

EMPATHY AS A TOOL FOR HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING: AN EVALUATIVE APPROACH OF THE ANCIENT GREEK PRIMARY HISTORY CURRICULUM

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Abstract

The present study examines the ancient Greek history curriculum and the corresponding textbook as they are implemented in the fourth grade of primary school in an aim to determine whether and to what extent empathy is recognized as a fundamental tool for historical understanding. A close examination of the curriculum revealed that empathy is not explicitly included among the skills which are to be taught in the history class. Nevertheless, the special nature of the curriculum under study contributes towards a creation of an educational setting in which it is possible for empathetic procedures to take place. The study supports that the empathetic activities appearing in the history textbook are limited in number. These activities are mostly composed of undisruptive historical events that have no serious consequences and carry no emotional charging. Because of this reason, historical events offering more advantageous opportunities for empathetic processing are not touched upon. Similarly, the historical material that supports the empathetic activities of the textbook is limited. The instructions provided in the teacher's book are also inadequate. In this framework, the empathetic comprehension of history disengages from the historical method and is primarily based upon pupils' imagination and intuition.

Introduction

Empathy is the person's ability to comprehend the other's position, even though he does not have the direct experience to do so. In other words, empathy is one's ability to put oneself in another person's place even if the other is a stranger to him or even if he thinks differently than his own self. Therefore empathy can be defined as the ability of an individual to participate in the psychic experiences of another person as if he were reliving them himself.¹

Despite the fact that the concept is not clearly defined up to the present day, it has been widely used in psychiatry and psychology.² The historian, compared to the psychiatrist or the psychologist, provides a special meaning for the concept of empathy, exploiting it as a tool to solve problems that arise in historical research. With the aid of historical evidence he attempts to mentally reconstruct the historical event under study. His ability to empathize allows him to place himself in the position of specific historical persons or groups in order to understand how they felt, thought, evaluated the situations, and acted under the special historical conditions they were in.³ In this way, historical empathy could be defined as a process through which the historian contextualizes the actions of historical persons in order to understand them.

Just as the historian, teachers and students use empathy as a tool for historical understanding in the classroom setting. Students identify themselves with historical persons and observe history through the eyes of those who lived it. As a result, they are able to understand the

thoughts and motives of these historical persons, realize their circumstances, appreciate their impediments and assess the consequences of their actions.⁴ Through empathy they are capable of placing historical actions into the proper historical context to successfully reconstruct events in history and by doing so, avoid falling prey to presentism.⁵ In this sense empathy contributes to historical understanding to such a degree that it could be entirely identified with it.⁶

According to Ashby & Lee, empathy does not constitute a process. Instead it is an “achievement,” a mental accomplishment, as well as a gradually developing capacity that is improved through teaching and practice.⁷ Evidence reveals that empathy is a teachable and learnable ability. Empathic teaching aims at equipping students with the ability to view historical facts from multiple perspectives.⁸ As they move beyond their own perspective, little by little they become more capable of realistically understanding the complexity and the difficulty of historical incidents. They gradually move away from simplified judgments concerning the just and the unjust, the civilized and the uncivilized, the friend and the enemy, and learn to critically approach historical occurrences. Through empathy students acquire the stance of not directly rejecting any different or even unprecedented human action as being thoughtless, approaching it instead with a disposition of openness and critical understanding. For this reason the empathetic approach is suitable for the processing of sensitive and ambiguous issues, where human action is judged as paradoxical or irrelevant according to the prevalent practice. Crucial historical circumstances that historically led to conflict or tragedy are ideally empathically approached.⁹ The most significant goal of empathic teaching is for students to progressively develop their mental capacity and disposition as well as their readiness to transfer their comprehension of history to situations in their own lives.¹⁰ Empathetic practice on historical issues could contribute to the comprehension and tolerance toward various cultures, thus improving communication among people in contemporary multicultural societies. Consequently, the development of empathetic strategies to approach historical events is becoming more and more popular in discussions concerning the teaching of history in schools because this contributes to the attainment of significant aims in contemporary education.¹¹

