



# The Trajectory of Elementary and Middle School Students' Perceptions of the Concept of History

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## Abstract

The current study aims to reveal the trajectory (change) of the perception of the concept of history during elementary and middle school years through students' responses to the question, "What is history in your opinion?" The cross-sectional research design was the preferred method to provide stronger opportunity for the current study to reach its broad target by allowing the simultaneous study of various age groups. The study group consisted of 712 students of various socio-economic statuses from six schools. The data collection tool used for the elementary level first- and second-grade students was an interview, whereas for all higher grades, it was an interview form. Data obtained were analysed through content analysis, resulting in the conclusion that students had three different perceptions of history. Perceptions of history as time exhibited a decline from the beginning of elementary school to the end of middle school, whereas the perception of history as a current activity showed an increasing ascent. Perceptions of history as past remained important all along the trajectory and also showed gradual increases. One of the important results obtained from the current study was that students, from the third grade and above, gradually began to own the history. Their characterization of the past activities transformed to our past activities over time. In conclusion, we contend that the centre of gravity for elementary and middle school students' perceptions of history reside in the past rather than the present.

## Keywords

Elementary Students, History Education, Middle School Students, Perception of History, Perception Trajectory.

The past is an important part of both adults' and children's social and physical environments (Aslan, 2006). A child's capacity to comprehend the nature of history surfaces at a very early age, and most children begin school equipped with a considerable amount of knowledge of history (Hoodless, 1998). Students' knowledge of history affects their response to "What is history?" Multiple meanings in responses and younger children's ability to express their thoughts more clearly than their older counterparts, are parallel with their knowledge (Barton, 1994, 2002; Lee, Dickinson, & Ashby, 1996; Levstik & Pappas, 1987; Safran & Şimşek, 2006). Development of a perception of history

in pre-school children (ages 4–5), who exhibit some understanding of their response to "What is history?" continues throughout elementary school.

Students view history at all levels as relating to the concept of time and chronology. Even second grade students used large categories of time as a means to discuss the relationship between history and time (Alabaş & Dilek, 2009; Levstik & Pappas, 1987; Safran & Şimşek, 2006; Şimşek, 2007).

Students often define history as *that which happened in the past* (Alabaş & Dilek, 2009; Barton, 2008; Brophy, VanSledright, & Bredin, 1992; Goalen, 1999; Papanikolaou, 2008; VanSledright & Brophy, 1992; VonHeyking, 2004; Waldron, 2003). Fourth

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to eighth grade students primarily used the concept of the past in the definitions they constructed (Safran & Şimşek, 2006; Şimşek, 2007). Detailed, in-depth examinations, however, present different evaluations. Students, as early as second grade, had some understanding of history as the study of important past events (Levstik & Pappas, 1987), and children in the fifth grade seemed more inclined to describe noteworthy events as history (VanSledright & Brophy, 1992). Fifth grade children further defined history as happenings of far past (VanSledright & Brophy, 1992). Studies have been conducted on the high school level as well and have obtained completely conflicting results (Tekeli, 1998a).

Research has shown that students develop to also incorporate the subjects of *continuity and change* that Seixas (1996) considers a basic within the discipline of history. Fourth and fifth grade students viewed history as a process to progress toward *an advanced life style* (Barton, 1996; Waldron, 2003). Sixth grade students emphasized the concept of *continuity* by defining history as *the time that has passed since the beginning of world, all happenings that have taken place since the past times and the time that has passed up to present day* (Alabaş & Dilek, 2009). Safran and Şimşek's (2006) study observed that students from the fourth to eighth grades referred to the concepts of change and continuity in their responses to the question 'What is history?' However, very few children seemed to have the true knowledge of when history began.

Fourth and fifth grade students seemed inclined to reduce the complexity of history. They simplified the spatial and chronologic elements and were able to recall only very few people and events (Barton, 1996). Additionally, fifth grade students also viewed history as merely the present-day recounting of what happened in the past (Şimşek, 2007).

Third grade (ages 11–14) and fourth grade (ages 14–16) students, without guidance, were able to provide more complete definitions (Goalen, 1999). For instance, high school students attributed the following to history: *creating basis (knowledge) for current moral decisions; providing skilled and knowledgeable people who are responsible for progress with opportunity; explaining live, real, and current problems; connecting past, present, and future; enlightening identity and culture and providing life skills and qualities* (Hunter & Farthing, 2009).

