

My Historical Backpack

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ONLY A FEW DECADES AGO, work as a history teacher rarely involved anything but one-way communication with students. Teaching history at schools was often limited to political history, focused on its macro-level implications, such as conflicts and processes of state formation. The historical narrative used to focus on kings, aristocrats, plantation owners, and, for later periods, industrialists and politicians. This all-male cast of historical actors dominated textbooks and student assignments well after the Second World War. The Charlemagnes, Cromwells, Washingtons, and Hitlers of history became the heroes and villains of the past that generations of students celebrated for their virtues or booed for their evils.

However, the general understanding of what history is and how it is taught in a broader educational context has changed drastically since at least the 1960s. This is true for both history as an academic discipline and history as a school subject. The social and cultural turn within historical studies, as well as the development within the field of education, has had a major impact on both contents and methods in learning and understanding the past. Moreover, the increase in the number of multicultural classrooms—around the world and particularly in Europe and North America—points to the necessity of rethinking history in relation to the demands of

inclusive education for all young people.¹ In line with these new demands, ways of teaching history should be created that would enable students to accept differences of opinion, of conviction, of belief, and of lifestyle—while respecting the rule of law, diversity, and gender equality.²

To us, historical perspectives and knowledge about the past have a lot to offer students on these matters, and we are of the opinion that questions of diversity and democracy should be part and parcel of history education. Within the context of history teaching, this points to the need to take actual history learners into account and to put the students' own histories and identities at center stage. At the same time, there is relatively little understanding of what cultural diversity in an educational environment means for students' constructions of the past.³

The purpose of this article is to discuss the opportunities and challenges of using students' personal narratives of the past as a vehicle and catalyst for learning history. The point of departure is a research project entitled *My Historical Backpack*, conducted at Örebro University in Sweden since the fall of 2016. The project is a collaboration between the teacher training program at the university and several upper secondary schools (*gymnasieskolor*) and involves both history teachers and students in Örebro; it is carried out by three senior lecturers in history, the authors of this paper.

History Education in Swedish Upper Secondary Schools

Students in most European and American school systems are confronted with history teaching that is often framed in a nation- or Euro-centric manner. In this respect, Sweden is no exception. Before World War II, history as a subject in Swedish secondary education was linked to the idea that all Swedes shared a common ethno-national heritage. History teaching was thus part of a national project and was supposed to teach Swedish students values and moral lessons from the past in a national narrative where the Vikings and Sweden's period as a "Great Power" in Northern Europe were emphasized. However, during the post-war period, the form and content of history education changed markedly and developed from contributing to and legitimizing the construction of a nationally framed history towards an increasingly more diversified approach to the subject.⁴

History curricula, under the influence of ideals of democracy and equality, became more and more focused on citizenship education. In parallel to developments tied to growing interdisciplinarity within the field of historical studies, new perspectives started to gain traction that emphasized the use of history in the service of democracy and equal rights. As a result, history curricula were influenced by history from below, women's history, and the history of ethnic and sexual minorities, etc. Furthermore, the academic discipline of history became increasingly multifaceted, which had an important, follow-on impact on the teaching of history in upper secondary schools. New cultural perspectives, social theories, and the relationship between past and present were emphasized and pushed forward in both the field of historical studies and in history teaching. Thanks to these new perspectives, the subject of history in upper secondary schools was no longer exclusively tied to the political history of the nation. Indeed, in some very real sense, the teaching of a nationally framed history yielded to the teaching of diversity and democracy.⁵

The subject of history, both in school and the academy, was formed in relation to demands of ongoing social changes. Furthermore, teaching and learning history started to address both historical skills and contents.⁶ Students were seen as active learners who, by engaging with historical sources, so the argument went, learned to handle the complexity of history and historical interpretation. Furthermore, immigration-related identity issues have begun to challenge the previous understanding of what a common historical narrative is. Hence, the inclusive educational approach required, and still requires, new tools for accommodating students who (or whose families) had cultural experiences that differed from the majority of Sweden's population. Their perspectives and experiences have the potential to contrast and even challenge a nationally focused approach to history, which in turn can enrich students' understandings of the past. An increasingly important challenge for the subject has been to develop the historical skills necessary for students to understand how to deal with the fluidity of their past—a past which goes beyond the boundaries of identity and collective memory.⁷

The most recent curriculum for the courses in history in Swedish upper secondary schools was implemented in 2011 and stresses four main areas of instruction.⁸ Firstly, the students are taught how to use history as a frame of reference to better understand the present

and to give perspectives on societal changes to come. Secondly, students are trained in the usage of some basic theoretical approaches and to understand history as an interpretive discipline involving a variety of different perspectives. Thirdly, students are acquainted with historical skills—i.e., the methods and mindset of the academic discipline of history—and are tasked with posing historical questions and learning how to interpret historical sources. Finally, students are taught to analyze the uses and abuses of history in the present-day context: in popular culture, politics, commercials, etc. In conclusion, the Swedish curriculum combines elements of two different didactic traditions: one that emphasizes historical thinking and historical understanding, and another that centers on historical consciousness and historical narratives.⁹