A contemporary history curriculum utilizes empathy as a tool for historical understanding. The curriculum in mention regards learning of historical content as being equally important as the ability to make empathetic judgments. Empathetic competence is recognized as one of the developing skills that students of all educational levels should acquire. Empathetic teaching in history activates students’ ability to withdraw from the present place and time, enabling them to attain contextual understanding. Through empathic identification, students are prompted to make a mental reconstruction of the historical event, just as it occurred in the specific historical conditions. A critical, analytical, and reflective study of the historical event is possible only within the specific historical context. In any other context, the real motives of historical persons remain vague and inaccessible, rendering the relationship between cause and result unattainable.¹² Consequently, the overall historical approach is vulnerable to the shortcomings of presentism. In order for the historical context to be revealed, it is crucial that the history curriculum provides for sources that are adequate in number and diverse in nature.¹³ The selection of suitable investigation questions guides the students to unlock these historical sources, to analyze the available historical evidence, and to focus on the substantial clues arising in class discussions.¹⁴ At the end of the process students should be in a position to support through rational argumentation the validity of the historical reconstruction they arrived at, as well as the thoughts and arguments they came up with during the teaching process. The teaching strategies of role-playing, structured debate and narrative-writing concerning issues historical

persons confront also contribute towards this cause.¹⁵ The reconstruction of historical events takes place within this particular framework with the assistance of student imagination and intuition.¹⁶ Nevertheless, in order to avoid jumping to simplified conclusions and anachronisms the emotional involvement and insightful conception of ideas should be based on historical facts, complying with rational thinking and systematic investigation.¹⁷ Otherwise, the empathic procedure ends up as merely a game of imagination. The instructor facilitates the procedure of historical research guiding students to achieve a balance between reflective inference and the intuitive recreation of the historical event under study.

2. The framework of the study

In the Greek educational system each subject taught at every stage/level of education is governed by the corresponding curriculum. The current curriculum that was established in 2003 is developed in two sections. The first concerns the basic cross-curricular concepts, skills, and attitudes that all students belonging to the same stage/level are expected to acquire, and the second constitutes the curriculum of every subject for every stage/level. The two sections complement one another and cooperate effectively, so that work at school combines the instruction of cross-curricular concepts, skills, and attitudes, along with the instruction of academic content and the relevant skills of each subject-matter. The Greek curriculum is compiled by the state and is enforced in all educational institutions throughout the country. The curriculum yields the framework for the writing of the corresponding textbook of every school subject. Each textbook for every school subject has been chosen as the most suitable among others and has been approved by the Greek Ministry of Education so that it constitutes the one and only textbook for the teaching of all school subjects nationwide.

The present study examines the curriculum and corresponding textbook for the teaching of ancient Greek history. This educational material is taught to fourth graders of primary school, that is students who are ten years old.

The textbook of ancient Greek history includes three books:

1. the student's book containing the historical narration and the supportive primary and secondary historical sources,
2. the workbook containing the activities for every unit of the student's book,
3. the teacher's book containing extra historical material, teaching recommendations, bibliographic references, etc.

Teachers are obliged to implement the above-mentioned educational material, while maintaining a small degree of autonomy. That is to say, to a certain extent teachers have the authority to enrich, alter, or even to replace the supplied educational material according to their own judgment. Moreover, teachers are provided with approximately 10% of the total teaching time to put into effect cross-curricular project work of their free option and development.

3. The purpose of the study

Aim of the present study is to examine the following three dimensions:

1. whether and to what extent the curriculum and the textbook concerning the instruction of ancient Greek history in the primary school acknowledge empathy as a fundamental capacity in the history class and whether the pupils are encouraged to involve themselves in empathetic procedures of historical research
2. whether and to what extent the empathetic activities and the accompanying historical material included in the history textbook under inspection supports the empathetic approach
3. whether and to what extent the suggested empathetic approach exhibits the various perspectives of historical events.

