
Research article

Students' use and perception of history textbooks in Grades 9 to 13: a retrospective study revealing general insights and latent profiles

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Abstract

This quantitative study reveals the usage of history textbooks in upper secondary school settings in comparison with already published data taken from lower secondary school settings. A retrospective survey was conducted using a sample of 147 Austrian university students from different disciplines to identify distinct profiles of history textbook use in relation to students' conception of history through latent profile analyses and other quantitative approaches. The analyses reveal two clusters of students' perceptions of how they acquire historical knowledge through textbooks. The results suggest that students who more frequently worked with textbooks in their history classes showed a greater tendency towards content orientation. More frequent detailed interaction with the textbook (that is, reading authorial texts and solving tasks) promotes critical comprehension of historical content. Options for further research are also discussed.

Keywords history education; epistemic beliefs; historical understanding; historical thinking; critical thinking; textbook; secondary school; empirical research

Introduction

History textbooks are a core concern of the academic discipline of history education as practised in the twenty-first century (Bertram and Wassermann, 2015; Fuchs et al., 2014; Repoussi and Tutiaux-Guillon, 2010). For a lengthy period, research on textbooks taking place within the discipline of history education centred on the *content* of their historical narratives, primarily examining their empirical accuracy or otherwise and/or their omission of particular aspects of the topic at hand, generally via comparison with the work of academic historians (Bramann, 2017; Cajani, 2013; Crawford and Foster, 2007; Markova, 2014; Minte, 2014; Mittnik, 2015; Schinkel, 2018; Van Nieuwenhuysse and Valentim, 2018). In addition, the same field also features numerous content analyses that, from a *critical perspective* ('ideological critique'), engage with specific concepts such as the influence of nationalism, the representation of gender, the dominance of master narratives and other intersecting discourses (for example, Alridge, 2006; Grever and van der Vlies, 2017; Husemann and Schmitz-Zerres, 2021; Hutchins, 2016; Pamuk and Muç, 2021; Windischbauer, 2006). The relatively rare instances of attention to *domain-specific methodologies* of history teaching largely emphasise the complex educational and domain-specific character of these books (Houwen et al., 2020; Jansen, 2021; Kühberger et al., 2019a; Schreiber et al., 2013). Research that is interested in history textbooks as a domain-specific learning medium focuses on those moments that influence the acquisition of domain-specific concepts and procedures (Bramann and Kühberger, 2022). It is a question of whether and how history textbooks want to achieve a critical attitude towards representations of the past as interpretations, anchor source criticism as part of domain-specific learning, reflect on domain-specific terms and their conceptional shapes and so on. Therefore, it is not surprising that the analyses of tasks in history textbooks have been particularly intensively researched in recent years. Through tasks, it is possible to reconstruct the domain-specific teaching style offered and to make statements about the goals of the learning paths offered. Most of the research has focused on textbooks used in lower secondary schools, namely Grades 5 to 8 (Bramann, 2025; Buchberger, 2020; Handro and Schönemann, 2011; Kühberger, 2019; Kühberger and Mellies, 2008; Kühberger et al., 2019a; Reisman, 2012; Schreiber et al., 2013). This article aligns with approaches that highlight the intricate educational and disciplinary dimensions of textbooks; however, rather than concentrating – as is commonly the case in Austria – on lower secondary education, it shifts focus to textbooks used in upper secondary schools and their role in fostering critical historical thinking. Empirical findings on teachers' and students' perceptions of textbooks in the history classroom are scarce (Ahlich, 2020; Haydn, 2011; Houwen et al., 2020; Kipman and Kühberger, 2020; Von Borries, 1995, 2005). However, it must be pointed out that textbook research of this kind is particularly urgent because it takes the people involved into account. Thus, the learning medium is not researched as a passive object, which might never be used in history classes in the way analysed; instead, the history textbooks are embedded in their social context and questioned with regard to the users' perception. Accordingly, the research questions are as follows: what are the frequency and modes of history textbook usage in upper secondary education, and how do students' concepts of history shape their engagement with textbooks approached as historical narratives?

This article aims to shed light on the use and perception of history textbooks for Grades 9 to 13 in Austria. It presents insights from a study conducted among first-semester students, who had successfully completed secondary education. In a written survey, they were asked to reflect on their experiences in history classes during their upper secondary schooling. The survey focused on the frequency of textbook use in history lessons, the type of use experienced and the epistemic engagement generated. A comparative review of these findings alongside data from lower secondary schools on the same structural basis enabled us to draw conclusions on the specific features of history textbook use at the upper secondary stage. An area of particular interest during the study was the extent to which the responses enabled us to identify latent profiles of students' history textbook use, founded on these students' domain-specific epistemic beliefs, and their criteria for deeming an upper secondary

history textbook 'good' in quality. In outlining these findings, the article presents the first use of this methodological approach for data analysis in history education research.

Research context

As noted in the Introduction, the dominant tendency in history textbook research to date has been primarily to examine the historical accuracy or otherwise of textbooks' depictions of past events. It does not need to be emphasised that errors in textbooks are to be avoided. Other questions addressing the presentation of the content of history textbooks can also reveal necessary aspects for improvement, such as when certain subject areas are presented in an incomplete or one-sided manner. In this respect, there is a tradition of textbook criticism in Austria and Germany, especially regarding chapters on National Socialism (Foster and Karayianni, 2018; Mittnik, 2016; Von Borries, 2003). Some researchers have raised concerns around this preponderance, calling for the prioritisation of other approaches. It was around the end of the twentieth century that academics in this field began to note critically the lack of empirical work in history education research, specifically relating to the learning that takes place with history textbooks in school settings (Marsden, 2001; Repoussi and Tutiaux-Guillon, 2010; Rüsen, 1992; Von Borries, 2006). This critique noted certain 'ivory-tower' tendencies at work, with researchers sitting in their offices and pondering textbook quality criteria on the basis of theoretical models, lamenting the supposed state of textbooks without having physically or mentally darkened the door of a classroom. Notwithstanding the palpable change emerging with the dawn of the new millennium, with greater attention being paid to aspects of historical learning in textbooks, such essentially normative studies – for all their notable findings – effectively overlook the teachers and learners that actually work with the textbooks they critique. This said, we can currently observe an increase in studies, using a wide range of methodological approaches drawing on underlying qualitative and/or quantitative paradigms, which seek to take greater account of the users of history textbooks. The diversity of these approaches opens up a nuanced view of their subject, which in turn can help us perceive textbook use in its full complexity. The field will note the developments taking place in relation to ethnographic explorations of history textbooks and the novel insights they generate (Ahlrichs, 2020; Ahlrichs and Macgilchrist, 2017; Bernhard, 2018b; Macgilchrist, 2017; Tarmann and Ayas, 2011), and their capacity for incorporation in triangulated qualitative/quantitative sequential study designs alongside quantitative data-focused research – as in the work underlying this study (Bernhard, 2018b; Bernhard and Kühberger, 2019).

