



OBSERVATORY
ON HISTORY TEACHING
IN EUROPE



OHTE Thematic Report

Pandemics and Natural Disasters as Reflected in History Teaching

Summary



WHAT ARE PANDEMICS AND NATURAL DISASTERS?

A pandemic is defined as “an epidemic occurring worldwide, or over a very wide area, crossing international boundaries and usually affecting a large number of people” (Last et al. 2001). Pandemics occur when a new virus spreads easily among people who have little or no immunity to it. They are caused by novel pathogens that spread quickly between human hosts, affecting a great number of individuals globally (Kelly 2011).

Prasad and Francescutti (2017: 215) define natural disasters as “the overwhelming consequences of a natural hazard”. Natural disasters are frequent and global occurrences that range from earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and tsunamis to crop failure, famine, drought and floods. Historically, they have had a devastating impact upon humanity by crippling economies, destroying crops and displacing millions of people.

THE TEACHING OF PANDEMICS AND NATURAL DISASTERS

Despite the death and devastation they wrought on societies, events such as pandemics and natural disasters are given little attention in history education. This is because, traditionally, history education focused almost exclusively on political and national history and was centred on the construction and transmission of a positive national narrative designed to inculcate feelings of loyalty to one’s country and to reinforce notions of group belonging and identity (Carretero and Bermudez 2012; Cârstocea 2022). Similar lack of attention to these topics can also be seen in academic history, where studies of pandemics and natural disasters have been, until recently, considered specialist rather than mainstream subjects.

The teaching of such topics comes with numerous challenges. One of the most significant of these relates to the teachers’ own expertise, orientation and pedagogical content knowledge (Ní Cassaithe and Chapman 2020). Another relates to the curriculum space in which to include these topics and to the relative autonomy given to teachers in delivering the history curriculum. Yet another relates to the affective aspect of dealing with sensitive topics that address large-scale loss of life. There is also the added challenge of how to teach these topics effectively in the classroom.

History education can play an important role in providing students with a comprehensive understanding of pandemics and natural disasters, past and present, by providing a powerful platform through which these topics can be explored and discussed in European classrooms. Through engagement with the process of historical enquiry into past events, students can learn about and evaluate the historical precedents of contemporary pandemics and natural disasters and find ways to connect with the past that resonate with them in today’s world.

The Ohte Thematic Report on “Pandemics and Natural Disasters as reflected in history teaching” offers a unique insight into the extent to which pandemics and natural disasters topics are included in national curricula, the topics and themes that are actually taught in classrooms, and the pedagogies and resources that are used to teach them, across the 16 Ohte member states. The report furthermore identifies inspiring practices with regard to the teaching of pandemics and natural disasters in each member state.

The report covers the following main themes:

- *The inclusion of pandemics and natural disasters in history curricula*
- *Teachers’ pedagogical decisions about teaching pandemics and natural disasters*
- *Scapegoating*
- *Multiperspectival approaches*

KEY FINDINGS

The following 15 points are the main findings of the thematic report on pandemics and natural disasters as reflected in history teaching:

1. Despite some positive examples to the contrary, within the framework of compulsory state schooling, on average between the ages of 6 and 16, there is minimal or sometimes no coverage of pandemics and natural disasters in national history curricula across the OHTE member states. These topics have a peripheral
2. Pandemics and natural disasters are taught more extensively in other subjects across the curricula, but this involves little, if any, historical dimension (historical context, perspective, knowledge and thinking). Pandemics and natural disasters are currently taught primarily in geography, but also in civic and moral education, citizenship education, science and technology, life and earth sciences, biology, language and literature, the arts and classics. The inclusion of a historical dimension in the teaching of these topics in other subjects is rarely prescribed in national curricula.
3. The teaching of pandemics and natural disasters frequently occurs in integrated subjects, incorporating history alongside other disciplines. This presents both advantages and disadvantages: what may be lost in terms of historical disciplinary rigour (the use of primary sources, methods of enquiry specific to the historical profession) could be gained by emphasising the link between historical pandemics and natural disasters, and present-day challenges.
4. Many state schools and history teachers have considerable autonomy at the school and classroom level to be creative, innovative and responsive to contemporary global challenges and their importance for students today.
5. Despite the fact that relatively little attention is given to these topics in national curricula, over 75% of teachers reported that they do teach about pandemics and natural disasters at primary and post-primary level. Based on the TES results, at primary level teachers are more likely to teach about natural disasters than pandemics.
6. Teachers in all 16 OHTE member states believed it is vital that their students are taught about the historical dimension of pandemics and natural disasters, and were keen to see these topics better represented in the national curricula for history and other subjects, to reflect their importance and significance to diverse groups of citizens in different countries.
7. Teachers appear to be moving away from the primacy of textbook-based instruction and are engaging with a range of student-centred and constructivist pedagogical approaches, particularly historical enquiry, to teach about historical pandemics and natural disasters. More traditional forms of history teaching, for example, teacher-led pedagogies focused on the transmission of factual historical information and centred on the use of a textbook, are sparingly used in classrooms to teach about these topics.
8. Digital technologies (where available) and constructivist activities such as group work and investigation are increasingly being used for the teaching of pandemics and natural disasters. While the potential benefits of digital media are recognised both by governments and by teachers, so too are the pitfalls associated with the proliferation of unreliable information, resulting in the need for striking a balance in the use of such technologies critically in the history classroom.
9. Approximately 82% of teachers believed that teaching about collective experiences of pandemics and natural disasters across Europe can work towards creating a sense of European responsibility and cultural identity.



10. Over 93% of teachers believed that teaching about pandemics and natural disasters can play an important role in deepening students' understanding of the global climate crisis. Furthermore, over 95% of teachers believed that teaching about pandemics and natural disasters highlights common challenges students will face in the future, and that teaching about these topics helps nurture responsible global citizens.
11. Overall, most teachers did not believe that teaching about pandemics and natural disasters was too upsetting for students, although a significant minority (particularly in member states that have experienced natural disasters such as earthquakes and flooding) believed that the emotional dimension of teaching about natural disasters was too upsetting for students.
12. Approximately 87% of teachers believed that, given the complex and potentially sensitive nature of teaching about pandemics and natural disasters, teachers need specific strategies and approaches to teach about them effectively.
13. Educators in a number of the OHTE member states feel they have the professional expertise and knowledge needed to teach about pandemics and natural disasters.
14. Issues such as scapegoating and multiple perspectives are rarely included in the planning and teaching of pandemics and natural disasters in national curricula, but are considered very important by teachers and educators across the OHTE member states.
15. While natural disasters tend to be taught mostly in a national framework, with a focus on those that have affected the respective country in the past, pandemics and epidemics are taught from a transnational, European and even global perspective. The Black Death is the single most frequent example of a pandemic and is taught in almost all OHTE member states. The eruption of Mount Vesuvius is the closest such event in terms of natural disasters, but its coverage in national curricula is still significantly less widespread than that of the Black Death pandemic.