The study is organized according to the following key questions:

- Has a provision been made in the curriculum that renders empathy as a tool for approaching ancient Greek history?
- Are the historical narrations, the illustrated and written historical sources, and activities in the textbook under examination suitable so as to activate the empathetic competence of students?
- Do the teaching recommendations suggested in the teacher's book facilitate the activation of the empathetic skills of students?
- Is extra source material made available to the teacher and the pupils through which the historical empathetic approach will be constructed?

4. Empathy in the ancient Greek history curriculum

In order to ascertain whether and to what extent the ancient Greek history curriculum involves pupils in the empathetic understanding of historical events, it is necessary to examine the specific sections of the curriculum: the purpose, the aims, the content, and the suggested evaluation. A thorough review of the history curriculum guides us to the conclusion that nowhere in its text is there an explicit and direct reference to empathetic approaches of historical content. More specifically:

- aims related to the empathetic approach of historical material are not included
- historical events suitable for empathetic processing are not exhibited in the content
- activities related to the empathetic approach of historical material are not included
- in the section of the curriculum concerning pupil evaluation, there is no specific reference about the evaluation of empathetic capacity

Consequently, the curriculum for the instruction of ancient Greek history does not incite nor does it explicitly support teachers and pupils to develop empathetic activity in history. Nevertheless, it is widely accepted that apart from their direct and explicit statements, curricula are responsible for the creation of the specific educational setting that encourages or averts specific educational choices. The special nature of each curriculum defines to a considerable degree the type of educational activities that will be developed in the classroom. In order for a curriculum to encourage and promote empathetic teaching approaches, it must have specific

characteristics concerning its composition and development. More specifically, the curriculum that promotes empathy:

- emphasizes whole-child development
- has a pupil-centered nature
- encourages the activation of pupil imagination and intuition
- recognizes and accepts differentiated learning outcomes
- emphasizes the social and emotional development of pupils
- moves pupils forward in their knowledge and learning skills
- respects and renders value to any type of differentiation among people.¹⁸

The Greek history curriculum is successfully aligned with the above-mentioned principles, so that it provides the appropriate supportive educational setting for the development of empathetic procedures. Although teachers and pupils who apply this particular history curriculum are not explicitly urged to administer empathetic approaches, they are not hindered from doing so. It must additionally be noted that this history curriculum includes aims in tune with empathetic teaching approaches. More specifically the curriculum under inspection aims at enabling students:

- “to be informed about the social, cultural, religious, and national differentiations of societies that are being studied”
- “to comprehend and to accept cultural, religious, or other differentiations as a fundamental human right in a democratic society and as a positive factor in its development” and finally
- “to get acquainted with the ideas, the convictions, and the attitudes of people in their historical route.”¹⁹

Such aims are attuned with the objectives of empathetic approaches and encourage empathetic procedures in the history classroom. Nevertheless, these aims alone do not suffice for the manifestation of empathy, given that it constitutes a more demanding and more specialized procedure. Yet questions remain unanswered when pursuing the above aims of the history curriculum:

- Is it enough for pupils to “be informed about the social, religious, and national differentiations of societies that they are studying” in order to develop an openness to a difference in opinion, to a way of life, to ideology, to religion, to nationality?
- Through which procedures can pupils become adept at comprehending and “accepting the cultural, religious, or other differentiations” which is something even more difficult to accomplish?
- How can comprehension and tolerance become a life stance capable of directing human activity in the present and in the future?
- What happens when familiar manners of thought and action differentiate or clash with those of “others,” of those that are “different?”
- How can “the ideas, the convictions, the attitudes of people in their historic route” be approached when they deviate from those which the pupils are experiencing?

