

**“Hard” Facts or “Soft” Opinion? History Teachers’ Reasoning About Historical Objectivity**

Gideon Boadu

University of Newcastle, Australia

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**Abstract:**

Objectivity is a contested issue in history and history education. This study explores history teachers’ conceptions about historical objectivity and whether or not their reasoning resonates with their classroom practices. Data was collected through in-depth interviews and lesson observations from 15 public senior high schools in the Central Region of Ghana. Data was thematically analyzed, with three themes forming the main lines of argument in this study. Findings show that participants recognize historical evidence as important to accessing the past reality and regard the interpretive intervention of historians as useful in the reconstruction of the past. Classroom practices reveal minimal attention to the problematization of historical knowledge, as most participants taught history as grand narratives. The study recommends a postmodernist re-orientation of the Ghanaian history curriculum and a continuing professional development of history teachers.

**Key words:** historical objectivity; historical evidence; teacher reasoning; classroom practice; history teaching

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**Introduction**

There are several ways of conceiving the past reality (ontologies), which determine how historians conceptualize knowledge (epistemology), and their approach to creating knowledge and offering explanations (methodologies) (Munslow, 2006). Objectivity is one of the many contested issues in history and history education, characterized by several important questions such as: Are historical constructions biased or true? Can we attribute equal validity to accounts, or are some accounts superior to others? Can the past be scientifically studied (Newall, 2009)? These philosophical questions are of interest to history teachers as they are to philosophers of history. Best practice in history teaching involves encouraging students to progress in their search

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Corresponding author: [gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au)

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for historical knowledge to enable them to attain understanding of concepts and acquire sophisticated intellectual dispositions (Ragland, 2014; Wineburg, 2001). While this is an important consideration in history education, reports show that students tend to view history as more informative than investigative, and their approach to the subject has been to acquire knowledge and give what they perceive are the *correct answers* rather than to create and critique knowledge (Foster, 2011; Havekes, Aardema, & de Vries, 2010; Samuelsson, 2019). Consequently, researchers have made repeated calls for teachers to involve students in activities and processes that allow a more active engagement with history in order for students to understand the complexities and tensions that characterize history as a discipline (e.g., Barton, 2011; Fordham, 2012; Lee, 2005a, 2011; Levstik & Barton, 2011; Wineburg, 2007). Since history teachers' beliefs influence how they teach and shape students' thinking about history (Bennett, 2014; VanSledright, 1994; Wineburg & Wilson, 1991), it is important that their conception of the discipline and its associated contentions, such as the issue of historical objectivity, is given attention in research.

A considerable number of studies from Western countries have explored history teachers' epistemic cognition in history. Yeager and Davis's (1996) exploratory study revealed that teachers held three different views of history: history as construction, history as entertainment, and history as accuracy. Evans (1990, 1994) makes a similar but broader categorization of the profiles of history teachers: storyteller, scientific historian, relativist/reformer, cosmic philosopher, and eclectic. According to Evans (1994), storyteller teachers emphasized the details of events using teacher-centered pedagogies; scientific historians drew emphasis on historical explanations, interpretations, and generalizations and employed inquiry activities; relativist/reformers rejected objectivity in history; cosmic philosophers connected one event to another using general laws; and eclectic teachers were indefinite in their descriptions and practices. Likewise, VanSledright and associates have, in a series of studies, typified teachers' epistemic beliefs into three categories: copier, subjectivist, and criterialist, with each category reflecting different positions on how teachers conceived the past and history, the role of the historian, and the place of interpretation in history. Results showed that copier teachers were naïve realists who considered history as reflecting the past; subjectivists viewed history as reflected through the voice of historians but possessed limited understanding of the relationship between historians and history; and criterialists, on the other hand, conceived of history as the product of the interaction between historians and their object of study (see Maggioni, VanSledright, & Alexander, 2009; VanSledright, Maggioni, & Reddy, 2011; VanSledright & Reddy, 2014). While these studies and several others are significant (see, e.g., McCrum, 2013; Voet & De Wever,

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Corresponding author: [gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au)

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2016), they give limited focus on teachers' conceptions of the idea of objectivity in history. It appears that no studies have focused exclusively on history teachers' reasoning about historical objectivity. This study thus contributes to filling a gap in current knowledge and research in history education by examining how history teachers in Ghana reason about the idea of historical objectivity and transact their classroom practices.