To date, research on history textbooks has provided us with broad-based knowledge in a range of aspects of the subject, related in particular to content analysis. Few studies have examined the frequency of use of these textbooks in the classroom, leaving us with a distinctly limited pool of empirical work. A researcher exploring this matter will be driven by an interest in how history classes actually work in practice. Certainly, in German-speaking regions, frequency of textbook use is markedly high. A pilot study published in 2010 by the Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research in Braunschweig surveyed 202 secondary school history teachers in the German state of Lower Saxony and found that 90% used history textbooks 'every lesson or almost every lesson' or 'often' (Lässig, 2010: 201). More recently, Michael Sauer's (2018) research with 147 history teachers in lower secondary schools (Grades 5 to 7) reported a total of 73.5% using history textbooks in every class or often. The quantitative research conducted among Austrian lower secondary school (Grades 5 to 8) history teachers within the Competencies and Academic Orientation in History Textbooks (CAOHT) project used a closed-ended item to establish how often the 274 participants used textbooks, and recorded use in every lesson as over one-third (34.7%); added to the 50.7% using textbooks every second lesson, a total of 85.4% of teachers in this study report frequent textbook use (Kühberger, 2019), a figure similar to that recorded in Germany. Comparable data have emerged from the US, the UK, Brunei and Malaysia (Haydn, 2011; Mahadi and Shahrill, 2014; Razaq Ahmad et al., 2013; Schug, 1997; Wakefield, 2006). A key part of the relevance of these findings resides in the fact that this is likely a phenomenon observable specifically in relation to history classes. A German study on the use of chemistry textbooks delivers starkly contrasting figures, with only 11.4% of teachers in lower secondary schools saying they used textbooks 'every week' or more often in their classes (Beerenwinkel and Gräsel, 2005: 28).

The second significant aspect underpinning the insights presented herein is closely associated with the paradigm shift from a content-orientated approach ('knowing history') towards an increased emphasis on historical thinking as the central objective of history education – a development that was

initiated in Austria with the implementation of a new curriculum for lower secondary education in 2008, and that has continued to shape the objectives and methods of history lessons to the present day. As a result of this intervention, increased emphasis was placed on procedural and conceptual knowledge ('doing history') (Brait, 2022; Buchberger and Kühberger, 2018 – see also Havekes et al., 2012; Körber et al., 2007; Levstik and Barton, 2005; Van Drie and Van Boxtel, 2008).

Theoretical framing

An important theoretical point of reference for the present study is the conceptions of history held by students in tertiary education. Empirical work on epistemic beliefs conducted since the end of the 2000s (for example, Kelle et al., 2019; Maggioni, 2010; Maggioni et al., 2009; Nitsche, 2019; Salinas and Sullivan, 2007; Zanazanian et al., 2024) has demonstrated the centrality of a theoretical idea of history which knowledge of the past, and of specific events and experiences therein, cannot replace. We have now seen broad international engagement with, and acceptance of, the epistemic concept of history as a construct, which, by virtue of this constructed character, can only ever be an approximation of the past as it 'actually was'. In this context, the present study draws on constructions of items as developed across a range of research projects (Hsiao, 2004; Lange, 2011; Lee and Ashby, 2000; Trautwein et al., 2017). The four typical positions or sets of beliefs used stem from a qualitative research project that sought to grasp learners' concepts of history (see Table 1) (Ammerer and Kühberger, 2013). The identified types clearly reflect ongoing discourses on domain-specific epistemic models, as they are currently being discussed and refined in the literature (Lee and Shemilt, 2003; Maggioni et al., 2009; Nitsche, 2019). In line with earlier approaches to epistemological classification, students are assigned to these four categories (Stoel et al., 2017). Of particular note is the existence of a type that denies the possibility of accessing the past through historical narratives. This would, for instance, require extending the model proposed by Nitsche (2019), which encompasses positivism, scepticism and narrative constructivism, to include a form of practical nihilism. The questionnaire included an item designed to capture conceptions of history, based on an excerpt from a narrative from a textbook and employing a closed single-choice response format to probe students' assumptions regarding the textbook author's possession of definitive knowledge about the past. The response options represented the ideal-typical positions of the applied theoretical model, articulated in age-appropriate language that had been validated through a cognitive lab with lower secondary students (Kipman and Kühberger, 2020).

Table 1. Typology of conceptions of history (Source: Kühberger, 2018)

Type	Description
Agnostic or sceptical	This type believes that accessing the past and identifying its true events and nature is impossible, or possible only to a very limited extent.
Constructivist	This type believes that history is a (re)construction which meets specific quality criteria. In this view, an objective representation is impossible; 'history' is always a construct driven by the interests, skills and intentions of those who created the representation, by sources and by the medium of representation chosen, among other factors.
Positivist or historicist	This type believes that it is fundamentally possible to create an objective representation of the past, if the author works hard enough at it.
Naive or factuality-orientated	This type does not believe in a distinction between history and the past. The idea of history as a construct is a foreign concept to this type.

The types included in the theoretical model (Table 1) are related to styles of teaching. Findings on the main activities carried out using textbooks in the history classroom as they were revealed in lower secondary school settings (Kipman and Kühberger, 2020) will be compared to those examined in upper secondary school settings. To this end, we make a rough distinction between 'content orientation', in which history textbooks serve primarily to present the depictions and interpretations they contain as 'truths' for acquisition by students, and a centring of historical thinking, which places more emphasis on critique of the depictions contained in textbooks by, for instance, calling the knowledge or sets of assumptions underlying them into question, actively pointing out discrepancies and contradictions between diverging interpretations, considering value judgements on the past as such, and attempting to identify alternative interpretations. In so doing, this approach has recourse to theoretical constructs as postulated by historical thinking and firmly established in the discipline of history education in Anglophone and German-language discourses (Ercikan and Seixas, 2015; Körber, 2016; Trautwein et al., 2017; Van Sledright, 2013; Wineburg, 2001). This is of particular importance insofar as both the Austrian curriculum and the state-approved textbooks are aligned with the FUER model, a domain-specific competence framework aimed at fostering historical thinking based on Jörn Rüsen's theory of history (Körber, 2011; Körber et al., 2007). The model was introduced in lower secondary education in 2008 – as previously mentioned – and later incorporated into upper secondary education through a reform of the Matura examination ('A-levels') in 2011 (Mittnik et al., 2011), followed by subsequent curricular reforms.