The development of the Swedish history curriculum points to a change that has occurred in most European and North American school systems, which in turn raises the question on how best to conduct teacher training and to equip teachers and students for the challenges they will encounter in the contemporary history classroom. Two main challenges stand out when considering the Swedish context. One is the quite dense contemporary national history curriculum and its complex understanding of the subject of history. The curriculum places a high demand on upper secondary school students as they work with history from different perspectives and are asked to explore abstract concepts such as historical consciousness, identity formation, and the use of history.¹⁰ Analytically, it is quite a tall order for upper secondary school students. Nevertheless, this is the reality that needs to be addressed in teaching practices. The second challenge is the increasing complexity of multicultural classrooms in Swedish schools. Teaching contemporary students who are part of a global community—or, rather, global communities—solely about a nationally framed Swedish history is inadequate, both when considering the curriculum and present-day societal reality.¹¹

Both these challenges thus need to be addressed in the teacher training program. That is, teachers require the tools to both handle the complexities of the subject and be taught how to use inclusive teaching methods. The exercise *My Historical Backpack* offers a way to address the question on how teachers can implement democratic teaching in the history classroom in order to make it a common and inclusive learning space.

My Historical Backpack — The Exercise

The starting point of the exercise is the students' personal historical narratives. The name of the exercise, *My Historical Backpack*, is used metaphorically to express the idea that we all have personal historical experiences that we carry through life. This “backpack” connects us to the past and makes up an important part of our identity. Hence, it partially constitutes who we are and preconditions the way we learn about the past. Although the content of each backpack is unique, the historical experience is also shared with others. It is this mutuality of historical experience that the exercise approaches.¹²

Participants in the project are students, both at the teacher training program and in upper secondary schools. The main task of the exercise is to choose a material object that reflects some aspects of the students' family pasts. This can be a letter, a book, a photograph, clothing, souvenirs, etc., or just a picture of the object to be approached. Hence, the object represents a historical artifact with a story behind it. Both the object and the story need to have personal implications. At the same time, the chosen item should connect the story with a broader historical context, overarching historical processes, and common themes. The idea is that the chosen object helps the students to create their own narrative of the past and to reflect on the connection between their own history and a larger historical context. The lecturer leading the exercise helps students to activate their historical skills that they have already developed during their education and helps them to identify the links between the individual stories and larger historical processes. These links can be used as points of departure for the future individual research and studies and digging into specific historical contents.

Phase 1: University Lecturer with Trainee Teacher

The implementation of the exercise is conducted in two phases. The first phase is an introduction of the exercise, which is conducted by a lecturer at the university for students in the teacher training program. During a seminary, the lecturer “unpacks” their own historical backpack in front of the trainee teachers. “Unpacking” means a presentation of the object and the story surrounding it. The presentation lasts for about five minutes, and the significance

of the object and what it symbolizes is put in the context of the larger historical processes that the story implies. Thereafter, written instructions describing the exercise are distributed among the trainee teachers and they are encouraged to ask questions both on the experienced presentation and the exercise. After the introduction, the trainee teachers are given about two weeks to prepare their own historical backpacks, which will then be carried out in a comparable manner. Like in the introductory part, trainee teachers participating in the exercise choose an object linked to their personal history and train to construct an individual, historically informed story. The presentations of the trainee teachers' backpacks are carried out in smaller groups led by the lecturer and consisting of four to six students who listen to each other's stories. After the individual presentations, the participants are encouraged to reflect on the presented stories, as well as to comment on the choices of objects. A discussion on how the narratives relate to and differ from each other follows. Moreover, the presentations open for a follow-up discussion on questions concerning historicization of the individual presentations with relation to topics such as historical identity and historical consciousness. The aim here is to consider if and how the individual narrative relates to those of other students and to grasp freely emerging larger historical contexts, such as industrialization, migration, and development of the welfare state.

Phase 2: Trainee Teacher with Upper Secondary School Student

The second phase of the exercise involves the trainee teachers taking their own backpacks to upper secondary schools. The trainee teachers take on the main responsibility for conducting the exercise and leading the discussion. While running the *Historical Backpack* exercise, the trainee teachers follow the same pattern of the exercise as it was expounded in the university setting. In the first step, the trainee teachers unpack the backpacks with groups of upper secondary school students. At this stage, trainee teachers cooperate with upper secondary school teachers who support them with all necessary practicalities such as finding the right students in the right classroom, etc. Unpacking of the individual backpacks at the upper secondary schools is conducted exclusively by the trainee teachers who meet their students in small groups of four to six persons. The

task of the trainee teachers is to facilitate the discussions with their upper secondary students and to help them understand what makes the individual histories unique, find connections between them, and explore similarities and divergences in the narratives. Finally, the trainee teachers support their discussants in connecting the stories to larger historical contexts or processes.