### **A Ghanaian Background**

History is currently taught as an elective subject for General Arts students at the senior high school level in Ghana. Under the current arrangements, students can elect to study history only if they are assigned to study the General Arts course. One aim of school history in Ghana is to help students to "acquire the skill of gathering and objectively analysing historical data that will enable them interpret the actions and behaviours of the people of Ghana from a Ghanaian perspective" (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. ii). This curricular aim suggests that students are to be actively engaged in the *doing* of history to enable them to make their own judgements and interpretations of historical information. However, history teachers in Ghana are mostly under pressure to complete the history curriculum for accountability purposes and, therefore, their perspectives regarding the nature of their subject are often overlooked. For example, debates concerning the influences of postmodernism on school history and students' learning which gained popularity in the 1990s in Australia and other countries (Sharp, 2017) appear not to have attracted attention in either academic or public discourses on history in Ghana. For various reasons, including the 1987 educational reforms which, among other changes, led to the expunction of history from the primary school curriculum, past and recent studies have focused on the place of history in Ghanaian school curricula (see, e.g., Adjei & Kwarteng, 2017; Buah, 2002; Dwarko, 2007). Hence, little or no evidence exists to show whether Ghanaian history teachers problematize historical knowledge, adopt multiple approaches to teach history, or encourage rival perspectives on the content that they teach. Even though the postmodern approach to school history is reported to be a challenge and thus unpopular among history educators in some jurisdictions (Parkes, 2013; Seixas, 2000), evidence is limited in developing countries, including Ghana, as to whether teachers enact and transact this approach to history teaching. This study therefore investigates Ghanaian history teachers' conceptions of historical objectivity and whether or not their conceptions align with their classroom practices. The study is situated within the ongoing debates on historical objectivity with a view to adding a Ghanaian voice to discussions within the academe. Principally, the study seeks to answer this research question: How do Ghanaian history teachers reason about historical objectivity and how do their

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Corresponding author: [gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au)

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classroom practices reflect their reasoning? This research question is addressed through in-depth semi-structured interviews and lesson observations with 24 public school history teachers.

### **The Objectivity Disquisition**

The literature on the philosophy of history features long-standing disputes relating to the reality of the past, conceptualization of historical knowledge, and approaches to creating knowledge about the past. Historical objectivity, according to Walsh (1992), is the most important and baffling topic in the philosophy of history. While it is not possible within the scope of this study to cover every aspect of the contentions surrounding historical objectivity, effort is made to review salient aspects that are sufficient to situate the findings within the ongoing debates.

Terminologically, historical objectivity is viewed differently (see Mandelbaum, 1977), but the central issue is whether our knowledge of history is focused on the object of inquiry or is independent of our assumptions or expectations (Newall, 2009). The different perspectives regarding historical objectivity relate to the nature of the past and the roles expected of historians in the reconstruction of the past. Nevertheless, the role of historians in their study of the past has been at the center of the debates surrounding historical objectivity.

Debates about the role of historians in the study of the past have split historians and philosophers of history into positivist and relativist camps. There is a range of positionings within positivism and relativism, but positivist or empiricist historians generally believe in a knowable reality and argue that history aims to record truths about the past (Windschuttle, 2000). Conversely, the relativist position rejects the claim that history is objective and maintains that historians are at the center of any knowledge claims about the past and that universal theories are undermined when applied to history (Black & MacRaild, 2017; Rösen, 2008; Tucker, 2013).

The positivists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century believed in the existence of irrefutable objective facts based on evidence. Led by von Ranke, positivist historians believed that historical accounts should capture the wider truth in its own terms or take an a posteriori approach by grounding explanation in evidence (Boldt, 2007, 2014; Munslow, 2006; Plumb, 1969). However, postmodernist thinkers questioned the optimism of positivists and argued that it is difficult for historians to recreate the past (Anbalakan, 2016). For instance, Butterfield (1931), though initially appearing to assume a positivist stance, argued that it is wrong in historical writing “to abstract events from their context and set them up in implied comparison with the present day, and then to pretend that by this ‘the facts’ are being allowed to ‘speak for themselves’” (p. 57). Similarly, several seminal historical thinkers and history educators maintained that, unlike the natural sciences, objectivity is difficult

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Corresponding author: [gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au)

