A competence-oriented curriculum in practice?
Challenges and obstacles to teaching history in Danish elementary schools

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Abstract

For two decades, all curricula have defined history as a problem-based subject in Danish elementary schools. This means that the students' own inquiries into and constructions of historical knowledge are important. In 2015, a competence-based curriculum, 'Fælles Mål' (Common Aims), was introduced, which was revised in 2019. In general, however, new curricula do not offer much of a change in practice. It remains common that teaching history is about transferring existing historical narratives to students.

Based on research by HistoryLab (National Centre of Excellence for the Dissemination of History and Cultural Heritage), this article discusses how intentions are implemented in the curriculum and what the obstacles seem to be. It is the article's assumption that essential aspects of traditions in history teaching and teaching materials established at the end of the nineteenth century still live on and are fundamental obstacles to didactic changes in history teaching.

The article will discuss the question, how are the curriculum's intentions implemented and what obstacles to implementation do there seem to be? The research topic is approached from three coherent points of view. First, it asks, how does history education take place in practice? What are students' views on history teaching, historical knowledge and the usefulness of what they learn in history? Finally, how do teaching materials present historical knowledge, and how is this knowledge understood and used in teaching?

Keywords: elementary school; teaching history; historical thinking; historical competencies; curriculum implementation

The creation of history education in Denmark

Both inside and outside schools, today's understanding of history as a school subject is more influenced by traditional perceptions of the purpose, form and content of teaching than most other school subjects. These traditional conceptions have always been obstacles to didactic development of the subject. This also applies to the implementation of the current competence-oriented curriculum.

In these traditional approaches, history textbooks' narratives appeared as closed, final and true stories about past events. The textbooks did not present other possible explanations or narratives of the past events or point out that there could be other points of view of the events or perceptions of the past. Nor did the textbooks draw attention to the origins of knowledge about past events or ask how one could know anything about the past at all. In the early 1900s, history was established as a positive and empirical subject at universities, with source criticism as the central method. But history as a subject in elementary school and at the university had different aims and were, in practice, two completely distinct subjects. During the 1900s, and especially after the Second World War, the nationally self-glorifying tone of the school's history books diminished. During the last decades of the century, the content of the history books consisted to a greater extent of selected and pedagogically adapted results from historians' research. The narratives of past events were told more objectively and soberly in contrast with the emotional and immersive tone that characterized the tone of history textbooks at the beginning of the century (Poulsen, 2021).

However, despite several new curricula for teaching history, a basic and strong tradition for fundamental concepts in the textbooks' narratives was established, and it remained unchanged at least until the beginning of this century. Almost all of the narratives dealt with the history of Denmark, and the narratives continued to appear as if they were the final and only true representations of past events. The history textbooks rarely stated that narratives were interpretations or asked how they had come into being, what their source basis was, or whether there may be other sound and acceptable interpretations of the same past events.

It is my conviction that these types of narratives in history textbooks and traditional and resilient conceptions of the form, content and purpose of history education are the main challenges and obstacles to realising the intentions of newer curricula, including the competence-oriented curriculum this article focuses on.

A competence-based curriculum

For at least 20 years, changing history curricula for elementary school (grades 3–9) have emphasized that teaching is supposed to facilitate students' investigative and history-creating learning processes. Therefore, more emphasis should be placed on doing history at the expense of knowing history, i.e., learning historical facts by heart (Havekes, 2015). This does not mean that coherent knowledge of events and persons in the past is irrelevant, but that we should strengthen students' understanding that historical knowledge is always

revisable and extendible and has a different character than, for example, scientific knowledge. The reason why is simple: The past itself is gone and does not have an independent existence. Therefore, the past is only present in the form of tangible and intangible traces.

The latest curricula emphasize that students should understand that the historical knowledge they encounter in narratives in teaching materials consists of interpretations and constructions of the past—not real and indisputable representations of how it once was. That is why, first, the students also have to gain insight into the factors that influence interpretations of the past. Second, the students have to learn how to analyse and interpret historical sources and, based on their acquired knowledge, formulate substantiated historical narratives.

