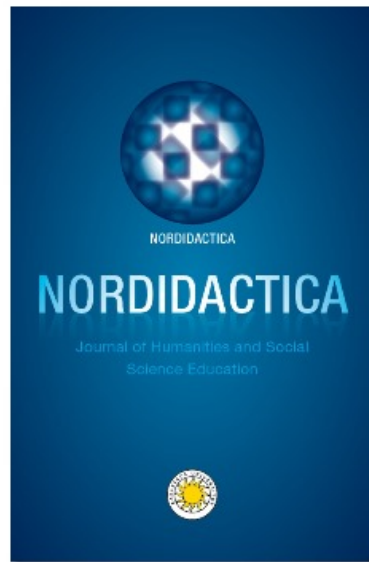


# Assessing Finnish and Californian high school students' historical literacy through a document-based task

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## Assessing Finnish and Californian high school students' historical literacy through a document-based task

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*Abstract: This article presents a study examining the historical literacy skills of Finnish (N=86) and Californian (N=131) high school students. Our goal was to discover how students read and subsequently interpret historical documents. For this purpose we created a document-based task. We analysed the data by surveying how students interpreted the documents and used them in their texts. The students were capable of identifying the content of each document and most crafted coherent conclusions based on the given sources. The most problematic aspect of historical literacy in our study was contextualising documents. However, there were differences in the results for the groups. Among the Finnish high school students, the variation was great. Those students who mastered historical content knowledge also mastered historical literacy; those whose historical content knowledge or Finnish language skills were weak also had weak historical literacy. This polarization was not evident among the Californian students we examined. However, their disciplinary literacy skills were reduced to generic text skills; students took the document-based interpretation task as a reading comprehension task and did not evaluate the authors' intentions.*

KEYWORDS: HISTORICAL LITERACY, DISCIPLINARY LITERACY, HISTORY TEACHING

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## Introduction

In this article, we observe historical literacy among Finnish and Californian adolescents. Although the primary objectives of history teaching are quite similar in these two educational systems, there are some differences in their curricula. The Common Core, adopted in autumn 2014 in California, precisely defines the skills students should achieve in the areas of reading and writing. Among other things, the Common Core dictates that 9th and 10th graders should be able to 'cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources', 'determine the central ideas of information of a primary or secondary source', 'assess the extent to which the reasoning and evidence in a text support the author's claim' and 'compare the point of view of two or more authors for how they treat the same or similar topics'. In addition, the student must be able to produce arguments on a given theme and justify them using evidence from the source material (California Department of Education, 2013).

In Finland, the National Core Curriculum emphasises that history teaching 'is based on the nature of history as a discipline and its criteria for the formation of knowledge'. Attention should be paid to the critical analysis and interpretation of information, and to diverse perspectives on different phenomena (Finnish National Board of Education, 2003). The objective of history instruction is that students are able to acquire information about the past and assess it critically, and to understand the relativity, ambiguity and complexity of historical knowledge. In autumn 2016, new curricula were put into effect in Finland, both in basic education and high school. The new National Core Curriculum for Basic Education was the first to mention multiliteracy and historical literacy. The history curricula in both basic education and high school now place greater weight on students' ability to reconstruct information about the past, based on sources, and to critically assess information and understand the ambiguity and relativity of historical knowledge. High school students must also be able to use historical information to create evidence-based arguments, and to evaluate how history is used and misused in society (Opetushallitus, 2015). History is taught in Finland in basic education from 5th to 8th grade, typically involving two 45-minute lessons a week. In 9th grade, instead of history, students study social sciences such as politics and economics. High school has a course-based curriculum; each course comprises 38 lessons lasting 45 minutes. The 2003 curriculum required every high school student complete four compulsory history courses. Therefore, a student graduating from a Finnish high school will have completed 152 history lessons and 76 social studies lessons.

Each Finnish high school history course is theme-based, varying from 'Turning-points in Finnish History' to 'International Relations'. The curriculum lists a substantial amount of content to be studied during these courses; however, teachers are free to choose their teaching methods. The high school career ends with matriculation examinations, and although history is not a compulsory subject, approximately 20% of students choose it. Exams consist of student essays measuring wide-scale competencies. Even so, teachers often focus their teaching on content knowledge rather than on historical thinking (Gullberg, 2010; Rantala, Manninen & van den Berg, 2016).

In the United States, the Common Core State Standards, which have been adopted in 42 states, highlight both historical literacy and cross-disciplinary literacy. These standards were created to ensure students would receive an equal and uniform education and have the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in their college studies and the economically competitive 21st century (National Governors Association, 2008). In California, the Common Core State Standards and the 1998 History-Social Science Content Standards for California Public Schools are used side by side. Even before the Common Core was implemented, the Content Standards stressed analytical skills, such as the identification of bias and prejudice in historical interpretations (Department of Education, 1998). Thus, historical thinking, document-based analysing and comparing and describing the key elements of historical literacy have been part of history teaching in California for years. The state's history teaching was developed under the auspices of different projects. For example, the History Education Group at Stanford University and the California History-Social Science Project at the University of California have produced both research and teaching materials for teaching historical thinking and literacy.