This information in the literature provided in the study does not seem conflicting or inconsistent; however, the data is far from presenting a systematic and meaningful structure in relation to students'

perceptions of history. This result may stem from neglecting to approach the issue as a whole in terms of methodology and also a lack of sufficient sampling. The current research aims to contribute to the relevant literature as its attempt to reveal *how the child's perception of concept of history changes and the trajectory that this change is on*. Research questions are as follows:

- How do elementary and middle school students understand the concept of history?
- What is the trajectory (change) of perception of history during elementary and middle school?

### Method

The current study is conducted within the developmental research method, a category of survey studies. Developmental research may be planned in cross-sectional, longitudinal and sequential designs. The current study was organized as a cross-sectional design, with the research presenting a momentary glimpse at the researched population at a specific time. The cross-sectional design defines various age groups to compare and contrast. In this approach, one dedicated observation opportunity exists for each subject, and changes in development are defined by examining subjects of various ages. The greatest advantage of this method is the opportunity to administer tests to members of the same age group at one time (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007; Onur, 1995).

### Study Group

The current study was conducted with 712 elementary and middle school students attending schools during the 2012–2013 academic years. The study group was selected from three elementary and three middle schools, six in total, to represent three different socio-economic environments (lower, middle and upper). The study group was expanded three times until sufficient data were collected on an average sample of 30 people each time. As a result, 100 first grade students, 93 second grade students, 95 third grade students, 94 fourth grade students, 86 fifth grade students, 90 sixth grade students, 85 seventh grade students and 69 eighth grade students, for a total of 712 students comprised of 360 females and 352 males, were interviewed.

**Data Collection Tools**

The data collection tool used in the current research consisted of an interview form. Students were asked the question, “In your opinion, what is history?” to collect data. As they were not able to respond in written form, elementary school first and second grade students were interviewed verbally. The views of elementary school third and fourth grade students and middle school fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth grade students were obtained through the interview form, which posed the question, “In your opinion, what is history? Please explain.” The researcher personally conducted the interviews and the applications of the interview forms to collect data.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Content analysis or the *open approach* (Bilgin, 2000) with a process based on the inductive method, was used to analyse the data obtained from the interviews and interview forms. Data analysis was conducted personally by the researcher through a trial version of the qualitative research software, NVivo 10.

**Research Validity and Reliability**

Various measures were taken to ensure the validity and reliability of the research. The first focused on the diversity of the data source. Two history educators were consulted as experts while defining the study group, determining the data collection tool, collecting the data and analyzing the results. In addition, the research results were provided through direct quotations to communicate a detailed description. For reliability purposes, data

were coded twice by the same researcher at different times, and two history educators were consulted to eliminate potential conflicts. Further, the role of the researcher was clearly explained during the study.

**Findings**

The students’ responses to “What is history?” were analysed, and the trajectory of the students’ perceptions of history in the process from elementary to the end of middle school were represented with percentage values. The following graph may be considered a type of trend analysis (Cohen et al., 2007).

Graph 1 represents the three themes revealed through the analysis of the students’ responses to “What is history?” Students were found to have made sense of history as *the time*, *the past* and *a current activity*. The first remarkable point shown is that these trends indicate a meaningful change. Making sense of history as *the time* is represented as the most important theme (60%) in elementary first grade and is observed to gradually decrease to a very low level (4%) in the eighth grade. Further, first grade students considered history as *the past* (33%), second to *the time*, and this gradually increased to first place (50%) by the eighth grade. It is remarkable that making sense of history, as a subject or science, as *a current activity* in the first grade was very low (7%), whereas it increased up to an important level (46%) by the eighth grade.

Students’ making sense of history as three different meanings—*the time*, *the past* and *a current activity*—may be due to the usage of the word, history, in the Turkish language with the different meanings, *the time*, *the past* and *a science branch*. Studies conducted show that students have similar

Graph 1  
The Perception Trajectory of the Concept of History

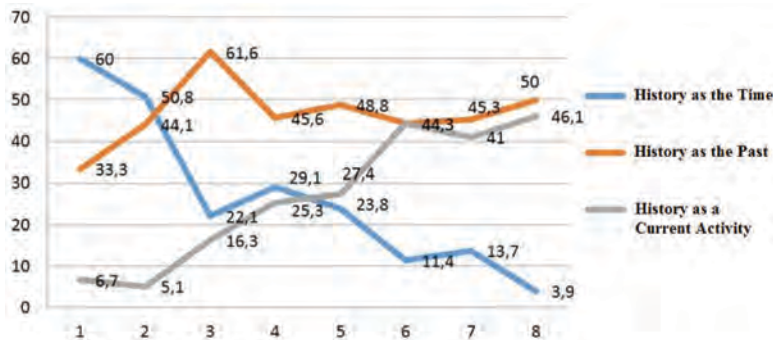


Table 1  
Perception of History as the Time

Main Theme	Sub-Themes	Grades (f)								Total (f)
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
History as the Time	As day, month and year	9	23	7	10	13	7	11	3	83
	Stating the time	5	3	3	9	5	1	1	-	27
	As important moments	2	4	9	3	1	2	1	-	22
	As calendar	2	-	-	1	-	1	-	-	4
	<b>Total</b>	18	30	19	23	19	11	13	3	136
	%	60	50.8	22.1	29.1	23.8	11.4	13.7	3.9	22.6