The current curriculum from 2019 (Fælles Mål) is competence-oriented, which means that the curriculum does not lay down fixed content in the form of specific narratives about the past that the teachers are obliged to teach. Instead, the curriculum reflects a competence-based approach to historical consciousness and historical thinking that is expected to be operationalized in teaching. A core intention is that the students develop their historical competences; this idea is inspired by a simplistic version of the so-called FUER model developed by Andreas Körber and other German researchers who deal with the didactics of history education (Körber, 2015; Körber & Meyer-Hamme, 2015). Historical competencies are broken down into three coherent sub-competencies or dimensions: *investigative*, *methodological* and *orientational*. These historical competencies are reflected and integrated in the three competence areas described in the curriculum: *chronology and context* (change and continuity; causes and consequences), *working with sources* (problem-based and investigative learning) and *use of history* (historical scenarios, constructing historical narratives, historical consciousness). Each area of competence includes competence goals, which are arranged to indicate a progression (Børne- og Ungdomsministeriet, 2019)

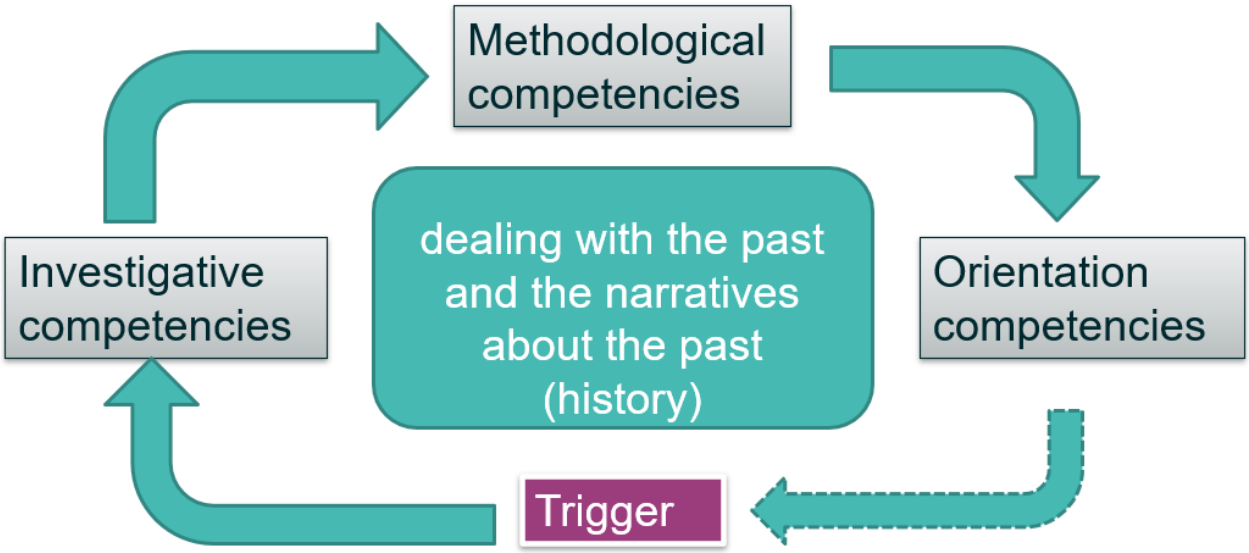

Figure 1: A model inspired by Andreas Körber et al. (2015) illustrates a didactic curriculum proposal for the organization of teaching and learning processes in history.

- The *Trigger* includes the teacher's reflections and decisions regarding the organization of teaching a historical subject or issue. How can students use their acquired historical knowledge and skills to get a better understanding of their everyday society and understand the purpose of the subject (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2019, p. 7)? How can teachers arouse the students' curiosity and interest in the chosen topic, motivate the students and facilitate their investigative work?
- *Investigative or inquiry competencies* mean that the students practice the skill of identifying historical questions and issues in the teaching materials and formulate relevant problem-based questions connected to the historical topic.
- *Methodological competencies* mean that teaching must strengthen students' knowledge and abilities to choose, analyse, and interpret suitable sources that can illuminate or answer the issues raised, but also that students should be able to analyse and, perhaps, deconstruct existing narratives about the past events they investigate.
- *Orientation competencies* are about the students' use of the historical knowledge they have acquired. Can they use the knowledge to re-construct or modify their former perceptions of contexts, persons and events of the past? Will the acquired knowledge lead to developing and strengthening the students' historical consciousness and promote their understanding of themselves and their surrounding world—and, perhaps, raise new questions that are worthy of investigation in history lessons?