In California, students have five history lessons a week. According to the History-Social Science Content Standards for Californian Public Schools, each study year is devoted to a specific topic. Students in the 10th grade study 'World History, Geography and Culture' from the ancient Greeks and Romans to the post-Second World War period. The theme for the 11th grade is 'United States' History and Geography', and for 12th grade it is 'Principles of American Democracy and Economics' (California Department of Education, 2000). The content to be taught is defined far more precisely in California than in Finland. Californian students have approximately 320 history lessons and 180 of social sciences during their high school studies, which is far more than Finnish students.

We studied students' historical literacy skills in both Finland and California by using document-based tasks that will be described later in this article. We wanted to ascertain how Finnish and Californian adolescents read and subsequently interpret historical documents. To do so, we focused on the following research questions:

1. How do students solve the document-based task given to them?
2. How do students form interpretations based on the given sources, and contextualise documents, address contradictory evidence, consider the intentions of the authors and indicate understanding of the interpretative nature of history and historical sources?

In addition, we are interested in possible differences between study groups that might reflect variations in educational approaches or emphases. Finally, we evaluate problems related to historical literacy raised by the students' performance.

## **Teaching historical literacy**

The reasons for teaching historical literacy derive from both the science of history and more general civic skills. In the 1960s and 1970s there was discussion on the extent

to which history is based on interpretations and how those interpretations are justified (Burke, 2001). This also influenced the pedagogy of history and placed historical thinking skills, rather than the transferring of content knowledge, at the core of teaching. The move toward skill-based history education started first in the United Kingdom, from where it travelled to the rest of the English-speaking world (Laville, 2004). Since then, working with documents has become the focal point of historical thinking and historical literacy (see e.g., Barton, 2009; Barton & Levstik, 2003; Rantala & van den Berg, 2013; VanSledright, 2010; Wineburg, 1991). In the Finnish core curriculum for basic education, historical literacy is defined as an individual's ability to read and analyse sources produced by the actors of the past and to competently interpret their meaning and significance (Opetushallitus, 2014, p. 257). However, teaching historical thinking and historical literacy does not mean raising mini-historians, but rather involves developing critical literacy and historical content knowledge (Nokes, Dole & Hacker, 2007; VanSledright, 2002).

Teaching historical literacy is generally connected with the knowledge and skills needed in the 21st century, including critical thinking, problem solving and information literacies. Historical literacy is neither unambiguous nor is it a clear concept; it has been used as a synonym for historical thinking, historical reasoning and even historical consciousness (van Drie & van Boxtel, 2008; Virta, 2007). The research to date is unanimous concerning the close relationship between historical literacy and historical thinking skills, such as the skills needed to compare and contrast documents and to produce justified arguments based on them (Nokes, 2013; Perfetti et al., 1994, pp. 260–261; VanSledright & Franks, 2000; Wineburg, 1991).

In this article, we understand historical literacy as the ability to work with, analyse and produce valid interpretations from historical sources. To do so, students need to understand that historical knowledge is always constructed, and must be able to contextualise documents, consider the author's intentions and work with contradictory evidence (see Wineburg, 1991). Accordingly, we see historical literacy as an active process in which the student not only acquires knowledge of the past, but becomes an active interpreter (cf. van Drie & van Boxtel, 2008). A historically literate person understands that historical knowledge consists of both substantive and procedural knowledge; in other words, he or she understands the historical context and that the historical knowledge is produced by someone. Therefore, he or she also understands why many differing narratives are associated with the same historical phenomena. Historical literacy is related both to reading and producing texts by using sources. The discipline-specific tasks require that students understand the norms of knowledge construction and communication in the discipline. In history, for example, students should be able to take an investigative stance when considering the past (Bain, 2006). To be historical literate demands that students understand the premises of historical knowledge formation. Students need to understand that historical interpretations are evidence based and are valid only based on the sources used. Therefore, historical research is not a neutral description of the past, but rather constructs a picture of the world through language (Monte-Sano, 2011).

According to Sam Wineburg (1991), historians in the process of constructing claims analyse evidence by sourcing, contextualisation and corroboration. This means historians have to consider how author, time and place have influenced the creation of a source. A historian must also be able to contextualise the source, which means he or she has to consider contemporaneous events occurring when a document was produced. Furthermore, historians should compare documents to identify agreements and disagreements. Historical reading starts with understanding the original meaning of a source to understand what it might be evidence of, and when selecting good evidence a historian must explain why or how the data supports the argument (Monte-Sano, 2016). Monte-Sano (2016, p. 31) has noted, 'Historical argument leads students to consider the credibility, relevance and significance of the evidence in developing and convincing others of a claim'. Thus, historical literacy requires historical thinking. The key concepts in history and historical thinking are continuity and change, time, and cause and consequence (Lee, 2005), while historical empathy is usually considered another element of historical thinking (Lee, 2005, p. 46; Seixas & Peck, 2004).

