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# How can historical consciousness catalyse a social justice approach to history?

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## Abstract

Historical consciousness has been increasingly visible in Australia and other English-speaking countries in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1992. To a significant extent, it has been linked with incorporating a wider variety of perspectives into history curricula, and what constitutes best educational practice, as well as attempts to integrate Indigenous knowledge systems in schooling within post-colonial contexts. Sirkka Ahonen has significantly influenced these implementations of historical consciousness by advocating that it is intimately connected with the transmission of stories and myths that generate, change and discard aspects of group identity as it evolves over time. This article explores how Ahonen's understandings of historical consciousness can guide a social justice approach to implementing history curricula, which counters post-truth conditions. In particular, this latter concept is an umbrella that includes misinformation, widening inequality, polarised politics and fragmented sociopolitical cohesion that characterise a post-truth context. To address this proposition, the first section provides an overview of the historical context in which Ahonen developed

her theories of historical consciousness. The second section dissects how aspects of her analyses work against factors that characterise a post-truth context. Finally, the last section examines how Ahonen's thinking might be adapted and operationalised in other contexts, using Australia as a case study.

**Keywords** historical consciousness; civics; citizenship; democracy; post-truth; Australian curriculum

## Introduction

Sirkka Ahonen has been a significant voice in ongoing dialogues about the relationship between historical consciousness, civics and citizenship, by working through case studies in social justice. An overview of her work and of what can be learned from it therefore appears timely, particularly as socio-economic assessments about issues such as hampered literacy development and recent initiatives to address well-being concerns, for instance, have been informed by data collected in responses to Covid-19 during 2020 and 2021 (Day et al., 2022; Merga et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2021). This article proposes that Ahonen's work presents an encouragement for history educators to have an active and ongoing connection with the past, so that their own studies – as with their students – can catalyse local, regional and global understandings of shared histories. The issues she writes about have become more visible in public discussions about educational policy in Australia, particularly as a new national curriculum is currently being implemented. This article contributes a series of considerations for the role(s) that historical consciousness can take in educational practice, and for instilling knowledge about how individuals and groups can both actively contribute to equitability and political coherency in the future, as well as demonstrate resilience to emerging threats such as political polarisation (McCaw et al., 2023; Sahlberg, 2023).

The first section contextualises Ahonen's earlier work in relation to debates in which she has engaged about historical consciousness, to set the stage for a later discussion about what can be learned for potential curriculum-driven solutions. In particular, the questions that she touches on have a background that was established by the gradual building of trust, teacher expertise and cohesion in the Finnish education system (Ahonen, 1990; OECD, 2011; Sahlberg, 2023), the emergence of inequalities stemming from the growth of neoliberal economics (Ahonen, 2002; Henrekson and Wennström, 2022; Luke et al., 2018; O'Donnell, 2022) and radical forms of subjectivity (more recently referred to as a component of post-truth) during the late 1980s (Ahonen, 1997; Parkes, 2007; Pomerantzev, 2019; Pomerantzev and Weiss, 2014). The second section elaborates on what can be learned from her approach of framing historical consciousness using a social justice lens. In a curriculum context, this conceptual configuration acts as a pathway for establishing shared understandings among all members of school communities (Ahonen, 2005, 2017a; Clark and Peck, 2018). Notably, what distinguishes Ahonen's work is the emphasis on relational understandings that permeate in environments outside schooling, so local and national bonds are centred on an agreed set of values. The last section examines the role that her thinking about historical consciousness plays in addressing more contemporary concerns about equity of provision and equality of access to education. It includes considerations for how her thinking might be implemented in Australian high school contexts.

## Historical consciousness and authentic history

This section explores what can be learned from aligning Ahonen's case studies of historical consciousness, to examine consistencies in the ways this concept has been applied. These range from the shaping of various forms of identity – from individual to regional – educational structures and provisions, as well as expertise, trust and ethics that guide the means people have to engage with the past. This approach will frame the second and third sections, which examine how Ahonen's contributions can be transferred to different contexts so as to develop contextually relevant understandings of historical consciousness (such as Ahonen, 2005, 2017a; Clark and Peck, 2018).