Documentation and Feedback

All steps of the exercise are documented. The individual presentations during the seminars at both the university and in schools are filmed and stored. Moreover, after each seminar, all participants are asked to give their feedback on the exercise by filling in a feedback sheet. Both the audiovisual material and the feedback sheets make up the source material for this paper.¹³

My Historical Backpack — The Research Project

As recent research shows, students tend to reject nationally framed historical narratives if the diversity of identities represented in the classroom are not sufficiently considered.¹⁴ *My Historical Backpack* emphasizes the involvement of students in detailed discussions and takes its point of departure in an inclusive history education that has potential to challenge conventional narratives of the past.¹⁵ By focusing on historical artifacts, the purpose of the exercise is to stimulate students to present a historical account of their own and to offer an opportunity to discuss and reflect over the diversity of narratives. As a research project, *My Historical Backpack* aims at making students' multiple, hyphenated, and layered identities visible, exploring the tool's usefulness as an asset in history classrooms.

The project was started in 2016 and, since then, the complete exercise (from university to school students) has been conducted five times, involving in total almost 170 trainee teachers and close to 450 upper secondary school students. The response received is in general very positive from both trainee teachers and upper secondary school students. One advantage repeatedly mentioned in the feedback sheets was that the exercise offers students the opportunity to explore their own history and to connect it to larger historical processes.

In such a way, the exercise becomes a part of their own history instruction. The upper secondary school teachers with whom we cooperated affirm that the exercise offers their students new perspectives on history and historical thinking. The shared opinion of the participants is that the exercise is useful on many different levels. In the feedback sheets, one of the teacher trainees wrote: “It was especially interesting and challenging to connect my own history to broader perspectives...I realized that larger processes have had a profound impact on my own family history.” Another teacher trainee concluded that the exercise put focus on how “history and identity are connected with each other and that it offers high school students a meaningful entry to the study of history.”¹⁶

Looking at the collected material, one of our observations is that a majority of the participants, both upper secondary school students and trainee teachers, usually focus on their grandparents or great-grandparents. However, even if the historical timeframe seldom extends beyond contemporary or modern history, the individual accounts can often be related to various long-term historical processes. Hence, urbanization, industrialization, democratization, and migration are common themes that help students to contextualize their individual narratives.

Generally speaking, the accounts of both trainee teachers and upper secondary school students fall into two broad categories. The first tie the individual story into larger historical processes or contexts and thereby make their relatives the historical actors. These accounts connect the students to collective experiences of, for example, class formation, ethnic identification, etc. We understand these stories as a way for students to *exemplify history* and create meaning beyond the often rather bland textbook accounts of the past. The second type of account points to divergences and how to interpret and understand the past from different perspectives. We apprehend these accounts as a way for students to *problematize history* and to contrast their own story with other narratives of the past.

Exemplifying History

My Historical Backpack has the potential to exemplify history. The stories told in the classroom thus situate the students and their families in meaningful historical contexts and can help students to

understand history by reflecting on their own family past. In the following, we present two instances where the participants of the exercise exemplify history.

Lisa, Trainee Teacher

The first case concerns the historization of class identity and is an account given by Lisa, one of the trainee teachers. Lisa chose to link her story to a toy model of a Swedish-built car—a Saab. This toy car becomes a symbol of how Anders, her grandfather, found employment in the booming Swedish automobile industry after the Second World War.

Anders started working at Saab in the 1950s and worked there until his retirement in the late 1980s. Saab was a very influential company in the town of Trollhättan and played a large part in the family history during the post-war period. Far more than just being a workplace, the factory and the company were important in shaping the local community and Lisa's grandfather became, as she puts it, "a company man." Saab offered Anders the possibility of rising through the ranks, being offered to company-run courses, and ending up a foreman. In this way, through his employment, he experienced social mobility in a time when Sweden became a modern, industrialized country that could offer workers higher standards of living than were possible in previous generations.

Lisa's story, in essence, contextualizes her family's post-war history and addresses the importance of the emerging Swedish welfare state for her working-class family. The social security system, steady employment, and new possibilities for social mobility of the family members serve as positive examples to explain what the emerging welfare system meant in the lives of "ordinary people." In her story, she connects the history of her grandfather to a number of historical processes such as industrial change, urbanization, and the development of a modern society.

Lisa's story thus deals with positioning of the family history in a local and national context through a focus on class identity, gender relations, and the role of economic growth during the post-war period. We interpret Lisa's story as an example of *exemplifying history*; her family history becomes a lens through which she sees the causes and effects of overarching historical processes.

Tinka, Upper Secondary School Student

The second case concerns Tinka, an upper secondary school student, who exemplifies global history through an account of her family history. Tinka brought to school a traditional female shawl of the Karen people, a minority of Burma. The shawl was a gift from Tinka's mother and is used as an entry point to a presentation of Tinka's identity as a Karen woman. Here, through Tinka's sense of historical identity, her family history is placed center stage in global historical processes.

