



I Don't Know, I just Don't Like History: Historical Understanding of Students With Intellectual Disability

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Abstract. In 1976, Franz Henkemeier researched the historical understanding of students with disabilities in the setting of German Special School. Henkemeier asked the students questions about why they should learn history. Most informants, aged nine, said history could prevent them from being conspicuous after leaving school. This subject impacts their social and political attributes as they want to be a part of and participate in society. Today, the same question may be revisited in a different or more critical setting: To what extent have the voices of students with disabilities in history learning been heard? In answering the questions, a thorough analysis of the historical understanding of students with disabilities is required. Unfortunately, there is a gap in the study since Henkemeier's study. Many remarkable studies have been conducted in this area, resulting in the methods and approaches for specific learner characteristics such as learning disabilities, intellectual disability, or deaf people. However, regarding disabilities, the complexities of students' dis/ability may affect the generalization of those teaching methods. This article reports a study on the historical understanding of students with disabilities in the setting of Indonesian special education. The main question is to what extent the students understand history. A qualitative study was conducted in Secondary Special School Surakarta (SMALB) using a case study approach. Four students with intellectual disabilities were interviewed. The interview started with a fundamental question regarding their knowledge of history. The data were then analyzed to build a holistic data of students' historical understanding. The findings of the research show that mentally disabled students struggle to understand history as a subject in school, even at the elementary level of understanding. The first impression is that history is unattractive and difficult to learn. They tend to understand in a very personal way and associate history with significant events in their past that are easy to remember. The findings lead to a further question: Should intellectually disabled students learn history?

Keywords: disabilities, history subject, historical understanding

1 Introduction

In 1976, in the setting of German Special School, Franz Henkemeier researched the historical understanding of students with disabilities. Henkemeier asked questions regarding the reason why the students learn history. Most respondents, aged nine, said history could prevent them from being conspicuous after leaving school. This subject shaped students' social and political consciousness as they want to be a part of and

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participate in society [1]. Today, the question may be revisited: To what extent have the voices of students with disabilities in history learning been considered?

Analyzing the historical understanding of students with disabilities is crucial. As part of epistemic cognition, students' understanding of history corresponds with historical thinking and learning. It functions as the basis for students to learn history. Different types of students' epistemic cognition may be projected in various forms and modes of historical understanding [2]. In the case of students with disabilities, Sebastian Barsch [3] notes that a deeper understanding of how students with disabilities understand history can be an entry point for designing inclusive history learning. Barsch argues that students with disabilities must be taught with a particular approach based on their ability to learn history. With the basis of the knowledge, the learning process may be suitable for students' prior ability and knowledge.

Students' exceptionalities can affect their understanding of history and how they learn history. Deaf students learn by their ability to use sign language or interpret visualization. Blind or visually impaired students use their audible and tactile senses to learn. Meanwhile, students with intellectual disabilities can learn through easy language. The paths cannot be generalized since the way of learning the history of blind students can differ from that of others. It means that students' exceptionalities can create diverse paths of learning history. The diversity of students propels deeper analysis of how they learn, understand, and articulate history. The analysis becomes essential to ensure that the subjects are not too far away from students' zone of proximal development.

Unfortunately, since the work of Henkemeier [1], there has been no further research on the historical understanding of students with disabilities. In the German epistemic community, this has been pointed out by Barsch [4] as an unclear problem that led to a fundamental question regarding the participation of students with disabilities in historical culture. On the other hand, in the Anglo-Saxon epistemic communities, the research is focused on advancing technology-assisted learning and specific learning methods for disabilities [5]. This path is similar to the Indonesian case that focuses on developing technology, media, and learning instruments under the flag of research and development. To a certain degree, it can be said that the historical understanding of students with disabilities has not yet been spotted as a fundamental issue.

