What do you know when you know something about history?

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ABSTRACT: What does it mean to know something about history? If you know “your” history, what is it that you know? For many, it is definitely about being able to provide dates, to state what happened or how people lived in the past; while for others it means being able to conduct genealogical research or being able to navigate in a video game that takes place in an historical environment. In a school context, the issue of knowledge is always central. Pupils and teachers meet in, around and through knowledge, and moreover, knowledge is assessed daily. This article addresses how pupils in the last years of the nine-year period of Swedish compulsory schooling regard knowledge about history. The aim is to investigate how Swedish 15 years old pupils in Grade 9 describe knowledge about history, as well as what type of knowledge about history pupils appear to hold.

KEYWORDS: Historical Knowledge, Secondary Education, Swedish Students

A topical problem

The discussion surrounding knowledge about history seems constant and on-going. It often intensifies with the rewriting of school curricula, such as the recent National Curriculum review in England, or when some journalist or researcher conducts a review of history textbooks. In many countries, discussions have taken place regarding the content and focus of history teaching. During the past decade in Sweden, the topic of knowledge and school quality has chiefly been brought forward by the school and education minister, who has talked about discipline and order in schools and about making knowledge requirements more stringent. The latter view is supported by a number of international studies that show that Swedish pupils have fallen behind regarding knowledge as well as problem solving skills (Martin, Mullis & Foy, 2008; OECD, 2007; OECD 2014). Likewise, analyses by the Swedish National Agency for Education supported the conclusions regarding falling results, the significance of teaching, and the important role of teachers (Skolverket, 2009; Vinterek, 2006; Thullberg, 2010). During 2008-2009, as a step in the work of raising the quality of schools, the government instructed the National Agency for Education to write new curricula for Swedish schools. These took effect during 2011, and for several years to come, will serve as guidance and governing documents for work in Swedish schools. For the subject of history a clear emphasis is placed on four spheres providing pupils with the necessary conditions for: (1) using a historical frame of reference; (2) critically interpreting and evaluating sources; (3) reflecting on how history has been used; and (4) using historical concepts to organize historical knowledge.
Knowledge and thinking - an outlook to the west and to the east

One notices that there are several similarities when the main ideas in the Swedish curriculum, the four spheres, are placed in an international context, even if the Swedish curriculum is unusual regarding an emphasis on the uses of history. The wide approach to history in the Swedish curriculum corresponds to the English ‘National Curriculum’ (2007), which underlines that pupils develop their understanding when they ask and answer important questions, evaluate evidence, identify and analyse different interpretations of the past and learn to substantiate any arguments and judgements they make. In several respects, the Finnish national curriculum (2004) is rather similar to the English curriculum, outlining requirements for pupils to learn to obtain and use historical information, use and compare sources, understand that historical information can be interpreted in different ways and be able to assess future alternatives using historical change as an aid. As far as Sweden is concerned, the concept of knowledge in the new curricula is more nuanced than before and requirements are clearly stricter. At the same time, the National Agency for Education has implemented a program with national assessments in order to use the results as a measure of quality. The risk with this is firstly, that all quality aspects of knowledge are not measurable and therefore will not be made visible. Secondly, the view of knowledge can become narrow and only cover isolated and measurable special aspects of knowledge and skills. With that, there is a risk that deeper and more analytical knowledge is overlooked (Ball, 1996; Ball, 2010). The narrowness is also criticized in England, with the argument that the specialization can result in a “pick ‘n’ mix” history (Chapman, 2011, p. 46).

Internationally, during the last few decades there has been a substantial shift from teaching knowledge to teaching historical thinking, not least in England and in the United States. Historical thinking is also labelled as historical skills or conceptual thinking. To clarify, Veronica Boix-Mansilla (2000) describes historical thinking as a basis for investigating societal and individual experiences over time. Pupils should practice asking questions, formulating working hypotheses and interpreting information (Boix-Mansilla, 2000; Collingwood, 1961).