In her presentation, Tinka creates a story about belonging and identity of the Karen, "her people" that had their roots in present-day Mongolia, but who had migrated to Burma. Thereafter, she continues speaking about nineteenth-century colonialism and about how "her people" fared in this "new place" during British rule. When the British left, the situation of "her people" deteriorated when civil war broke out. In her story, she affirms her minority identity and emphasizes that "her people" have suffered from constant conflict with, and suppression by, the Burmese ever since the end of the Second World War. Tinka is seventeen years old and was born in Thailand. In her story, her family is forced to flee and settle in Thailand, where her younger siblings are also born. After a few years, the family continues to Sweden, where they attempt to settle again. Tinka's grandmother is still left in Burma and is an important link to the family's past, which is why the family keeps regular contact with her. Thus, the grandmother is the key to maintaining bonds with the family past and Tinka's Karen identity.

Tinka's story is connected to a family history and concretizes historical processes. In the case of the latter, this happens by a focus on belonging and identification. As we can conclude, the "we" that Tinka refers to in her narrative is not, strictly speaking, the same "we" throughout, and her sense of belonging takes on many different forms. Sometimes, "we" signifies a belonging to an ancient people with their roots in contemporary Mongolia, while the "we" in the modern history of the former British colony of Burma makes up a persecuted minority. The "we" sometimes also signifies being part of a decolonized Burma left by the British. Finally, "we" is also used to describe family belonging and its importance after the move to Sweden. In this story, a number of different collective identities are displayed: family, Karen, Burmese, Swedish, immigrant, and

female. These are connected to the process of identity formation and a sense of connection with the past. In this respect, “we” signals identity and belonging throughout the historical narrative, whilst at the same time, it confirms and connects Tinka and her multi-layered and complex family history to overarching processes of historical change: processes such as de-colonization, minorities in state-building processes in Asia, migration, and globalization.

Exemplifying Identifications and Identities

The second example confirms the already observed tendency towards considering identifications rather than identities in history education provided by sociocultural psychology focusing on narratives.¹⁷ Tinka’s shawl is a point of departure to tell her audience about the complex relationship between history, identity, gender, and migration. In the case of Tinka’s story, one can see how students focus on their own identifications and make them historically significant in the classroom and, by doing so, they become significant in the context of Swedish history, at least for the duration of the exercise.

Global history is a recurring topic in students’ accounts that relates to identities and family backgrounds that are not always historically situated in Sweden. The stories show that the exercise is often used as an opportunity to address cultural otherness. These accounts vary strongly and are interesting due to the fact that they can be understood as historical voices of various cultural groups living in Sweden, groups such as migrants and minorities. These voices are seldom heard, and the multicultural perspectives are seldom touched upon in Swedish history textbooks even if textbooks’ impact on students’ motivation to get involved with history is well documented, both in general and as a subject at school.¹⁸ Thus, the student stories give different perspectives on social diversity encountered in Swedish schools and, at the same time, effectively illustrate a factual development in contemporary Swedish history.

Problematizing History

Exemplifying history is, however, not the only way in which the *My Historical Backpack* exercise can be meaningful. Even though the stories to some extent always connect to specific historical

contexts and become examples of historical processes, some stories also have a potential to challenge or provide nuance to participants' understanding of the past. In fact, each of the stories provides an individual account based on an individual understanding of the past. The encounter of these accounts can be complementary, but they can also be conflicting. Thus, to *problematize history* means to challenge and confront the participants with alternative ways of understanding specific historical events and processes and to emphasize that people understand and experience history in different ways. Below, we present two cases where *My Historical Backpack* participants problematize history.

Martha, Trainee Teacher

The teacher trainee, Martha, pulls an old identity document from her backpack that used to belong to her grandfather, Urho, and she tells a story full of pain and sadness. Urho owned a petrol station in Finland, but after he went bankrupt in the 1950s, he migrated to Sweden. Urho got a job at a factory in southern Sweden, but living in the new country made him unhappy. He started drinking, and died with alcoholism only nine years after arriving.

With its focus on Finnish labor migration, the story might function as a corrective to an often-told success story about how the Swedish welfare state developed and provided work and prosperity for everybody. At the same time, it is clear that Martha is closely connected to another often-retold history: one about the unhappy and alcoholic Finnish migrant who never becomes a part of Swedish society. Therefore, Martha's story about Urho gives a different perspective on the development of Swedish industrial society and the emerging Swedish welfare state than the one Lisa presents in her story. The development of the Swedish industrial sector required large numbers of workers. For some of these industrial workers, especially migrants, the new jobs obtained in Sweden were not enough because the new environment they found themselves in led to social alienation, cultural isolation, and a sense of rootlessness. Martha's story, hence, complements the simplified textbook narrative that emphasizes national economic prosperity as the only significant result of the booming industrial growth. Welfare thus refers to the state's economic, political, and social development, rather than to

the welfare of the state's inhabitants. In this sense, Martha's story problematizes the well-established and simplified success story of the booming Swedish welfare state of the 1960s.

