught about Cyprus*" – although Cyprus' modern history is (supposed to be) taught in the 3rd year of lower, and third year of secondary school, a phenomenon identified by Christou (Christou, 2007). In regards to WWI, the general feeling that prevailed could be summarised in the statement: "*we have been taught about it but don't remember much*". Students showed a reluctance to engage with the second activity on WWI as they "*did not know anything about it*" or "*forgot everything*". This kind of behaviour might be connected to the statement that quite a few students made, that what is important in history is what affects us either geographically or chronologically.

2. Handling the accounts

The employment of grounded theory gave a second thematic cluster of students' constructions: the handling of accounts. Students' understandings on *why* and *how* accounts differ, varied showing different degrees of sophistication. The two patterns found on *why* accounts differ were:

- i. Historians say (same) things differently (in terms of wording): "*It has to do with how you say the story*".
- ii. Historians say things differently because they are biased: "*No one is telling us the truth anyway*".

On which account would be better the patterns that emerged were:

- i. An account coming from a proximate person: "*It is better if we find out things from our own people*".
- ii. An account coming from a neutral person: "*A Turkish Cypriot. He is a*

Cypriot but on the other hand he is a Turk, so he is in the middle. He knows better”.

iii. A combination of accounts -“Scissors and paste” (Lee et al,1996):

“If they [the accounts] were put together it would be better”.

iv. Accounts are provisional: *“Both could be valid in their own way”* and *“every different explanation might have something to say”.*

Other pieces of research indicated further patterns in relation to students’ understandings of accounts, which patterns however, did not emerge here; *possibly*, due to the small sample of students. A notion that did not seem to come up was the importance of the gaps in evidence. A suggestion was that an author *“might know more”*, clarifying after asked to illustrate, *“like... knows more information”*; an answer that might be pointing out that it is possible that a historian *could* have access to more evidence. Neither did students identify that different accounts is in the nature of history. Nor did students touch upon the temporality of history identifying that different times give different constructs of history. Moreover, students did not point to the possibility that the authors might be dealing with the same topic but answering different questions. If the absence of patterns persists on the main study as well, this could be validating the hypothesis that students ontological beliefs strongly affect their methodological approaches. What is more, and in relation of handling the accounts, one of the most interesting findings of the pilot study, was that students were not cautious at all on the provenance and kind of the accounts. It was quite striking that students did not pay any attention at all to the accounts’ provenance. No one did so for WWI whereas only two students in the group interviews could point out the provenance of the Cyprus’ accounts.

Answers on the possibility of one of the two accounts being *better*, were also interesting. The second Cyprus account (‘TRNC’ website) was chosen by most of the students as better on the justification that it was *“more detailed”*, a justification also used when responding in the majority that the first account on WWI (UK textbook) was better. One of the students answered with regard to the differentiation of the Cyprus accounts: *“No one [is better than the other]. In this event two people are involved, the Turks [meaning the Turkish-Cypriots] and the Cypriots [meaning the Greek-Cypriots], so each refer to the event according to their ‘side’”*. With regard to WWI, the explanation given was that the first account was much more detailed and *“whoever has put it together has looked into it more”*. The fact that the first account had more data automatically gave authority to the

specific accounts in the eyes of the students. These findings are in line with those of CHATA.

Students accepted the possibility of choosing a better account amongst two conflicting accounts; four patterns emerged from their answers. The most common pattern was that an account would be better if coming from a proximate person: *“It is better if we find out things from our own people”*. The second most common pattern was, an account coming from a neutral person. A student exemplified: *“A Turkish Cypriot. He is a Cypriot but on the other hand he is a Turk, so he is in the middle. He knows better”*. A quite different pattern was suggesting the combination of accounts. A characteristic answer within this pattern came from the female student who demonstrated the most thoughtful way of thinking: *“if they [the accounts] were put together it would be better”*. Lee et al. (1996, p. 62) identified this pattern as “scissors and paste”, with one of the students participating in their research arguing: *“You take the best bits out of this one, and the best bits out of that one, and when you’ve got it up, you have a picture”*. In this research, the student who suggested *“putting the accounts together”*, was the only student who made the distinction between primary and secondary sources⁽⁷⁾. The fourth pattern on which would be the better account was that accounts *“might both be true”*, as *“both could be valid in their own way”* and *“every different explanation might have something to say”*.

