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'What did it achieve?' – Students' conceptions about the significance of the French Revolution

Concepciones de los alumnos sobre la relevancia histórica de la Revolución Francesa

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Resumen

Este estudio presenta las percepciones de los estudiantes sobre las consecuencias y la relevancia histórica de la Revolución Francesa. Se recogieron datos de alumnos suizos-alemanes de noveno grado (de 15 a 16 años; N=22) mediante discusiones de grupo y entrevistas centradas en problemas. Los datos se analizaron mediante un método cualitativo reconstructivo. El pensamiento histórico de los alumnos está dominado por la creencia en el progreso y el presentismo. Los jóvenes se ven envueltos en la historia de la Revolución Francesa, que tiene una relevancia y significado simbólico y presente-futuro (Cercadillo). Así, construyen la relevancia histórica de forma ejemplar (Rüsen). Estos patrones explicativos están anclados en las ideas cotidianas y no en una comprensión científica. Una consecuencia de esto es que los profesores deben modelar cognitivamente el pensamiento mostrando cómo los historiadores narran la relevancia histórica de la Revolución Francesa, haciendo explícito este concepto de segundo orden y ofreciéndoles la oportunidad de conocer y analizar diferentes tipos de narrativa (Rüsen).

Abstract

This study presents students' conceptions about the consequences and significance of the French Revolution. The data were collected from Swiss ninth graders (15 to 16 years old; N=22) by means of group discussions and problem-centred interviews. The data were evaluated using a reconstructive qualitative method. The students' historical thinking is dominated by a belief in progress and paramount presentism. The adolescents feel entangled in the history of the French Revolution, it has a symbolic and present-future significance (Cercadillo). Thus, they construct historical significance in an exemplary way (Rüsen). These explanatory patterns are anchored in the everyday conceptions of the students and not in an academic understanding of history. Therefore, teachers should cognitively model learners' thinking by showing how historians narrate and construct the historical significance of the French Revolution, by making this second-order concept explicit and by giving them the opportunity to explore different types of narrative (Rüsen).

1. Introduction

'What did it achieve?' In a low voice and lost in thought, a 9th grader let the question I asked about the achievements of the French Revolution sink in. The question was in the context of "consequences" of the historical event – after he himself having mentioned the word "achievements": 'You say achievements. What do you mean by that?' The fact that the French Revolution did achieve something is beyond question for the student. It clearly becomes apparent that for this age group's everyday conceptions, an effort is only worthwhile if it gets you anywhere. This everyday way of thinking comes consequently unreflected into being when contemplating history or historical events. Not surprisingly, it is the learner's "presentist" everyday conceptions and patterns of explanation, which mainly influence historical learning for students (Barton, 2008; Borries, 2011; Mathis, 2015, 2016; Savenije et al., 2014; Seixas et al., 2011).

Since the past is irretrievably and no longer accessible, historical knowledge is always an imparted knowledge. The construction of historical knowledge is based on sources and representations (Goertz, 2007; Rüsen, 2013). Psychologically speaking, the learning of history is a complex and ill structured domain. The difficulties students encounter when learning history not only arise from the inaccessibility of the past, the structure of historical knowledge or the historical 'subject', moreover the complexities are rooted above all in their pre-conceptions (Limón, 2002, 2003). The student must permanently link new knowledge meaningfully to existing knowledge. Thereby, a moderate constructivist view of learning presides, which may create a better understanding of historical learning as an experience and context-based construction of knowledge (Günther-Arndt, 2014). If these assumptions on psychological learning are taken seriously, students' subject-related pre-conceptions must be systematically reconstructed and taken into consideration when planning and teaching classes (Chapman & Georgiou, 2021).

After elaborating on the design of this larger study, on the questions, the sample and the research methods involved, results will be presented regarding the sub-question: What conceptions do Swiss 15 to 16 years old secondary school[1] students have of the significance of the French Revolution? Finally, consequences for secondary education or an outlook on further research are proposed.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Historical thinking and historical significance

In the German-speaking world, several competence models of historical learning have been developed in recent years (e.g. Gautschi, 2015; Körber, 2015; Körber, Schreiber, & Schöner, 2007; Schreiber, 2006). Despite all the differences, there is still agreement regarding historical thinking. In essence, all of them are concerned with historical orientation (Rüsen, 2005, 2013); firstly with historical time, secondly with plural and controversial, multi-perspective representations of history – and thirdly, with orientation in the sense of clarifying one's own standpoint and judgement with regard to history and historical events (Körber & Meyer-Hamme, 2015). The latter is particularly relevant to the second-order concept significance (Lévesque, 2008; Seixas & Morton, 2013).