Debates about historical consciousness position it as a series of socially constructed understandings, which evolve based on each individual's and community's relationships with the past. These are triangulations between a 'full awareness of the historicity of everything present' (Gadamer, 1987: 89), historiographic traditions and forms of engagement with representations of the past, as well as a sense of individual, historical (self-)consciousness (Parkes, 2024). Ahonen is situated in this ongoing discussion by her analysis of the way this concept relates to social dynamics, such as dominant majorities making decisions on behalf of a minority, or ways that societies can be inclusive (or exclusive) towards a diverse range of perspectives (Ahonen, 2017a). There are two significant consequences of this thinking. In the short term, it allows for more inclusive language to construct shared pasts, which facilitates the burdens of the challenges which face communities to be shared more evenly, and approached with a more coordinated ethos. In the long term, these ideals have their realisation in every individual having the knowledge, skills, opportunity and encouragement to make choices which constructively benefit themselves and their community.

Ahonen's socially situated case studies of historical consciousness focus on identifying the structures that underpin how people connect with the past, as well as how their identities are constructed, splintered and re-formed. Her analyses have been particularly pertinent when applied to the impact of significant economic, political and social aftershocks of global events, which are traceable through cultural knowledge. In an educational context, Ahonen's work offers possibilities for how history might be taught to address – and be considerate towards – traumas embedded within societies such as Estonia (Ahonen, 1992), East Germany (Ahonen, 1997) and Finland (Ahonen and Rantala, 1990) as well as South Africa and Bosnia-Herzegovina (Ahonen, 2012). These case studies, in particular, suggest that historical consciousness is formed in part by an awareness of the past, combined with a dynamic relationship that binds individuals, local communities and nation-scale identities together. As part of this relationship, she elsewhere suggests that historical consciousness might be embedded in education to provide optimal conditions for growing connective tissue between conceptions of social justice, critical literacy and shared historical identities. When placed in dialogue with one another, these concepts have the potential for generating shared understandings of the past that pave the way for enduring community bonds (Ahonen, 2001). These same ideas provide the foundations for proposing alternatives to the state of play about what she labels as structural questions, which pertain to the governance of education, both in Finland and more broadly. While she suggests that there is an egalitarian ethos that still persists (Ahonen, 2021), the degree to which it is put into practice in schools is inconsistent due to being reliant on the approaches advocated by principals (Seland et al., 2021).

A new insight from Ahonen's investigations into historical consciousness is that the degree of involvement by state-based authorities in curriculum organisation has significant influence over how individuals make sense of historical understandings. In 1985, for instance, Estonia was accused by Soviet education inspectors of having too much local content when it 'allocated 50 lessons to its history, with the rest of the 600 allocated to the history of the U.S.S.R.' (Ahonen, 1992: 107). A further measure of the influence of these centralised authorities was that no teaching associations were permitted until 1991. Additionally, when some aspects of curriculum documents were rewritten in 1987 after that year's Teachers' Congress, they still retained Hegelian dialectics as a starting point for understanding the longer-term arc of history (Rouk, 2013). Although the content was rigidly controlled, Veronica Nagel (2006: 152) has pointed out that there was a localised 'hidden curriculum' that included slight changes in learning materials, and non-verbal expression to show inclinations of bias and perspective (no doubt to avoid surveillance measures) in the documents with which they were forced to teach. A prime example of these tendencies was borne out by educators verbally critiquing (without a written learning component) whether Estonia had joined the USSR willingly, or whether it had been annexed (Ahonen, 1992, 1997).

A similar historical pattern is notable through numerous other case studies that Ahonen has put under the microscope. The 'street nationalism' expressed by youth groups in East Germany during the late 1980s, for instance, represented their frustrations with the form of government and lack of identification with the histories they were being taught, rather than 'a lack of historical knowledge' (Ahonen, 1997: 51). These activities were significant in a context where, similar to their Estonian counterparts, East German youth had experienced rigid controls being imposed on all aspects of their lives to encourage a collective Soviet-orientated identity. The street nationalism was therefore exercised in an exemption clause guaranteeing a slightly greater degree of freedom during leisure time (Stock, 1994). The lingering impact of these ingrained restrictions on the communal sense of the past in both contexts is likewise shown in the aftermath of extensive state involvement in everyday life suddenly

ceasing, with the dissolution of the USSR: without an oppressive body to contrast against, there was a collective traumatic readjustment about the place of the individual as part of a community in both Estonia and former East German territories.