The curriculum for the instruction of ancient Greek history expresses the following important aims, however without connecting their achievement with the development of the

students' empathetic capacity. When a history curriculum expresses the aim of "accepting differentiation as a fundamental right in a democratic society" without at the same time defining an appropriate teaching approach, a demanding and complicated educational procedure appears to be simplified. It does not suffice for the teacher to point out something that is different in the historical route in order for the learners to comprehend and accept it in the contemporary world. An empathetic teaching approach is required in order to comprehend something that is different, especially when it is accompanied by the pursuit of its acceptance. Otherwise that which is different remains strange, peculiar, peripheral, and even when pupils put up with it, they are not in a position to understand it, to interpret it, and even more so, to accept it.

The third aim of the history curriculum concerns acquainting the pupils with the idea that "the concepts, the beliefs, and the attitudes of people are constantly changing in their historical route." The history curriculum clarifies that pupils should come to understand that various historical contexts produce different ways of human thought and action that may deviate to a great extent from one another and from the corresponding one of the present day. This is one more aim that implicitly refers to empathetic approaches of historical content without making explicit reference to them. Is it possible for the pupils to comprehend the manners of thought and action of persons in various historical periods without empathetically identifying with them? Only through the implementation of the empathetic teaching approaches is this attainable. It is truly peculiar that in a history curriculum that sets as the most significant of its aims the development of the pupils' ability to comprehend historical events from the different perspectives of the people of the past, reference to empathy as a means of achieving those aims is omitted.

Despite the fact that the ancient Greek history curriculum does not explicitly introduce empathetic thinking in the teaching of history, due to its special nature it formulates an educational setting where it is possible for empathy to take place. In this way, space is left for the author of the textbook and the teacher of the class to include the content and activities that are of empathetic nature in the history lesson. Below it is examined whether and to that extent the possibilities provided by the history curriculum are put into effect in the corresponding history textbook.

5. Empathy in the ancient Greek history textbook

At the beginning of every teaching unit, the history textbook contains the historical narrative text followed by the accompanying historical illustrative and written sources, as well as by the relevant activities. In order to examine whether and to that extent empathy is promoted through the history textbook, it is necessary to inspect these particular parts that comprise it.

5.1. The historical narrative texts of the history textbook.

Issues of historical content that are considered to lend themselves to an empathetic analysis are those in which a conflict of ideas, attitudes, interests, and actions among historical people and groups dominate.²⁰ Usually, they are historical issues that are crucial, doubtful, and challenging in nature and have had significant or even fatal consequences for those involved.²¹ The history textbook under examination narrates the historical content, avoiding focusing on extreme human actions, tragic events, erroneous decisions, and personal obsessions. The

historical narration of the textbook keeps to the facts being neutral and depersonalized. Because of this, the opportunities for empathetic processing in the narrative texts are limited.

5.2. The illustrations of the history textbook.

In order for an illustration to be suitable for empathetic processing, it should refer to situations that are familiar to those of the pupils so that it is comprehensible through the recalling of their personal experiences. An illustration that renders itself for empathetic processing assists the pupils in entering the illustrated scene mentally as if they were a part of it. By placing themselves in the illustrated scene it is possible for them to reflect about its content. Also, that which is illustrated should challenge, set questions, and stimulate the pupils' disposition for inquiry. In addition to cognitive advancement, it should also refer to the pupils' emotional cultivation and should cause a feeling of sentiment through their identification with historical persons.

The illustrations of the history textbook are comprised of paintings on urns and vessels, sculptures, sites, designs, and maps. A close inspection of the textbook leads us to the assumption that its illustrations were not chosen with the primary aim of empathetically activating the pupils. Even in the cases where illustrations are suitable towards an empathetic analysis, the textbook does not instigate such an analysis. Two illustrations in the textbook are singled out as being the most suitable for the activation of empathetic instructional procedures:

The first illustration constitutes a black-figured vessel, which is in the Archaeological Museum at Eleusis (Appendix 1). Pictured is an armed battle among the colonists and the native inhabitants during the first Greek Colonization (8th century B.C.) The caption notes:

“Settling down in foreign lands was not always peaceful. Many times the colonists had to come up against local peoples. This is an illustration of a vessel which depicts the colonists' attempt to disembark from the ship”.