Moreover, there is another challenge in Martha's story that is related to the fact that Martha, like most of the participating students, refers to her family story, which is personal to her. This personal aspect of history, especially when containing a dark side as in Martha's story, makes the situation of the exercise emotionally charged. In the case of Martha's story, the university teacher who led the conversation after her emotional and tearful presentation was confronted with a challenging situation. In spite of the fact that Martha's story offers plenty of potential to problematize history, Martha's emotional reaction requires more than just a historical contextualization of her family past. The university teacher needs to initiate a discussion on how history can be something personal, and emphasize that the trainee teachers need to be prepared to be faced and handle strong emotions when leading the exercise with the upper secondary school students.

Marcus, Upper Secondary School Student

Marcus' story also roused strong feelings in the classroom, even if in quite a different way to Martha's. Marcus, an upper secondary student, pulls out a photograph of his grandmother from his backpack and tells a story about her upbringing in the Third Reich during World War II. After the war and the division of Germany, she became a citizen of East Germany (GDR). In the early 1950s, she migrated to Sweden, found employment, and started a family. Marcus seems to have quite a detailed grasp of his grandmother's past. In Marcus' story, she is a strong person, shaped by her emigration from Germany. Quite surprisingly, though, before he starts telling his story, he emphasizes how he always thought that his grandmother had fled the Nazi regime to Sweden. Even after his story and during the common discussion in the classroom, he continues not to recognize the significance of the Cold War context of the 1950s. Marcus' grandmother fled the GDR, and even if she was indeed a refugee, she did not flee the Nazi regime as he initially believed. As Marcus points out, the economic depression at the end of WWII strongly impacted the lives of ordinary people like his grandmother's. However, the economic crisis also continued after the war. The fact that the

establishment of Soviet political control meant, among many other things, economic uncertainty for GDR citizens and in fact forced many of them out of the country was the missing piece in Marcus' story about his grandmother's migration to Sweden. Marcus' history education at school and the strong narrative about Nazi persecution of European Jews as well as the history of refuge from the Nazi regime to Sweden during the 1930s have not only interfered with Marcus' understanding of history, but also confused his understanding of his grandmother's past. In this sense, the exercise helped Marcus to position his grandmother's story in a meaningful "grand narrative" and to understand his grandmother's past—not as a victim of Nazi persecution, but as a political refugee from GDR. For the students participating in the exercise, Marcus' story contributed an interesting nuance to their learning about ordinary people's situations in Germany during the second half of the 1940s, which is only mentioned in the textbooks in the context of the general destruction of Europe after WWII and often lacking details regarding the impact on people's lives. For Marcus, however, the historicization of the economic crisis in the Soviet-controlled zone after WWII had a considerable emotional impact, as it destroyed the picture of his grandmother as a victim of Nazi persecution and instead opened questions regarding his grandmother's past during World War II.

Problematizing Legacies and Tragedies

The emotional dimensions of Martha's and Marcus' stories vary strongly. To Marcus, his grandmother is a historical riddle whose experiences have become a family legacy. Martha's story—her tragic description of her grandfather's life—is just as sensitive a subject in the context of her family history, but she does not claim that his destiny has shaped her own life in any significant way. This in itself may be because Martha, as she says herself, never got to meet her grandfather. Marcus, on the contrary, describes a sort of hardness of heart in his grandmother that lives on in his father and also in himself. In this sense, Marcus seems to consider his grandmother's history as a kind of inherited sin—or at least a rather heavy backpack to carry. Marcus believes that his grandmother and her story have influenced the family and have also shaped him as a person. He is far from alone among the high school students in looking at his parents'

or grandparents' history in such a way. When high school students reflect on the exercise and reflect on what they have learned, many express the sentiment that working with their historical backpacks has provided them not so much with a knowledge of history, but with more general "lessons for life." This becomes clear in a reading of the feedback forms that students fill in after the exercise.

The trainee teachers make other reflections on the exercise or, rather, they reflect on how the small, personal stories are integrated into a larger historical context. The exercise seems to have taught many of them the importance of placing the object of the backpack in a historical context. In general, the trainee teachers seem to find it easier to distinguish and distance themselves from the story they are telling. This also applies to Martha. She is certainly deeply moved by the story of her grandfather, and she emphasizes that her family has been affected by her grandfather's fate. But, unlike Marcus, she takes an "outside position" to the events and does not become part of the story she tells, nor does she play an important role in the story.