The notable legacy of direct state interference has been the development of school curricula that react against such forms of government. These structures in turn affect the shape of historical consciousness that is cultivated in educational institutions, in dialogue with the cultures of everyday life. Estonia's curriculum, for instance, pivots away from authoritarian, hegemonic forms of epistemologies from the Soviet period, to promoting a lens of democratic pedagogies and evaluative thinking (Mehisto and Kitsing, 2022). Consequently, in the history curriculum, there is a focus on students developing their proficiency in separating facts from interpretations (Mehisto and Kitsing, 2022; Pomerantzev, 2019). These expectations point to how historical consciousness features in the curriculum in a similar way to the community it shapes. In the Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act 2011, such values are defined in terms of how Estonian identity is socialised within 'common European values and achievements of world culture and science' (Riigi Teataja, 2011). Additionally, historical and ethnic experiences with Russia feature, in that Estonian is the lingua franca of curriculum, despite nearly one-third of Estonia's population being of Russian heritage (Pomerantzev, 2019). Such details are suggestive of the influence of curriculum on definitions of what it means to be Estonian: what is included and excluded are informed by individual and collective dialogues with historical experiences (following Ankersmit, 2001), which are contextualised within political geographies.

Ahonen's focus on Estonia has parallels in her work on the role of historical consciousness promoting constructive relationships with the past in Finland and Canada. These national curricula are designed to enable students with accessing and participating 'in their culture as active and full members of society' (Linnakylä, 2007: 47, as cited in Moate, 2021: 358). The context of these documents suggests that they are responses to macro-scale developments. With the collapse of the grand narratives that drove much of the politics during the second half of the twentieth century, communal and national identities began to be redefined. This process was encouraged by the creeping emergence of several consistencies that appear to precede the development of post-truth (Gudonis and Jones, 2020; Keyes, 2004; Malpas, 1992; Tesich, 1992). In particular, the socio-economic crisis and increasing inequalities in Finland that followed the collapse of the USSR took place just after the growing influence of neoliberalist policies and sentiments in the late 1980s (Ahonen and Rantala, 2001). Such circumstances appear to be catalysts for a renewed focus on how accomplished individuals shaped the course of history, as a way of translating a neoliberal narrative about effort translating into achievement. As such, individuals such as Simo Häyhä's extraordinary sniping in the Second World War came to symbolise resilience and ingenuity in the face of overwhelming odds, while Alexander II came to be depicted as a Tsar who allowed a modern Finnish identity to emerge (Chung, 2019; Kirby, 1980; Saarinen, 2014). Educational reforms were also closely tied to broadening life opportunities, promoting the notion that community identity is both porous yet distinct, and reinforcing the legitimacy of the state (Ahonen, 2012). Ahonen made a notable observation that in this context, educational resources were being crafted to articulate how a shared identity could be defined (Ahonen, 2020). She applies a similar point about how apartheid South Africa's racial segregations have been suppressed in school curricula, in favour of a rainbow nation that has undergone a significant healing process (Ahonen, 2021; Rice, 2017).

Until the past two decades, educational resources such as textbooks provided a core idea of what materials were adopted in schools (Moate, 2021). Consequently, these guided the type of historical knowledge promoted in the curriculum – and, correspondingly, the extent to which it incorporated historical consciousness. The importance of these documents can be seen in Ahonen's Finland by a textbook purge that took place at the end of the Second World War, as part of an effort to re-forge a national identity. Notably, until the 1990s, Indigenous Sami and Roma peoples were excluded from national stories, such as those that promoted Finns as great warriors and survivors who forged a nation in spite of brutal conflicts (Ahonen, 2020; Ahonen and Rantala, 2001; Lähteenmäki-Smith and Salminen, 2011). In her analysis of Finnish textbooks, Ahonen (2020) divides their development into three categories:

- the books written during the post-war reconstruction (1945–60)
- those written during the making of the welfare society (1960–90)
- the textbooks from the period of the European integration (1990 onwards).

Notably, while European political integration was taking place after membership of the European Union was granted in 1995, Finnish history was still taught in a separate curriculum strand from global events, rather than being interspersed with global history (Ahonen, 2020). This approach appears to mirror other nations that have sought to reorient their approach to global politics so as to more distinctly assert a localised identity. England adopted such an approach after Brexit (Karayianni and Foster, 2018), for instance, while Singapore's Thinking Schools, Learning Nation initiative reoriented education from a neoliberal, economic focus, towards the development of 'critical and creative thinking, the use of information technology in education, citizenship education, and administrative excellence' (Tan, 2008: 112; see also Kwek et al., 2023).