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[1] The students attended the upper secondary level of the *gymnasium* which prepares students for university studies. History is a compulsory subject.

In regard to historical orientation and signification (Rüsen, 2013) distinguishes four possibilities of constructing meaning in the form of a historical narrative: Traditionally, history is presented in such a way that the meaning presented in the narrative proves to be eternally valid. The exemplary construction of meaning presents concrete cases which demonstrate general rules of action with timeless validity. "History functions as the teacher of life (historia magistra vitae)". The genetic narrative starts out from the assumption of a development and tries to identify the direction of this change. Rüsen grants a special position to the critical narrative type which is realized ex negativo in relation to the three others. "Critical narrative destroys and deconstructs culturally predetermined patterns of traditional, exemplary and genetic interpretation" (Rüsen, 2013, p. 217). In this study, these forms of narrative are not seen as a progression model but rather types of narratives one should be able to identify or to choose when constructing a meaningful historical narration.

According to Danto (1980), meaning depends on the possible narratives in which it plays a relevant role; or, as he puts it, in which it represents a 'significant' event. Historians only can attribute 'significance' to an event or a series of events only ex post. Danto distinguishes four types: If a historian depicts certain events and behaviour because he considers them to have an exemplary moral significance or because they appear to him to be suitable as evidence for a theory, Danto speaks of 'pragmatic' or 'theoretical significance'. What these two forms of significance have in common is that they seem to be determined by externally fixed demonstration interests. By 'consequential-significance' he understands that significant consequences of events classified as 'significant' come into view. By contrast, 'revelatory significance' focuses on factors that are considered possible causes (Danto, 1980, pp. 216–221).

Cercadillo (2000) based her study, among others, also on these two historical theorists. She compared in her empirical study ideas about historical significance in a sample of 144 students aged between 12 and 17 in England and Spain. She defined five types of significance and construed a model of progression: 1) 'Contemporary significance' is the fact that people at the time saw an event as significant, 2) 'Causal significance' puts a causal event or a process in relation to its causal power and also in relation to later consequences, 3) 'Pattern significance' is allied with contextuality and refers often to concepts of progress (or decline), 4) 'Symbolic significance' is attached to lessons from history such as moral examples, understood as an ahistorical concept, 5) 'Significance for the present and the future' operates only in the long term with a perspective to the future. It is related to causal weighting (Cercadillo, 2000). She found that, in both countries, most students treated significance as a fixed property. About 60% of the students age 16-17 did not recognize that significance varied according to criteria set by whatever question we choose to ask, and by the timescale we use. However, most of the students at this age also were able to attribute significance according to type 4 and 5.

In my larger study I found twelve typical patterns of explanation (Mathis, 2015, 2016). These patterns of explanation are constructed in an everyday sense and not according to academic history. A pattern called 'presentism' could be reconstructed as a 'super-pattern' which interferes with all other patterns, thus influencing students' academic historical thinking. It could be observed – as in many other countries – that present day values, beliefs, and ideologies are applied to the past without taking into account the alterity and change of that time (Barton, 2008; Borries, 2011; Savenije et. al., 2014; Seixas et al., 2011; VanSledright & Maggioni, 2016). Other patterns were 'optimism of progress' and 'modernity', i.e. the present liberal state with its democracy, human

rights and public sphere are seen both as a project to enhance and protect and as universal values and norms.

2.2. The Model of Educational Reconstruction (MER)

This larger study applied the Model of Educational Reconstruction (MER) to history education. It is used when looking at subject-related conceptions of students. The MER is based on European *Didaktik* and *Bildung* traditions – with a particular emphasis on the German tradition (Duit et al., 2012)[2].

A key concern of the model is that academic subject matter issues as well as students' pre-conceptions of the subject matter must be given equal attention in attempts to improve the quality of teaching and learning. It is based on the conceptual change approach (Chapman & Georgiou, 2021; Limón, 2002, 2003).

There are three major emphases that are intimately connected (Figure 1):

1. The clarification and analysis of historical subject matter, including second-order concepts and principles like continuity and change, evidence, cause and consequences, significance etc. (Lévesque, 2008; Seixas & Morton, 2013; Van Boxtel & Van Drie, 2018);

2. The empirical investigation into students' cognitions regarding the chosen subject (including pre-instructional conceptions);

3. Here, the first step is a so called 'educational structuring' which systematically matches and correlates both complex of conceptions. Conclusions can then be drawn on how to design relevant lessons for teaching history.