Method

Research context and measures

The present study drew on the CAOHT project, which conducted a quantitative survey of 1,086 school students in Austria, with an average age of 13.44, regarding their use of history textbooks, alongside research with 277 history teachers at lower secondary schools, with the aim of illuminating both the learning and teaching sides of the classroom situation (Kipman and Kühberger, 2020). The creation of the questionnaire, developed in a sequential setting, was preceded by observation of 50 history classes in Viennese lower secondary schools and interviews with the teachers involved, with the aim of taking practical issues around the classroom situation and teachers' views of teaching history into account, specifically in relation to textbook use (Bernhard, 2017, 2018b). This preparatory phase enabled us to develop a quantitative questionnaire that encompassed both theoretical models of history teaching and aspects of the issue that the discipline of history education has tended to neglect or overlook completely hitherto; these include the various types of classroom use made of history textbooks. The questionnaire itself consisted of 68 items and spanned six pages. The questions were organised using five-point Likert scales, as well as other response formats (for example, 'yes' or 'no'). In addition, the questionnaire included a task designed to assess students' conception of history (see Box 1), which was implemented in a single-choice format with four response options. Sociographic data were also collected, including age, gender, migration background and the number of books at home, in order to account for socio-economic status (Kipman and Kühberger, 2020).

It was this questionnaire that, with its language adapted for recent graduates of upper secondary schools (for instance, appropriate changes of tense), was used in the present study (Bernhard, 2018a; Kipman and Kühberger, 2020). The validation of the questionnaire in cognitive labs (Jabine, 1984; Werner and Schreiber, 2015; Willis, 2004), and its successful use with eighth-graders, suggest its appropriateness and comprehensibility for older respondents. In addition to demographic items, most of the questionnaire consisted of closed tasks asking students to indicate their attitudes or assessments regarding textbook use in their history lessons in school. A further task sought to ascertain respondents' epistemic beliefs (see Table 1).

To clarify the procedure applied to the closed items, a corresponding item battery is presented here. Task 5, for instance, focuses on the use of history textbooks during classes (Table 2). Respondents were asked to assess how frequently they encountered these activities during history lessons.

Sample

The survey, covering 174 students at the University of Salzburg, Austria (108 women, 66 men), took place in November 2016, during their first semester. A key difference from the lower secondary school student

population surveyed in the original CAOHT project ($n = 1,086$) was the broader dispersion, with the avoidance of clustering effects as typically found when surveying school classes. The students, who were enrolled in a diverse range of subjects (29.8% were student teachers specialising in history and social studies/political education), originated primarily from the Austrian federal states of Salzburg, Upper Austria and Tyrol, and had an average age of 23.30 years ($SD = 4.06$), meaning that they had four years' experience of history classes before participating in the study. The selection of this group was guided by research-economic considerations, and it therefore constitutes a convenience sample. Nevertheless, as neither the teaching staff nor the instructional approaches underwent any substantial changes during the period of schooling covered, the composition of the sample is regarded as methodologically justifiable for all items related to history instruction. This approach also enabled the inclusion of adult respondents who, unlike underage school students, could be surveyed without legal restrictions, thereby significantly reducing the logistical and administrative effort involved in data collection. Ethical standards could easily be upheld using anonymised questionnaires. Moreover, respondents with academic training can provide informed reflections on past learning experiences, making them a valuable source for studies seeking to reconstruct educational processes or classroom activities. A remaining limitation lies in the fact that the data reflect present-day conceptual understandings. When interpreting the results, it is important to acknowledge that while the recalls of history instruction can largely be considered reliable, they have been linked to the respondents' current conceptual frameworks as tertiary-level students in order to enable meaningful interpretations.

Box 1. Task involving ideal-typical positions on conceptions of history

An author wrote the following paragraph, which is already published in a history textbook. Please read it carefully!

From the beginning, the Romans fought many wars to make their empire bigger and to protect its borders. Roman citizens who owned land, a house and money could be called to serve as soldiers. They had to pay for their own weapons, equipment and food. When the war was over, the men returned home. But after a while, this system didn't work anymore. There were wars almost every year, and sometimes the soldiers didn't come back for many years. Farming families suffered the most from this. (Christoffer et al., 2014, p. 78)

After you have read the paragraph, which of the following statements do you agree with the most? Please choose only one option (mark only a, b, c or d)!

- (a) No one can really know what it was like back then. The textbook author wasn't there!
- (b) The text is probably based on sources, so it's just an attempt to describe the past.
- (c) If the author tried hard, then what he wrote must be exactly right!
- (d) The textbook shows how things really were in the past. That's possible in a textbook!

Table 2. Exemplary item set (Task 5) as used in the analysis below (see Table 3), showing selected history textbook activities and their categorisation according to the intended analytical dimension

Task 5: We would also like to know how frequently and in what ways you used history textbooks during your upper secondary history classes.

Please check one box per row	very often	often	some-times	rarely	never	intended analytical dimension
I identified the most important information from a textbook passage during history lessons. (item 5.1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	content-orientated use of history textbooks

Table 2. Cont.

Please check one box per row	very often	often	sometimes	rarely	never	intended analytical dimension
In history class, we discussed whether certain content in the upper secondary history textbook contradicted itself or should have been presented differently. (item 5.2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	critical reception of history textbooks
We silently worked through several paragraphs from the upper secondary history textbook during class. (item 5.3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	content-orientated use of history textbooks
Together with the teacher, we worked through several paragraphs from the upper secondary history textbook during class. (item 5.4)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	content-orientated use of history textbooks
When reading texts from the upper secondary history textbook, we also asked ourselves how the author knew what they wrote. (item 5.5)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	critical reception of history textbooks
We examined whether the past was presented in a more positive or negative light in the upper secondary history textbook. (item 5.6)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	critical reception of history textbooks
We questioned whether the text in the upper secondary history textbook could have been written differently. (item 5.10)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	critical reception of history textbooks
We compared different history textbooks on the same topic. (item 5.12)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	critical reception of history textbooks

Statistical analysis

Data analysis proceeded on an explorative case-by-case basis, with the aim of inductively identifying whether it was possible to discern distinct groups or types of history textbook users (manifest and latent profile analysis incorporating two-step cluster analysis, or LPA). First, we did some explorative analyses to find out how students could be clustered; then, we used a confirmatoric approach to get a latent profile pattern. LPA is a latent variable modelling technique that is known in the literature by a variety of names, including latent class cluster analysis (Vermunt and Magidson, 2002) and finite mixture modelling (McLachlan and Peel, 2000). A good introduction to this technique, and to latent variable modelling in