Correspondingly, the form of historical consciousness that these education systems cultivate depends on how closely civics and citizenship are intertwined in the history curriculum, and which skills and values are deemed to be a critical part of active participation in broader society, as well as which individuals and groups are cast as role models or subject to exclusion. In Ahonen's context – prior to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) headlines of 2005 – Finland's education system was deemed to reflect a society that had undergone decades of rapid transformation, from a rural-based population to an industrialised welfare state (Antikainen, 1990; OECD, 2011; Whittaker, 1983). The emergence of the modern welfare state in Nordic countries more generally involved a recognition of how class consciousness impacted life opportunities, and, with the emergence of structuralist schools of thought during the 1960s, concerns about social issues, labour conditions and welfare began to be viewed as considerations for the extent to which each member of society could actively, constructively and willingly participate (Markkola, 2023).

Ahonen's work therefore also suggests that historical consciousness – whether explicitly taught about or otherwise – plays an essential part in how relationships with the past significantly influence choices in personal role models and form moral awareness, which in turn shape the degree to which students mature into full members of society (Moate, 2021; Seland et al., 2021). Students in countries such as Finland, Canada and – to a lesser extent – Australia (Heggart et al., 2018) may not get consistently instructed about democratic processes at the level of content (Seland et al., 2021). They are more likely to be provided with models of human behaviour that align with democratic behaviours and thinking, such as equity of access and support, and equality of opportunity (Välimaa, 2022). In an Australian context – which will be examined in more detail in the third section below – these case studies in historical consciousness are instructive for how social cohesion and trust have been treated as work that requires consistent adaptation and maintenance – between people, communities and institutionalised structures. As Anna Clark (2017) notes in her study of teachers' and students' experiences of colonisation and Indigenous content across history curricula, common perceptions have shifted from a 'Great Australian Silence' until the 1990s to an 'uncoordinated overexposure'; that is, from an omission to inclusion with minimal guidance of purpose. Using the terms of Frank Ankersmit (2001) – whose work directly influenced Ahonen's – there has been an increased historical awareness of Australian history, without necessarily the historical experience to complement it. He goes on to elaborate elsewhere that representations of the past are always recorded through artifices of language (Ankersmit, 2010, 2012). A shared language is therefore required to bridge mutual connections and understandings about the past, to catalyse constructive debate and curriculum considerations that more authentically address areas of contention in collective historical consciousness.

Another consideration is that each member of a community participates in ongoing personal and collective identity construction. In the case of conflicting narratives – as are present in Ahonen's case studies from northern and southern Europe, as well as from South Africa – Jörn Rüsen (1987) points out that these are nevertheless part of forming beliefs, traditions and entrenching continuities (see Ahonen, 2005; Clark and Peck, 2018; Seixas and Peck, 2004). As part of sketching out how these features are learned, Rüsen (2004) elaborates on how they are present in several narratives, in four components:

- *Traditional*: a binding agreement between individuals about a shared understanding of the past, that cannot be deviated from.
- *Exemplary*: general principles about reciprocity in favours (and exclusions).
- *Critical*: historical arguments about whether to be guided by moral principles.
- *Genetic*: modern considerations are weighed up against ancient traditions in how much moral codes of behaviour in the past will be mapped into the present.



Rüsen's (2004) points show that Ahonen's work needs to be historically situated so as to interpret its applicability and limitations. The emphasis on present degrees of moral reasoning distinguishes this form of historical consciousness from Peter Seixas's and other North American scholars' emphasis on the use of the past to make sense of the present, and to pave the way for a shared future (Seixas, 2017b; Seixas and Morton, 2013). The starting point of tensions between tradition–modernity and determining moral codes is what allows different perspectives to explore areas where they converge, as part of negotiating a culturally pluralistic understanding of the past. The consequence of situating Ahonen within a broader continental European tradition of historical consciousness is how curriculum development then can be taken to embody an individual and collective process of working through traumatic aspects of a shared past. In this respect, she builds on Rüsen's work by arguing that all participants need to be receptive to one another when discussing or contesting their shared history (Ahonen, 2005).

Ahonen's scholarship clarifies how historical consciousness, citizenship and identity formation influence the degrees of inclusion and exclusion that are experienced by each individual. For history educators, and their students, institutions and communities, these factors are evident in terms of degrees of experience in equality of life opportunities, as well as equity of inclusion, educational provision and socio-economic support. While this section has provided an overview of Ahonen's work in relation to these core themes, the next section elaborates on the challenges educators face in addressing the concerns that she highlights. In particular, its focus is on how the splintering of societies through inequalities, and filter bubbles in networking technologies, as well as social and political polarisation, go hand in hand with the creation of disparate communal and national stories.