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[2] In fact, *Bildung* is viewed as a process. Bildung denotes the formation of the learner as a whole person, i.e. its development of its personality. The meaning of *Didaktik* is based on the notion of Bildung. It concerns the analytical process of transposing and transforming human knowledge like domain specific knowledge, e.g. academic history, into knowledge for schooling that contributes to the Bildung of students. Therefore, Didaktik is not to be confused with the understanding of a rather restricted instructional method (Hopmann & Riquarts, 1995; Horlacher, 2016).
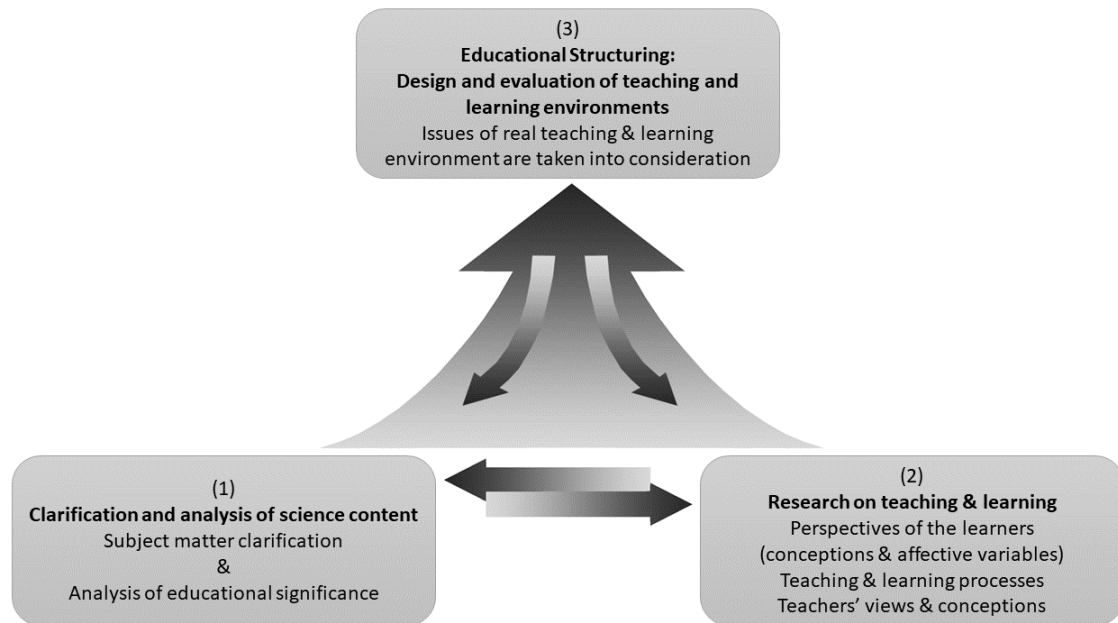
Figure 1. The three components of the Model of Educational Reconstruction. Source: Own elaboration.

The three research steps are not separately and sequentially processed but in parallel applying a step by step, repetitive, iterative approach[3].

3. Method: Research on students' conceptions: research questions, sample, research methods

The leading research questions were: What conceptions do the students have about the French Revolution? What are their 'theories' and pattern of explanations?

In Switzerland, lower secondary school history teaching (year 7 to 9) is some sort of a black box. There are no studies on what exactly is and in what way it is taught; nor do we have studies telling us what kind of textbooks or teaching materials are used (Gautschi, 2015; Gautschi et al., 2007)[4]. Mostly, the French Revolution is taught at the end of grade 8, some only do it at the beginning of the next year. After grade 9, compulsory schooling ends and the chronological passage through history ideally ends with the post Cold War era. Most of the higher secondary school teachers begin grade 9 or 10 with the French Revolution again and teach chronologically through history until the matura, i.e. graduation which gives them direct access to universities[5].

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[3] The 'Model of Educational Reconstruction (MER)' originally comes from biology and science education (Kattmann et al., 1997). There are only a few history education research projects applying the MER (Günther-Arndt, 2005; Mathis, 2015, 2018; Mathis & Gollin, 2018; Stöckle, 2011).

[4] In Switzerland, the cantons (states) have educational sovereignty. In addition, each Gymnasium designs its own curriculum. Despite loose coordination, there is great diversity in terms of topics and progression. Furthermore, the state does not designate any compulsory textbooks. Numerous teachers even teach without textbooks, using their own scripts.

[5] However, in most Swiss cantons, students leave general lower secondary school after year 8 if they choose to follow up four years of schooling in a gymnasium to the matura. Only an average of about 25% of the adolescents choose this path, roughly 75% choose to do an apprenticeship.

Consequently, higher secondary school teachers (starting in grade 9 or 10) don't really know what their students know and how they think about history; and in particular, there were no studies about the French Revolution which is a mandatory subject in all of Swiss grammar schools.