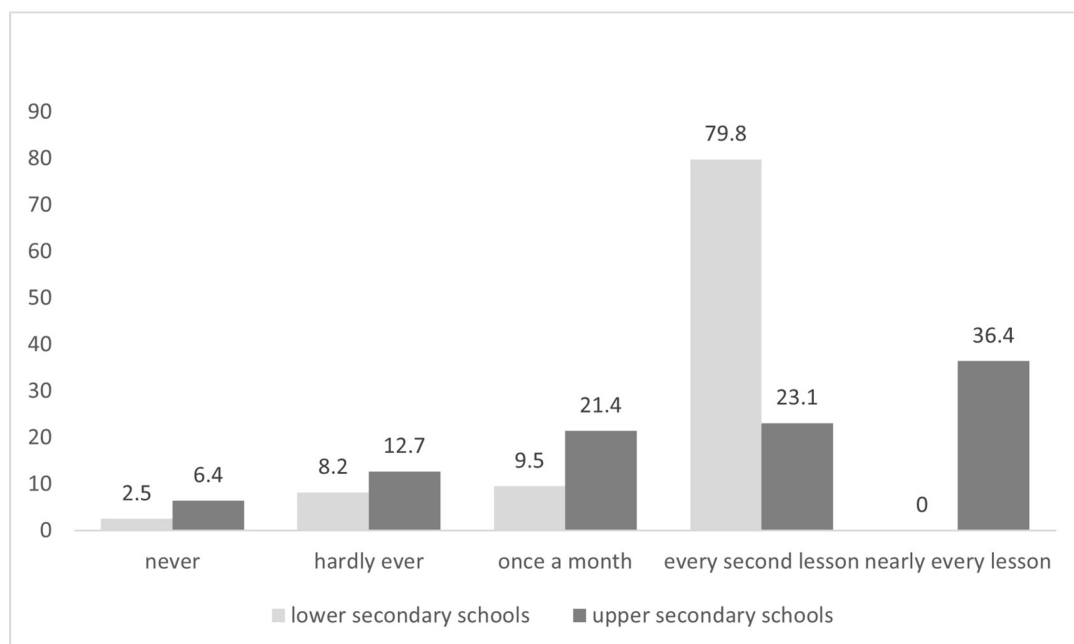
general, can be found in other research articles (Magidson and Vermunt, 2002, 2004 – a more technical but very thorough treatment is given in McLachlan and Peel, 2000). The goal of LPA is the same as that of cluster analysis: to identify clusters of observations that have similar values on cluster indicators. The main difference between LPA and traditional cluster analytic techniques is that LPA is model-based, whereas hierarchical and most non-hierarchical applications of cluster analysis are not. LPA is a type of latent variable mixture model. Thus, latent profile analyses represent a suitable method to cluster individuals based on qualitative differences in patterns of several latent variables (Lubke and Muthén, 2005). Thereby, this model-based method offers the advantage of being able to compare different profile solutions based on their respective model fits. For an overview of other advantages of this method over conventional methods such as cluster analysis, see Pastor et al. (2007). We additionally analysed questions relating to inferential statistics, partially on the basis of the structures previously identified, and using hypothesis-testing processes (χ^2 -tests, T-tests, U-tests, Pearson correlation analysis).

Results

Frequency of use

Figure 1 details former Austrian upper secondary school students' perceptions of the frequency with which they used history textbooks in their history classes. It is evident that this use is less frequent in upper than in lower secondary schools. We may additionally assume that didactic approaches to the teaching of history vary distinctly among the different types of upper secondary school in Austria. These are high schools (*Gymnasium*, Grades 9–12), which have an academic orientation, and the more vocationally centred schools for higher technical education (*Höhere Technische Lehranstalt*, Grades 9–13) and schools for higher commercial education (*Handelsakademie*, Grades 9–13). The proportion of lower secondary school students in the original study who reported textbook use every other history lesson stood at around 80%; by contrast, according to the findings of the present study, in upper secondary schools, it was 59.5%. Former upper secondary school students reporting no textbook use at all in their history lessons amounted to 6.4% of the sample, over double the proportion of lower secondary school students asserting likewise.

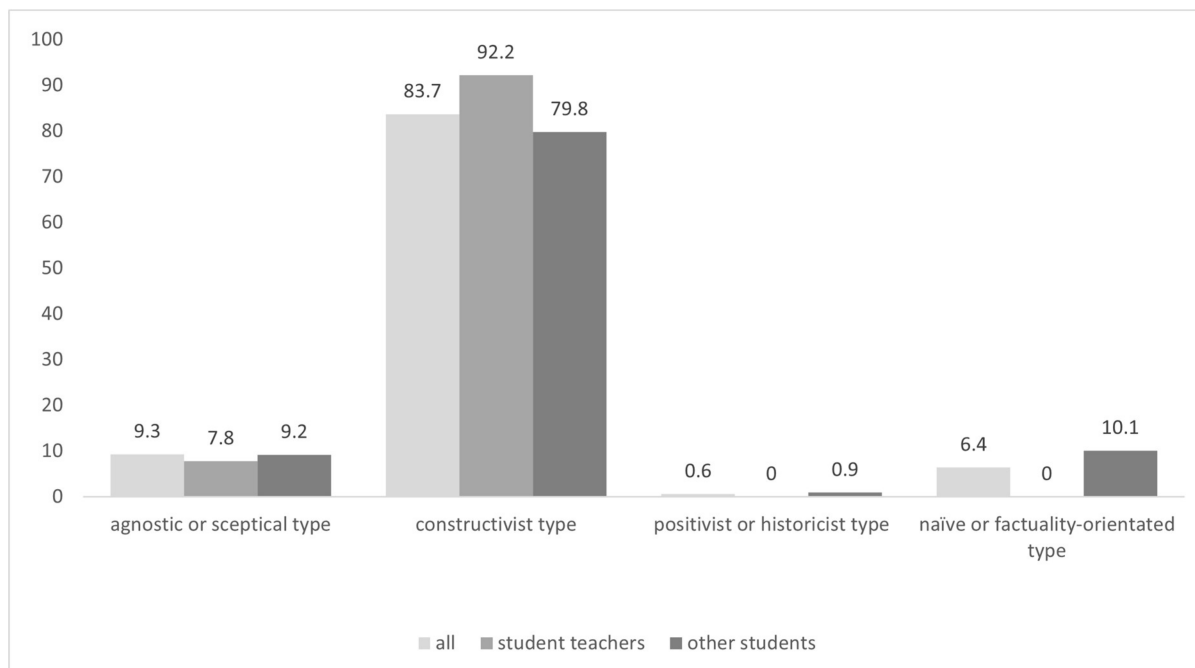
Figure 1. Frequency of history textbook use in lower and upper secondary schools (%)



Conception of history

Consideration of student responses to the task presented to them in the context of the survey, the purpose of which was to gauge their conceptions of history (task 13; items 13.1 to 13.4), reveals that students in the sample who were training to be history teachers were more likely to be aware of the nature of history as a construct than students not studying for a career in the history classroom; 92.2% of the former group recognised this property of history, as compared to 79.8% of those studying other subjects. No history teaching student was found to be in the positivist or naive group. It is, however, noteworthy that 7.8% of the student history teachers (and 9.2% of those enrolled in other degrees) subscribe to the assumption that 'nobody can really know what things were like back then', putting them in the agnostic class ($\chi^2(3) = 9.91, p = 0.019$; $\chi^2(1) = 3.89, p = 0.049$) (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Types of conception of history present among the sample (%)



Styles of teaching with history textbooks

Alongside the frequency of history textbook use per se, the study explored the frequency of various types or styles of the use, referencing theoretical constructs reproduced in the questionnaire in the form of various items. One of these constructs is 'content-orientated use of history textbooks', consisting of items relating to the elicitation of information from depictions of historical events and other pieces of text to be read, which represents a rather traditional way of using textbooks in the classroom that tends to overlook critical interaction with history in favour of memorising and reproducing 'facts'. The other represents the notion of 'critical reception of history textbooks', corresponding to a style of teaching that seeks to encourage students to think historically for themselves (see Table 3).