Students’ constructions on the function of the accounts were also reflected in the way they perceived the writing and purpose of history. Students did not seem conscious that accounts *are an outcome of construction* by historians or authors and that accounts *are constructed by other sources* – primary and secondary: *“We need to search all the sources, if people are trustworthy we will count on them but they [the historians] will still say their own truth”*. What is more, the different accounts were seen as mostly different points of view or being “better” due to the author’s

(7) The student emphasised in the group interview that if there could be a triangulation amongst primary and secondary sources on the same topic *“we would be very close to the truth”*. When asked *“which of the two should we trust more”*, she commented: *“well... primary sources are included in the secondary, so secondary could be seen as more useful... but I could never fully trust a historian”*. Another girl said on the historians: *“they are trying to brainwash us”*, whereas another one added immediately after that *“it is better if we find out things from our own people because they will be more direct, and they will not have many details like the books”*.

proximity to the event. Lee (2005, p. 56) warns on the above notion, as the recognition that someone writing a long time after an event has occurred is not in as good a position to know about it as someone writing at the time is useful as a broad principle. The danger is that students will mistakenly generalise the principle to historians, as if their histories were also reports from the past, rather than attempts to construct pictures of the past on the basis of evidence.

As Lee (2005) points out, one of the common misconceptions that students have is that accounts are a copy of the past and therefore they *are* true accounts. On the contrary, it is often believed by students that accounts might be deliberately created in order to distort the truth, and are therefore biased. The key question here is, how could we facilitate students from impulsively inclining to and adopting the notion of ‘bias’, overlooking other variables such as limited access to evidence? This natural inclination of students may possibly impact on our research: how could we be clear that students talk of bias and not limitations, or for (personal) bias and not (public) propaganda; and how could we facilitate and give them the appropriate tools for doing so?

3. Access to the truth

A general finding from the questionnaires was students’ acceptance of ‘truth’. However, this ‘acceptance’ was followed by more scepticism in the conflicting accounts written tasks, while during the interview the majority of the students attempted and achieved to a large degree to articulate on the ‘patchy’ nature of ‘truth’ with regard to the accounts. By the end of the interviews and the completion of the three stages the rejection of history’s positivist use was prominent. Some indicative statements were *“an account can be partly true”*, *“they [the accounts] can be true up to a certain degree”*, while the reasoning behind these answers was either (deliberate) bias or different opinions. In the question *“How can we find out about the truth?”* some indicative answers were: *“It is not completely impossible but it is very difficult”*, *“by asking people who lived then”* and *“from the study of parallel sources”*. Another interesting answer was from a boy who emphasised that *“we need to search all the sources, if people are trust worthy we will count to them but they will still say their own truth”*.

The notion that one account could not be by itself complete or ‘true’ as it is provisional, did not reflect to a large degree students’ responses. Nonetheless, most of the students – few spontaneously and most of them

after some thinking - answered that there is no need or reason for affirming an account as representing the absolute 'truth': "*Both could be valid in their own way*" and "*every different explanation might has something to say*". One student suggested that the possibility of 'truth' exists – but with conditions and within certain contexts: "*It depends what we are talking about. Some things, well let's say our case [the Cyprus war]... we know they are true!*". Reversely, the answer of another student "*well... our case is different*" [referring to the Cyprus war], seems to be indicating that *in some cases* the 'truth' cannot be found. Similar results were found by Christou (Christou, 2007) as in her own research students and teachers supported that 'truth' cannot be discovered and that an objective history cannot be written due to conflicting views and opposing perspectives. Such statements limit history to the notion of bias and seem to be suggesting a connection between students' ontological orientation and their capacity on historical enquiry. Boix-Mansilla (2005, p. 112) draws from her own findings that, a coherence analysis suggested a strong association between students' research background and their favoured epistemological orientation. When reasoning about the acceptability of historical accounts, students trained in scientific research tended to favour an objectivist stance. In contrast, those trained in historical research overwhelmingly favoured a view of historical accounts as organising the past for contemporary audiences.

Another pattern with regard to the source's truthfulness was about to where or to whom it refers. Seixas (1993) reported similar findings on his research on six year-11 (16 to 17 years old) students with classroom observation and two depth interviews: the results indicated that family and agencies other than school strongly influence students' understanding of history. Here, one boy answered the question "how can we tell if the source is telling the truth", as following:

"By looking all the sources. But there are things that we know that are true. If someone has lived it, and was big, and if that person is really big and a hero, like Afxentiou (one of the biggest heroes of the Cyprus Struggle against the British Rule in 1955-59), that means that the source is reliable and he [the author] is telling the truth".

Interestingly, findings of other research (Barca, 2001, p. 60), suggest that students often dismiss an account just because of its provenance, a performance that here functioned vice versa: here, the account's provenance

made the student to consider the account not only as valid but also as indisputable. This answer also highlighted the fact that students often confused the author and the character of the source, assuming that if the first was reliable the latter would be reliable also. As Lee (2005) highlights, students often fail to recognise that “stories order and make sense of the past; they do not reproduce it”.

