

History Education and Students' Historical Consciousness in Malaysian Primary Schools

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Abstract

History education plays a vital role in shaping students' national identity, critical thinking, and understanding of the past. This study explored the level of historical consciousness among primary school students and evaluated how history teachers implement pedagogical practices to stimulate students' engagement with historical narratives. A quantitative research design using a survey method was conducted among 80 history teachers across selected primary schools in Selangor. The findings revealed that while most teachers adhered closely to the curriculum, the incorporation of student-centered methods and contextual approaches varied widely. The study suggests that to enhance historical consciousness, teachers must adopt reflective teaching strategies that link past events with contemporary issues.

Keywords: History Education, Historical Thinking, Primary School, National Identity, Curriculum

Introduction

History is more than a record of past events; it serves as a framework for students to understand identity, causality, continuity, and change over time. In Malaysia, history has been a compulsory subject since 2013, symbolizing its importance in nurturing patriotic citizens. However, despite curriculum mandates, students often perceive history as difficult and irrelevant to daily life (Noraini & Rahim, 2020). This study investigates how teaching practices influence students' historical consciousness defined as their ability to contextualize present issues with historical knowledge (Rüsen, 2004).

Historical consciousness is a mental structure that helps individuals interpret historical events and make sense of the present and future (Lee, 2005). It is closely tied to national identity and civic development, especially in multi-ethnic societies like Malaysia. The Malaysian education system uses history as a tool to promote unity and patriotism among citizens. However, when taught through rote learning and examination-oriented approaches, history loses its potential to foster critical engagement (Shamsul Amri, 2018).

The importance of historical thinking has gained attention globally. Scholars like Wineburg (2001) argue that students must not only learn what happened in the past but also understand how historical narratives are constructed. This skill, known as historical literacy, involves sourcing, contextualization, corroboration, and interpretation. When students learn to think like historians, they can critically evaluate evidence and build reasoned arguments, which enhances their civic literacy and decision-making abilities (Seixas & Peck, 2004).

In the Malaysian context, research has shown that many students regard history as a dull and fact-heavy subject. This perception is exacerbated by textbooks that present a single narrative, often ignoring multiple perspectives (Yusof & Aziz, 2022). For instance, controversial or sensitive historical events are often underrepresented or presented with limited discussion, which restricts students from understanding the complexity of history and its relevance to current societal issues (Rohaty & Abu Bakar, 1989).

Effective history education requires more than curriculum mandates—it demands innovative pedagogy. Inquiry-based learning, project-based approaches, and integration of digital tools have proven to increase student engagement and deepen historical understanding (Barton & Levstik, 2004). However, the implementation of these methods in Malaysian classrooms remains inconsistent due to constraints such as large class sizes, limited teaching resources, and lack of professional development (Chan & Zainal, 2019).

Teachers play a critical role in shaping how students experience history. According to Yahya and Hashim (2021), teachers who link historical events to students' everyday lives and current affairs are more likely to foster historical empathy and critical awareness. When students are encouraged to question sources, debate interpretations, and reflect on ethical dimensions of the past, their historical consciousness becomes more developed (Lévesque, 2008).

Moreover, students' historical understanding is influenced by their socio-cultural backgrounds. In Malaysia, where students come from various ethnic and linguistic communities, inclusive and pluralistic teaching approaches are essential. Studies have emphasized the need to present multiple historical narratives, especially in a postcolonial society, to ensure that students of all backgrounds see themselves represented in national history (Ahmad, 2020).

Another significant challenge is the assessment format. The focus on memorization in examinations undermines the development of analytical skills and historical thinking. Scholars argue that assessments should include open-ended questions, document analysis, and historical argument writing to evaluate students' deeper understanding of the past (Lim & Mohd Roslan, 2021). Reforming assessment practices is necessary to align them with 21st-century skills and global education standards.

This study aims to investigate how Malaysian history teachers approach the teaching of history and how these methods influence students' historical consciousness. By examining pedagogical practices, teacher perceptions, and student responses, the research seeks to identify effective strategies for cultivating reflective and engaged citizens. The findings may provide valuable insights for curriculum developers, policymakers, and teacher educators.