The higher the values on the 'content-orientated use of history textbooks' scale ($r = 0.78, p < 0.001$), the more frequent the use of history textbooks; put differently, the more frequent the textbook use, the greater the content orientation observable. By contrast, we note a markedly smaller (albeit still significant) correlation between 'critical reception of history textbooks' and history textbook use ($r = 0.30, p < 0.001$); we may infer from this that more critical use of textbooks is less closely linked to frequency of use than is content-centred use. Statistically speaking, it is not possible to separate critical use from content-based use; in other words, use takes place (where it does take place) in both modes, not solely in one or the other.

Table 3. Indices of items and scales for use of history textbooks

Construct	Content-orientated use of history textbooks	Critical reception of history textbooks
Items	5.1; 5.3; 5.4	5.2; 5.5; 5.6; 5.10; 5.12
KMO	.702	.853
Bartlett	.000	.000
α	.831	.875
Statistical power	$\geq .65$	$\geq .51$

It is on this basis that we proceeded to two-step cluster analysis, which gave rise to two manifest clusters reflecting frequency of use and not, as we had originally intended, type of use. The clusters consisted, first, in those students who had experienced frequent use of history textbooks (both content-based and critical) and those for whom use had been less frequent. Analysis of the conception of history present among these two groups showed that 87.9% of those reporting frequent use viewed history from a constructivist perspective, as compared to 81.4% of those who experienced less frequent use. As this value is not statistically significant, we note it descriptively ($\chi^2(1) = 1.18, p = 0.276$).

Latent profiles

As outlined above, the research sought to identify the latent profiles pertaining to the students in the sample, and the extent of their consistency with students' domain-specific epistemic beliefs about history as a construct and their criteria for a 'good' upper secondary school history textbook. To this end, we conducted latent profile analysis (LPA) using Latent Gold® 5.1 (Magidson and Vermunt, 2016). With a sample size of 174 participants, the LPA can be considered sufficiently robust to support meaningful conclusions. Research suggests that LPA can yield stable and interpretable results even with sample sizes between 100 and 300 participants (Nylund-Gibson and Choi, 2018). Therefore, despite minor limitations inherent to medium-sized samples, the findings of the present study can be regarded as reliable within the accepted methodological standards.

LPA calculates the probabilities of a subject being in a specific cluster, while conventional cluster analysis, which is generally based on Euclidean distances, generates discrete allocations of subjects to clusters. Fit checking for the various models took place via a likelihood-ratio test using AIC, or Akaike Information Criterion (Akaike, 1987), and BIC, or Bayesian Information Criterion (Schwarz, 1978). LPA on the items attached to questions 13 and 18.7 to 18.10 suggests two-cluster representation as favourable and plausible; it has an optimum number of parameters, combined with a BIC of 661.17 (# parameters = 21).

The profile depicted in Figure 4 indicates that the Cluster 1 group (107 individuals; 77 women/30 men) acknowledge that the narratives around the past in history textbooks presumably draw on historical sources and can therefore only ever represent, and be read as, an approximation of what really went on (task 13, items 13.1 to 13.4). Simultaneously, however, they want a 'good' history textbook to name its sources (item 18.7), encourage readers to think about its content (item 18.8), avoid restricting itself to discussing only dominant or ruling figures and classes and the victors of history (item 18.9), and help learners to form their own view on the events it depicts (item 18.10). Cluster 1, totalling 61.6% of the sample (while 37.4% belong to Cluster 2; 31 of these 64 individuals are women and 33 are men) therefore comprises former upper secondary school students whose schooling has enabled them to comprehend key insights into the acquisition of historical knowledge.

We identified no significant differences between the clusters (Figure 3) in terms of age or whether or not students belonged to the category of first- or second-generation immigrants (*Migrationshintergrund*). We nevertheless note that: (1) women appear significantly more frequently in Cluster 1 ($\chi^2(3) = 8.88, p = 0.031$); (2) over three-quarters (76%) of student teachers in history and social studies/political education are, expectably, in Cluster 1 ($\chi^2(1) = 4.90, p = 0.027$); and (3) Cluster 1 is characterised by a higher socio-economic status than Cluster 2 ($U = 2797.5, p = 0.018$).

Analysis of other variables reveals a degree of consistency in the fundamental definitions of the two clusters. Significant findings in respondents' attributions of reliability to sources of information (items

2.2, 2.3, 2.5, 2.7 and 2.8) show that individuals in Cluster 1 ascribe greater reliability to museums and historical sources and lower reliability to feature films, Wikipedia and historical novels (see Table 4).

Figure 3. Latent profiles of students' self-reported comprehension of historical content through textbooks (low versus high)