## How can equity and equality be more than a pipe dream?

Characteristics linked with historical consciousness can work to (re)define the relationships between segments of a community or group. Although the need for doing so is more obvious during times of crisis or transition, or when a shared future seems unclear, it is also a significant factor in maintaining cohesion between demographics, economic and political classes, and providing constructive relationships that are resilient to splintering shared identities. There have been, however, significant disagreements over how educators could be a fulcrum for providing an environment that constitutes a space for discussion – or even reconciliation – between perspectives that contest the legitimacy of each other. In 2017, Peter Seixas's and Ahonen's contributions to the edited book *Teaching and Learning Difficult Histories in International Contexts* gestured to how widely historical consciousness has come to frame engagements with the past (Ahonen, 2017a; Seixas, 2017a). Seixas (2017b: 595–6) described how German traditions of historical consciousness operated in curricula through three components:

- as constituting a 'relationship of disciplinary historical knowledge to everyday life'
- '[calling] up not only the relationship among present, past and future but also the relationship between knower and known' (a relationship he later classified as a major catalyst for all the issues that come from investigating history)
- as 'expressed through narratives that embody a moral orientation'.

Seixas used his commentary to test the degree to which his history/memory matrix of historical consciousness could be validly applied, which built on the second order concepts from the Schools Council History Project in England, the Canadian History Project, and his own work with Tom Morton (see Seixas and Morton, 2013). His interpretation of historical consciousness is similar to Ahonen's, in respect of how this concept should incorporate the operation of history, in terms of social weight, moral claims and historical justice. That said, in spite of these points of agreement, there is significant divergence over the role that narrative plays in generating meaningful understandings of the past. This section elaborates on how the diversity of opinion on historical consciousness allows a degree of adaptability in the face of such conditions as political polarisation (Block, 2018; Gudonis and Jones, 2020; Hussain, 2019; Kalpokas, 2019), a discourse casting authority in crisis (Enroth, 2023) and social conflict as having no resolution (Jaques et al., 2019).

Constructing an agreed-upon, coherent and shared narrative is essential for the development of a social identity that is both pluralistic and constructive in resolving tensions and conflicts (such as: in historiography, Ahonen, 1990; in Estonia and Germany, Ahonen, 1997). Ahonen's work advocates the need for these narratives, particularly in relation to addressing personal and national trauma. Here,

fractured relationships – in individuals, and between sociopolitical groups – appear irreconcilable. The pressing nature of this issue is demonstrated at the time of writing, where a denial of professional expertise by figures who are pseudo-experts has eventuated from the open-access intention of digital culture (McIntyre, 2018; Moravčíková, 2020). In this respect, the type of ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’ that Jean-François Lyotard (1984: xxiv) outlined in *The Postmodern Condition* has played out in the way language structures in forms of public discourse mimic those used in inquiry and research, but without necessarily being subject to the same professional rigour (see Malpas, 1992; McIntyre, 2023). As such, a key insight from Ahonen’s work is about how several communities have begun – and continue – to heal conflicting pasts with varying degrees of effectiveness.

These purposes pose constructive alternatives to several uses of the past that are linked with post-truth conditions: a political narrative of decline that will purportedly be arrested by the appointment of a messianic (and usually authoritarian) leader (Foroughi et al., 2019; Fuller, 2018), as well as a tendency to dismiss perspectives based on an emotional reaction rather than a logically constructed understanding based on evidence (Gudonis and Jones, 2020; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; McIntyre, 2018; Pomerantzev, 2016). A potential aim is alluded to in what Lee McIntyre (2023; for variations, see Peters et al., 2020; Pomerantzev, 2019) has called inoculations against misinformation. As part of operationalising historical consciousness, history teachers and educators might start their planning by diagnosing the characteristics that underpin constructive and cohesive relationships, in personal, professional and public contexts. These observations can then show how standards of trust and validity in information are measured differently. In turn, this emphasis on cohesion might work to integrate the divergence between Seixas (2017b) and Ahonen (2017a) over the place of cultural pluralism in historical consciousness, since engagement with – and working through disagreements about – varieties of perspectives underpin democratic principles.