Previous research has shown that using content area strategies, such as summarising, outlining or using a graphic organiser, are not enough to develop reading and writing from a disciplinary perspective (Monte-Sano, 2011). Students do not naturally tend to read like historians (Wineburg, 1991); as researchers have pointed out, while reading historical texts students often focus on the literal meaning of documents and miss intertextual reading strategies (Afflerbach & VanSledright, 2001; Rantala & van den Berg, 2013). Using primary source material does not necessarily lead to history-specific literacy instruction, as Nokes (2010) has noted. Rather, teachers tend to use primary sources to illustrate certain points during their lectures. However, according to Monte-Sano (2010), students' writing can demonstrate disciplinary thinking if the instruction used emphasises historical thinking and arguments. Monte-Sano (2011) has argued that if more teachers integrated disciplinary thinking and literacy, their students would become not only better readers and writers, but also better thinkers.

Learning historical literacy is not a simple process, and researchers disagree about the age at which a student is able to interpret documents. According to VanSledright and Afflerbach (2005), 5th graders' inadequate reading skills prevent them from interpreting primary sources. Research on the text skills of high school students has shown that they also have problems, particularly in contextualising sources and considering authors' intentions (Rantala & van den Berg, 2013; Wineburg, 1991), and working with contradictory evidence is not easy for adolescents (Veijola & Mikkonen, 2016). However, the purpose of history teaching is not to produce historians, and high school students cannot operate like trained historians when interpreting sources. Instead, it is realistic to assume that historical literacy is developed over time through education (Downey & Long, 2016, p. 9; Reisman, 2012).

## Implementing the study

To understand adolescents' historical literacy, we created a task that involved four documents, postulating that students would place the authors correctly into their historical context. Based on what was previously learned and on the information provided by the documents, students were to take the authors' points of view and position into account. The first task was to define the Cold War, following which the students were asked to examine the attached documents and fill out the related worksheets. Students were asked to identify the author, the date and the main idea of each document. They were also asked to answer the question, 'What feelings does the document bring up in you, the reader?' and note any questions arising from each document. The third and primary task was 'Based on the documents, what can you conclude about who started the Cold War? Justify your opinions and refer to documents that support your reasoning'.

Three of the four documents were texts, and one was a political cartoon. The text documents were an excerpt from Winston Churchill's 'Iron Curtain' speech, General Walter Smith's telegram to President Truman about Smith's conversation with Joseph Stalin and a quotation from Stalin published in the newspaper *Pravda*. The political cartoon from *Punch* magazine showed Truman and Stalin dividing Eastern European countries into spheres of interest. The basic information about each document, such as the author, the date and the place of publication, were given to students. Documents were not placed in chronological order; analysis of the interrelationship of the documents postulated that students would check the chronological order.

For students in California, the documents were in English; for Finnish students, the documents were in Finnish. We used typewritten excerpts from the original documents because we wanted to ensure the students would be able to read all documents and complete the exercise in a given amount of time. The use of abridging documents is a common and justified practice in history teaching (see e.g., Reisman, 2012). The length of the texts varied from 152 words to 241 words in English. There was also a 32-word introduction to the political cartoon. No other changes were made apart from translating the documents for Finnish students.

The first task, defining the Cold War, provided information on whether the theme of the documents was familiar to students. With the second task, we observed how students handled the documents. In this task, students were instructed to consider not only the content of the documents but also who the author was and to ponder the impact of each document. We were interested to see whether the students realised that the texts were authored by someone in a particular situation or whether they saw the documents as offering neutral information. The third task, writing an argument, required students to perform sourcing and to contextualise and corroborate the documents in a coherent manner.

This document-based task was similar to those used in the United States (see Barton & Levstik, 2003; Reisman, 2012; see also Monte-Sano, De La Paz & Felton, 2014; Wineburg, Martin & Monte-Sano, 2013). The task was based on the presupposition that the context of documents was familiar to students from their history lessons, as the

beginning of the Cold War is a theme taught both in Finnish and Californian high schools. The task required students to interpret sources, consider the authors' intentions and formulate their arguments. The documents contained contradictory evidence, with the aim of stimulating the cognitive dissonance that should lead to the development of analytical thinking and learning (Reisman, 2012, p. 240).

The Californian data was collected from two different high schools. In this article, these schools are called Californian high school 1 and Californian high school 2. Both schools were public high schools, with approximately 1,500 students each. In a national comparison, the first school did very well while the second school was of an average level. Students' socio-economic statuses varied between the schools, and there were also differences in their language backgrounds. In the first school, data was collected from three groups of 10th graders, and in the second school from two such groups, totalling 131 students.