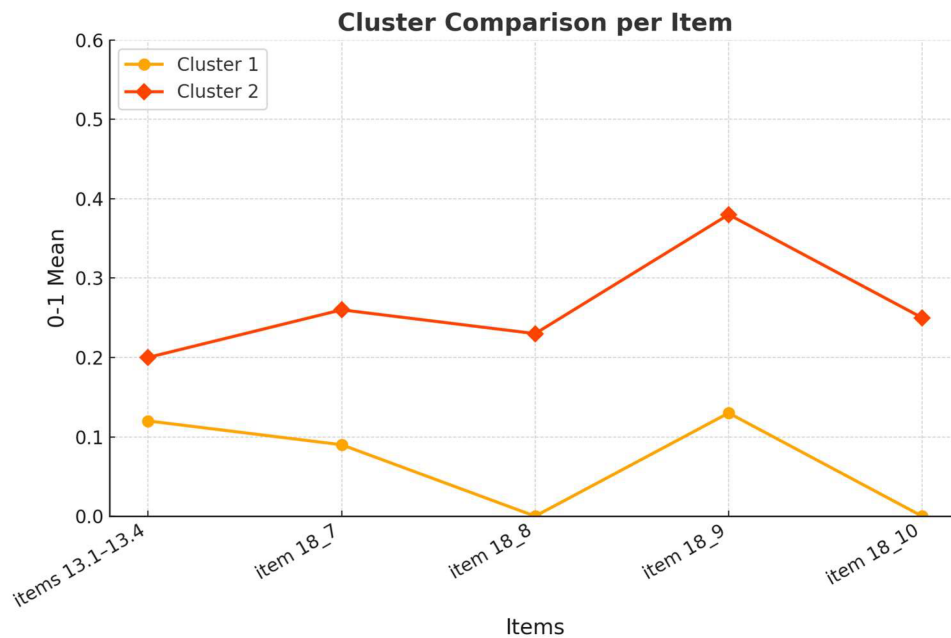


Figure 4. Development of conception of history by type

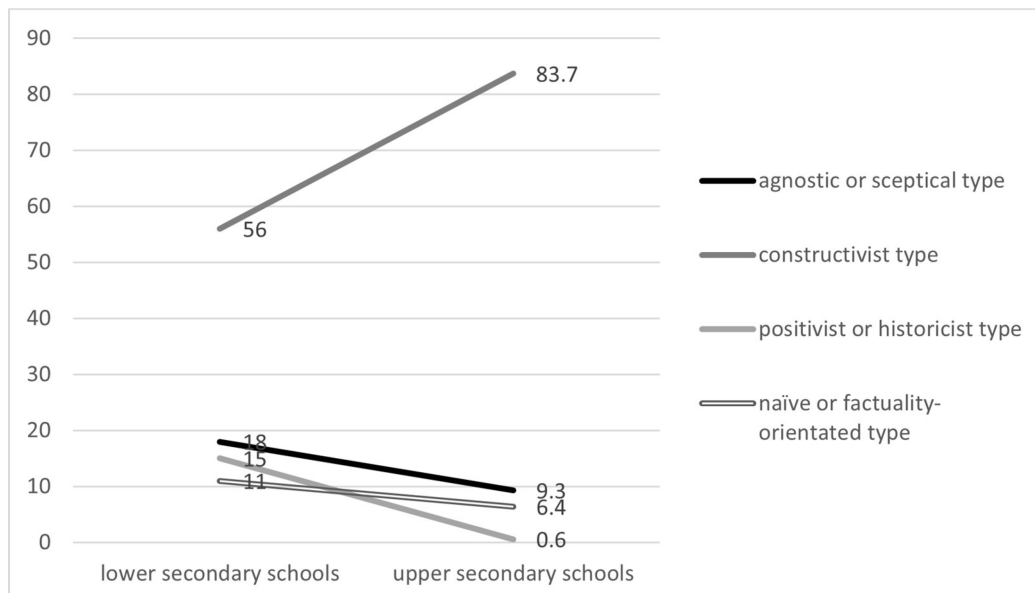


Table 4. Comparison of arithmetic means of the two clusters' responses to Question 2 (statistically significant differences only)

Item	Cluster	Mean, standard deviation	Mean differences
I can find high-quality and reliable information about the past in museums and at sites of historical interest. (item 2.2)	Cluster 1	$M = 4.23,$ $SD = 0.73$	$t(170) = 2.03,$ $p = .044$
	Cluster 2	$M = 3.98,$ $SD = 0.79$	
I can find high-quality and reliable information about the past in movies. (item 2.3)	Cluster 1	$M = 2.12,$ $SD = 0.74$	$t(169) = 2.58,$ $p = .011$
	Cluster 2	$M = 2.43,$ $SD = 0.79$	
I can find high-quality and reliable information about the past in Wikipedia. (item 2.5)	Cluster 1	$M = 2.84,$ $SD = 0.91$	$t(169) = 2.47,$ $p = .015$
	Cluster 2	$M = 3.17,$ $SD = 0.74$	
I can find high-quality and reliable information about the past in historical novels. (item 2.7)	Cluster 1	$M = 2.51,$ $SD = 0.82$	$t(169) = 2.23,$ $p = .027$
	Cluster 2	$M = 2.80,$ $SD = 0.83$	
I can find high-quality and reliable information about the past in historical documents (sources). (item 2.8)	Cluster 1	$M = 4.22,$ $SD = 0.83$	$t(170) = 2.88,$ $p = .004$
	Cluster 2	$M = 3.86,$ $SD = 0.70$	

While statistically significant differences relating to frequency of textbook use do not occur, we find that individuals in Cluster 1 worked more frequently with the tasks given in the textbooks than did those in Cluster 2, and they also read the authorial text in the textbooks more frequently (see Table 5), which would seem to suggest that more frequent interaction with a textbook promotes critical comprehension of historical content; the differences here are highly significant and practically relevant. A significant difference is observable in terms of the exact nature of the activity, be it reading authorial text or comparison of sources, but no practical relevance attaches to this difference.

Discussion

The empirical data point to frequent use of history textbooks in the history classrooms of both lower secondary schools and high schools (as a type of upper secondary school); other types of upper secondary school also use textbooks more frequently in history than in other school subjects, as emerges from data from studies on the latter (as indicated above). This finding has inevitable implications, particularly for the manner of use of history textbooks. Ethnographic studies from Germany conducted in recent years have demonstrated the amplifying effect on the assumed 'truth' of a history textbook conferred by physical practices of engagement with it in classroom settings: pointing to content and interpretations from the textbook communicated in class, reading selected passages aloud, 'bending over' the book and other similar practices give rise to a problematic degree of reverence for the textbook, which generates a tendency to believe it uncritically and unquestioningly (Ahlrichs, 2020; Ahlrichs and Macgilchrist, 2017).

Table 5. Comparison of arithmetic means of the two clusters' responses to Question 15 (statistically significant differences only)

Item	Cluster	Mean, standard deviation	Mean differences
How often did you work with the tasks contained in your history textbook during your history classes? (item 8)	Cluster 1	$M = 3.16,$ $SD = 1.03$	$t(96) = 2.83,$ $p = .006$
	Cluster 2	$M = 2.59,$ $SD = 0.92$	
We read [authorial] text from our history textbook. (item 15.1)	Cluster 1	$M = 3.25,$ $SD = 1.32$	$t(170) = 1.97,$ $p = .050$
	Cluster 2	$M = 2.86,$ $SD = 1.16$	
We looked at this sort of text from history textbooks and then compared it with sources from the past or specialist [historical] writings to see whether these said different things. (item 15.2)	Cluster 1	$M = 1.72,$ $SD = 0.87$	$t(170) = 1.99,$ $p = .048$
	Cluster 2	$M = 2.00,$ $SD = 0.96$	

It is in this context that the present study identifies two fundamental types of history textbook use in upper secondary school settings: an approach markedly centring the textbook's content, and one that takes account of the nature of history (and therefore of the book itself) as a construct, and seeks to encourage students to understand and treat it as such. It is of little surprise to us – looking at the two-step cluster analysis – that those students who worked with textbooks more frequently in their history classes show a greater tendency towards content orientation in their perceptions, as several recent studies on Austrian history textbooks have demonstrated the continued predominance of content-orientated approaches and the uncritical reproduction of textbook knowledge. In his studies on written sources in history textbooks, Wolfgang Buchberger (2020) observes that 80.3% of tasks at the lower secondary level and 72% at the upper secondary level are focused on mere reproduction, without engaging students in historical thinking. In his analyses of tasks dealing with narratives of historical nationalism, Christoph Bramann (2019) notes that 75% of the examined activities lack any explicit alignment with the principles of historical thinking. However, the findings outlined above, alongside others not rehearsed in detail here because they are inconclusive, do not point to statistically significant differences between frequent and less frequent textbook users.