The next section explores how historical consciousness might work in practice in an Australian context. Currently, historical thinking is incorporated into several national and state curriculum documents (for example, ACARA, 2010; NESA, 2012), and while historical consciousness was explicitly incorporated into a 2023 revision draft of the New South Wales (NSW) History Curriculum, it reverted to only being mentioned once – in the rationale for the section pertaining to teaching 12-16 year olds – in 2024 after feedback from teachers, education systems and interest groups. The importance of this issue might be considered as part of the problematic nature of the ‘expanding horizons’ curriculum model and perceptions that underpin these documents. Frequently, these discount the purpose of curriculum being to stipulate rationale, purposes, methods and baseline requirements (Krahenbuhl, 2019), rather than to necessarily provide guidelines for disciplinary best practice. These features contrast with the aspirations for educational reform and future-focused learning that were stated as key recommendations in an NSW curriculum review (Masters, 2020). The next section begins with a brief discussion of how equity and equality have featured in discussions about educational aims and provision. It then explores how history educators can utilise principles linked with historical consciousness as a starting point for addressing the disruptions that are caused by forms of inequality.

## Finnish lessons for fostering Australian historical consciousness

As part of a round-table discussion of history educators in 2021, Sirkka Ahonen was asked to identify the greatest achievement of socially oriented educational research from Finland. Her response was:

I think that the most important achievement has been to bring the question of educational equality, or rather educational opportunities and equity, to the forefront of research ... Comparative research [between education systems] provides material for answering structural questions of education. For example, to explain the problematic development of higher education governance. And what information technology has to offer is big data giving limitless possibilities for comparative research. (Kosunen et al., 2023: 455–6)

Much of Ahonen’s work has been aligned with how curricula are a catalyst for present and future citizenship and participation in society. In this respect, the capacity for explicit and hidden curricula to shape personal and social values is reflective of political will. Her perspective thereby closely aligns with assertions made by Australian researchers (for example, South Australia: Boomer, 1992; Victoria: Brennan, 2011; Wescott, 2021; Western Australia: Marsh and Harris, 2007; Queensland:

Bedford and Kerby, 2024; New South Wales and Tasmania: Parkes, 2007; Sharp and Zarmati, 2022), whose scholarship focuses on how educational opportunities can foster a cohesive and more fair society. This similarity underscores the need for future research to address how moral consciousness needs to guide disciplinary thinking in history towards developing historical consciousness as a goal of education (Nordgren, 2019). Such considerations will ensure that any meaning making that takes place as part of understanding the past will yield conclusions that are in the interest of developing a 'good' individual who is more likely to act in the interests of society and its environment more broadly (Edling et al., 2020). Correspondingly, while big data provides more opportunities for tracing behaviours that entrench inequalities, access to the required technologies is limited for researchers, thereby slowing the pace at which solutions might be developed. In response – and to illustrate what curriculum-led solutions might look like – this section features examples drawn from documents published by the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) and Australia's national curriculum body, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA).

Ahonen's work on historical consciousness is distinguishable from other researchers (such as Karlsson and Zander, 2004; Rüsen, 2004; Seixas and Morton, 2013; Wineburg, 2018), as she lays the groundwork for the thinking skills required to address inequalities in education. The lens she advocates is particularly relevant after the failure of the Referendum on the Indigenous Voice to Parliament, since there was a significant amount of misinformation that was disseminated (to a significant extent by the 'No' campaigners) (Graham, 2024; Kaye and Menon, 2023; Yang, 2023). At the time of writing, in the Australian context from which this article is written, civics and citizenship education is being reassessed for how effective current initiatives are in cultivating democratic principles (Parliament of Australia, 2024). History and social science educators are cast as having a moral imperative for how ethics might guide decision making for future citizens (Haste and Bermudez, 2017; Innes, 2022), as well for ensuring voters' faith in democratic institutions (Rosenbach and Mansted, 2018).