In the teacher's book, the pupils are urged to imagine themselves in the positions of the colonists and the native inhabitants. Some of the pupils are prompted to place themselves in the colonists' shoes and to talk about the reasons why they were led to go there, the problems which they faced, as well as the life style of their homeland. Other pupils are prompted to place themselves in the position of the natives and to discuss about the way of life in their native land. The suggested approach urges pupils to contemplate on the phenomenon of colonization from both standpoints, that of the colonist and that of the local inhabitant, to identify themselves with each side and to provide arguments in favor of the one or the other. It is suggested in the teacher's book that the communication amongst the colonists and the native inhabitants take the form of “an interview/dialogue” between the two sides. Such activities are typical in activating the pupils' empathetic capacity and encourage empathetic work in the classroom. However, opposing arguments can be expressed concerning the scientific validity of the historical approach in mention. The activity may perhaps mislead the pupils to think that the colonists and the local inhabitants settled their differences through peaceful negotiation. Historically speaking, the Greek colonists emigrated because they were forced to do so by social or political needs, either from a desire for the acquisition of new lands or for economical profit through commerce. In the new land, they faced resistance from the native populations which in many cases was very strong. The

settling was usually materialized with the colonists being the dominant ones. In some cases however the settling was cancelled because of the powerful resistance of the local inhabitants. If the event of colonization is not presented in its true historical dimensions, the empathetic approach will remain at the simplified and misleading level of supposed agreement based on dialogue. Empathy does not fulfill its aim unless it contributes to the presentation of the real historical context which nourished the historical events.²² Seeing things from their positive side, buffering negative emotions and softening conflicts may lead to the distortion of history.

The second illustration is of a painting on a lecythus which today is in the Archaeological Museum of Athens. It depicts a soldier bidding farewell to his wife on his departure for war (Appendix 2). The caption notes:

“A scene from a white lecythus which depicts an Athenian warrior who bids his wife farewell”.

The teaching approach of the unit urges the pupils to imagine, to describe, and to estimate the relationship of the two cities, of Athens and Sparta, on the eve of the Peloponnesian War. The aim is for the pupils to ascertain the competitive character of these relationships and to speculate on the imminent war. One could infer that the image on the lecythus in mention is chosen in the specific chapter in order to provide the pupils with the opportunity to contrast the fanaticism, the harshness and the irreconcilability of this destructive civil war, opposing it to the tenderness and the love that exists in the everyday relationships between spouses. The image lends itself to empathetic processing because it refers the pupils to thoughts and emotions which are familiar, substantial and beloved. Yet the illustration appears in the textbook, and no relating activity is suggested. This good opportunity is in danger of remaining unexploited if the pupils simply talk about the subject matter of the depiction on the lecythus. In order to provoke identification with historical persons, which is necessary for the materialization of empathy, pupils must be moved to experience emotions which war brings on, such as the pain of separation and the fear of losing a spouse. However, the empathetic approach should not be limited to emotional expression. The approach should focus on a strong grasp of historical information in order for the students to revive the specific historical period.²³ The scene will become more expressive if the pupils contemplate the great loss of human life and property the Peloponnesian War incited. The lecythus, as a type of burial vessel, reinforces this tragedy even more, as the image most likely depicts the real incident of the warrior’s death in the war.

5.3. The written historical sources of the history textbook

In order for the written sources appearing in the history textbook to activate historical empathy, they should present historical events that provoked dissent, clashes, or even tragedy. Through the reconstruction of these events in the classroom, the pupils become able to understand and then interpret the attitude and the behavior of historical persons. Written historical sources of this nature are not absent from the textbook, although they are few.