In terms of their concepts of history and the associated epistemic beliefs, we found that the overwhelming majority of student respondents are of the constructivist type; that is, they perceive history as a construct created with reference to historical sources, and therefore as an interpretive approach to, or approximation of, the past. These respondents were Austria-based students in tertiary education looking back on their upper secondary school years; the same item appeared in the CAOHT questionnaire for lower secondary school students (Kipman and Kühberger, 2020), which brings us to the novel insight that, viewed systemically, school students tend to 'grow out of' the more basic notions of history held in their earlier secondary school careers (see Figure 4). While we acknowledge that procedural objectivism could theoretically influence some responses, the consistent and significant decline of naive and positivist positions across the entire sample, combined with the strong majority endorsing constructivist views, suggests more than a superficial adaptation. Therefore, we consider the conclusion to be well-supported by the data.

The data retrospectively collected from adult students do not permit us to ascertain why this might be; we must therefore refrain from assertions about whether this is a process of general maturation, a matter of domain-specific instruction, the influence of university teaching or an interplay of diverse facets of experience. It is, however, doubtless reassuring that, as Figure 4 illustrates, the emphatic majority (83.7%) of secondary school graduates who progress to degree-level studies have learned the lessons about history that the school system intends. A plausible explanation may lie in the specific structure of the Austrian teaching profession. Although the training of history teachers was standardised

in 2014 – establishing a unified curriculum and qualification framework for all future teachers – the situation in practice, particularly at the time of data collection at the lower secondary level, remained heterogeneous. Prior to the reform, teacher education for *Mittelschulen* (middle schools) consisted of only three years of study, and it was not uncommon for teachers without a formal specialisation in history to be assigned to teach the subject. At the time the data were collected, approximately 16% of history teachers at *Mittelschulen* were teaching the subject without holding a formal qualification in history, that is, without having completed a subject-specific degree programme. This structural inconsistency may have contributed to variations in historical knowledge and instructional approaches encountered in the field (Kipman and Kühberger, 2020). Furthermore, Kipman and Kühberger (2020) have demonstrated that significant differences within the teaching profession can influence both history instruction and the way textbooks are used in the classroom. Teachers with an academic background in history education – that is, those who have completed a specialised degree in history teaching and attended a greater number of courses in history education – report a stronger tendency to promote critical engagement with historical representations. Similar patterns were observed regarding attitudes towards domain-specific competence orientation: older, male, subject-certified teachers with higher academic qualifications emphasise these aspects significantly more (Kipman and Kühberger, 2020). It is therefore plausible that the teaching staff at the upper secondary level – composed exclusively of teachers holding a formal qualification in history teaching – exert a distinct influence, which may be reflected in the data. However, there is currently no empirical evidence to confirm this assumption.

A recent study conducted in Estonia, which examined the relationship between instructional teaching practices and epistemic beliefs in history education, concluded that there was no significant correlation between the two constructs (Kaarlõpa et al., 2025). Research specifically focusing on the development of epistemic beliefs indicates that the scholarly landscape in this field still demands substantial refinement and differentiation. Whereas the present study offers systemic feedback derived from a large-scale format, investigations such as those by Potjer et al. (2024) on elementary teachers' beliefs reveal that developmental processes are not necessarily unidirectional; instead, multiple beliefs may coexist, and they may be simultaneously engaged and strategically utilised. It is certainly necessary to continue research in this direction and, for the time being, to regard quantitative findings such as those presented here merely as points of orientation.

These findings notwithstanding, we would be unwise to overlook the other types, although the data here suggest that their numbers all reduce substantially from lower to upper secondary school. More broadly based qualitative studies on epistemic aspects of students' engagement with history and the past might flesh out the positions qualitatively outlined here, giving us access to the arguments and ideas that underlie them. We note with some puzzlement the particularly sharp drop in numbers of the positivist type, which, after all, is a position frequently reflected in such artefacts of popular historical culture as museums, television documentaries and works of historical non-fiction.

Limitation and future directions

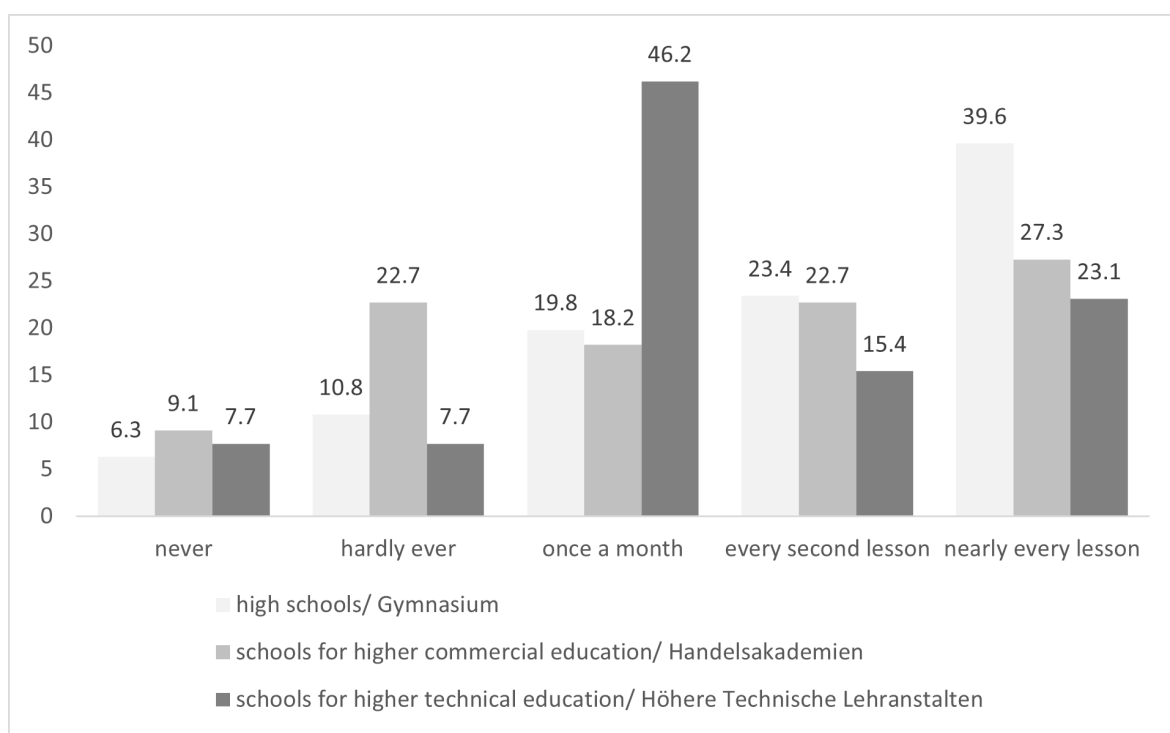
One of the limitations of this study is its retrospective design, with respondents looking back on their schooldays, which may have produced a degree of distortion. However, when considering differing assessments from various disciplinary perspectives, it becomes evident that the use of recalls can indeed lead to reliable data. In a study on the reliability of recall data, Shirley Dex (1995) found that memories of concrete, localised and temporally well-anchored events – such as recalling history lessons in upper secondary school, as is the case in the present study – tend to be more reliable. The fact that the events in question took place only a few years prior and are recalled by young respondents further supports this position (Dex, 1995). Moreover, the present data do not refer to a single discrete event in the past, but rather to experiences that occurred routinely over an extended period of time. We therefore assume that any distortions resulting from recall processes are minimal. This interpretation is further supported by the fact that such forms of recall are also recognised as valid within legal psychology discourse (Arntzen et al., 2011; Bliesener et al., 2014). The extent of the validity of data generated a posteriori from former upper secondary school students now in tertiary education may require some consideration. The risk here is that we have lost a large number of former upper secondary school students who entered the labour market after graduating, rather than remaining in education. Recruiting our respondents exclusively from students in higher education may have provided us with a population more given to reflecting on matters of history, and specifically on the questions asked in the study. A source of distortion lies, unavoidably,