In other words, if you, as a teacher, have the intention to use the curriculum as a guide to organize history teaching, you cannot only focus on the transmission of declarative or first-order knowledge to students. Teaching must operate with an expanded concept of knowledge that includes second-order knowledge and development of students' abilities in historical thinking, i.e., reflecting on changes and continuities, causes and consequences, similarities and differences and historical significance, evidence and interpretations (e.g., Levstik & Barton, 2015; Lévesque, 2009; Lévesque & Clark, 2018; van Sledright, 2014).

The research question, methods, and limitations

The article will discuss the question, how are the curriculum's intentions implemented and what obstacles to implementation do there seem to be? I will approach this question from three coherent points of view: first,

by examining typical teaching patterns based on observations in classrooms and interviews with teachers. Based on interviews with students, some common features of students' views on history teaching, their perceptions of historical knowledge and their stances on the usefulness of what they learn in history are discussed. Third, I look at how teaching materials present historical knowledge and how this knowledge is understood and used in teaching. This leads to a summary and conclusion of what seem to be the main challenges and obstacles in facilitating students' historical thinking and supporting the development of their historical competencies—with particular emphasis on the possible importance of a widespread traditional view of history, including the teaching material that conveys a national consensus on narratives of the past.

The article is based on ongoing and completed research projects I have carried out in cooperation with other researchers at HistoryLab (National Centre of Excellence for Dissemination of History and Cultural Heritage), a department of UCL University College (e.g., Knudsen & Poulsen, 2016; Peters & Poulsen, 2018; Poulsen, 2021a). These projects made use of qualitative mixed methods: classroom observations, video and audio recordings, and interviews with teachers and groups of students. However, in connection with one of the research projects (Knudsen & Poulsen, 2016), quantitative research was also completed (Rambøll 2015, 2016). Analyses of widely used teaching materials (textbooks and digital learning portals) are also used in the article. In addition, especially in the discussion of the significance of a widespread traditional view of history education and teaching materials, I will draw on results from my research on why and how narratives in history textbooks about Denmark's war with Prussia and Austria in 1864 have changed between 1864 and now (Poulsen 2021).

The article is mainly based on qualitative studies and therefore does not offer a complete and comprehensive picture of the state of history in Danish elementary schools. Indeed, it is impossible to create such a complete and comprehensive picture. Teaching practices, as they are implemented, unfold differently in different contexts. The aim of the article is thus to identify, through a few concrete examples, some of the difficulties that need to be overcome to put the curriculum's intentions into practice.

Teachers and teaching in elementary school

First, I will present some typical features of history teaching in elementary school—with the proviso that there are huge deviations from one class to another. Based on observations in classrooms, however, at least some characteristic patterns about how history teaching takes place can be inferred. First, nearly all the teaching takes place in the classroom or in other areas and rooms in the school. Rarely, the surrounding area is involved: museums, cultural institutions and other arenas are used as learning spaces and learning materials.

Second, the most widely used teaching materials are digital learning portals and history textbooks that publishers have didactised, which means they are produced for use in teaching. Although some teachers also use other non-didactic teaching materials, such as video, pictures, artefacts and so on, in

most cases, the didactic learning materials are decisive for the choice of historical topics and the order in which they are taught (Rambøll, 2015, p. 13). Many teachers probably agree with one who stated, "I have to admit that it (the curriculum) is not something we get hung up to on a daily basis". Not only in Denmark do school textbooks determine the choice of topics. It is the same in, for example, Sweden and Norway (Ammert, 2013, p. 88f; Justvik, 2014). Most of the topics are from Danish history, and the subject is the past seen as something which is handed over and completed. It is the exception that interactions between past, present, and future are discussed. The focus is on the students acquiring first-order knowledge. In the interviews, the teachers were asked about their expectations regarding students' learning outcomes. A teacher answered:

> I think that they (the students) should have knowledge about what has been going on before—that they should know about the past—both in Danish history and in the history of the world. And then I really want to teach them the good stories. [...] I would like my students to know who the notable figures in Denmark's history are.

Another teacher has this view of history teaching:

> History is, of course, all the knowledge we have of what has happened in the past before all the post-rationalisations took place. The historian's raw material. How it can ever become less important (for students) to have knowledge about facts than to be able to analyse them, I find it difficult to understand.