The written historical source of the history textbook entitled ‘The death of Pausanias’ constitutes an example of this instance. In the excerpt written by Cornelius Nepotus provided below, it is noted:

“While Pausanias was leader of the Greek fleet, he was charged with betraying his country. Specifically he was held responsible for coming to an agreement with the Persians to hand over the country of Greece to them. It seems that this frugal Spartan was dazzled by the wealth and the luxury of the Persians and began to wear Persian dress and to behave like a Persian leader. Then the nobility of Sparta asked him to return, sentencing him to death. Beseechingly, he sought shelter in the temple of Athena Chalkioikos. His fellow countrymen sealed the door of the temple and removed the roof so that he could die from hunger and the cold. It is said that even his mother took part in this act. Shortly before he died they carried him out of the temple so that he would not pollute it’.

The teacher’s book advises the teacher to make the pupils aware of “the likelihood that the charges against Pausanias were unfounded. The pupils tackle with the issue of judgments especially during periods of war.” It is true that the historical sources render opposing and uncertain judgments concerning the role which General Pausanias played in the war. As a result, the suggested teaching approach aptly questions Pausanias’ treason, which is mentioned in the written source. The controversy is left dangling, however, because reference is not made to further research by supplying historical evidence that would check the validity of its content. Moreover, a series of other crucial questions aimed at the history class are omitted. How was it possible for the victor of the Persians at Plataea to betray his country to the Persians a short while later? How was it possible for the Spartans to forget their debt to Pausanias so easily and to hold such a tormenting death in store for him? Could it be that Pausanias was their scapegoat whom they punished for their own failures? What was that which in reality caused the Spartans to disfavor Pausanias? If the ill-will expressed towards Pausanias was unjust, how was it possible that his own mother shared in it? Such questions urge teachers and pupils to explore the matter further through research that is fertile even when it is not possible to reach a clear and definite conclusion.²⁴ Empathy contributes to a teaching approach of difficult and controversial historical issues such as this one.²⁵ The teaching of such complicated historical issues from multiple perspectives is fruitful because it enables students to form their own understanding of history. All the same, the history textbook does not make any reference to such processing. Perhaps this is because it is considered that it would be very demanding of the young pupils the textbook is addressing.

5.4 The activities of the history textbook

The history textbook designates two of the activities as being empathetic. The first of these refers to the colonization of the Greeks (8th century B.C.). This activity places the student in the shoes of a young colonist who travels by ship towards the new land of settlement and asks him to describe both the cheerful and sad thoughts he has made.

“Imagine that you are a child of that period. Your family and the other Ionians are on a boat that is sailing towards the shores of Asia Minor with the intention of finding a new land to live in. Try to describe your thoughts by dividing them into two categories.

<i>Cheerful thoughts</i>	<i>Sad thoughts</i>

The explanations provided in the teacher's book urge the instructor to process "the issues which are set in action when cultural groups differing amongst themselves come into contact with one another and to project the positive side which exists in the composition of the dissimilar." In addition, the pupils are urged to involve themselves individually or in groups in an interview or a dialogue in which they are to play the roles of the colonists and the local inhabitants. They are to converse among themselves about the reasons that led them to the new world, about the problems they faced, about the elements of their culture, their manners and customs, their religion, and about the practices they brought with them to the new world. This is in essence "an open type exercise in which it is possible for the pupils to develop their capacity for empathy in order to comprehend the conditions under which the First Colonization took place." The activity in mention is accompanied by a painting on a vessel in which armed local inhabitants are depicted driving away colonists who are attempting to settle in their land (Appendix 1). The historical event of colonization is presented through the eyes of its protagonists. The pupils are put in the place of historical persons, taking on roles that are opposing and at times conflicting. They experience cheerful and sad emotions which are brought on by each historical event and are urged to defend the different or opposing views of each side. When guided by an experienced teacher, this activity could activate the pupils empathetically.