The development presented above is highly inspired by the works of the two English researchers Peter Lee and Denis Shemilt. They have been important in the development of the Anglo-American tradition of history didactics since the early 1980’s when Shemilt presented wide ranging research into adolescent historical thinking (Shemilt, 1980), and during the last decade they have worked together. In their research they have proceeded from thinking of children and adolescents. In 1987 Shemilt (1987) outlined models for progression in adolescents’ ideas about causation. By constructing frameworks of knowledge, young pupils get an overview of historical connections. Lee and Shemilt argue for frameworks as scaffolds that can be elaborated and filled with new and more complex content while pupils develop their skills (Lee & Shemilt, 2003; Shemilt, 2009; Howson & Shemilt, 2011). They stress that ‘Second Order Concepts’ are the tools to construct such a framework. These concepts do not refer to First Order Concepts, straightforward historical terms such as peasants’ revolt, nobility or revolution, but rather concepts such as change, comparison, evidence and continuity. During the last decade teachers have applied and developed Second Order Concepts in their practice and theorized the results. For example Rachel Foster and her pupils have analyzed the concepts of change and continuity in students’ thinking. Inspired by Lee (2005) they put focus on change as a process (Foster, 2008).

These concepts imply a different knowledge, namely knowledge in the form of overall perspectives, analysis and comparison. That kind of knowledge is a way for pupils to apply more complex forms of historical accounts – content and process – and the current Swedish curriculum is heading in that direction. In this article, intentionally there is no specific
definition of the concept of knowledge. Instead, the point is to analyse how pupils describe, express and define knowledge about history.

State of the Art in Sweden

In a study in a Swedish context, Mikael Berg (2010) has used questionnaires and life stories from upper secondary school teachers in order to categorize their different kinds of subject understanding. Berg found three kinds of subject understanding, even if combinations do occur. The largest group of teachers has an education-oriented subject understanding, in which orientation and knowledge about society’s history and culture is essential. A group of teachers almost as large represents a criticism-oriented subject understanding, which involves critically analyzing historical and societal structures and contexts. Methodical competencies and “knowing how knowledge” characterize this subject understanding. The third group of teachers is significantly smaller and emphasizes identity creation by making visible both the pupils’ own history as well as that of others. These teachers claim to emphasize international and social issues (Berg, 2010). The broad subject understanding that the teachers express in Berg’s study is however conspicuously absent when teachers assess knowledge. David Rosenlund (2011) has analysed what kinds of knowledge are demanded and activated in Swedish upper secondary teachers’ written exams and their instructions on examination papers. On average, the teachers address only 29 % of the goals that are written in the Swedish subjects’ curricula in Lpf 94. Since exams usually reflect the focus of the teaching, it is likely that the teaching is also characterized by knowledge acquired by memorizing and frequent epoch terms in a reconstructionistic view of history (Rosenlund, 2011). Regarding historical methods and source criticism, Rosenlund (2011) maintains that only a few of the teachers ask for this kind of knowledge. I can stress that in the new curriculum that aspect of knowledge is obligatory, just as in England. For advancing didactic research it is now essential to study how pupils describe and define knowledge about history.

Material and methods

My aim was to investigate what kind of historical knowledge could be found among Swedish ninth-grade pupils. In an exploratory study the pupils’ definitions are focused and therefore I will not come up with an unequivocal definition of the concept of knowledge per se. Instead I use a typology as an analytical framework in which I posit the pupils’ statements.

A complex and difficult to survey picture of knowledge emerges from the introductory discussion. In order to be able to handle the analysis of basic and advanced kinds of knowledge in an orderly fashion, I decided to use Bloom’s revised taxonomy. For some teachers and scholars, Bloom’s taxonomy is obsolete and avoided. Nonetheless for my analyses the taxonomy makes it possible to distinguish and characterize concepts of knowledge in a way that is illustrative. In the revised taxonomy from 2001, theories about cognitive development as well as more nuanced perspectives on kinds of knowledge and cognitive skills have been worked into the model (Anderson & Krathwool, 2001). At least for me, the point of a two dimensional model is that it makes apparent the complexity encompassed in the concept of knowledge.
Dimensions of Knowledge | Cognitive Processes
---|---|
Remembering | Understanding | Applying | Analyzing | Evaluating/Appraising | Creating
Facts
Concepts
Procedure
Metacognitive

Table 1. Bloom’s Revised Taxonomy

The study is based on an analysis of original source material. In order to design a study that addresses how pupils view knowledge about history and how their knowledge of history is expressed, I chose to use questionnaires. The advantage with questionnaires is that the respondents have time to reflect on the questions, to think about their answers and to reconsider them. Another alternative would be to conduct interviews; however, I wanted a somewhat larger set of basic data in the study and using interviews would be limiting in that respect.