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to achieve in the construction of history, and that grand narratives are unsuited to history teaching in schools (see, e.g., Atkinson, 1978; Collingwood, 1946; Stanford, 1998; White, 1973). Even though differences exist in the views of these scholars, some agree that it is possible, in principle, to offer true statements about the past but argue that such possibility is not sufficient to claim objectivity since historians' personal inclinations cannot be completely bracketed from the accounts they create about the past (Atkinson, 1978; Walsh, 1992). Collingwood (1946) is well noted to have argued that "all history is the history of thought" (p. 214) and that evidence changes with every change in historical methodology. Also, every change in the situation of historians brings variation to the manner in which evidence is interpreted (Collingwood, 1946). This reflects the perspective theory of historical objectivity which argues that all history is written from a point of view (McCullagh, 2004; Walsh, 1992). Drawing from the literature, three factors could be said to have characterized the debates on historical objectivity: evidence, selection, and interpretation/explanation.

Evidence is important in history since historians seek answers to the questions they ask about the past through analysis of evidence (Collingwood, 1946; Lee, 2005b). However, it is argued that evidence does not necessarily present a recoverable reality and that, like its sources, no history is impartial but is, rather, contested and problematic (Black & MacRaild, 1997, 2017; Marwick, 1989). Walsh (1992) notes that even though traces of the past offer a working theory of truth in history, such truths do not satisfy all philosophical questions. Hence, Walsh (1992) maintains that any assertion about the past depends on historians' decisions about what evidence is available to support such claims. It is likely, however, for new evidence to emerge (Carr, 1987; Collingwood, 1946). McCullagh (2004) therefore argues that any claim that historians can describe the past in its exactness and complexity, independent of their beliefs and interests, using incomplete evidence, is unfounded. McCullagh (2004) describes such empiricist theory and its attendant correspondence theory of truth as naïve empiricism. Mandelbaum (1977) counters this view and argues that even though the background and experience of every researcher affects their work, there is always an independent appeal to the object of inquiry regardless of one's personal experiences. Further, it is argued that since historians build upon each other's work, their cumulative results could be regarded as objective knowledge, despite the possibility that new evidence might provide a different perspective or overturn what is already known (Mandelbaum, 1977; Windschuttle, 2000). This view suggests that it is possible to reach objective conclusions by crosschecking and integrating one historian's account with other existing accounts; however, this raises concerns about the credibility of each account as a standalone inquiry about the past, which complicates the problem of historical objectivity.

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Corresponding author: [gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au)

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Issues about historical evidence have a connection with the idea of selection. Historians are generally selective since it is not possible to capture everything about their object of study. Hence, it is argued that any assertion about the past depends on historians' decisions about what evidence is available for selection to support their claims (Walsh, 1992). Besides, determining what is important to select from the past is relative because it depends on historians' judgement of what is important (Carr, 1987; Walsh, 1992). In light of this, Atkinson (1978) argues that the inevitability of selection and summary compounds the problem of historical objectivity, asking, "How can selection be other than arbitrary and subjective?" (p. 69). This means that reporting the whole truth about the past is difficult to achieve. History teachers, therefore, need an awareness that only aspects of the past are constructed as history, and they should be encouraged to search for and construct knowledge continually with students.

Historical interpretation is another site of contention among historians because of the plurality of interpretive theories, including whig, Marxist, and feminist traditions. In light of the diverse explanatory theories leading to historical skepticism, historians argue that there is no universal standard of historical consciousness to which all historians subscribe and that every history reflects a perspective (McCullagh, 2004; Walsh, 1992). Yet, some researchers observe that plural interpretations do not necessarily make history unscientific and that different perspectives afford multiple means to understanding the past (Anbalakan, 2016; Bevir, 1994; Bohan & Davis, 1998). In the classroom, for instance, encouragement of multiperspectivity is noted to equip students with domain-specific historical processes and the interpretative frames adopted by historians to explicate events (Stradling, 2003). This suggests that history teachers need to seek alternative approaches to explaining past events and guide students to reflect on their own interpretations in order to reach informed conclusions.