Beyond the above-mentioned objections concerning the historical validity of this activity, it must be noted that in order for the empathetic approach to be implemented, support must be provided by suitable historical material.²⁶ In order for pupils to come to understand the historical event of colonization, it does not suffice for them to draw from their own personal experiences dealing with their families' possible resettling in other lands and to project these familiar incidents onto the historical event. Without the aid of the historical material, instruction would remain at the level of imagination. Pupils would attempt to imaginatively recreate thoughts and feelings felt by the colonists as well as by local inhabitants, something that would lead to anachronisms and simplifications far-off from historical reality. Pupils' imagination, insight, and lastly their empathetic skill should be based on historically accurate evidential reconstruction of events of the past being studied.²⁷ For this purpose the pupils should be supplied with source material that reflects various aspects of the historical event. They should also get practice in posing suitable questions, in getting answers and in reaching conclusions that they could provide proof for.²⁸ The sought-after historical material is not provided in the history textbook, nor is it suggested in the teacher's book. As a result, the teacher must investigate the historical sources on his own in order to locate it.

The second empathetic activity that is suggested in the history textbook transfers the pupils to Alexandrian times:

'Imagine you are a reporter of that time and that you are interviewing Alexander the Great. Write up the questions you would like to ask him'.

It is suggested in the teacher's book that the activity take "the form of a dramatization in which the pupil would take on the role of the interviewer who poses the questions and the other pupil would 'act out' the role of Alexander the Great." It is also recommended that the activity is supported by the illustrated reference material that accompanies the historical narration in an aim to present the particular conditions in which the specific campaign took place. Through the illustrated material the pupils are aided in locating possible questions the student/interviewer poses to Alexander the Great concerning the particular conditions of the campaign. In order for the activity in mention to function as an empathetic activity, the pupils should reconstruct the historical conditions in the army camp of Alexander, outlining intentions, thoughts, ambitions, hesitations, relationships, and associations of power. In this case as well, this activity demands the inquiry teaching method by resorting to authentic historical material. It is uncertain if the material provided in the history textbook is adequate for the reconstruction of the various aspects of this complicated historical incident. In addition, the teaching instructions in the teacher's book are insufficient.

It should also be pointed out that the history textbook itself makes a sequence of other activities available, which could be exploited for the purpose of empathetic teaching, even though they are not recommended as being empathetic in nature. In other sections of the textbook the pupils are asked:

-to express arguments concerning one or another view on a crucial issue

Imagine that you are a faithful servant of Kodros. Write up a dialogue which you may have had with the King on the morning of the day he decided to go to the Dorian camp.

Imagine that you live in Athens or in Sparta during the time when the Peloponnesian War broke out. What would you say to your fellow countrymen in order to persuade them not to embark on the war?

-to make an inference, as a result of critical thought, based on the given facts

Observe the map of the Greek colonies. If you lived in the country of Greece of that time period and were the leader of the colonists where would you choose to create a colony? How would you name the new city?

-to compose an original text exploiting and extending their experience by resorting to their imagination

If you lived in Athens during the time when the great monuments were being built, in the building of which would you like to have taken part (for example to have worked as a sculptor)? Imagine what you would have done and try to describe it.

Imagine that you are one of the persons who followed Alexander the Great (a historian, a geographer, a mechanic, an artist) and that you are keeping a diary. Present your impressions of an important day of the campaign in writing.

-to describe their emotions about a difficult or painful situation

If you lived in Carthage and were watching your town being destroyed by the Romans, how would you feel? Describe your emotions.

How do you imagine the Athenians felt while they were closed up within the city walls for such a long time? (during the siege of Athens by the Spartans at the time of the Peloponnesian war)

How do you think the Greeks felt about the accomplishments of Alexander the Great?