Martha's and Marcus' stories are also interesting as they highlight, in slightly different ways, other aspects of the development of the Swedish welfare state and the history of the Third Reich compared to those that are often used in Swedish textbooks. In Marcus' case, this is particularly evident; several of the high school students who listened to him are affected by his story, and one of the students explained that she now has a different perspective on living conditions in Germany during World War II and that "not only Jews suffered during the war," but also "regular Germans."

In different ways and to different degrees, the stories that problematize history open a different way of looking at the more general historical processes of change to which they relate; they become a kind of didactic "battering ram" that can give trainee teachers and high school students alike a more detailed picture of history and perhaps also challenge their own family history, as well as larger, more well-established historical narratives.

Lessons From the Exercise

The *My Historical Backpack* exercise provides a general model based on student participation that uses students' personal stories of the past and develops their historical thinking skills. At the

same time, it supports active learning in the history classroom and underlines the importance of the cultural diversity surrounding and pervading students' understanding of the past. The strength of the exercise is the simplicity of the concept and its adaptability to different educational contexts. For us as researchers, the exercise is primarily a way of teaching our trainee teachers how to handle two major challenges in their future careers as history teachers—i.e., helping students to develop the complex understanding of the past that the curricula require and creating an inclusive history teaching in the context of a multicultural classroom. The exercise acknowledges that personal historical background and experience matters for the process of teaching history at schools and universities. In this sense, the effects and results of the exercise are twofold: pedagogical and sociocultural.

Some students' stories challenge an often uniform and simplified picture of the past by attaching their family histories to the content of the history textbooks. Their narrations of the past represent collective memories that are framed by processes of identity formation opposing "us" to "them." This opposition has consequences for the relationship between students' stories and textbooks. The students' backgrounds lie partly beyond the frame of the textbook narratives that the students are not entirely admitted to. What we can see is that, through the student stories, history is brought alive and that the exercise as a whole has the potential to supplement or challenge the history textbooks.

Opposing or intertwining perspectives on the past during common discussions in the classroom provide insightful ideas that make history education more in tune with intercultural reality at school and beyond. The exercise offers students the time and space to share and re-evaluate a personal past, often already formed and negotiated at home. In this respect, students' understanding of the past encounters the type of history taught at school.¹⁹ During the discussions, the students' stories of the past, including their understanding of this past, become a broader topic involving a variety of perspectives. At the same time, from the perspective of history education itself more generally, the exercise actively meets schools' and universities' endeavor towards an inclusive history education, as it involves articulation of a variety of perspectives on the past in a constructive and intercultural dialogue.

The students' feedback also shows that the exercise is widely appreciated by participants. One of the oft-stressed valuable effects is that the exercise introduces the students to their own family history, which not only increases participants' intrinsic motivation to learn more about the past, but also strengthens personal bonds and social relations beyond the classroom. At the same time, it is essential that the teachers help students to embed their artifacts, and the stories surrounding them, in a historical context. This is even more important when upper secondary students unpack their backpacks. Otherwise, there is a risk that the exercise only provides a general popular knowledge that does not necessarily extend students' historical thinking in relation to the narrated past.

To sum up, if carefully conducted and historically contextualized, the *My Historical Backpack* exercise can provide several interesting effects in the process of teaching history, both at university and in schools. Not least, it adds nuance and opens new perspectives on the past. In addition, the exercise gives voice to ordinary people focusing on their past. These voices rarely make it into history textbooks. So, rather than letting Charlemagne, Cromwell, Washington, and Hitler become the sole historical actors, this exercise has the potential to create historical understanding by placing the students and their histories center stage. It is, after all, the students who tell their stories.

Notes

1. The importance of inclusive education is recognized as a central aim of the 2015 Paris Declaration. European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, *Declaration on Promoting Citizenship and the Common Values of Freedom, Tolerance and Non-Discrimination through Education* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2016), <https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/education/news/2015/documents/citizenship-education-declaration_en.pdf>.

2. Keith C. Barton and Linda S. Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 25-44; Antoni Santisteban, Joan Pagès, and Liliana Bravo, "History Education and Global Citizenship Education," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Citizenship and Education*, ed. Ian Davies et al. (London, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 457-472; Justin Detmers, "Scholarship or Teaching: Understanding History as an Academic Discipline or as a School Subject," *Curriculum and Teaching*

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3. Maria Johansson, *Historieundervisning och interkulturell kompetens* (Karlstad, Sweden: Karlstad University Press, 2012); Kenneth Nordgren, *Vems är historien?: Historia som medvetande, kultur och handling i det mångkulturella Sverige* (Karlstad, Sweden: Karlstad University Press, 2006).

4. Tommie Lundquist, "Från Gud och fosterlandet till arbetet, freden och världen: Historieämnet i den obligatoriska svenska skolans undervisnings- och läroplaner 1878-1980," *Kronos* 1 (1988): 19-76; Ole Elgström and Mats Hellstenius, "How History Became a Core Subject in Swedish Upper Secondary Schools," *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 54, no. 6 (December 2010): 565-580; Niklas Ammert, *Historia som kunskap: Innehåll, mening och värden i möten med historia* (Lund, Sweden: Nordic Academic Press 2013), 25-40. See also Thomas Nygren, *History in the Service of Mankind: International Guidelines and History Education in Upper Secondary Schools in Sweden, 1927-2002* (Umeå, Sweden: Department of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies, Umeå University, 2011).