A third teacher wants to revitalize the tradition where the teacher is a storyteller: "Damn it, let us […] get some kings, some funny robes and some narrative into teaching so that children and young people can be enchanted by the peculiarity and diversity of history".

Although the focus in practice is on first-order knowledge, most teachers express higher ambitions regarding students' learning outcomes. A teacher says, "Students must learn what has formed their contemporary life and society [...] and we can learn from history". To quote another teacher, "In my opinion, history is about learning that you influence the world, and the world affects you. [...] That is why the subject of history is important. [...] History must help us to understand that the world is changing and that you have influence on how". Another teacher believes that the most important goal is that students learn to "think and reflect". History creates opportunities for this because "it's about people making choices", which students can immediately relate to. A third teacher said: "I think it is essential [...] that they can reflect, that is, that they can use the story. [...] It does not mean so much to me that they know it was just years, something happened. But that they can use it, for example, to discuss the future".

As you can see, the two teachers express expectations for students' outcomes in history that are consistent with the intentions of the curriculum and that presuppose that teaching also incorporates second-order knowledge and procedural knowledge. In the interview situation, several teachers formulated similar expectations, but in practice, their teaching was mainly based on the students acquiring first-order knowledge. Source work is included in the teaching. Although the curriculum stipulates that students from the third grade must practice working with sources, it usually does not happen until the eighth or ninth grades, when students may have to be tested in the subject. Students often practice source criticism in formalistic courses not linked to the historical subjects in which they are taught. History books and the digital portals used as teaching materials are rarely subject to source-critical analyses. The teachers' plans for the year's teaching show that the topics are defined on the basis of substantial or first-order knowledge. As a rule, topics are organized chronologically, so that the oldest times (e.g., the Stone Age) are taught in the youngest classes and more recent history is taught in the oldest classes.

Third, the teacher decides how the teaching should be organized and what tasks the students should perform. Only occasionally does the teacher explain why the subject in question is important, and the teacher shows limited consideration for the immediate wishes and interests of the students. In general, the teacher is continually active in history lessons, while the students are relatively passive. Often, class conversations about historical issues are characterized by an I-R-E-pattern: The teacher *initiates* the conversation with a question, the student *responds* and the teacher *evaluates* by ascertaining whether the answer is right or wrong. This may be one of the reasons why several of the teachers in the interviews reported that, of the subjects they taught, history was the one that required the most of them—both in preparation and teaching.

History teaching is often strongly dominated by the teacher. It is the teacher who reviews the content and decides with what and how the students should work. Such teaching hardly promotes students' abilities to think historically or develops their historical competencies, since, as we have known for years,

> Meaningful learning requires active engagement in the construction of knowledge. People become engaged in studies of the past when they understand that history is made, when they are shown how it is made, and when they are provided opportunities to share in its construction. […] If learners are to make meaning of the past, it must have relevance for them. This is one of the most important challenges for history […] (Davis, 2005, p. 120).

Students' understanding of history and history education

How do students perceive the content and form of history lessons and the usefulness of the subject? Interviews with students revealed different perceptions. These could be a general attitude to the subject, as when a girl in ninth grade said, "History is not exactly my favourite subject". And it may depend on the

topics. A boy in seventh grade said, “Back then, we had the Middle Ages and such stuff—I think that bored me to death. But if it is about World War II or the Napoleonic wars, then I think it is going to be a little more exciting”. A student (boy, ninth grade) expressed this view of history: "It's a slightly boring subject because it's old events and historical events [...] I don't think you can use it for anything nowadays. […] I find it hard to get into it (the content of the history lessons) because I don't see how it has affected me and my life." But there were also students who had the opposite view—for instance, this girl in ninth grade: “I like to know what it was like then (in the past) and how it has changed, so it has become what it is today. [...] It provides an opportunity to know what was different and what was good then and what was not so good and things like that”.

There are major differences in how teaching is carried out. However, a common feature is that students regularly answer questions from the teaching material or formulated by the teacher or in writing. However, this is rarely so to the extent that a female student (in ninth grade) remembered it: “In 8th grade last year, I remember we got such a huge compendium, and then we just had to answer some questions in writing—and we had to do that all year”.