Implementing historical consciousness through the lens advocated by Ahonen would involve integrating local Indigenous knowledges more broadly in content learned by other Australian demographics, with an eye to creating a more holistic, historicised national identity. Members of this demographic are frequently cast as 'other' (Innes, 2022), and such an approach would require continuing to dispel revariant narratives that shape how Australian history educators deliver content, particularly the so-called 'black armband' (Beasley, 2013; Reynolds, 2013), as well as those perspectives that celebrate nation building and deliberately obfuscate victims of colonisation (Clark, 2022; Donnelly et al., 2019; McKenna, 2018). It would also require educators to rework expectations away from working to achieve outcomes, to instead generating cultures of thinking that catalyse democratic thinking and aspired-to behaviours, particularly the value of debate measured by proof-based reasoning. While outcome-based curricula have their strength in clarifying benchmarks of understandings, cultures are underpinned by value sets that need to be maintained, reinforced and elaborated on to be responsive to new experiences. These understandings operate at four levels:

1. to work against more exclusionary historical narratives in Australia that advocate the contributions of Western cultures against all other backgrounds (Cairns, 2018; Carroll, 2020)
2. to cast school-based history as an evolving point of access for students to understand
3. to make meaning from their relationships with their local communities, and Australia more broadly
4. to align educator practice with high expectations, and to encourage both teacher and students to cultivate a dynamic relationship with the past.

These considerations align more closely with the original intentions in the ACARA national curriculum documents, which emphasise the need for cultivating student agency (ACARA, 2019; Bleeze, 2024) to ensure that historical understandings form the foundations for transferring skills acquired through studying history to real-world, community-based contexts (ACARA, 2009). The potential impact is suggested by Kay Carroll's study of 562 students in Australian high schools (Carroll, 2020; see Carroll and Littlejohn, 2021). Here, the scope of students' historical consciousness was widened by applying individual and collective learnings from history to a wide variety of contexts. This process involved creating links between individual and shared perspectives of the past, with contemporary circumstances ranging from the rise of populist governments, causes behind current events at a local and regional level, and deconstructing how their own connections with the world were enriched by understandings they formed by distinguishing between various pasts.



Ahonen's social justice perspective on the significance of cultivating historical consciousness can therefore pick up where [Carroll's \(2020\)](#) study left off, by suggesting the end goal of applying 'ontological and contemporary perspective to dissect and make sense of the world' ([Ahonen, 2020: 44](#); see [Clark and Grever, 2018](#)). In this respect, historical consciousness forms a catalyst for the active participation of educators and students of history in cultivating constructive individual and collective identities in Australian societies of which they are a part. The skills and capabilities fostered by the NSW and Australian curricula can therefore be aligned within a more authentic context of active citizenship ([Innes, 2022; Tambayah, 2017](#)).

The interweaving of historical consciousness with social justice extends to the treatment of reframing issues related to technological change. [Ahonen \(2005, 2021\)](#) reframes this issue in terms of a lack of historical awareness of the nature of inequalities within human cultures. The logical next step is to address such inequalities within history education, by strategising how to accommodate disruptions to historical knowledge. Core to this thinking is how developing historical consciousness involves the embedding of historical awareness ([Ankersmit, 2001](#)), historical thinking ([Wineburg, 2018](#)) and relational connections with historical realities ([Popa, 2021](#)). What therefore remains to be learned from Ahonen's work is how localised mechanisms that enable historical consciousness have their macro-variants, thereby paving the way for further investigations into how regions are connected by shared historical patterns. Her work bears out this point in comparisons of nationally traumatic experiences, such as those between inhabitants of (former) East Germany and Estonians, as well as South Africa with Bosnia-Herzegovina ([Ahonen, 2021](#)). These comparisons are framed on the basis of the following consistencies:

- *historical knowledge* being a series of details that form the foundations for shared understandings (such as narratives or schools of thought)
- *historical awareness* of communal pasts being generated within academic, cultural and social contexts
- *historical thinking* being developed through education systems, enabling connections between self–community–nation
- types of *historical consciousness* growing through the cultivation of relationships with the past, which reflect each individual's participation in economic, political and social systems

In Ahonen's case studies, historical consciousness therefore links individual experiences of inequalities across varieties of scales. Historical knowledge therefore cannot be understood accurately unless these other layers of historical transmission are accounted for. Similar to the Estonian teachers' non-verbal communication about the content of the USSR's mandated curriculum quotas, contextual details remain unexpressed or unrecorded, which disrupts the ability of contemporary and later generations to form an equivalent relationship with a sense of the past. More work therefore also needs to be done on the extent to which these localised mechanisms that guide the development of historical consciousness operate independently and in tandem with each other. Oral testimonies of discrimination and poverty under apartheid in South Africa, for instance, lie somewhat in conflict with the Rainbow Nation story that exists in textbooks, just as the current stance of Estonian education towards outsider interference cannot be properly understood without reference to the prolonged Russian and Soviet occupation. Additionally, any analysis of Finnish educational success only reaches a surface-level understanding unless more deeply embedded currents of Finnish history and culture are accounted for, rather than starting with the economic crash of Finland in the early to mid-1990s. Ahonen and Rantala's survey of Finnish education history demonstrated a pattern of rapid modernisation that involved cultural exclusion of Indigenous peoples – Sami and Roma – which had to be recognised over time as part of building historical consciousness ([Ahonen, 2020; Ahonen and Rantala, 2001](#)). The value of Ahonen's work, then, has been to open up these two areas of future investigation by framing education within historical consciousness. In doing so, she has unpacked the formal, institutional mechanisms by which the past can be transmitted between generations and demographics.