misperceptions in the usage of history language as a result of semantic and phonetic associations (Husband, 1996 as cited in Dilek, 2008; Jenkins, 1997; Metin, 2011; Öztürk, 2011; Sakaoglu, 2010). It may be said that textbooks are written without taking these points into consideration (Ruhi & Kocaman, 1996, pp. 13-14).

Detailed analyses of sub-themes on these three themes obtained in the study are explained in the following tables:

**History as the Time**

The first theme obtained through the content analysis was *History as the Time* theme. Four different sub-themes emerged out of this main theme, and the relevant details are given in Table 1.

One of the themes obtained from the analysis was the theme of *the Time*. Under this theme, students were observed to have understood history as words of days, months and years, and as important moments in relation to the calendar. Elementary first grade students used the word history, primarily *to state the time* (60%). This attempt to understand history gradually diminishes until the end of middle school and refers to students considering history in relation to the time when they state that *it shows the time; it is the time for which people live; it covers the*

*past and the future; it is the present number of days; it looks like seasons and hours and it is the numbers that remind you your life.*

**History as the Past**

The current study revealed that most students made sense of history in relation to *the past*. Details of the *History as the Past* theme and its sub-themes are presented in Table 2.

This theme indicates that students understood history as a past, the past that they owned, past events, people, objects or locations, and finally as only those important, but not all, in the past. Elementary first grade students used the word, history, to a certain extent, to mean *those in the past* (33%). This value gradually increased in the second (44%) and third (62%) grades and, in the later years, continued on at the 50% level. In other words, almost half the number of students at each grade level made sense of history as *those in the past*. Previously conducted similar studies (Alabaş & Dilek, 2009; Fink, 2004; Goalen, 1999) supported this finding. In addition, Yilmaz and Kaya's (2011) research revealed that a majority of social studies teachers perceived history as *those happenings in the past*.

Table 2  
Perception of History as the Past

Main Theme	Sub-Themes	Grades (f)								Total (f)
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
History as the Past	The past as a whole	3	17	26	11	11	14	10	10	103
	Owned past	-	1	4	11	6	12	11	20	65
	The past of events	3	1	14	6	11	6	12	7	60
	A person's past	1	4	3	4	8	5	5	1	31
	The past of an object	2	1	5	1	2	3	3	-	17
	Important past	-	-	1	3	-	2	2	-	8
	The past of the location	1	2	-	-	1	1	-	-	5
	<b>Total</b>	10	26	53	36	39	43	43	38	288
	%	33.3	44.1	61.6	45.6	48.8	44.3	45.3	50	47.8

Examining the sub-themes suggests that some students related the past as a whole to history, whereas others related history to only those important in the past. It is also remarkable that a considerable number of students, beginning from the third grade, understood history in relation to their own past. In addition, students were revealed to have, to a large extent, related history to concrete elements such as *events, persons, objects and locations* in an effort to understand it. Results of various studies are parallel with these findings (Brophy et al., 1992; Leigh & Reynolds, 1997; Levstik & Pappas, 1987; Safran & Şimşek, 2006; VanSledright & Brophy, 1992).

**History as a Current Activity**

History as a Current Activity is the third and last of the themes revealed in the study. Students understood the concept of history as *a written work, a course and a science field where the past is explained and learned in relation to identity, with reference to future*. Details of this theme and its sub-themes are presented in Table 3.