Besides the existence of plural interpretive theories, historians group and explain their material in different ways. These include colligation (Walsh, 1992), covering law (Burston, 1954; Hempel, 1942), and uniqueness (Evans, 1994). The colligation approach assumes that different historical events come together to form a whole and that particular events are explained by locating and finding the causal connections that they have with other events in the shared whole (Walsh, 1992); thus, events that are colligated are those that are caused by similar factors, and historians' task is to seek patterns and knit together fragmented pieces of historical information into meaningful and coherent explanations (Munslow, 2006; Retz, 2017). The covering law model projects general concepts on events and explains events in terms of how they belong to a class of events (Burston, 1954; Hempel, 1942). This approach to the past permits historians to make

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Corresponding author: [gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au)

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generalizations in their explanation of events and to predict and categorize future behavior or action and its function given particular circumstances and their regularity of occurrence (Munslow, 2003, 2006). The uniqueness pattern of explanation considers an event in terms of how different it is from others of its kind; its main argument is that the purpose of historical

historians must emphasize the individuality and exclusivity of each historical epoch or event with recourse to its time of occurrence (Boldt, 2014). While these different patterns of grouping and explanation present alternative approaches to the past, they compound historical skepticism. For instance, colligation has been criticized as obscuring the complexity of the past and establishing false interconnections among disparate events (Black & MacRaid, 2017), while the covering law approach is regarded as a poor philosophical model that commonly leads historians to misrepresent historical explanations (Dray, 1960).

Munslow (2003) attempts to classify the various epistemological orientations about history under three typologies: reconstructionism, constructionism, and deconstructionism. Munslow (2003) explains that these positions differ in terms of their emphasis on empiricism. According to Munslow, reconstructionist historians believe that close examination of evidence can yield the most likely meaning of past events and actions. Constructionist historians, for their part, move beyond description to the analysis and interpretation of evidence to discover the meaning and structure of events through the adoption of social and scientific theory. Deconstructionist historians, on the other hand, hold that the content of history presents meanings that are only representational of the past; hence, their focus is not on discovering meanings of the past using evidence or theory but through a “representation of pastness” (Munslow, 2003, p. 6). The multiple epistemological orientations indicate that evidence is conceptualized and used differently by historians. Consequently, it is argued that the several contentious issues in the discipline make history ontologically altered and epistemologically fragile (Jenkins, 1991; Munslow, 2006). It is therefore important for teachers to be aware of the contested nature of history and translate such awareness into meaningful pedagogies for students’ understanding.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Setting and Participants**

At the time of the study, there were 10 administrative regions in Ghana. In these regions, there were 565 public senior high schools. Out of this number, 542 offered General Arts (Ghana Education Service, 2015). There were, however, no publicly available records as to which schools offered history classes. Table 1 shows the breakdown of schools in each region.

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Corresponding author: [gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au)

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*Table 1: Public senior high schools in Ghana*

Region	Number of schools	Number of schools offering General Arts
Ashanti Region	102	100
Eastern Region	81	80
Volta Region	79	76
Brong-Ahafo Region	64	63
Central Region	55	51
Western Region	47	46
Northern Region	40	37
Greater Accra Region	40	40
Upper East Region	25	24
Upper West Region	32	25
Total	565	542

Source: Ghana Education Service (2015)

Since the study was exploratory in nature and did not aim to generalize claims, the researcher considered that one region was enough to inform the study based on the following reasons. Consideration was made of issues relating to access and other context-specific practical constraints. For example, due to the lack of public records on the number of schools that offered history, the total population of history teachers, and institutional contact details of heads of schools and teachers, the researcher could not send bulk emails to heads of schools to negotiate access and to invite teachers into the study. Besides, emails were not the regular means of communication in schools. While the use of alternative approaches such as internet survey and/or telephone interviews could have helped address this difficulty, logistical and human factors did not make their use feasible—internet was generally expensive and unstable in some parts of the country—so the researcher embarked on personal travels to schools to negotiate access and to contact potential participants and invite them into the study. Hence, it was considered that a region with which the researcher had sufficient geographic acquaintance was necessary. Following Husbands, Kitson, and Pendry's (2003) example, the Central Region was

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Corresponding author: [gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au)

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chosen in order to produce a study that was manageable yet large enough to account for different school contexts and characteristics.