It is a widespread perception among students that history is about the past. In being so, it differs from another school subject, social studies, which deals with conditions in contemporary society. It is not uncommon for pupils to refer to a given subject—based on the time to which it belongs—alternately as social studies or history.

Another widespread perception among students is that the task for the students is to accumulate facts about the past. The more you can remember about past events, the more skilled you are in the subject. But the perception that history is a memory subject presents a challenge, as expressed by a student (ninth grade): “I think history is a difficult subject because there are a lot of facts, years and things like that, and names that are hard to remember”. This perception of historical knowledge is consistent with that of Swedish history didactician Niklas Ammert, who recorded the responses of 65 Swedish ninth grade students to the question, "What does it mean to know something about history?" (Ammert, 2013, p. 55ff.). Ammert classified the students' statements based on Anderson and Krathwohl's taxonomy (2001). He found that 33 statements could be placed in the category "Know and remember"; 27 in "Describe and Understand", one in "Analyse and Interpret" and four in "Evaluate and Criticize".

Subsequent observations of lessons and interviews with students yielded the impression that many students believe it is possible to find or reconstruct definitive and true narratives about past events. These narratives, moreover, are thought to be the ones in history textbooks and digital learning portals. A student (female, seventh grade) said, "I expect that authors of the teaching resources have come as close to the reality as they possibly can. At least, it is 98% correct. So, most pupils uncritically accept the narratives in the teaching resources—and do not see them as interpretations”.

Many students think that history as a school subject is about big and decisive political events without any connection to the students' own histories and everyday lives. Yet students often like to hear their parents, grandparents or other older family members tell stories about the "old days". This general distance between history in school and the history of everyday life or "layman's history" seems to be a huge didactic problem in history teaching. In general, students consider history to be less important than most other school subjects. Several students believe that only if you are going to be an archaeologist, historian or history teacher is the subject important. A student (eighth grade) puts it this way: "It depends on what job you will have. [...] You don't have to know much about history if you're going to be a taxi driver, for example". This does not mean that students in general think that the subject is useless. Some students believe that we can learn from history so as not to repeat the mistakes of the past. One student (ninth grade) says you have history in school to "learn how things have been and how they have evolved". Several other students expressed a similar view.

Teaching resources and the curriculum

As mentioned earlier, didactic teaching resources are often essential for the choice of historical topics and the way teaching is organised and implemented—and thus, also, whether the curriculum's intentions are implemented in practice. Of course, there are differences between publishers' materials, whether they are textbooks or learning portals. From a bird's eye view, however, you can identify some common traits—at least if you look at the body texts.

First, the author's texts are built on a classic narrative pattern with a beginning, middle and end. The narratives in the body texts can be pure descriptions with no explanations as to why things happened as they did. When links between causes and consequences are included, only one cause is usually given decisive importance. As a rule, it is agents such as kings, powerful and influential individuals, governments, etc. who are driving forces in historical processes, while structures play a minor role. Much of the content in the teaching material focuses on national history, predominantly from a political point of view. Second, the narratives about events in the past emerge as the final and true accounts of what was going on. The author's text does not hint that the narrative is an interpretation and that there may be varied and perhaps contradictory narratives about the same past event. There is no suggestion that the event can be seen from other points of view. Third, the source of the narratives is also not given in the textbook or learning portals. We learn neither how you can know anything about the past nor what characterises historical knowledge and how it differs from, for example, scientific knowledge. Admittedly, most newer teaching materials also contain historical sources with questions that students can try to answer (e.g., Olsen & Lumholtz, 2018). But they are often a supplement to the author's text, and you do not need to use the historical source in teaching. Our observations show that teachers seldom let students work with these sources and stick to the author's text. Often, the purpose of the author's text is to help students get an overview of the text so that they

remember its central points—and not to encourage students to read with a critical and reflective gaze. This is illustrated by the following example, a task based on a text about the Thirty Years' War:

> In this chapter, learn about a war that lasted for 30 years. To keep track of the many years, write the dates and years you meet along the way. Find a sheet of paper that you divide into two columns. In one, you enter the date/year. In the other, you write what happened. (Olsen & Lumholtz, 2018, p. 75)

Here, Danish learning materials differ from, for example, British materials, where curricula for history have emphasized for decades that students should practice working exploratorily and thinking historically. That is way in British history books have contained been many historical sources since The School History Project was set up in the 1970s (e.g., Shephard, 1993; Rees et al., 2017).