In Finland, 86 high school students from three different schools participated (see Rantala & Veijola, 2016). In this article, these schools are called Finnish high school 1, Finnish high school 2 and Finnish high school 3. Based on the results of four compulsory subjects in the Finnish matriculation examination, two of the three schools are among the best high schools in Finland. The third is an average Finnish high school.

In all the schools where the data was collected, the teachers had paid attention to the teaching of historical thinking. All teachers were experienced and involved in the development of history education. We selected classes taught by these teachers because we wanted to be sure that working with sources was not strange to the students and that they were familiar with analysing documents and making interpretations.

The Finnish and Californian groups differed in status and age. In Finland, the high school is a voluntary institution; secondary-level education is provided by general upper secondary schools (high schools) and vocational schools. Schools select their students based primarily on previous qualifications and grades. General upper secondary education is designed to prepare students for the matriculation examination, with matriculated students eligible to apply to higher educational institutions. Approximately half of the age group study at general upper secondary schools and the other half at vocational institutions. The Finnish students who participated in our research were aged between 16 and 18. In California, high school is still compulsory schooling. On average, the Californian students were a little younger than their Finnish counterparts. Among Finns, Finnish high school 3 had more first- or second-generation immigrants than Finnish high school 1 and Finnish high school 2. Among Californians, Californian high school 2 had many more English Language Learners (ELL) and special education students than Californian high school 1.

The test situation also varied between schools. Students had 45–50 minutes to answer, apart from Californian high school 2, where they had 80 minutes. The length of a lesson varied from school to school. At Californian high school 2, the history lessons were notably longer, and we wanted to give students enough time to complete the task. In other schools, the length of history lessons varied from 45 to 55 minutes, meaning a complete lesson was used to complete the task. For Finland's Finnish high school 1, the task was part of the course exam and affected their grade. At Finnish high school 2, the



task was taken into account while only affecting grading positively. At Finnish high school 3, the task was part of an ordinary lesson and had no effect on grading. At the California schools, students completed the task in a normal history classroom situation without any effect on grading.

In Finland, students completed the task alone; students in Finland are used to independently working on tasks, and in two of the schools, the task was part of an exam. Conversely, Californian students are accustomed to working in groups and engaging in discussions during history lessons. Therefore, they were given the opportunity to chat in groups of three or four people after reading the documents. However, each student produced their written answers independently. Furthermore, the students' discussions centred more on topics other than the task, and there was little real group work.

Despite differences in test situations, student backgrounds and teaching methods, the data collected from Finland and California is possible to examine and discuss together, although there are limitations that will be discussed later in this article. However, we can identify interesting observations and draw conclusions regarding the historical literacy skills of the adolescents who participated in our study.

## Analysis and results

### Students' interpretation of the documents

The document-based task consisted of three sub-tasks. Given that they were of different styles and measured different aspects of historical thinking and literacy, we used different analysis tools to measure students' abilities. The purpose of the first task, defining the Cold War, was to determine whether the general theme of the task was familiar to students. It was also used to measure students' historical content knowledge. It showed that the majority of the students were able to define the concept either fully or well enough. Thus, they also exhibited an understanding of the phenomenon. There was, however, quite a large variation between the schools, as seen in Table 1.

TABLE 1

*The percentage of replies that showed proper understanding of the phenomenon*

	CHS1 (N=74)	CHS2 (N=54)	FHS1 (N=24)	FHS2 (N=25)	FHS3 (N=37)
Showed proper understanding of the phenomenon	90%	64%	96%	100%	62%

Notes: CHS = Californian high school; FHS = Finnish high school

We classified as 'proper understanding' responses that dated, named key participants in and gave some kind of characterisation of the Cold War. In Finnish high school 1, Finnish high school 2 and Californian high school 1, almost all students showed they knew what the Cold War involved. In Californian high school 2 and Finnish high school

3, just over 60% of the students demonstrated a basic understanding of the theme. In these schools, one in five students answered this question incorrectly. Examples include:

*The Cold war is a war that happen in the early 1900s between the Easterns States of Europe. (Californian High School 2)<sup>i</sup>*

*The War in the North. (Finnish High School 3)<sup>ii</sup>*

*After the Second World War, Finland against the Soviet Union. (Finnish High School 3)*

By asking students to fill in interpretation tables for each document, we wanted to lead the students to read each document carefully and then consider who the author might be, what the content of the document was and what kind of reactions, ideas and questions the documents initiated. Using this task, we observed how students handled the documents. We divided students' answers into four categories: detects perspective, considers it to be neutral information, misunderstands and overinterprets. In doing so, we made use of previous research, in particular Sam Wineburg's (1991) work on historical literacy, in which an essential part of reading historically is sourcing and taking into account authors' possible intentions; in other words, to understand the interpretative nature of texts. We included the category 'misunderstands' because we considered it essential to determine whether students properly understood the content of each source.