The students’ detections on the completeness of truthfulness seemed to be shifting through the three stages of the research. Whereas students showed some confidence in the objectivity of truth in the questionnaires by talking about ‘a truth’ that can be either established or not, in the written tasks they touched upon the idea of a ‘partial’ truth, whereas they demonstrated confidence in this during the group interviews; however, they seemed to lack knowledge on how this partial truth operates. A student emphasised that history cannot be grasped as following: *“We cannot learn the truth because it exists from mouth to mouth”*. What is more, it was obvious that students failed to recognise that “historians are not simply forced to choose between two reports, but can work out their own picture, which may differ from both” (Lee, 2005, p. 58).

General Conclusions

Concluding, the findings of this research demonstrated a close relationship between students’ ontological views in relation to the use and source of knowledge of history as well as to the handling of the accounts, raising a series of challenges for further research and suggesting that *it should be possible* to develop historical understanding by adopting a systematic and vigilant pedagogical approach.

The findings gave three thematic clusters: 1) Views on history; 2) Handling of the accounts; 3) ‘Truthfulness’. In relation to students’ views of history, the majority of students gave answers relating to the past, their ancestors and loving/knowing one’s country whereas they also focused in oral transmission of information as well as on school (textbooks and teachers) as the principal source of historical knowledge. There was an emphasis on the ‘authority’ of history, exactly reflecting the findings of the *Youth and History Study* (Angvik & Von Borries, 1997), demonstrating that in certain parts students indeed focused on the authority of history in transmitting ‘sacred’ knowledge, overlooking historical thinking and

enquiry. The handling of the accounts was also interesting in its outcomes, as findings indicated to two patterns on why accounts differ: historians say (same) things differently (in terms of wording), and historians say things differently because they are biased. Following, findings gave four patterns on which account might be better. In preference order these were: 1. An account coming from a proximate person; 2. An account coming from a neutral person; 3. A combination of accounts -“Scissors and paste” (Lee, Ashby & Dickinson, 1996); 4. All accounts can be true in their own way. Access to the truth was perhaps the most ambiguous thematic cluster: students’ constructions on truthfulness seemed to be changing throughout the three stages. At the same time, it can also be argued that access to truth, as well as views on history closely and organically connects to students background and historical enquiry: “*we cannot learn the truth because it [history] exists from mouth to mouth*”. All three categories seemed to be open for discussion leading to some fascinating revision of previous patterns of thinking and handling the accounts. It is risky to make any claims at this point; however, we might assume that instruction was of vital importance in relation to students’ thinking, argumentation and applying skills. Based on his own research, Barton (1997, p. 213) also argues that instruction proved to be of extreme importance:

When pressed to think of other ways to find out about the past, most students made reasonable suggestions. A few mentioned artefacts. ...Once students had more experience collecting historical information in their classroom, their answers to interview questions like these became much more confident and varied.

At this point it should be pointed out that as this is the pilot study and therefore a small scale study, final conclusions cannot be reached. It should also be kept in mind that Barton’s (1997) findings from a longitudinal study on how students use sources in order to make historical accounts in connection to prior knowledge – also connecting to van Sledright’s (2000) study, suggest that students’ epistemological constructions did not change as they have not been inducted in the methodology of epistemological inquiry. Students were not in a position to develop a considered approach so as to see different perspectives, to thereafter create different accounts and finally reach to further conclusions. Boix-Mansilla (2005) also concluded that students in general failed to recognise the “constructed nature” of the

accounts.

However, and despite findings such as the above, this study gave many considerable examples on how patterns of positivism and relativism and/or objectivism and subjectivism interchanged through the research. In the written tasks, students argued in favour of (an existing) truth, whereas when confronted with a set of conflicting accounts, their answers suggested a more relativist view. In the interviews they demonstrated progressive signs of relativism. Students’ responses throughout the three phases might be suggesting that their preconceptions and cultural background *could be* detachable to their learning, and that students’ preconceptions might be gradually lessened in the light of historical enquiry approach. The no-answer on whether history is useful may be implying an objectivist view of history and disbelief in people’s capacity to learn from it; it might be also implying a relativist view of history and the belief that (one) “truth” can never be reached.

Thus, data suggests that *it should be possible* to develop historical understanding by adopting a systematic and vigilant pedagogical approach. Nevertheless, we should be cautioned when putting forward such an argument, not only due to the small sample of the research, but what is more, due to the implications and ethical considerations involving the handling of accounts at times of educational and political transition as Cyprus is at the moment.

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