In the empirical part of the larger study (i.e. the perspectives of the learners, see fig.1), the conceptions of 9th grade students from different Swiss grammar schools in central Switzerland (German speaking) about the French Revolution were reconstrued. The sample is composed by N=22, divided into 4 group discussion with 4 students each, two female and two male; and 6 one to one problem-centred interviews (3 female, 3 male) (Mathis, 2015). The students of the sample volunteered, and the teachers put them either into gender-mixed groups for the group discussions or into the group of students that was interviewed individually. The schools were chosen because the students only joined their grammar schools in grade 9 – eight months before they participated in the study.[6]

Thus, the students in the sample came from various schools, school types, and rural or urban contexts. In addition, some of them were taught about the French Revolution, others haven't had any teaching on the subject; some had been taught with an official textbook, others haven't been using a textbook, but some sort of script written by their teachers; others have only been watching a documentary in class about the French Revolution. It can therefore be assumed that the sample represents the heterogeneous group that teachers of this region will encounter when they take up the subject in 10th grade.

In terms of research methods, on the one hand, the group discussion method can be used to collect a broad spectrum of concepts, ideas and conceptions that are socially shared (Bohnsack, 2010) or are co-constructed during the session (Table 1). Problem-centred interviews, on the other hand, allow more in-depth exploration, which reveals deeply rooted conceptions of the students because they constantly have to argue and justify their concepts (Witzel & Reiter, 2012).

Table 1
Open questions on significance and meaning

- If you hear "French Revolution" what does come to your mind? What is it about? What can you tell me about this historical event?

- Why should we study the French Revolution? What does it teach us? Does it teach us something?

- Explain to a sixth grader why they will (and should) study the French Revolution in eigth grade!

- What would the world be like if the French Revolution had not happened?

- Some people say we wouldn't be who we are without the French Revolution. What do you think about that?

- Is the French Revolution any of your business? How does it concern you? Why?

- Are you/How are you specifically affected by the impact of the French Revolution?

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[6] In the sampling, care was taken to ensure that the prior education of the students at High School level 1 varied. Some students were already in the Gymnasium, where the teachers had a master's degree in history. Others were from high schools, where teachers had a broader master's degree in teaching. Accordingly, the students' prior education in history was quite diverse. In this respect, the sample represents the typical diversity of an upper secondary class at the Gymnasium.

Source: self-elaboration.

The discussions and interviews were recorded and transcribed. The collected data is analysed according to the Documentary Method (Kölbl, 2004; Mathis, 2015; Straub, 1999). While in the Documentary Method the student conceptions are reconstructed inductively from the data on the one hand, the models of Rüsen and Cercadillo - mentioned above - functioned as "theoretical horizons of interpretation". Likewise, the findings referenced from other studies on significance and relevance served as "empirical horizons of interpretation" (ibd.).

4. Results: Conceptions about the significance of the French Revolution

As mentioned before, the following presentation focuses on German speaking Swiss students' conceptions of the significance of the French Revolution.

In both the group discussions and the one to one problem-centred interviews an open stimulus question was chosen: 'If you hear "French Revolution" what does come to your mind? What is it about? What can you tell me about this historical event?' In all the encounters, during this first narrative, often associative phase the students addressed the causes, the motives, and the consequences. Historical actors were also named or described. Somewhat less spontaneously came statements about the historical process. After this first narrative phase, I got involved, taking up and paraphrasing aspects already mentioned. This was also done regarding the historical consequences. I was careful to ask in general terms and not in terms of 'contemporary' or long-term 'present-future' consequences, for example: 'You have mentioned "achievements". What do you mean by that? Can you be more specific?'

It is noticeable that the questions about the consequences of the revolutionary era are understood as questions about its 'achievements' or even 'legacies'. For the students it is beyond question that the French Revolution did achieve something. This everyday way of thinking comes consequently into being when contemplating the French Revolution which is seen as an effort to make the world a better place. It clearly becomes apparent that for this age group's everyday conceptions, an effort is only worthwhile if it gets you anywhere. Consequently, it can be seen that the majority of students attribute significance to the French Revolution first and foremost as 'present-future significance (Cercadillo, 2000) by talking about 'achievements'.

As to these 'achievements', the students follow the three slogans of the French Revolution. Although, equality, liberty and occasionally fraternalism are cited as major achievements, the adolescents mainly attach importance to the political and social achievements, which are not always easy to separate analytically. Moreover, in the broadest sense of cultural achievement, a change in mentality is added.