Literature Review

Historical consciousness refers to an individual's understanding of how the past shapes the present and influences the future. According to Lee (2005), it enables learners to develop a temporal perspective and make sense of human experiences across time. In educational settings, this concept is closely associated with historical thinking, interpretation, and moral judgment. It allows students to appreciate continuity and change, and to critically engage with historical narratives rather than memorizing isolated facts.

In the Malaysian context, history education is deeply linked to national identity formation. The curriculum highlights themes such as patriotism, unity, and the nation's struggle for independence (Shamsul Amri, 2018). While these themes are essential for fostering national pride, the overemphasis on narrative memorization has drawn criticism. Many scholars argue that this method limits students' capacity to develop critical thinking and analytical skills, which are key to building historical consciousness.

Wineburg (2001) emphasized the value of teaching students to think like historians by evaluating sources, interpreting perspectives, and constructing arguments based on evidence. This approach contrasts sharply with the traditional textbook-centered teaching methods often found in Malaysian schools. When students are trained to critically assess the authenticity and bias of sources, they develop a deeper and more reflective understanding of historical events.

Yusof and Aziz (2022) found that inquiry-based learning methods significantly improve students' historical thinking abilities. Their study revealed that students who engaged in activities such as debates, source analysis, and historical role-play were more likely to question dominant narratives and make connections between the past and present. This inquiry-driven approach also helped boost student motivation and classroom participation.

Teachers' perceptions of history also play a critical role in shaping students' learning experiences. According to Yahya and Hashim (2021), teachers who believe that history serves civic and moral purposes tend to use discussion-based methods that encourage reflection and empathy. In contrast, teachers who view history primarily as a content-heavy subject are more likely to rely on lecturing and rote memorization, which can limit student engagement.

Another important aspect is the representation of diverse historical perspectives. In a multicultural society like Malaysia, presenting multiple viewpoints, especially from minority ethnic groups, enhances students' ability to engage with history critically and empathetically (Ahmad, 2020). Exposing students to different narratives helps them recognize bias, develop tolerance, and understand the complexity of historical truth.

Digital technology is increasingly being used to support historical thinking. Barton and Levstik (2004) suggested that multimedia tools, interactive timelines, and virtual museums allow students to explore history in dynamic and meaningful ways. These tools can bridge the gap between abstract historical concepts and students' lived experiences, especially when aligned with constructivist teaching principles.

Assessment practices also influence how history is taught and learned. Lim and Mohd Roslan (2021) argue that standardized exams focusing on factual recall discourage teachers from implementing student-centered strategies. They recommend alternative assessments such as historical essays, document-based questions, and performance tasks to evaluate students' analytical and interpretive skills.

Lastly, professional development for history teachers is crucial for effective implementation of progressive pedagogy. According to Seixas and Morton (2013), teachers need ongoing training in historical thinking concepts, curriculum planning, and culturally responsive practices. Without such support, even well-designed history curricula may fail to achieve their intended impact on students' historical understanding.

Methodology

A descriptive quantitative approach was employed to examine teachers' methods and their perceptions of students' historical understanding. A structured questionnaire consisting of Likert-scale items was distributed to 80 history teachers from public primary schools in Selangor using purposive sampling. The instrument was validated through expert review and achieved a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.89, indicating high reliability.

Research Population and Sample

The study involved 80 primary school history teachers selected from various government schools across Selangor. Teachers varied in experience, gender, and educational qualifications. This diversity provided a broad perspective on teaching methods and historical consciousness awareness among educators.