TABLE 2

*Student interpretation of the documents: All four documents together*

	CHS1	CHS2	FHS1	FHS2	FHS3	Mean
Detects perspective	17%	5%	42%	55%	5%	25%
Considers it to be neutral information	67%	66%	49%	37%	62%	56%
Misunderstands	9%	23%	4%	4%	5%	9%
Overinterprets	0.3%*	0.4%*	3%	4%	3%	2%
No Answer	7%	5%	2%	0%	25%	8%
Total	100 %	100%	100%	100%	100%	

Notes: CHS = Californian high school; FHS = Finnish high school, \*There were only one students which would have rounded percentage to zero.

With the exception of Finnish high school 2, and to some extent in Finnish high school 1, the students mainly read the documents as neutral information, without considering the authors' intentions. Thus, students summarised the content of documents by stating the authors' viewpoints as facts:

*That no one knows what Soviet Russias limits are or what they will do. Which is not good because so many famous cities and the population around them, are subject of control by Moscow. (Californian High School 1)*

We categorised such answers as 'Considers it to be neutral information'. Only a few students noted the authors' role in how texts were created, or that texts were shaped by

a distinct environment. If the student mentioned such aspects, the answer was categorised as 'Detects perspective'. In these cases, students stated that the author was trying to influence the audience:

*The main idea of this document was to get people to recognize that although the Allies had won IIWW; the USSR is taking over countries, and putting them behind the 'Iron Curtain' of communism. The feeling that this document bring up would raise fear. Hearing this speech could make people fearful of the USSR, and wanting to put an end to the soviet regime. (Californian High School 1)*

*The main idea of the document is propaganda, which highlights the West to be free and an ideal place, and that there are no freedom or rights under the influence of the Soviet Union. The document annoyed me a little bit, because it is so one sided and overplayed. (Finnish High School 2)*

'Misunderstands' was used to indicate students misunderstood the content of documents:

*[Churchill's 'Iron Curtain' speech]: Many countries are becoming more advance due the production of iron. (Californian High School 2)*

*Democrats are considered crazy and unreasonable that are Hitler's allies. The Soviet Union is good and merciful when it wants to liberate European countries from the claws of democracy. (Finnish High School 1)*

Such answers typically underline either the students' inability to contextualise documents or poor language skills that hamper the reading and analysing of texts. This was clearly visible among the students in Californian high school 2; they tried to analyse all the given documents, but misunderstood many of them. In Finland, Finnish high school 3 had many students who apparently did not understand the documents and simply decided to skip the task.

The category 'Overinterprets' is interesting in that it occurred most among Finns. There were only two Californian students who both made an overinterpretation in only one document. Both reflected their inability to think about the authors' intentions and contextualise the documents. They overinterpreted the documents by showing sympathy for individuals and people, assuming that documents provided facts:

*You sort of feel sad for Stalin because he is making seem as if everyone is ganging up against. (Californian High School 1)*

*It brings up sympathy towards the Soviet union because they helped the Europeans/Germans and all they want now is safety. (Californian High School 2)*

When overinterpreting the documents, Finnish students did not perceive the information given as neutral, and their interpretations revealed quite strong convictions. They did not accept the general content of the documents, but rather were sceptical towards them and wrote quite emotionally:

*The document brings me a sense that Stalin was a power-hungry man, and his actions brought nothing good for the country. (Finnish High School 1)*

*And because there is an “anti-soviet government” in some countries, must these governments “turn” and be part of the Soviet Union. Stalin is a power-hungry social climber. (Finnish High School 2)*

*The Soviet Union is bad. (Finnish High School 3)*

To some extent, we can see that Finnish students were more aware about who Stalin was, and about his policies and actions. The Finnish students, particularly at Finnish high school 3, who did not have the skills to identify the content did not interpret the documents, or their interpretations were invalid. A quarter gave up, leaving blank papers. Meanwhile, even the Californians whose definition of Cold War was incorrect often interpreted documents acceptably, for example by describing the content. This suggests that in these Californian schools the students are accustomed to working with documents and possess the tools to identify the content.

### **Students' use of documents to validate their claims**

In the third task, students were asked to answer the question, 'Based on the documents, what can you conclude about who started the Cold War? Justify your opinions and refer to documents that support your reasoning'. We formulated the assignment in this way because we wanted to determine whether the students understood the interpretative nature of historical knowledge; in other words, whether they understood there was no one cause or party behind the events. Successfully answering this question required the student to assess the reliability and relevance of the sources and to provide a written, document-based interpretation. In addition, providing a successful answer required contextual knowledge. Out of 86 Finnish students, 15 did not engage with this task. Of these, 13 studied in Finnish high school 3. Of the 131 Californian students, 14 left their papers blank, 10 of which attended Californian high school 2. (See table 3 below.)