Based on the above background, this article aims to fill the research gap by analyzing the historical understanding of students with intellectual disabilities. In this article, students with intellectual disabilities refer to subaverage intellectual development concurrent with adaptive behavior [6]. They can be classified based on the level of support from mild to profound [7]. To be precise, the subject of research is those with mild intellectual disability who have 55 to 70 IQ scores. In comparison with other disabilities, students with intellectual disabilities experience more difficulties and discrimination. Their proximal development is limited by the general assumption of their disability/ability.

Then, the main question is to what extent students with intellectual disability understand history. It is hard to answer the question since no research addresses the issue. The study of the memory of intellectual disabilities can speculate the answer. Intellectual disability deficits to use and preserve short and long-term memory. The ability to use and preserve memory fluctuates depending on its etiology [8]. If

intellectual disability deficits use their memory, history is a part of the past, and memory may be impossible to learn. The assumption is debatable and may be wrong. Empirical evidence that they can remember the past is needed. Then, this article posits to answer the question.

2 Methods

A qualitative approach based on the case study was conducted at the State Special School Surakarta (SMALB). This research took cases of historical understanding of senior high school students with intellectual disabilities. SMALB Surakarta is located in Sidorejo, Mangkubumen, Banjarsari, Surakarta. This special school organizes elementary and secondary education for disabled students. The learning process was conducted mainly based on the student's personal needs. The research was conducted from February to June 2022, starting with data collection and ending with writing a report.

This research used qualitative data mainly from interviews with students with intellectual disabilities. There are four informants with particular intellectual characteristics: RA (19 years old), C (19 years old), E (19 years old), and RI (19 years old) have an IQ score between 50 - 70. The data were collected through a series of interviews with the informants. The main question is to what extent they understand history. The interviews were conducted in-depth, starting with how the informant felt and understood history as a subject in school. The following questions flowed according to the informant's answer to their opinion about history as the past. Data triangulation was then conducted to measure the data's validity and find intersectional data from informants. The data were then analyzed thematically to draw holistic explanations regarding their historical understanding.

3 Findings

The research findings show that the informants were unable to express the meaning of history as a subject or a discipline. For instance, when responding to the word history, C used the word "dizzy" and showed his gesture of ignorance (interview with C, 28 March 2024). RI also stated the same response. She did not know anything about the world's history for any reason. Meanwhile, the other informants expressed what they knew and were interested in history. E stated that history is a flashback of his life (interview with E, 27 March 2024). RA mentioned the G30S/PKI event when considering history (interview with RA, 27 March 2024). RA revealed that knowledge about the Maya civilization in America is one of the most exciting things in history (interview with RA on 27 March 2024).

In responding to the question regarding the history of a school subject, the informants tend to disfavor history. This was expressed by C, who did not have a reason to like history. C stated, "I Do not like it, I do not know, I just do not like it, I do not like history" (Interview C, 28 March 2024). RI also said that history subjects mainly contain reading and memorizing. That is why she does not like history (Interview with RI, 28 March 2024). RA was not very interested in history lessons,

"Like it but a little." RA's reason for disliking history is in line with RI. RA was interested in history subjects because she could get to know the nation's heroes by learning about history (Interview with RA, 27 March 2024).

The informants' favor and disfavor history raises a question about what methods they take to learn history. E and RA said reading books is the best way to learn history. E added that she relied on learning from her teacher's explanation in class. E had difficulty remembering the content and forgot it quickly. It makes E prefer to write the teacher's explanation and read it herself at home. E also said she preferred learning with friends because it was more fun (interview with E, 27 March 2024). C and RA said that they did not like the way of learning with the teacher because there were too many stories, which made students sleepy. C said he preferred learning with friends to learn (interview with C, 28 March 2024). While RI did not convey the reason clearly, RI said that sometimes RI could enjoy learning. RI understood history more quickly when it was explained and given examples (interview with RI on 28 March 2024).

Regarding the perception of the importance of history, all informants agreed that history is an important subject. E said that history, like social studies, helped her learn about nature (interview with E, 27 March 2024). RA explained that history helped her be more careful in daily activities (interview with RA, 27 March 2024).