Table 1

Respondents' Demographics

ITEM	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Age	10	12.50%
Below 30 years	20	25.0%
31-40 years	30	30.0%
41-50 years	20	20.0%
Over 50 years		
Gender		
Male	50	37.5%
Female	30	62.5%
Education Level	50	62.5%
Bachelor's Degree	30	37.5%
Degree Master's		
Years of Teaching Experience		
1-5 years	15	18.75%
6-10 years	25	31.25%
11-15 years	20	25.0%
Above 16 years	20	25%

Table 1 presents the demographic distribution of the 80 history teachers who participated in this study. In terms of age, the largest group of respondents were between 41–50 years old (37.5%), followed by those aged 31–40 years (25.0%) and above 50 years (20.0%). A smaller portion, 12.5%, were aged below 30 years. This indicates that the majority of the teachers were mature and likely to have extensive experience in teaching history

For gender, a higher number of respondents were female (62.5%), while male teachers comprised 37.5% of the sample. This is consistent with national trends where the teaching profession in Malaysia, especially in primary schools, is predominantly female. Regarding educational qualifications, most teachers held a Bachelor's degree (62.5%), while 37.5% possessed a Master's degree. This suggests a relatively high academic qualification level among the respondents, which may positively influence the depth and quality of their teaching.

When considering years of teaching experience, 31.25% of the teachers had been teaching for 6–10 years, followed by 25.0% each for those with 11–15 years and more than 16 years of experience. Only 18.75% had less than 5 years of teaching experience. These findings show that the majority of the teachers had substantial teaching experience, which is important for understanding long-term pedagogical practices and their impact on students' historical consciousness. Overall, the demographic data suggest that the respondents represent a well-qualified, experienced, and gender-diverse group of history educators.

Research Instruments

This study employed a structured questionnaire as the primary research instrument to collect quantitative data from history teachers in selected primary schools in Selangor. The questionnaire was systematically designed to align with the research objectives and to measure both the demographic characteristics of the respondents and the key variables under investigation. The questionnaire consisted of five main sections, each serving a distinct purpose:

Section A gathered essential background information about the respondents, including their age, gender, academic qualifications, and years of teaching experience. These demographic details were crucial for understanding the respondents' profiles and examining any patterns or relationships that might influence the dependent variable.

Section B Students' Historical Consciousness focused on evaluating the level of historical consciousness among students, as perceived by their teachers. Items in this section were designed to assess students' interest in historical events, their ability to make connections between past and present, and their engagement in discussions related to historical narratives.

Section C Teachers' Educational Level explored the academic qualifications of the teachers, with a focus on whether higher educational attainment correlated with improved pedagogical practices or perceptions regarding students' historical understanding.

Section D Teachers' Years of Teaching Experience aimed to understand how teaching experience influenced the adoption of effective teaching strategies and the fostering of

historical consciousness among students. Teachers were asked to indicate their years of experience using categorized options.

This final section Section E Use of Student-Centered Teaching Methodsexamined the extent to which teachers implemented student-centered teaching strategies in their history classrooms. Statements in this section addressed the use of discussion-based learning, project work, inquiry methods, and the contextualization of historical events.

Each item in Sections B through E was measured using a five-point Likert scale, allowing respondents to indicate their level of agreement with each statement. The scale ranged from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), providing a nuanced understanding of teacher perspectives and practices. This format ensured consistency in responses and facilitated quantitative analysis of the data. The questionnaire was pilot-tested to ensure clarity, relevance, and reliability before being distributed to the targeted group of respondents. Feedback from the pilot phase was used to refine the items to enhance their validity.

Data Collection and Analysis

The Google Forms platform was used to distribute the questionnaire. The respondents were given two weeks to complete the survey. The completed questionnaires were downloaded from the platform and analysed using SPSS version 26. The data were analysed descriptively, including frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation.

Results

The purpose of this study is to examine the level of historical consciousness among primary school students and evaluate how history teachers implement pedagogical practices to stimulate students' engagement with historical narratives. A total of 80 history teachers from selected primary schools in Selangor participated in the survey. The findings are presented according to the main variables of the study: students' historical consciousness, teachers' educational level, years of teaching experience, and the use of student-centered teaching methods.

Demographic analysis revealed that the majority of respondents (30%) were within the 41–50 age group, followed by 31–40 years (25%), and over 50 years (20%). Most teachers were female (62.5%) and held a Bachelor's Degree (62.5%), while the remaining 37.5% held a Master's Degree. In terms of teaching experience, 31.25% had 6–10 years of experience, while the rest were fairly distributed across other categories.