## Conclusion

A decrease in the number of democracies from comprising 50.4 per cent of the world's population in 2010, to 29.3 per cent in 2021 has had ripple effects on scholarship: in Finland, there were several publications that reflected on how schooling operates as a microcosm for catalysing social, political and economic

conditions (Thrupp et al., 2023). At the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) on 20 January 2022, there was a book launch for *Empowering Teachers and Democratising Schooling* (Heggart and Kolber, 2022), which featured several educators (including Pasi Sahlberg, Steven Kobler and Keith Heggart) discussing how teachers could implement a democratic education. Three pertinent problems that were part of the discussion were:

1. What can teachers do in their local contexts to be model citizens?
2. How can they allow students an experience of democracy?
3. How can these ideals be realised when the profession itself is part of a hierarchical system that is not necessarily democratic?

Ahonen's corpus contributes to addressing such issues in Australia, as her work analyses several attempts to answer them elsewhere. Communities have both tried to make sense of the past, and to reconcile their conflicting and contradictory elements. Historical consciousness has played an essential aspect in communal healing of traumatic punctuations, and selective forgetting (Ahonen, 2017a). These potentials of historical consciousness are particularly significant for planning to address the political polarisation, economic inequality and other tensions that were exacerbated during the recent pandemic. Core to shifting these relationships are history curricula, as they are a reflection of present concerns, as well as an aspired-to society (Barton, 1997; Boomer, 1992; Parkes, 2007; Sharp et al., 2017).

These learnings are generalisable from Ahonen's Finnish context to an Australian one because of a shared tension in how history curricula are implemented. Similar to the formation of hypertrophic scars, education can exacerbate ruptures within communities and between distinct histories, if curriculum implementation is overtly hegemonic and there is a displacement of knowledge (Ahonen, 2017b; Wescott, 2022). The consequence for democratic thinking in both Finnish and Australian contexts is that the construction of a shared past is not participatory, therefore removing the adaptive, innovative and inclusive potentials that might otherwise be enabled in both societies more broadly. Case studies of post-truth in particular reinforce the value of Ahonen's work, particularly in how the Russian textbooks are symptomatic of a rigidly hegemonic political structure (Almaev et al., 2020; Free, 2024; Krawatzek, 2021), just as Michael Gove's UK-centric history curriculum did not enable students in England to critique or challenge the dominant narratives that underpinned these documents. A case in point is how these curriculum reforms from 2014 did not allow scope for reflecting on the consequences of colonialism (Watson, 2020).

A logical next step for Australian contexts to learn from Ahonen's work includes how forms of democracy and historical consciousness must be mirrored in the curriculum as a preparatory exercise for participating in the process (Ahonen, 2017a, 2020). There are signs that elements of historical consciousness are being incorporated: the current curriculum reforms in New South Wales (from where this article is written), such as the 2023 version of the NSW History Curriculum, emphasise the necessity of Indigenous authorities needing to be consulted as part of teaching difficult lessons (see Torney-Purta et al., 1999). There have also been practical recommendations for how teachers can integrate local Indigenous knowledges (Thorpe et al., 2024). These have included the Learning from Country framework (Burgess et al., 2022), which embeds reflection and reflexivity to critically engage with local wisdom from the past, as well as with new and emerging knowledges and practices from a relationally responsive standpoint (Yunkaporta and Shillingsworth, 2020). At the time of writing, a National Inquiry into Civics Education, Engagement and Participation in Australia has closed for consultation. It potentially marks a turning point for how curriculum-led demands by various academic, cultural, educational and legal stakeholders might be responded to, by integrating a version of historical consciousness which is authentically constructed for an Australian context.

## Declarations and conflicts of interest

### Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

### Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

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The author declares no conflict of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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