TABLE 3

*Students' response rates to the third task*

	CHS1	CHS2	FHS1	FHS2	FHS3	Mean
Answer	95 %	82 %	96%	96 %	68%	87%
No Answer	5 %	18 %	4 %	4 %	32 %	13%
Total	100 %	100%	100%	100%	100%	

Notes: CHS = Californian high school; FHS = Finnish high school

This third task provided information about students' ability to compare and contrast the sources, contextualise them and connect the documents in a coherent manner. Bruce VanSledright and Peter Afflerbach (2005) have pointed out that assessing sources, and especially source status, draws on at least four interconnected cognitive activities: attribution, identification, perspective and reliability. We analysed the data using the aforementioned cognitive activities of attribution, identification, perspective and reliability. VanSledright and Afflerbach (2005) stated that several of these activities can occur simultaneously. However, for each student we classified only one activity,

specifically the most typical stage for his or her answers. These are illustrated in Table 4. We added the 'novice' category because many students did not reach the lowest, attributive stage; novices cannot distinguish between evidence and information (see Wineburg, 1991).

TABLE 4

*The levels of interpretations based on students' answers*

	CHS1	CHS2	FHS1	FHS2	FHS3	Mean
Novice	73%	89%	42%	16%	89%	70%
Attribution	16%	7%	21%	40%	11%	16%
Identification	0%	0%	21%	20%	0%	5%
Perspective	11%	4%	8%	24%	0%	6%
Reliability	0%	0%	8%	0%	0%	1%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	

Notes: CHS = Californian high school; FHS = Finnish high school

Most students classified at the novice level viewed documents as neutral information and did not separate information from evidence. Typically, their answers were short and did not include references to the sources. Some novice-level students showed that they had mastered the context and were able to connect the documents to the situation after the Second World War. However, they seemed unaware of the interpretative nature of historical knowledge.

The students classified at attributive level understood that historical sources were created by someone for a specific purpose. However, they did not evaluate the author's intentions and quite often were unable to contextualise sources sufficiently. We also placed at this level those students who recognised the authors' perspectives but failed to make their own interpretation because they thought the documents were not neutral. Furthermore, those students who showed they understood that documents allowed for various interpretations but still failed to provide their own interpretation by using only one document or failing to compare or contrast documents were categorised at this level.

We classified students at the identification level if their answers showed they understood the authors had objectives to achieve through their texts. These students were also able to differentiate between primary and secondary sources. Students were not asked, however, to identify whether documents were primary or secondary sources. Thus, only in Finnish high school 1 and Finnish high school 2 did students note this. Students in this category also tied the documents to the historical context and considered the authors' intentions, usually highlighting sections that revealed these intentions. However, they did not compare or contrast the sources or assess their reliability. There were few respondents in this category; this was probably not because of their lack of ability, but rather because of the choice of words we used in our assignment. We did not ask students to distinguish between primary and secondary sources, nor did we ask them to specify source quality. Students did what they were asked to do; they did not include information outside the scope of the instructions.

Those students who contrasted the documents and connected them to their historical context reached the perspective level. They were able to assess the impact of the documents and how the national leaders reacted to each other's speeches. Students classified at this level typically compared the documents and used more than one to justify their opinions. However, they did not demonstrate an ability to assess the reliability of sources in relation to other sources. Students at the perspective level could be found in all schools, with the exception of Finnish high school 3.

Only two students were judged to have reached the reliability level, and both studied in the same Finnish school. They indicated in their texts that they recognised the authors behind the documents and their intentions. They also considered the documents to be manifestations of the propaganda battle in the Cold War. Furthermore, these two students assessed the reliability of the sources, and were able to compare them and consider the historical context and circumstances.

All students were asked to refer to the documents and use them in their approach to the third task. We also analysed how students used the documents in their texts, as illustrated in Table 5. To do so, we used categories created by Rosalyn Ashby (2005), with which she examined how students validate historical claims. These categories are questioning, collecting and counting, matching and story-focused. Apart from Finnish high school 3, almost all students referred to at least one document in their answers. In spite of this, over one-third of the students did not use any documents, and their answers were story-focused. They typically decided that the Cold War was started by one side and wrote one simple narrative supporting their claims.

TABLE 5

*Students' way to use documents in their answers*

	CHS1	CHS2	FHS1	FHS2	FHS3	Mean
Questioning	3%	2%	13%	4%	0%	4%
Collecting and counting	42%	25%	25%	32%	0%	24%
Matching	19%	18%	25%	28%	5%	19%
Story-focused	31%	39%	33%	32%	62%	39%
No response	5%	18%	4%	4%	32%	13%
Total	100%	102%*	99%*	100%	99%*	

Notes: CHS = Californian high school; FHS = Finnish high school, \* due to rounding, the total percentage is above or below 100.