That Danish history books contain only what textbook authors have written have a long history. Fundamentally, the narratives of the late 1800s and our own time are constructed according to the same resilient concepts and traditions concerning how historical narratives should be presented in teaching materials. Body texts in teaching materials are often "closed" narratives that appear as final truths and judgments of the events and persons in the past—always seen from a Danish point of view. The body texts do not point out that the interpretation of the past event may be different, or that there may be several other valid narratives about the same past event (Poulsen, 2021).

In short, it can be argued that body texts in teaching materials often support the perception that school history is about transferring indisputable narratives of past events to students and that they do not in themselves facilitate students thinking historically, working to investigative how to construct narratives about the past or engaging in other pedagogical history activities.

Closing and summary remarks

In summary, the first issue raised by this article — "How are the curriculum's intentions implemented?" — can briefly be answered in such a way: In general, the intentions are far from being implemented. Some teachers are inspired to organise their lessons to make students more active by, for example, allowing them to work in a more investigative and problem-based way, but this seems to be a minority. The extent to which the teaching is carried out in accordance with the curriculum remains to be researched.

The second question raised here — "What obstacles do there seem to be to the implementation of the intentions?"— also cannot be answered with certainty. However, we identified a few factors that appear to have significance, and these factors seem to form a "vicious circle". These include the general status of the subject in school and, in this context, who is responsible for the teaching. Are the teachers educated in history as their main subjects or not? Until 10–15 years ago, among students, parents,

teachers, and school management alike, subjects such as history generally had a low status compared to, for example, Danish as a mother tongue, mathematics, and foreign languages. Unlike subjects considered more important, there were neither national tests nor grades in history. It is obvious that a teacher who teaches music or visual arts must have mastered their subject. The same is not the case for teachers who teach history. History is only taught in one or two lessons a week. If a teacher has not met his or her working time standard, the headteacher may require them to teach history, even if they were not educated to do so. In the youngest classes, the teaching of history is typically provided by teachers who do not have the educational qualifications for doing so. There are still major differences in whether the teaching of Danish (as a mother tongue) and history are carried out by teachers with educational competences. In third grade, 96.2% of teachers who teach Danish are educationally competent. In history, the figure is 57% (Børne- & Undervisningsministeriet, 2021). In addition, school management generally does not prioritise continuing courses for history teachers, although many teachers are interested in such courses (Rambøll 2016).

Subjects such as Danish, mathematics and science are considered the most important in school. There are national tests on these subjects, and pupils' results are measured internationally (e.g., by PISA), which is why curricula seem to attribute greater importance to these subjects than to history. It seems that many history teachers have a somewhat laissez-faire attitude to the curriculum. They have knowledge of the curriculum and some of the intentions behind it. However, I have not interviewed any teachers who have studied it thoroughly and can explain its importance in their lesson planning. In general, the curriculum plays a minor role in the teacher's planning, implementation and evaluation of the lesson. A teacher puts it this way: “We use the Fælles Mål (curriculum)—you might say as a background. But we are committed to Fælles Mål. It is not the case that, when I am planning every topic, I am thinking about the curriculum”.

This study has shown that textbooks and learning portals often define the content and form of history teaching (Knudsen & Poulsen, 2016, p. 19). Almost 60% of teachers indicate that they follow the teaching material's sequence of topics, and only 28% discuss the content and form with students (Rambøll, 2016, p. 26).

By extension, a logical question is, when textbooks and learning portals are so important for what is going on in history lessons, why are they not prepared in strict accordance with the curriculum? A major reason is that in Denmark, there are no official bodies that pre-approve or quality-assess teaching resources. The production of most teaching materials is a commercial matter, where supply and demand are crucial to what is published. Of course, publishing houses would like to facilitate the intentions of the curriculum. But the economics of teaching materials are tight, so at the end of the day, they invest in what can be sold.

There may be several ways to break the tradition. For example, the curriculum can be formulated with precise guidelines for teaching and with external control of practices, as other countries have. But this would be a serious attack on teachers' freedom of method, which is highly valued in Denmark.

Perhaps a more constructive approach would be to give history teachers further education and let the state invest in learning resources that support the intentions of the curriculum.

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