Very rarely mentioned are economic achievements and when they are, they are then related to socio-political achievements, i.e. are closely linked to them. As an example of the above mentioned, I quote Eveline's answer to the question about the 'main achievements' of the French Revolution:

> Eveline: *Equality*. // I: And why? // Why? Yeah hhh, that everyone today has the same rights. // I: Hm .// That would / yeah / (3 secs) It's mostly like that, isn't it? // I: Yes

.// (3 secs) that everyone has his personal *freedom*, okay, not totally free, that isn't possible, then you'd restrict the others again, but that you don't have to do anything you don't want to. // I: Hm .// (4 secs) Hm, hm hm (3 secs) difficult …sigh. (4 secs) What else did it achieve? (4 sec) Perhaps that one had the *courage* to take action against an unjust government, that you don't put up with everything. // I: Hm .// (4 secs) And there was the *separation of powers*, without that, it would be yeah / yeah, if there was absolutism today, that wouldn't be good at all (Dt-CH-EI3, 196-197)[7].

The example shows how Eveline emphasises the 'present-future significance' (Cercadillo) here. She makes a reference to her own time and life situation by emphasising that we have the same rights. In addition, she tells an exemplary story here (Rüsen); the French Revolution is an encouraging example to continue to fight against unjust rule in the future. Therefore, it is also an example of how 'symbolic significance' (Cercadillo) is addressed.

It comes as no surprise that the students particularly cite political achievements, especially as political upheaval is primarily addressed in academic history and most textbooks on the French Revolution (Engels, 2003; Fuchs & Onken, 2020; Hunt, 2004). Students see the abolition of the monarchy and the system of estates, the establishment of the republic and the abolition of absolutist rule as prerequisites for the achievements described below. With regard to the first point, Luke says in a problem-centered interview:

> Well they definitely achieved that there was no more nobility, // I: Hm .// and that there [...] was no longer a king. . [...] – Republic (Dt-CH-EI2, 48, 56).

And Oli puts it in a group discussion as follows:

> Because of this, well / new forms of government were formed and so, and - uh - yeah with Republic and / (4 secs) yeah, simply to abolish the Monarchy, that that's no longer really of great importance today, well in England, where it's still symbolic, but real monarchies, so to speak, no longer exist (Dt-CH-GD4, 182-183).

In this situation, Oli understands by 'real' monarchies the absolutist and tyrannical rule. It is apparent that the students have drawn on their perceptions of their identity as adolescents of a democratic republic to help them think about the present significance of the French Revolution.

Most students put emphasis on *equality* in the achievements. They often mention equal rights and mean it in the literal sense: Everyone has the same rights, and all are equal before the law. Equality is guaranteed and enforced in students' conceptions through a *constitution*. Such a constitution was written for the first time in the French Revolution and from then on served as the foundation for others. In the students' understanding, our present Swiss constitution is also based principally on that of the 1790s. For example, Stefan thinks:

> Erm, yes, I think they sort of had like a commission, because / an extreme number of MPs or something like that. I think they tried to make a constitution, a new one (Dt-CH-EI1, 74).

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[7] All references cited in the following student comments were pseudonyms and have been linguistically polished up; in addition, they have been translated by the author. It is about exemplary selected 'anchor quotes' that stand in as a representative for a precise view. The following transcription rules have been used: <riiight> vowel is drawn out. <World /> At the end of a line: The speaker is interrupted. <The / the> inside a statement: The speaker briefly stops and the sentence starts again, i.e is repeated. <#>, <##>, <###> A new person starts to speak. The statements overlap. <[all laugh]> Action description. <Hhhh> a loud in or exhaling. <// I: Yes ?//> The listeners talk between themselves, without interrupting the speakers flow of speech.

This conception also came up in group discussions:

> I: [...] my next question is then: How / What did the French Revolution actually achieve?
> Tanja: Equality.
> Anna: Hm. A very good constitution. [...]
> Roger: [...] # We've actually adopted / quite a lot still from the French Revolution nowadays.
> Anna: # And then /
> I: Like what?
> Roger: Err.
> Reto: Definitely rights (Dt-CH-GD3, 517-519, 527-531).