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7. Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2002).

8. Skolverket, *Ämnesplan i historia för gymnasieskolan*, <<https://www.skolverket.se/undervisning/gymnasieskolan/laroplan-program-och-amnen-i-gymnasieskolan/gymnasieprogrammen/amne>>.

9. The gradual re-orientation of the school subject of history has, during the past decades, generated an extensive body of Swedish didactic research on subjects such as student perceptions of history, the historical bases of identity formation, and new teaching practices in history. This research has had a strong focus on how to develop historical consciousness or historical thinking of history students. Some recent examples are Johan Samuelsson and Joakim Wendell, "Historical Thinking about Sources in the Context of Standards-Based Curriculum: A Swedish Case," *The Curriculum Journal* 27, no. 4 (December 2016): 479-499; Robert Thorp, "How to Develop Historical Consciousness through Uses of History - A Swedish Perspective," *Historical Encounters* 7, no. 1 (2020): 50-61; Robert Thorp and Anders Persson, "On Historical Thinking and the History Educational Challenge," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 52, no. 8 (2020): 891-901; Joakim Wendell,

Teaching and Learning Historical Explanation: Teacher and Student Cases from Lower and Upper Secondary History (Karlstad, Sweden: Department of Political, Historical, Religious and Cultural Studies, Karlstad University, 2020).

10. See, for example, Ammert, *Historia som kunskap*; and Henrik Åström Elmersjö, *En av staten godkänd historia: Förhandsgranskning av svenska läromedel och omförhandlingen av historieämnet 1938-1991* (Lund, Sweden: Nordic Academic Press, 2017).

11. Kenneth Nordgren and Maria Johansson, "Intercultural Historical Learning: A Conceptual Framework," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 47, no. 1 (2015): 1-25. See also Vanja Lozic, *I historiekansons skugga: Historieämne och identifikationsformering i 2000-talets mångkulturella samhälle* (Malmö, Sweden: Malmö högskola, 2010); and KG Hammarlund, "Historia som ämnesdisciplin och vardagsliv - ämnesdidaktiska utmaningar i ett flerkulturellt samhälle," *Norddidactica* no. 3 (2015): 1-18.

12. For a full description of the exercise and the instructions offered to the participants, see Appendix A and Appendix B.

13. Research material collected within the project is a private research collection administrated by Örebro University. In order to gain access to this research material, please e-mail the authors of this article.

14. Terrie Epstein and Jessica T. Schiller, "Perspective Matters: Social Identity and the Teaching and Learning of National History," *Social Education* 69, no. 4 (May-June 2005): 201-204; Maria Grever, Ben Pelzer, and Terry Haydn, "High School Students' Views on History," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 43, no. 2 (2011): 207-229; Kate Hawkey and Jayne Prior, "History, Memory Cultures and Meaning in the Classroom," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 43, no. 2 (2011): 231-247; Mario Carretero, María Rodríguez-Moneo, and Mikel Asensio, "History Education and the Construction of a National Identity," in *History Education and the Construction of National Identities*, ed. Mario Carretero, Mikel Asensio, and María Rodríguez-Moneo (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing 2012), 1-14.

15. Kate Hawkey, "History and Super Diversity," *Education Sciences* 2, no. 4 (2012): 165-179; Floor Van Alphen and Karel Van Nieuwenhuysse, "Conceptualizing 'Identity' in History Education Research," *Yearbook of the International Society of History Didactics* 40 (2019): 81-114.

16. Research material collected within the project is a private research collection administrated by Örebro University. In order to gain access to this research material, please e-mail the authors of this article.

17. Keith C. Barton and Alan W. McCully, "History, Identity, and the School Curriculum in Northern Ireland: An Empirical Study of Secondary Students' Ideas and Perspectives," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 37, no. 1 (2005): 85-116.

18. Lozic, *I historiekansons skugga*, 206; Henrik Åström Elmersjö, *Norden, nationen och historien: Perspektiv på föreningarna Nordens historieläroboksrevision 1919-1972* (Lund, Sweden: Nordic Academic Press, 2013), 29; Lina Spjut, *Att (ut)bilda ett folk: Nationell och etnisk gemenskap i Sveriges och Finlands svenskspråkiga läroböcker för folk - och grundskola åren 1866-2016* (Örebro, Sweden: Örebro University, 2018), 253-256.

19. Nordgren and Johansson, "Intercultural Historical Learning," 12.

Appendix A: Instructions for *My Historical Backpack* for Students at the Teacher Training Program

My Historical Backpack An Exercise

As a prospective teacher, you will need to reflect on the heterogeneity of the student groups you will approach and work with at school. This is important not least for History teachers, given the variety of historical images and stories that surround us, as well as the breadth of historical experiences that students will bring to your classes.