Within this theme, elementary first grade students used the word history to mean of *a current activity* (7%), gradually increasing by the third grade (15%), increasing considerably (40%) during the middle school years, and reaching the top (46%) in the eighth grade. In short, students make sense of history as a current activity right from the beginning of elementary school. When the sub-themes are examined, the perception of history, particularly as *explanation of the past, learning about the past, a science field, and a part of our identity*, gradually increased from elementary to middle school. The role of history in identity development is emphasized by history educators (Aslan &Avcı Akçalı, 2007; Poyraz, 2007) as well. Some of the students were observed to maintain

their perception of history as a written work, or as a course, and in reference to the future. The historian is the man of the time, and s/he is dependent on the contemporary period through human conditions. Even the words that the historian uses—democracy, imperial, war, revolution—have unique contemporary meanings that are inseparable from words themselves (Carr, 2011, pp. 76-77). The historian is able to write history to praise, to protect and even to forget the past (Tekeli, 1998b, p. 74), and the requirement for each is hidden in the day that the historian is alive (today). It is important for students to be aware of this feature in the nature of history.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The most important result obtained from the current research is that three different trends revealing the trajectory of elementary and middle school students’ perceptions of history were identified. These may be stated, in short, as the perceptions of history as *the time, the past, and a current activity*.

From the current research, the gravity centre for students’ perceptions of history was mainly on the past. Perception of history without connection to the present may indicate that past happenings are the truths to be learned or taught without discussion and questioning. Therefore, this gravity centre must be balanced at the middle school level, and history must be emphasized in relation to present day and today’s historian. Dewey (1899) states the following on this issue: *“If history be regarded as just the record of the past, it is hard to see any grounds for claiming that it should play any large role in the curriculum of elementary education.”*

Table 3  
Perception of History as a Current Activity

Main Theme	Sub-Themes	Grades (f)								Total (f)
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
History as a Current Activity	Explaining the past	1	1	4	9	8	17	11	6	57
	History as a science field	-	1	5	6	6	7	11	12	48
	Learning about the past	-	-	4	2	3	5	9	4	27
	History as identity	-	-	-	1	2	5	4	8	20
	History as a written work	-	-	-	-	-	8	2	-	10
	History as a course	1	1	1	2	3	1	-	-	9
	History with reference to future	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	5	7
	<b>Total</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>178</b>
	<b>%</b>	<b>6.7</b>	<b>5.1</b>	<b>16.3</b>	<b>25.3</b>	<b>27.4</b>	<b>44.3</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>46.1</b>	<b>29.6</b>

Discussions and research on history education are observed to mainly ignore the nature of historical knowledge and focus on the content and teaching methods and techniques. This brings up the issue of the lack of a relevant pedagogic-epistemological basis (Köksal, 2007). This issue stems from making sense of the concept of history. The first to be considered are the curricula. Indeed, when elementary and middle school *curricula* are examined, the concept of history is shown to be addressed but only in a limited sense and only in the third and the sixth grade levels (Ata, 2009; Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı [MEB], 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2009). Studies also argue that the concepts used by students to define the past often originate from their encounters with history curriculum (Hunter & Farthing, 2008; Waldron, 2003). When Science of Life 1, 2, and 3, Social Studies 4, 5, 6, and 7, and the Republic of Turkey History of Revolution and Kemalism 8th grade books--shared on Education Informatics Network (EIN)--are examined, the concept of *history* is included only in the glossary of the sixth grade Social Studies textbook (Köstüklü, 2011).

The second element to be examined about the lack of pedagogic-epistemological basis in relation to the concept of history is teachers. Yılmaz and Kaya (2011), in a similar study, found that a majority of social studies teachers perceived history as *those in the past*. Upon consideration of this result, one source of students' perceptions of history as *the past* is, likely, their teachers. An important deficiency draws attention to classroom teachers who teach history in elementary and middle schools, particularly the social studies teachers, who take many history classes during their undergraduate studies but not the classes associated with the philosophy and methodology of history.

One of the most interesting results obtained from the current research is that students gradually own history beginning from the elementary third grade level. For instance, the expression, *those in the past*, was highlighted in the earlier years (as in the first and the second grades), whereas students increasingly preferred the expression, *those in our past*, in later years. Social studies classes taught beginning from the fourth grade, and the content associated with history, have been effective for this change. This result also suggests the importance of linguistic examination in similar research. For instance, the concepts that students use when defining history may inform us whether they have individual, local, national or global views.

Another result obtained from the current research was that students referred to concrete constituents when defining history. Examined definitions showed that students referred to concrete historical factors such as events, objects, people and locations. This particular result of the current study supports the assumption that using concrete constituents in history instruction, particularly during elementary years, is important.

Thinking that history is embedded in the present day should not be associated with the philosophical view of history. The pedagogical view of history is also directly associated with the present day. At this point, investigating students' perceptions of history in details, particularly through longitudinal studies, is important. However, it is more important to investigate, as in Andraess' (1939) and Egan's (1989; 2010) studies, how students make sense of history and the factors, such as family, peers, teachers, media, affect this process.



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