in the nature of surveys that require the recording of knowledge and attitudes founded on memories of past schooldays; this may reduce validity and obscure the degree to which we can identify abilities relating to historical thinking as having been acquired in school or after graduation.

Cross-sectional studies, as presented here, are a well-established method in educational research, particularly when aiming to capture developmental patterns across educational stages. Although heterogeneity between the groups exists in factors such as age and educational experience, the design of the study intentionally reflects these differences to provide a broader and more nuanced perspective on the research question.

Finally, we find ourselves facing further issues, new to the field, raised by the rather surprising findings on the frequency of history textbook use. Which educational approaches in upper secondary school settings take over the share of in-class time that had been devoted to textbooks in lower secondary schools, but apparently no longer in the more advanced grades? To find robust answers to this question, we would need further empirical research based on ethnographic observation in exploratory settings. We may safely assume that the different types of upper secondary school in Austria, with their general, technical or commercial emphases, will each ascribe varying importance to history as a subject, and that these emphases will influence the types of teaching practised in these institutions. Comparison of the data for each school type (see Figure 5) shows the highest frequency of use at high schools (*Gymnasium*, with an academic emphasis), with 63% reporting use 'nearly every lesson' or 'every second lesson'; this is presumably due to continuity of traditions arising from lower secondary schools, and to the fact that some of the history teachers concerned teach both lower and upper secondary classes.

Figure 5. Frequency of use in different types of Austrian upper secondary schools (%)



Former students of schools for higher technical education (*Höhere Technische Lehranstalten*) who reported use 'nearly every lesson' or 'every second lesson' represent a smaller proportion, at 38.5%; schools for higher commercial education (*Handelsakademien*) are in the middle, with half saying that they used textbooks at these frequencies. It appears, therefore, that the stronger the humanities emphasis of the school, the more frequent the use of history textbooks.

Although the significance level was reached, we acknowledge that the effect is likely to be small, and it should therefore be interpreted with caution. The analysis indicates that a higher frequency of textbook use is more strongly associated with content-orientated teaching practices. This relationship is

reflected in the stronger correlation between frequency of use and content-orientated scales compared to critical use. Thus, content orientation is more likely where textbooks are used frequently, although both approaches coexist.

One influencing factor that must be acknowledged among the limitations is the training of teachers. While, since 2015, all history teachers in Austria have been trained for both lower and upper secondary levels through a combined bachelor's and master's degree programme, this was not yet the case at the time the data presented here were collected. At the time, teachers at upper secondary schools, as well as those teaching at Gymnasium-type lower secondary schools, typically held university degrees in teaching history. In contrast, teachers at *Mittelschule* – another type of lower secondary school – had generally completed a three-year teacher training programme, which was later converted into a bachelor's degree programme starting in 2007. In these schools, it is not always guaranteed that history lessons are taught by teachers with a formal qualification in history. There are currently no reliable data on the proportion of non-specialist teachers teaching history without domain-specific certification. Despite the ongoing joint training of all history teachers, unqualified teachers continue to be employed in history instruction at *Mittelschulen*. It remains questionable whether these systemic interventions in teacher education will lead to substantial changes at the *Mittelschule*.

Conclusion

The present study has found notable differences in frequency of history textbook use between lower and upper secondary schools in Austria, with somewhat less frequent use in the latter, against the backdrop of markedly frequent use in both types of institution. In relation to students' conception of history, the proportion of students having completed upper secondary schooling who are able to identify history in textbooks as driven by interests, intentions, sources and so on, and who therefore identify with the 'constructivist' type of historical thinking, is strikingly higher than that of current students in lower secondary schools.

Analysis of types of history textbook use indicates greater content orientation among students reporting frequent use; this said, we found no statistical evidence that frequency of use influences the emergence or otherwise of critical historical thinking. LPA resulted in the identification of two clusters. Cluster 1, which is more constructivist in character and has a more strongly academically orientated understanding of history, comprises 61.6% of respondents, with over-representation of women and history students, and shows greater frequency of history textbook use. While the data in this study provide noteworthy leads, the general paucity of work to date on the use of history textbooks for upper secondary schools means that further research will be required to address the question of the relationship between textbook use and teachers' domain-specific teaching styles, and the matter of the effects of this relationship on students' historical thinking.

In order to be able to implement these types of studies, it will once again be necessary to observe the social practice of textbook use and to gain insight into the 'culture of usage' through ethnographic or focused qualitative research. Only on a broader basis of a triangulated research setting (Kelle et al., 2019; Morse and Niehaus, 2009; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2010) will it be possible to make even more differentiated statements about the use of the history textbook in Austrian upper secondary schools. For example, it would be important to find out whether and which learning media those history teachers use whose students stated that they 'never', 'hardly ever' or 'once a month' work with the textbook. In this way, other aspects of historical learning at school come into focus that have hardly ever been addressed to this day, such as worksheets created by teachers themselves (Bernhard, 2019) or other teaching media.

Data and materials availability statement

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The authors conducted the research reported in this article in accordance with the standards of the Ethics Committee of Pedagogical University of Salzburg.

Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

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

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