Thus, the constitution guarantees the equality of people by defining rights. Once again, it is apparent that in terms of rights, the French Revolution is directly linked to our rights. It is the same rights as then, historical development and further social conflicts with their corresponding political struggles are faded out. Here, the 'presentist' pattern of thinking of young people is clearly shown. The pupils have a pretty good idea about these rights, as the following longer quote shows:

> I: [...] So, you all said that three slogans of the revolution are / were written into the constitution. [...] Those are only / so far only words. Let's put some content into it. You said equal rights. That is something along the lines of égalité or equality. // Anna: Hmm.// What else was there?
> Reto: The privileges were abolished by others, // I: Hm.// by them.
> Roger: Nobility and the // Reto: Yes.// clergy. So that / they didn't / so that the farmers and the people no longer # had to give the nobility tax and – errm – food and such.
> Anna: # That everyone must pay tax.
> I: hmm.
> Reto: Wasn't hunting also a privilege?
> Anna: Hmm. Only the clergy and yes / and the nobility were also allowed to.
> I: (3 secs) Is there anything else to say about equality? Well, equal rights, can we expand upon that a little?
> Anna: Well, everyone paid as much tax as he / according to wealth, wasn't it? //Reto: Umm.// that those who had more, had to pay more, than those who had less //I: Hm.// less.
> Roger: # less, yes, exactly.
> Tanja: # And that everybody had to. That too/
> Anna: But that everybody definitely had to.
> Tanja: Yes. Clergy and the nobility as well. Hm.
> I: (3 secs) [...] But what would be political equality, for example?
> Anna: Well /
> Reto: the right to vote? Hm.
> Anna: Yes, all voting rights.
> Reto: Yes, all the same (Dt-CH-GD3, 136-154).

By naming the abolition of the privileges for the nobility and the clergy as well as the abolition of tax burdens, the students focus foremost on *social equality*. They view *economic equality* as achieved by the fact that everyone has to pay taxes regardless of their social background and that this taxation follows a progression, i.e. greater income and wealth are taxed more heavily than smaller ones. At the end of the quote, the group brings examples of *political equality*, the right to vote. It should be noted that the students hardly address the passive voting right, i.e. to

stand for election. In their defense, however, it must be said that they were not asked to make this distinction.

From these notions, a pattern of explanation becomes apparent, which apply to all student conceptions on the 'achievements' and can be referred to as 'beliefs in progress'. This goes along with Cercadillo's 'pattern significance'. The examples presented also show the exemplary formation of meaning by the students (Rüsen). The yardstick for progress here is social equality.

In addition, however, another pattern of explanation becomes apparent, which I have called 'the idea of legitimacy'. It is the idea that a form of government, a ruling governance, or any forms of coexistence of people is to be controlled and ultimately legitimized. In the quoted interview the 'constitution' is mentioned in this context.

Another 'achievement' that can be subsumed under the context of equality, which the pupils state with poignancy, is the *right to education*. This, among other things, is also a human right in the understanding of the students. They are aware that today compared with their ancestors (provided that they were not noble and / or male), they have a privilege which they owe to the French Revolution, which initiated the 'project of modernity', and they would not want to be without it, as they can see – in the sense of 'symbolic' and 'present-future significance' (Cercadillo) – specific parallels with their own lives:

> I: Um - (3 secs) has the French Revolution had an impact on your [...] life today? [...]
> Jara: Suppose that / that the school system wasn't like it was, I'd say, today I can go to school [...] (Dt-CH-EI6, 188-189).

This demonstrates one facet of the historical consciousness of adolescents, which Kölbl (2004) has called 'being entangled in history' or 'be caught up in history' (i.e. 'in Geschichte verstrickt sein'). It is worthwhile to look at this in a little more detail. When asked about the 'achievements' of the revolution, Erik is the first to respond out of the group:

> Erik: Yes, we can actually do what we want to do and didn't Napoleon introduce obligatory schooling or something like that. And if he had not, we would / have fewer jobs and therefore Switzerland would be poor. [...]
> I: You are saying that going to school means that the country is actually doing well economically?
> Erik: Yes.
> I: That's actually then / that would mean that education is a consequence of the French Revolution?
> Erik: Yeah sure. (3 secs) that you can also / and being at school allows you freedom of thought. And then you can think, like now, when thinking in terms of the French Revolution, "yes, I agree with that", or you think, "no, that's not good". And no one tells you, "no, that's not true", "you have to think like this", and "that wasn't good at all" and so on (Dt-CH-GD2, 316, 321-324).

The misconception that Napoleon introduced compulsory education in Switzerland will not be discussed here (see Mathis, 2009). What seems of more importance is Erik's ideas relating to the right to education. On the one hand, a school education enables a career choice, thus improving job training, which in turn promotes a country's prosperity and wealth. Behind this, in addition to the pattern of explanation 'belief in progress', here 'utility concept' becomes apparent, which is relatively deterministic and linear – as is reflected in the further course of the interview.