During winter 2011, three ninth-grade classes responded to two questionnaires. A total of 63 pupils answered the first questionnaire and 59 pupils answered the second. The study was thus based on 112 questionnaires answered by 63 individuals. The first questionnaire included open questions regarding what the pupils think is interesting in history, what they think is important in history, and what you know if you know something about history. The questions were also open in the sense that they are not associated with any specific material in the teaching of history, which means that the pupils need not be inhibited by the anxiety of giving a wrong answer. Based on how the pupils described and stressed what is important and interesting and what you know when you know something about history, I placed their answers in the typology.

The second questionnaire was quite different. Using the profoundly disturbing events in a passage from the book *Ordinary Men* by Christopher Browning, I sought to establish how pupils react and ask questions to a narrative that provides a clear context and is highly charged. The same text has been used in Rachel Foster’s project (Foster, 2011a) to train students’ ability to identify arguments in history books. The power of the story was a way to engage the students. Empathic and moral aspects often stimulate pupils’ interest and provide a forceful way to study the past (Ammert, 2013; Foster, 2011b).

In the section cited, the Reserve Police Battalion 101 is to evacuate the Polish village of Józefów and send able-bodied Jews to Lublin. Women, children and people not fit for work are to be taken into the woods and executed by the execution patrols. However the commander, Major Trapp, gives the soldiers the opportunity to avoid participating in the killing. Only a few accept the offer. After the text, I ask questions that address how the pupils interpret the text and what questions they would like to ask of it. The purpose of the questions is in part to see how pupils react to a text with a clear and strongly charged content. What do the pupils emphasize as the primary essence of the text? Is it the fact-oriented segments, is it understanding and explanations, or is it empathy and values?
How do pupils describe knowledge about history?

You know particular dates or important facts. History is a must. (Pupil II:1:1)

If you know history, for example I know a little about the former Swedish king, Gustavus Vasa. I remember when we read about him in sixth-grade and I remember a lot, and that means I know history. (Pupil I:1:13)

In the most frequent answers to the question of what you know when you know something about history, the pupils state that history deals with knowing about events, dates, people and facts. Using Anderson and Krathwohl’s taxonomy, I classified the quote above under knowledge of facts. The objects of knowledge are therefore the fact-related parts of a larger context. The verb expresses the cognitive process, that is to say what someone does with the knowledge. In the quote above, this means remembering and knowing. I therefore placed these quotes under the heading Remembering, as an example of recognizing and remembering.

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Table 2. What do you know when you know something about history? (Number of answers)

Of a total of 65 answers by pupils, 33 are examples of remembering. A majority of the pupils who state that knowing something about history is to remember, emphasize “important people, and dates” (Pupil III:1:10). It is principal figures and crucial events that they emphasize. A smaller group of pupils chose instead to point out that it is knowledge about how people lived that is knowing about history: “You know about how people lived back then” (Pupil II:1:2).

Among the answers that belong to the group for the cognitive process understanding, a number of examples that can be categorized as explaining stand out.

You know the reasons for why the war broke out, you know about the events, how they happened and their consequences, what happened after the war ended. (Pupil I:1:13. Additional examples can be found in III:1:19 and III:1:22.)

The subgroup explaining means that the pupils can explain how the segments in a course of events are related to one another, and that the causes lead to the events just as the events have consequences. There are no examples of contextual causal explanations in the questionnaire answers, since the questions to the pupils are general and do not address specific material. The answers therefore lie on a general and typological level. There are relatively many pupils, 11, who mean that explanations are the same as knowing about history.
Under the heading explaining, I also place the answers suggesting seeing and understanding relationships. This means cognitively understanding events in terms of cause and effect. Thus, there is a distinction between understanding relationships and drawing conclusions. Drawing conclusions means that one is able to see patterns or understand a coherent picture from examples (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Nine pupils emphasize the ability to draw conclusions as being essential to knowing history:

You can understand people’s motives, development and thoughts. How these have developed during the course of history. Compare inventions and events and realize why they were needed or what caused them. Maybe even say what you think is right or wrong in wars and such. (Pupil III:1:16)

The pupil gives a complex description that contains components of interpreting, comparing and evaluating. The crucial formulations are the active verbs “comparing” and “realizing”, which together indicate that the pupil draws conclusions using these activities.