Based on the above findings, informants realize that history is an important subject but too complex to be learned easily. Moreover, the informants tend to associate their personal experiences with understanding history as part of past or historical events. They also already know the best methods for learning history. Moreover, all informants agreed that history is an important subject. They realized that history can broaden their horizons to learn about society and nature, increase their awareness, and teach discipline.

4 Discussion

The research findings show that students with intellectual disabilities struggle to understand history both as a temporal subject and as a subject in school. Most of the informants tend to dislike history but admit that it is an important subject. The ability of students to understand and express history confirms the deficits in their capacity to use and preserve short and long-term memory [8]. History, memory, and history education share the same cognitive activity regarding the past [9]. Activating memory when learning history is vital since students need to remember historical events, process historical information, and preserve it in their long-term memory. With IQ scores ranging from 70 to 85 points [10], students with intellectual disabilities have difficulty remembering material presented in history textbooks and delivered by teachers in class. Students may understand a piece of historical information, but complex and multiple narratives can be too heavy. It can lead to a negative expression of history and historical teaching. Then, students' dislike of history cannot be directly interpreted as a subjective articulation. It should be understood as the result of their impression of historical complexity.

If history is too complicated to learn, should it be taught by students with intellectual disabilities? Students' perceptions of the importance of history as a subject

and the best methods to learn it can be a starting point for answering the question. Based on the research findings, students state that history is an important subject. It supports Henkemeier's [1] findings that, with similar articulation, students acknowledge that history supports their social understanding. In addition, the students also mentioned personal benefits from history, especially in supporting their awareness and self-discipline. Students can also find the best methods to learn history that make it possible to learn it. Based on the students' voices, it can be pointed out that history is vital for them, although it may be challenging to learn. Therefore, it can be a proposal for the existence of a history subject in a special school. Although, it cannot be arbitrarily assumed that it should be learned at every educational level from the elementary education level. From the authors' point of view, the subject of history can fit the needs and abilities of students with mild and moderate intellectual disabilities in secondary education or even higher education. Consequently, teachers in special schools should be ready to teach history. Then, using easy language [11] or other teaching methods [12] can be helpful for teachers to teach students with intellectual disabilities.

The tendency to associate history with students' life experiences can be a point of departure in teaching history for students with intellectual disabilities. Although previous research has mentioned the inability to make associations as one of the intellectual characteristics [13], the findings show that students with intellectual disabilities can make associations between personal life and history. For mild and moderate intellectual disabilities, it is possible to make associations as the basis for learning based on their academic ability; to comprehend complex language concepts and academic skills; to do simple multiplications/divisions, write simple letters and lists; and sight-word reading; copy address from card to job application; match written number to number of items [14,15]. The association certainly does not lead only to a scientific understanding of history and other conceptions but rather to a simple personal association with the meaningful experiences from students' lives. Association is not merely posited as a technique or method of learning. Nevertheless, in the case of students with intellectual disabilities, it can be a bridge that connects their personal experience and history. Thus, theoretically, it can be a starting point to learn history.

5 Conclusion

The findings of the research show that students with intellectual disabilities struggle to understand history as a subject in school, even at the very basic level of understanding. The first impression is that history is unattractive and difficult to learn. They tend to understand in a very personal way and associate history with significant events in their past that are easy to remember.

Moreover, a personal association between history and their life experiences may be an entry point to start historical complexities. This research is very limited to the case of SMALB Surakarta and focuses on intellectual disabilities. Therefore, it could not be arbitrarily generalized. More comprehensive research should be conducted to give a holistic view of this issue. Therefore, it is recommended that other researchers take different approaches and use different geographical areas. This research also shows

the importance of a particular approach in teaching history for disabilities. Thus, teachers should be able to adopt and adapt alternative methods and approaches of teaching that are in line with the historical understanding of students with intellectual disabilities.

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