Taking information from several documents ('collecting and counting') was most common among students from Californian high school 1; 40% based their answers on more than one document. These texts had a typical formula, which began with the phrase, 'Based on the documents', followed by a summary of the context of each document. Although students referred to the documents, they usually did not compare them or question their content. Some of the students created a coherent narrative ('matching') in which they used only the documents that supported their claims of who started the Cold War. Technically, these students were able to refer to the sources and

to summarise their content. However, because they understood the sources as providers of neutral information and did not take into account the authors' intentions, their use of sources did not reach a high level of historical literacy. Students also had problems with comparison of documents. Generally, the students in Finnish high school 1 and Finnish high school 2 understood that the third and fourth documents referred to the first document, whereas the majority of Californian students did not notice this.

Even when the Californian students referred to the documents, they remained detached from their historical context and circumstances. Students failed to use their own knowledge of events, relying only on information provided by the documents. This was particularly visible in situations where students misunderstood the content of the document because they were unable to connect the document and the political situation after the Second World War. For example, some students interpreted Stalin's words from 1946 without realising that, at the beginning of the speech, he described events that had happened during the Second World War and used them as an excuse for the way he acted after the war.

[The main idea of document:] *The invasion of the USSR by the Germans through Finland, Poland, Rumania, Bulgaria, and Hungary. (Californian High School 2)*

[The main idea of document:] *Germans have invaded the USSR. The government in these countries were hostile to the USSR and that how the USSR were invaded. The Soviet Union cannot forget those loyal to the government in order for a better future. (Californian High School 2)*

This lack of content knowledge was not reflected in the answers from students at Finnish high school 1 and Finnish high school 2. In these schools, students were able to successfully connect the documents to the Second World War and its aftermath. It should be noted that the content of the speech is partly linked to the history of Finland and especially to the Continuation War (1941–1944) between Finland and the Soviet Union. As the Continuation War is studied in Finnish classrooms, it is unsurprising that Finnish students were better able to contextualise Stalin's speech.

## **Limitations of the study**

There are several limitations to our research. The beginning of the Cold War is studied both in Finnish and Californian high schools. We wanted to collect data from students who had recently studied the topic, which led to a slight variation in the age and status of participants. While the Californian students represent their entire age group, in Finland the upper secondary school as a non-compulsory school incorporates only a section of each age group. In Finnish high school 1 and Finnish high school 2 in particular, students had excellent leaving certificates from lower secondary education. Therefore, the results would potentially be different if the Finnish data had been collected from representatives of the entire age group.

Second, the data collection varied from school to school. We aimed to allow students to respond to the task undisturbed in their typical environment. The data was first

collected at Finnish high school 1, where students took 30–40 minutes to write their answers. Based on this, we thought the other students would be able to complete the task within a 45–55 minute lesson. However, at Californian high school 2, students had longer lessons and were used to longer tasks. Because it was possible to give them extra time, we did not want to create pressures they were not used to. Furthermore, because we wanted the data collection setting to be as natural as possible, we gave Californian students a chance to talk to each other while working on their tasks.

It is also worth pointing out that our research does not address possible differences in how the teachers emphasised historical literacy. Further research is needed to observe how students' historical literacy could be developed in the long term, in which teachers are observed and interviewed regarding their solutions. Such studies have been carried out in the United States (e.g., De La Paz et al., 2014; Monte-Sano & De La Paz, 2012; Reisman, 2015), but it is still lacking in Finland.

We were able to investigate how students solved the given task and how students formed their interpretations based on the given sources. In this paper, we see those solutions as manifestations of different types of understanding. Yet, we only have students' written answers and were unable to evaluate what students were thinking while completing this assignment. There are also inevitable challenges in these kinds of document-based tasks. Abby Reisman (2015, pp. 34–38) found that a high number of documents gives the respondents the impression that the information required for the response is found in the documents. This easily leads to a situation where students fail to utilise their content knowledge and background information, and only gather information from the given sources. This was reflected in our research, where the main task, 'Based on the documents, what can you conclude about who started the Cold War? Justify your opinions and refer to documents that support your reasoning', prompted several of the students to read the documents in search of a party who clearly started the Cold War, failing to refer to their previous knowledge.

We wanted to look at various aspects of historical literacy, and therefore compiled an extensive document-based task. In future studies, it would be useful to focus on specific aspects of historical literacy and to research extensively the development of students' historical literacy. In addition, the classification of some students was difficult because their answers included features from several categories. This raises the question of the reliability of the results of paper-and-pencil tests (see Seixas, Gibson & Ercikan, 2015, p. 11). For many students, the intensity of their response seemed to decrease as the task progressed, which at least is partly explained by fatigue. This was seen in particular among Finnish high school 3 students and also with those from Californian high school 2. The document-based task we used was demanding and perhaps too overwhelming for some of the students. On the other hand, it demonstrated that there are students who are historically literate.

Particularly in the United States, students work in groups to support each other through document-based tasks, but so far all research—this paper included—has focused on individual cognition. There is a need for research on the social aspects of reading, thinking and writing, as Jeffery D. Nokes (2017, pp. 566–568) has stated. This



could reveal how a social process might help to foster historical literacy among adolescents.