Conversely, this would mean that a country's lack of wealth and prosperity is due to lack of education and apprenticeships. On the other hand, for Erik, school education enables 'free thinking'. Here we can discern another pattern of explanation: 'thoughts are free'. 'Presentist' thinking becomes apparent here too, the pupils are committed to the guiding principle of 'enlightenment' and thus to an 'idea of progress'.

Another important aspect of equality for the students is the *equality of men and women* respectively the *political and social emancipation of women*. Here too a 'present-future significance' (Cercadillo) is paramount; the pattern of explanation 'belief in progress', or more precisely: 'emancipation', dominates. This is what Jara said when asked the question what 'equal status' does mean: 'Yes precisely, women have the same voting rights' (Dt-CH-EI6, 105-106). Jara explicitly names the political equality of women, which is guaranteed by equal voting rights. This is accentuated somewhat differently by the group quoted below. The students call 'women's rights' and emphasize above all the social equality of women as an 'achievement' – in the sense of 'pattern significance' (Cercadillo) – of the French Revolution:

> I: [...] Yes, # what does it mean, women's rights?
> Eva: # Well / Well, that a woman has something to say. I think in this day and age well / compared to before the revolution, the woman had really nothing to say. She just / like a /
> Dina: Sat in the kitchen.
> Eva: Yeah, they really had nothing to say. They were just there for the husband, for his pleasure, and that // [laughing] // someone cooked at home, did the washing, and that / looked //Dina: That there were children.// after the children. They were just there and (3 secs) [...] [laughing]
> I: And today? Isn't/
> Dina: Yes, and now /
> Eva: Today, yeah, today is a lot different. Well, in a few places it's still the same. (3 secs) Yeah, there are still places and people where even / where they still have / where there isn't/ or there are those who don't want that a woman has something to say. // I: Hm.// (4 secs) And yeah, (3 secs) I mean / back then: Woman – school or girl – school, "No, they worked at home!" They had no chance of getting an education or anything. //I: Hm.// That's again # quite different today.
> Dina: # Yeah it is / (3 secs) but that's only happened though in the last hundred years //Eva: Yeah.// that it's changed. //I: Hm.// somewhat. (3 secs) and now it's pretty good [laughs].
> Eva: ## Or it's getting better. (3 secs) It's still not perfect, but it's getting better.
> Erik: ## It's still not quite there, but it's good.
> Yves: That's a good thing (Dt-CH-GD2, 339-341, 354-364).

The rights of women are explained *ex negativo* by the two girls. Read under a different sign, this means that today the woman has the right to have a say and to decide, she no longer has to sit in the kitchen and do the laundry, but can, if she wants, contribute to the family income, just like the man, by working outside the home. Today's women have the right to sexual self-determination and are no longer there to simply 'give pleasure' to the man. Women can make decisions on their bodies and decide whether and when they want children. Neither is childcare taken for granted as purely women's work. Women of today are not 'just there' – i.e. as objects – but see themselves as equal subjects with equal rights. Behind this argumentation, another pattern of explanation is discernible; that of 'self-determination' as the goal and norm for the women of today.

What is of interest, is the point Eva makes on education. Women used to be deprived of education because they had to work in the household, which meant that the young women had no chance to find a job or to live independently, i.e. independent of father and husband. Today however, women also have the right to education and therefore receive the same chance and opportunity as men and can realise their potential and personal fulfilment. Here, too, the linear concept is evident: 'Without any (initial) education, no apprenticeships and vocational training, no livelihood.'

Student conceptions on women today are such that, although the majority of women are on an equal footing with men, they are aware that this is not the case in all parts of the world and in all cultures. Women have come a long way, have achieved a lot and that is 'pretty good'. However, the students can still see moments of repression; 'It's still not perfect'. In the minds of the ninth graders, the project 'women's emancipation' is not yet over.

Again, there is a time before and after the revolution that is equated with today. The historical development is again faded out and the exemplary formation of meaning (Rüsen) dominates. The quotes also show a significance that is directed towards the future. The significance of the French Revolution for young people is obvious. It concerns them. It has to do with their lives. 'It's pretty good, but it's still not perfect', they say. The history of the French Revolution, and in this case the emancipation of women that it achieved, is exemplary. It teaches us a lesson – it has 'symbolic significance' (Cercadillo); and most importantly, this lesson from history motivates students to act for a 'better' future (historia vitae magistra).

Connected with this are also the moral judgments about the past. Judgement of the past by means of present ethical standards is typical for the students. It is not only a sign of their 'presentism', but it also influences their attribution of significance to the French Revolution. In those days everything was bad, unjust, and immoral. That became better with the French Revolution. Danto spoke of 'pragmatic significance' in this context. The students tell the story of the French Revolution as the story of an achievement.