Comparing, analyzing. Not making mistakes and having knowledge you can use in the future. (Pupil I:1:4)

The pupil is certainly concise, but what is meant is more than that. The recitation of the words “comparing” and “analyzing” are not explained or commented on here. However, the fact that the sentence is about not making mistakes and having knowledge one can use in the future is worth attention. The pupil means that history can provide teachings that make it possible to avoid future mistakes. Whether this is actually the case can be debated; however, the reasoning expressed is that one uses what one has learned to draw conclusions. Furthermore, the formulation about readiness for action in the future implies that the pupil means that people, based on drawn conclusions, have the readiness to use knowledge and act on it. Readiness for action indicates that the reasoning is hypothetical and that it is not a question of concrete application, leading to the answer being categorized as drawing conclusions. In this category of answers, we also find those answers that mean that historical knowledge is to know what has happened, so that it does not happen again (Pupil I:1:8; II:1:4; III:1:4).

Another subcategory of understanding is comparing. The pupils do not give any concrete comparisons, but they answer that knowing history is to be able to compare. Pupil III:1:6 describes it in this manner: “You can talk with people about the past. You can compare the past with the present.”

I think that you can react in different situations. Because if you see that something is about to happen, for example that someone is about to gain power, then you can recognize this from an historical context and see that it isn’t going to lead to anything good. You can see that the events don’t happen again. (Pupil II:1:4)

The keywords in this quote are that one can recognize and identify something from an earlier situation and that it is not a desirable chain of events. My interpretation is that the pupil’s wording, “you can see that” actually means, “you can insure that”. In other words, I read this to mean that the pupil thinks that one has the ability to stop what is happening. In this line of reasoning there is an appraising judgement, and thus criteria for discerning which events are seen as good or not so good, respectively. Against the background of the criteria for evaluation, the pupil writes that one can react. Acting means to criticize and observe that something undesirable is about to happen. The quotation is an example of the cognitive process evaluating.
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Of the answers that clearly differ from the most frequent answers, there are two statements by pupils that touch on a different kind of knowledge (along the Y-axis) than knowledge of facts. One of these covers knowledge of concepts and is stated as follows:

You can divide events into centuries, for example, according to historians the 20th century began in 1914 and ended in 1990. You also know that causes, events, consequences are the most important things in history.” (Pupil I:1:1)

The example demonstrates how ‘century’ as a structural principle for periodization is used. Knowledge about classification and categories ties together different factual components. In addition, the pupil’s answer suggests the ability to reason about the concept of century. A simple mathematical division in even centuries is abandoned for a more thematic or functional division according to events and patterns that unite a period. The pupil briefly mentions the so-called short 20th century, from the beginning of World War I to the end of the Cold War. I interpret the reasoning to fall under the cognitive category analyzing, to be able to organize chronological parts into a context-bearing whole.

Also in the answer is an example of metacognitive knowledge, which according to Anderson and Krathwohl is the most abstract.

If you know history, then you decide yourself what you want to know. (Pupil I:1:21)

The quote cannot, with any certainty, be placed under the heading Strategic knowledge, which includes knowledge about learning theories or knowledge about ones’ own learning. According to Anderson and Krathwohl, strategic knowledge entails mastery of general strategies for learning. Such strategies relate more to pedagogic-psychological aspects than to knowledge within or about a subject. Instead, I define the metacognitive dimension of knowledge as such that the pupil can, on a meta-level, relate to a subject and its content and reflect on it. In Bloom’s revised taxonomy, the authors open up for such reasoning when they write that “[m]etacognitive knowledge is unique because the objectives require a different perspective on what constitutes a correct answer.” (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001, p 69). Based on that kind of reasoning, pupil I:1:21 demonstrates a metacognitive kind of knowledge. The cognitive process that is associated with the knowledge is evaluative, and more specifically, the process that involves criticizing. With support from criteria, which involves an individual’s factual and methodical related knowledge, enables the individual to express opinions on what is worth knowing.