Even though these activities are not recommended as being empathetic in nature, they could be transformed into activities of empathy with the proper teaching approach and with the support of the appropriate reference material. In order for an activity to be characterized as being empathetic in the history lesson, it should fulfill several or all of the following conditions:

- to contain an historical situation that is peculiar and novel, one that seems to be inexplicable by today's standards
- to contain two or more opposing views for its explanation: a certain position and another contrasting one
- to constitute a challenging historical reality that caused a serious problem, a conflict with a painful outcome, or incited a broad ethical dilemma
- to involve the pupils' thinking and emotions in the solving of a problematic situation
- to activate the pupils' imagination and intuition
- to include the element of intricacy and to lead to a process which is advantageous from an educational point of view
- for abundant material of authentic historical sources to be available and easily approached by the teacher and the pupils so that it can be implemented in the classroom.²⁹

It is obvious that the activities recommended in the history textbook do not fulfill many of the above conditions. They are probably safe and harmless approaches that ask the pupils to draw from their personal experience in order to envision the emotions and the thoughts of historical protagonists. Placing the pupils in front of authentic historical dilemmas that the historical persons faced is something that is avoided. Involving pupils in procedures of historical research of the deeper incentives which led human action in the particular historical moment is also averted. The young age of the pupils the history textbook is directed at may perhaps have constituted a factor that was taken into account for this choice. However, according to more recent research, effective class work during the history lesson does not depend so much on the level of mental competence of the pupils as on the type of learning experiences the school has to offer.³⁰ In other words, pupils' involvement with demanding activities improves their skills in performing more advanced mental operations.³¹ Even the younger pupils of primary school are capable of implementing an experiential approach when supported by properly selected source material and when guided adroitly by the teacher. What is more, even though the ancient Greek history curriculum and the corresponding textbook for the teaching of ancient Greek history in high school is directed at older students (who are 13 years of age), and despite the fact that it is a newly published textbook, it does not contain any additional or more complex activities concerning empathy. The review of the history curriculum in high school guides us into reaching similar conclusions while the corresponding history textbook includes only one activity that could function as an empathetic activity, without being explicitly labeled as such.

6. Conclusion

The Greek history curriculum does not recognize empathy as one of the priorities in the teaching of history. Its nature in total however allows and perhaps facilitates empathetic procedures to take place in the classroom. It is important to note that among its central aims the curriculum puts forward the various perspectives of historical events. The corresponding history textbook interpreting the character of the history curriculum names only two activities as being empathetic. Given that the teaching of ancient Greek history lasts for one whole school year, the quantity of empathetic activities is regarded as limited. Moreover, the illustrated and written historical sources are included in the textbook without demanding empathetic processing. Consequently, the teaching approach suggested for these activities cannot be regarded as a comprehensive proposal for the promotion of empathic skills in the history lesson. Empathetic approaches in history impose the inspection of historical material in an aim to reconstruct the historical context in which historical events took place. However in the history textbook being examined in this study, the supporting historical material is so limited that it does not allow the pupils to achieve an authentic reconstruction of the historical context. As a result, it fails to make the pupils understand that the historical events are complicated and that the real motives of historical persons are often concealed. The explanations that are given in the teacher's book are so few that they do not adequately support the teachers and the pupils in their endeavor to approach history empathetically. Therefore, the whole teaching approach is based solely on pupils' imagination and intuition. Lastly, mention should be made about the type of empathetic activities that were chosen. The history textbook selects harmless historical events to be approached empathetically, events that are of less historical importance, which have restricted consequences and limited emotional charging. In many historical situations the history textbook offers the solutions instead of posing crucial questions for the pupils to contemplate. It is impressive how crucial issues in ancient Greek history such as slavery, the arrogance of Athenian democracy, the place women had in society, issues that lend themselves to the empathetic teaching process are degraded or are entirely omitted from the suggested historical approach. In this manner, the dynamic and challenging character of ancient Greek history is debased. It is exactly this element that really brings ancient Greek history so close to contemporary life and to our expectations for the future.

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Appendix

1. *“Settling down in foreign lands was not always peaceful. Many times the colonists had to come up against local peoples. This is an illustration of a vessel which depicts the colonists' attempt to disembark from the ship”.*



(Archaeological
Museum of Eleusis)

2. “A scene from a white lecythus which depicts an Athenian warrior who bids his wife farewell”.



(Archaeological Museum
of Athens)

NOTES

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