## **From general literacy to historical literacy**

The most problematic aspect of historical literacy in our study was contextualising documents, which demands historical content knowledge and consideration of the authors' intentions. Most of the students lacked these skills, and therefore accepted the documents as neutral without questioning them. Students did not grasp the hidden material in the texts because they were so focused on the direct information they provided. Students also had problems comparing documents. These issues have also been reported in previous research (see Nokes, 2011; Rantala & van den Berg, 2013; Wineburg, 1991). Our data suggests that there are different kinds of distinct problems in different classrooms. Some can possibly be traced to the different teaching styles and emphases used in Finnish and Californian history teaching, which reflect the various ways of teaching history at school.

According to the Finnish curricula, history teaching should have been skill-based for more than two decades, and in the high school curriculum in particular a number of content area objectives are still listed. In addition, textbooks emphasise the content knowledge and the teaching of historical thinking have had a minor role (see e.g. Rantala, 2012). Both Finnish high school 1 and Finnish high school 2 had students who were able to make use of content knowledge and contextualise and compare the sources to produce justified answers based on the documents. The students at Finnish high school 3, however, had poorer literacy skills and were not able to apply previously acquired content knowledge when analysing the sources. Their texts were short and limited; some did not complete the task at all.

History teaching, which stresses literacy skills, would seem to produce students who are able to read direct information provided by sources and write their own texts based on the documents. Whereas weaker Finnish students failed at the task, Californian 10th graders demonstrated the ability to read the documents and explain their conclusions. However, especially at Californian high school 2, this appears to indicate generic text skills rather than disciplinary literacy skills. Knowing history requires both content knowledge and historical thinking skills. Students must understand how historical knowledge is created, how to gather and handle it critically and how to produce justified conclusions (Brozo et al., 2013). Although the majority of students were able to define the Cold War, they were unable to use their content knowledge when analysing and comparing the documents. Among some Californian students, inadequate content knowledge of the Second World War and the beginning of the Cold War led to conclusions in which historical context, continuity and change, cause and consequence and even timing—all key elements in history—were lacking. As such, many of their answers took the form of either biased narratives or simple lists of information.

Many students had problems analysing more than one document at a time. They were able to relay quotations and facts from sources, but were rarely able to analyse the

sources as historical evidence. The notion that every teacher is a language teacher, which can be found both in the Common Core and in the Finnish National Core Curricula, means that every teacher is also an expert in disciplinary literacy. It is not possible to be historically literate without understanding how historical knowledge is created (Nokes, 2010). Teaching general text skills does not provide enough readiness for students to work within a specific discipline like experts. This challenge is highlighted when working with students whose language skills are weak (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012).

Our results also raise a question regarding whether different styles of assessment produce different kinds of learning. In Finland, student assessment in history is holistic and based on wide-scale competencies. The National Core Curricula and the only nationwide exam, the matriculation examination at the end of high school, centre on this kind of assessment. It is characteristic of the Finnish high school history assessment that students' content knowledge and skills are assessed simultaneously, often by measuring knowledge in the form of essay answers. Although the history teaching in classroom situations often emphasises content knowledge, tests do not differentiate between content knowledge and historical thinking, but instead assess students' written answers as a whole.

In turn, in the United States, Common Core knowledge is divided into separate skills, which at least in part are precisely measurable. These skills are practiced in different grades, and the idea is that students will have mastered them by the end of high school. This means too that historical literacy is worked on one skill or field at a time; it is assumed that the final result will be the overall and extensive command of historical thinking. Though the exercises carried out in the history lessons are highly diverse, the students' skills are often measured through multiple-choice tests. With the data used in this research, we are not able to say anything definitive about how the different cultures of assessment reflect students' capabilities. Even so, many Californian students at both schools provided recurring patterns in their answers, such as starting their phrases with 'Based on the documents' and following this with a summary of the content of each document. This suggests they had been trained in how to answer, but perhaps somewhat schematically.

Based on our study, it appears students' difficulties with historical literacy relates to both from a lack of historical content knowledge and their limited understanding of the interpretative nature of historical knowledge. The practicing of historical literacy requires that the starting point is the nature of historical knowledge, which is interpretative and multiperspectival. This enables various types of documents to be compared and contrasted, and allows for a dialogue between different points of view provided by authors.

Steering history teaching in the direction of training historical thinking will not be easy. Teaching historical literacy requires not only time and the proper materials, but also that a teacher understands the nature of history as a discipline. Teaching historical literacy is especially challenging in schools where students' general literacy skills are diverse. This is a reality in California, and has become more common in Finland due to

immigration, among other factors (see Vettenranta et al., 2016, pp. 55–57). For teachers, this is a demanding task and necessitates professional development.

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ASSESSING FINNISH AND CALIFORNIAN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' HISTORICAL LITERACY THROUGH A DOCUMENT-BASED TASK

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<sup>i</sup> The misspellings in quotes are made by students.

<sup>ii</sup> The Finnish responses are our translations from the original Finnish.