What forms of knowledge do pupils demonstrate?

In order to cover several aspects of what kinds of knowledge pupils demonstrate, the analysis starts from two different sets of questions, which are each presented separately below. The overall picture may indicate which forms of knowledge the pupils’ answers are examples of.

The questions of How do you interpret the text? and What does the text say to you? are asked with the purpose that the answers will reflect the pupils’ spontaneous expressions of knowledge about history.

Concerning the question of cognitive processes, emphasis has been moved from remembering to understanding. Regarding the question about what the text says to the pupils, the answers that specify remembering make up 20 of the 50 answers. One example is:

It is a retelling of WWII and one person’s experiences. It doesn’t say much except that many did not want to shoot Jews. (Pupil I:2:2)
In the answer, the pupil expresses some of the basic elements from the text. The pupil does not use his/her own words.

Twenty-nine of the answers are of the explanatory kind, and most common among these are those where the pupils draw conclusions:

It depicts the psychological difficulties that resulted for those who were forced to execute Jews. (Pupil II:2:9)

The pupil demonstrates some level of certainty about her ability to understand the text. She says nothing about the obvious events, but rather captures one of the underlying threads found in the text. The pupil notes that the German soldiers hesitated in the face of killing and writes that the text depicts their psychological difficulties. These last words express that the soldiers were forced to kill, which however, was not the case in the text.

There are also a number of interpretive answers, meaning that the pupils capture the essence of the text and reformulate it using their own words (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001, p. 70). The citation below exemplifies how the pupil chooses some different wordings, but in general restate the text.

I understand how the author, the narrator sees this and how he feels about it. The Jews were meaningless to the Germans. The strong Jewish men had to work, while the weak, women, old people and children were shot dead. They exploited the Jewish men and promised them they would live, which in most cases never happened. (Pupil I:2:5)

There are some nuances that indicate that the pupil can translate the message in the text. The sentence “The Jews were meaningless to the Germans” is an example of this.

A summary of the text’s most important content where the essential parts of the text are captured is categorized as summarizing:

This text is very moving. That it was like this back then is very scary. The text says a lot. It tells about how it was to be a man in Germany and how one might get such a horrible assignment. How women, children and old people could be shot, just like that. They had done nothing.

The text also tells how frightened they were and that anything could happen without them knowing. But that there were also strong men that did not want to carry out the mission. (Pupil II:2:4)

The line of demarcation is in many cases narrow, and within the category understanding, many of the answers fall under more than one subcategory. However, I have allowed each pupil’s answer to have one fixed place in the matrix. Pupil III:2:8 however, falls somewhat outside of the frame:

It shows another side of the second World War. I thought that you were forced to kill, and if you refused, then you were shot. (Pupil II:2:8)

The answer can be interpreted as meaning that the pupil draws a conclusion from the text. On closer examination, I argue that the pupil’s answer is actually an example of distinguishing parts of a pattern. She observes and explains that it does not seem like everyone was forced to kill or that all soldiers blindly obeyed orders. The pupil analyzes the content of the text and recognizes distinguishing qualities in the story. Consequently, the answer is an example of an analytical cognitive process (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001, p. 80).

The second question that is a basis for the analysis of what kinds of knowledge or forms of knowledge the pupils express is What questions do you want to ask of the text after you have
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read it? From their answers, I try to understand what the pupils find relevant and interesting, how they read and interpret the text, and thus on which level the knowledge types can be localized. What characterizes this question is that the pupils must be creative and formulate a question themselves. In this manner, they are required to have a good grasp of the content. Twenty pupils have answered the question and of these, 12 express knowledge that is about understanding, and in more detail, explaining.

What did the men who did not step aside think? What happened to the men that did it? (Pupil II:2:1)

The questions cannot be answered with facts directly from the text, but instead lead onward to a cause and consequence relationship. Questions that even more obviously touch on cause and effect can be found with pupils II:2:14: “Why didn’t all of them step to the side?” and III:2:15: “Why did this situation occur at all?”

The text touches on profound human values and several of the pupils are shocked and react to the description of how the Jews were to be executed.