Meeting your students, you will find many different family histories that can be shared as a story about their personal pasts. This family history is, in fact, a patchwork of personal stories and family myths that every person uses to connect with “the past,” i.e., the broader historical context. The historian Klas-Göran Karlsson calls this individual connection with the past the genealogical aspect of History in school because it is related to the individual’s identity and the process of identity formation. History and identity are the starting point for the work on the *My Historical Backpack* project that you as a history student in the teacher training program will work with over the coming weeks.

For you, the purpose of the project is to gain an understanding to the variety of perspectives on the past that exist in the contemporary secondary school classroom. Our hope is that you also want to participate in our research project that maps which historical stories are important for Swedish secondary school students and how well-prepared history students in the teacher training program are to meet secondary school students’ needs in discussions about history.

The *My Historical Backpack* exercise will be conducted as follows:

- Initially, one of your lecturers will provide you with an introduction to the project and highlight the *My Historical Backpack* teaching exercise as a way to strengthen students’ own historical identities and create an understanding of the variety of perspectives on history; a past that is common for everybody. Thereafter, the lecturer will demonstrate how the exercise is to be conducted by talking about an object that is connected to the lecturer’s own historical past—an object that reflects both the teacher’s personal story and a larger historical context. During the presentation, you as a student have the opportunity to ask questions about both the presented object and the story.

- After the introduction, you will then be given the task of packing your historical backpack yourself, which means that you will choose an object that reflects your history and you will be expected to situate this object and your story in the larger historical context.
- In the classroom at the university, you will gather with other students and the lecturer in groups of five. One by one, you will tell your story about the object pulled from your historical backpack. The storytelling will last for about seven minutes per person. After your presentation, the lecturer will lead a group discussion with all participants, reflecting on the presented stories and aimed at deepening to larger historical contexts. In this group discussion, you will connect “the little story” to “the big history.” Later, when the exercise is to be carried out at an upper secondary school, it will be your task to act as the conversation leader and to support the students in their discussions about their historical backpacks.

Some examples of the objects that can be found in a historical backpack include: letters, books, photographs, clothing, jewelry, souvenirs, etc. If you do not bring a “real” object or if it is difficult to bring into the classroom, you can bring a picture of it or something that symbolizes the object. For example, getting your grandfather’s motorcycle into the classroom is not easy. Here, perhaps a picture of this motorcycle or a toy motorcycle can serve as a point of departure for your story.

Please let your lecturer know if you would like to participate in the described research project as soon as possible. Your participation matters! It helps us to create a better History teacher education, based on scientific knowledge of how History students in the teacher training program develop their historical skills and abilities.

Appendix B: Instructions for *My Historical Backpack* for Students at the Upper Secondary Schools

My Historical Backpack

Talking about the Historical Past Based on an Object

Everyone participates in history and carries their own story about the past.

This personal story is, of course, about ourselves, but we are never alone in creating it. Everybody is a link in a historical chain that makes us into who we are. At the same time, these many, many links shape the history of the world. Different things can be important to us in our own history. For some, older relatives (living or dead) might play an important role. For others, it can be a particular place or event of significance.

In *My Historical Backpack*, you will be able to tell some of your classmates about your own story. Before the exercise, you will have to pack a backpack with an object that you think is important to describing a moment that forms part of your own history.

Before the exercise in the classroom, your task is:

- To choose an object that reflects your own history.
- To prepare yourself to talk about the chosen object, and to think about how and in what ways it is important in your past.
- To prepare a presentation that is about five minutes long.

The object you choose should in some way describe your own historical past. It can be linked to your family history, to a place that has shaped your understanding of belonging, is for some different reason important for your past, or is anything else that connects you with the past. It is important to choose an object that not only describes yourself and your interests, but also that has importance for your family past.

Some examples of the objects that can be found in a historical backpack include: letters, books, photographs, clothing, jewelry, souvenirs, etc. If you do not bring a “real” object or if it is difficult to bring into the classroom, you can bring a picture of it or something that symbolizes the object. For example, getting your grandfather’s motorcycle into the classroom is not easy. Here, perhaps a picture of this motorcycle or a toy motorcycle can serve as a point of departure for your story.

In the classroom, you will unpack your historical backpack and talk about your item in a group of five or six classmates, who have also prepared their own backpacks. Each of you will share the own story and then answer questions posed by your classmates. Telling the story, you will be able to justify your choice of item. *Why did you choose it? Why is this item important for you? What is the story behind this object? Are there any other items you could have chosen to tell your story?*

The exercise will be led by a student participating in the teacher training program. During the session in the classroom, the group will discuss the similarities and differences between your activity and you will reflect on what way the history that you learn at school (“the big history”) is connected with your own story (“the little story”).



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