5. Discussion

The students' remarks on the 'achievements' of the French Revolution base themselves on the regulative ideas of modernity: equality, freedom, solidarity etc. They therefore see the main 'present-future significance' of the French Revolution in the political establishment of social, economic and political equality, legitimized by means of a constitution: equal rights for all, tax liability for all, right to education as well as equal rights for men and women.

I have tried to show the most typical patterns of explanation of the 9th grade grammar school students by means of the topic of equality. Their historical thinking is dominated by a belief in progress, which is paired with a linear way of utilitarian thinking. Added to this are guiding ideas of the Enlightenment such as freedom of thought, self-determination, and emancipation. It is evident that these patterns of explanation are strongly anchored in the students' everyday conceptions and are rarely used in a scholarly understanding of history. Presentism is clearly evident in the thinking of the young people. (Social) equality, progress, and emancipation are also considered moral reference points for the students' exemplary narration (Rüsen) of the French Revolution; or, according to Cercadillo, for its 'symbolic significance'.

Students equate the 'achievements' of the French Revolution with the regulative ideas of modernity. In doing so, the historical event is 'de-limited'; the revolution is not yet over, the project of modernity is not yet finished. Although the French Revolution and modern times are not synonymous, both terms function as 'narrative abbreviations' (Rüsen, 1994, p. 11) for progress, a more just world, rationality, democracy, emancipation, participation, etc. These values – seen both as universal values of their present time and worth fighting for in the future – demonstrate the students' personal connection to the history of the French Revolution.

In conclusion it can be said: the Swiss adolescents are in their historical narration – understood as a process of making sense – committed to an *exemplary narrative* by which history the French Revolution has a 'symbolic' and 'present-future' significance and is used to justify universal laws or rules of human values and practice; continuity and change are understood 'as validity of rules covering temporally different systems of life' (Rüsen, 1994, p. 17, 2004, 2005, p. 12). They make use of the master narrative of the Enlightenment.

6. Conclusion

Firstly, it should not be underestimated that the achievements of the French Revolution – liberty, equality, and solidarity – are regarded as the foundations of the Swiss federal welfare state. Secondly, they represent the 'promises of modernity', which are considered to be the yardsticks of progress and civilization of a state or society. In this respect, it is not surprising that, against the background of the heterogeneous and superficial basic education on the subject of the French Revolution at lower secondary level, students' thinking about it is 'a-historical' – the development between the revolutionary period and the present is ignored – and it is thought of as 'not yet over'.

In the sense of the 'educational structuring' – the third phase of the Model of Educational Reconstruction (see Fig. 1), for the purposes of an academically orientated history teaching (Günther-Arndt, 2014), at least three consequences arise as a result:

First, students should be made aware that how they interpret and learn history depends on their everyday life conceptions. It should be pointed out to them how different everyday historical thinking is from scholarly historical thinking. This epistemological change of knowledge contexts or 'epistemic switching' – from an everyday understanding to an academic one – must be guided and demanded by the teacher (Gottlieb & Wineburg, 2012; Mathis, 2015, 2016; Stoel et al., 2017). The aim is to show what distinguishes historical thinking (academic-oriented) from every day, pragmatic thinking, i.e. what does it mean to attribute significance to the French Revolution from a scholarly point of view.

Secondly, the teacher must model the students' thinking (Collins et al., 1989) by demonstrating how historians narrate a historical event or answer the problem of the consequences of the French Revolution. Hereby, the teacher must explicitly address the second-order concepts such as 'cause and consequences', and 'historical significance' (e.g. Lévesque, 2008; Seixas & Morton, 2013; Van Boxtel & van Drie, 2018). There is need for a systematic teaching of the relevance of the past for the present (Haydn & Harris, 2010).

Thirdly, during secondary education, the students' processes of making sense of history must be deliberately irritated, for example, by offering them the chance to deal with different narrative types (cf. Rüsen 1997). Thereby, especially the genetical narrative type should be chosen; and the difference between the exemplary and genetical narrative should be presented[8]. Students could rewrite the narratives themselves and see which functions are served by which form and how.

Finally, it is a desideratum that, based on the findings presented and the consequences formulated in a new study (e.g., with design-based research), lessons on the French Revolution should now be planned and carried out, and learning and learning growth should be investigated.

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Specific contribution of the authors

I hereby declare that I have authored this paper individually by my own.

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[8] Regarding the genetic types of narration, change and difference are taken into account. One's own presence is understood as an 'interim period' or transition. 'The matter of time differences is no longer ascertained as constant and consistent or in an abstract timeless transversal or overarching general. [...] change and transformation are what make sense" (Rüsen, 1994, p. 19).

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