I would want to ask if it felt hard killing small children. (Pupil III:2:13)

The pupil starts from an implicit belief that it is wrong to kill and that it is especially wrong to kill children. When the Nazis’ actions are weighed against that attitude, the result is a question about how the soldiers may have felt about the assignment.

How could people live with themselves afterwards. (Pupil III:2:17)

The pupil asks a question that takes its starting point the same belief as the above, that is to say that human life is inviolable. Of the 20 answers, two express an evaluative and critical cognitive process. There is also one answer that clearly deviates from the others as it touches on the knowledge type knowledge of procedure:

I want to know if all of this is true and how it felt to be so powerless. (Pupil II:2:3)

In the first stage of her wondering, the pupil is open to finding out whether the text is documentary or fictional. This type of knowledge touches not only on the content, but also on its form and a question of whether the content can be verified. In terms of cognitive processes, the question is an example of an evaluative attempt. The pupil adopts a critical attitude towards the text and even if she does not express or apply principles of source criticism, I categorize the question as evaluative.

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Table 3. What forms of knowledge do pupils demonstrate? (Number of answers)
a) = How do You interpret the text? (50 answers); b) = What questions would You like to ask of the text? (20 answers)
Conclusions

The empirical results show that the knowledge type that the pupils in Sweden describe deals predominately with knowledge of facts. The idea of a material-centred knowledge of history appears to be deeply rooted, even if differences come to light and the picture becomes more nuanced when cognitive processes are analyzed. When pupils describe and discuss what they think you know when you know something about history, it is primarily (a little more than 50 %) fact-based memorizing knowledge that is the core, which is something earlier studies have also demonstrated. A somewhat smaller percentage of pupils say that explanations and the ability to draw conclusions are most essential when it comes to knowledge about history. Comparisons are also emphasized. A few pupils emphasize ethical and evaluative aspects. In general, the answers correspond and are quite in agreement with the kind of knowledge Swedish upper-secondary school teachers ask of their students in written examinations.

The study’s other general question is about what kind of knowledge about history pupils express when they ask questions, and in this way “do history”. The cognitive processes of understanding, explaining, drawing conclusions and evaluating dominate (65 %) in this more concrete and material-related context. The answers are displaced towards more advanced cognitive processes. The cognitive processes that pupils express become more complex and abstract when: a) pupils act creatively by asking questions about or directed to the past; or b) when there is clear material around which one can reason. In other words, there is a distinction between pupils talking about history and pupils doing history and the two do not correlate.

The results raise a number of new questions: Are the pupils unaccustomed to talking about knowledge and reflecting on what they can and what they are expected to know? Why do the pupils demonstrate cognitive processes in historical knowledge on a more advanced level in situations with a clear content and when they themselves are active, than when they describe what it means to know something about history? Why do the pupils describe a traditional ideal about encyclopaedic knowledge of facts, which in reality lies on a more basal cognitive level than the kind of knowledge they themselves demonstrate? One possible explanation may be that pupils often strive for quick and simple answers, especially considering the availability of information and facts that today’s information and communications technology makes possible.

Does the strong values-charged content of the questions in the second questionnaire mean that the pupils have been reached, stimulated or provoked and because of this, demonstrate more active kinds of knowledge? Here, there is probably another partial explanation. These questions should be put in relation to David Rosenlund’s study, which shows that Swedish history teachers usually allow their pupils to face examination assignments that primarily measure a reconstructionist view of the scholastic subject of history. This means that knowledge is seen as fixed and that it can only be perceived in one way, while at the same time, more interpretive assignments are seldom used. My study indicates that the pupils can demonstrate other, and more advanced kinds of knowledge and skills than what they are allowed to show in written examinations given by their teachers.

References

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**Endnotes**

1 Sixty-three pupils have answered the questionnaires. The amount of data is rather small and no certain conclusions can be drawn. Neither can I claim that the data is representative. On the other hand, the study is strongly focused, which means that observations can be made and tendencies can be discerned. The classes come from three schools, one school in a smaller Swedish town (denoted I), one school in a middle-sized Swedish town (denoted II) and one school from a large Swedish city (denoted III). The questionnaires are denoted 1 and 2, respectively, and the pupils are randomly numbered from 1, accordingly, for example, Pupil I:2:14 is the response from the 14th pupil from the small Swedish town school to the second questionnaire.

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