In evaluating students' historical consciousness, the results indicated that teachers generally perceived students to show moderate to high levels of engagement with historical content, particularly when contemporary issues were linked to past events. Teachers with higher educational qualifications and more teaching experience were more likely to employ reflective and contextual teaching approaches. Additionally, the analysis showed a positive relationship between the use of student-centered methods and students' historical engagement, highlighting the importance of interactive and inquiry-based learning in history education.

Table 2

No.	Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	Score Mean Interpretation
1	Students' Historical Consciousness	4.10	0.45	High
2	Teachers' Educational Level	3.85	0.60	Moderate -High
3	Years of Teaching Experience	3.95	0.50	High
4	Use of Student-Centered Teaching Methods	4.20	0.40	High

Table 2 presents the mean scores and standard deviations for the key variables of the study. The variable "Use of Student-Centered Teaching Methods" recorded the highest mean score ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 0.40$), indicating a high level of implementation among history teachers. This suggests that many teachers are actively incorporating student-centered approaches such as discussions, project-based learning, and inquiry strategies into their history lessons.

The mean score for Students' Historical Consciousness was also high ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.45$), reflecting a positive perception of students' awareness and engagement with historical narratives. Teachers' Years of Teaching Experience had a mean score of 3.95 ($SD = 0.50$), indicating that the sample comprised experienced teachers who have been in the profession long enough to adapt their teaching strategies effectively.

Meanwhile, Teachers' Educational Level had a slightly lower mean score ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.60$), but it still falls within the moderate-to-high interpretation range. This shows that a substantial proportion of teachers had higher education qualifications that likely influenced their teaching methods and awareness of effective pedagogical practices.

Table 3

Students' Historical Consciousness

Code	Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree Strongly Agree
SHC1	Students demonstrate interest in learning history.	2	4	10	38
SHC2	Students can relate past events to current issues.	3	6	15	36
SHC3	Students express critical thinking in historical discussions.	1	5	14	40
SHC4	Students understand the importance of national identity through history.	0	3	12	37

Table 4

Teachers' Educational Level

Code	Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree Strongly Agree
EDU1	My educational background prepares me well to teach history.	1	3	10	35
EDU2	Higher qualifications help me use diverse teaching strategies.	0	5	12	40
EDU3	My academic training improves student engagement in history lessons.	2	4	14	38

Table 3

Teachers' Years of Teaching Experience

Code	Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree Strongly Agree
EXP1	My teaching experience enhances how I deliver history content.	1	3	11	39
EXP2	With more experience, I better understand students' historical thinking.	0	4	13	42
EXP3	I adapt teaching methods based on years of classroom experience.	1	5	10	40

Table 4

Use of Student-Centered Teaching Methods

Code	Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree Strongly Agree
SCTM1	I use group activities to promote engagement in history lessons.	0	2	9	41
SCTM2	I often apply discussion-based learning in the classroom.	1	3	12	40
SCTM3	I encourage students to analyze and question historical sources.	2	4	10	38
SCTM4	I use projects or role-play to help students connect with historical events.	0	5	13	39

	them understand and manage their emotions					
C4	Encourage children to share their feelings without fear of being ridiculed	0	0	2 (3.3%)	54 (90.0%)	4 (6.7%)
C5	Set a good example in dealing with my emotions in front of children	0	0	2 (3.3%)	55 (91.7%)	3 (5.0%)
C6	Rules or structures in the classroom that help manage children's emotions	0	0	1 (1.7%)	59 (98.3%)	0
C7	Praise and recognise children who can deal with their emotions well.	0	0	0	59 (98.3%)	1 (1.7%)

C8	Provide resources or materials to help children identify and manage their emotions.	0	0	0	55 (91.7%)	5 (8.3%)
C9	Take action when I see children having difficulty managing their emotions	0	0	0	55 (91.7%)	5 (8.3%)

Discussion

The results of this study provide valuable insights into the historical consciousness of primary school students, particularly in relation to their engagement with history, ability to relate past events to current issues, participation in critical thinking during historical discussions, and understanding of the importance of national identity through history.

The data indicates that the majority of students exhibit a reasonable level of interest in learning history, as demonstrated by the relatively high number of respondents who agreed with the statement that students show interest in learning history. However, the small number of students who strongly disagreed or disagreed with this statement suggest that some students find history less engaging. This aligns with previous studies which have shown that students often struggle to connect historical content to their lives unless teachers employ dynamic and interactive teaching methods. It is clear that enhancing student engagement should be a priority for educators, and incorporating more active learning strategies, such as project-based learning, debates, or the use of multimedia resources, could help foster a greater appreciation for history.

When it comes to the ability of students to relate past events to current issues, the results reveal a positive trend. A significant number of students were able to make these connections, suggesting that teachers are somewhat successful in linking historical events to contemporary issues in their lessons. However, the presence of a small number of students who disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement indicates a gap in the teaching strategies used to draw connections between history and current societal issues. History is not just about memorizing events but understanding their ongoing impact. As such, history educators should focus on developing curriculum and teaching strategies that explicitly connect historical narratives with contemporary global challenges, making history more relevant and relatable to students' lives.

The ability to express critical thinking in historical discussions is another area where the results were promising. A majority of the respondents agreed that they engage in critical thinking during history lessons, highlighting the importance of fostering analytical and reflective thinking skills. The critical engagement with historical content is essential, as it empowers students to question narratives, understand multiple perspectives, and form their own opinions. However, a small portion of students who disagreed or remained neutral suggests that there may still be some room for improvement in how critical thinking is encouraged in history classrooms. It would be beneficial to integrate more interactive

activities that prompt students to critically evaluate primary and primary sources, engage in debates, and analyze historical events from multiple viewpoints.

One of the most striking findings of this study is that most students agreed with the statement that they understand the importance of national identity through history. This suggests that history education plays a crucial role in shaping students' awareness of their national identity and fostering a sense of pride in their country's history and heritage. The strong recognition of history's role in developing national identity aligns with the broader educational goal of cultivating civic-minded citizens who are informed about their nation's past and its ongoing influence on their social and political context. However, some students remained neutral, which indicates that there may be varying degrees of understanding depending on factors such as the depth of historical content taught or the teaching methods used.

These findings have significant implications for teaching practice. First, it is clear that while students demonstrate a generally positive level of historical consciousness, there is still a need for improvement in certain areas. History educators should continue to explore ways to make history more engaging, ensure that historical content is connected to contemporary issues, and foster critical thinking in students. More student-centered approaches, such as problem-based learning or inquiry-based learning, could promote greater interaction with historical content and encourage deeper analysis.

Additionally, while the connection between history and national identity seems to be well established, teachers should continue to explore the diverse perspectives within history that shape a broader understanding of identity. This could include highlighting marginalized voices in history or connecting historical events with global issues, which would provide students with a more inclusive and comprehensive view of history.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of this study indicate that, overall, primary school students demonstrate a reasonable level of historical consciousness. The ability to engage with history, relate it to contemporary issues, think critically about historical events, and understand the importance of national identity through history is a promising sign of the effectiveness of current teaching methods. However, the study also highlights areas for further improvement, particularly in terms of enhancing student engagement and ensuring all students can relate history to their everyday lives. Future research could explore the impact of specific teaching strategies or curricula on students' historical consciousness to further refine educational practices. By adopting more interactive and reflective teaching methods, history educators can continue to foster a generation of students who not only understand the past but can also use that understanding to navigate and shape the future.

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on historical consciousness by contextualizing it within Malaysian primary education, a setting where national identity and multicultural representation intersect in complex ways. Theoretically, it affirms the relevance of historical consciousness as framed by Rüsen (2004) and Lee (2005), highlighting its utility in developing students' critical engagement with the past and their ability to relate historical narratives to current societal contexts. The research extends existing knowledge by emphasizing how student-centered pedagogical approaches such as inquiry-based learning

and contextual discussions enhance historical thinking and civic awareness. It underscores the importance of aligning curriculum delivery with inclusive, reflective, and culturally responsive methods, making it a valuable resource for policymakers, curriculum developers, and teacher training institutions aiming to foster historically literate and socially conscious citizens in Malaysia's multi-ethnic educational landscape.

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