The study involved 24 history teachers who were drawn from 15 public senior high schools in the Central Region of Ghana. A mixed purposive sampling technique comprising maximum variation and snowball sampling strategies were employed at different stages of the study. Through maximum variation, participants were recruited to reflect the two main variations of schools in the Central Region—location (urban and semi-urban) and structure (religious and secular)—based on a matrix designed by the researcher. The snowball sampling technique was employed to locate the schools that offered history and the history teachers that taught in those schools. The combination of these sampling strategies reflected the larger experience-sharing community of teachers and the diverse characteristics of schools as much as possible. Participants had a cumulative average of six years of experience in history teaching. Even though they taught in schools in the Central Region, most of them had different ethnic backgrounds and came from different regions in Ghana. Gregory and Boniface (all names are pseudonyms) held a Master's degree and PhD, respectively, while the remaining participants held Bachelor's degrees as their highest professional qualifications, with majors in one of such related fields as history, political studies, and social studies.

#### **Data Sources**

This study is drawn from a larger interpretive phenomenological research that explored history teachers' reasoning and practices using in-depth interviews, lesson observations, post-lesson interviews, and teachers' portfolios. Particularly, this study draws on the interview and observational data. Participant recruitment and data collection took place from October, 2017, to March, 2018. Each participant engaged in an in-depth semi-structured interview that was conversational in nature in order to enable them to express their views freely and to ensure their continuous cooperation in the study. The interviews were conducted in English as it was the official language of instruction in Ghanaian schools. The use of probes helped to elicit further detail and clarify vague responses. On average, each interview lasted for about 50 minutes and was recorded with an audio device alongside hand-written notes. Twenty out of the 24 participants agreed to be observed. A participant observation approach was employed to study these participants' classroom practices. The number of observations for each participant ranged between one and four, based on their availability and circumstances. In total, 55 separate lessons were observed and 95.5 observational hours were accrued. The interviews were used to crosscheck classroom practices, whereas the observations provided further insights about

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participants' interview responses. Interviews and observations were transcribed and returned to participants to check, amend if necessary, and approve. The research from which this study is drawn was approved by the ethics committee at the university where it was conducted.

### **Analysis of Data**

Data analysis commenced concurrently with data collection and involved continuous reflection and iteration, working from part to whole and from whole to part. Beginning with the "first interview [and] the first observation" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 191), transcripts were read multiple in order to develop sustained engagement with the data. Data was de-identified and assigned pseudonyms. Initially, the interview transcript of Bernard was manually coded; words and phrases that represented essential ideas relating to history and historical objectivity were identified and applied to various parts of the hard-copy transcript. The manual coding helped the researcher to "touch" the data through physical manipulation and flipping of papers, which gave a sense of intimacy, ownership, and control over the analytic task (Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 2000; Saldaña, 2009). However, after several time-consuming cycles of coding the transcript, manual coding was abandoned and NVivo was employed to make the organization, manipulation, and retrieval of data more manageable. The manual, paper-based codes were transferred to NVivo while paying attention to additional significant insights. Codes that cohered together were clustered into categories, and the themes that emerged from the data formed the basis of the findings. The recursive processes of multiple reading, coding, category building, and theming offered considerable room to maneuver the analytic task by moving back and forth between the steps and the data until no new insights were emerging. The findings of this study are presented around three emerging themes. Verbatim extracts from the interviews are cited as much as possible to account for participants' conceptions and to maintain a critical distance between their emic perspective and the researcher's etic understanding and interpretation. Frequency counts (n) are also employed to represent the number of participants that orientated toward particular beliefs and practices.

### **Findings**

#### **There is an existent and knowable past reality.**

All participants noted that the past is gone and is therefore not amenable to present observation. However, to most participants (n=20), history provides authentic access to the past actuality. Fidelis, for instance, expressed: "History gives an account of what really happened." These participants believed that there is a true, immutable past reality that is accessible, and it is the

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Corresponding author: [gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au)

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responsibility of historians to project and report the past disinterestedly in consonance with professional standards. Barns's perspective is informative:

History as a discipline lends itself to the scientific process of enquiry. The past needs to be investigated to find out the truth. [History] is an objective discipline and it always looks for the truth because there are clear standards that every credible historical account needs to meet.

This viewpoint connotes that history is objective inasmuch as it is primed on facts and informed by research and theory. It further implies that in constructing knowledge about the past, historians strive to reach accurate, verifiable conclusions as much as possible. Participants provided further insights on the need to get the facts right given the unobservable nature of the past. Of note is Gregory's response:

[History] is objective so far as it is driven by the facts, [and] that nobody is just manufacturing something and telling us. Especially, if the historical information is backed by in-depth research and theoretical underpinnings. History is very careful because you are trying to create a picture of the past while you were not there ... That is why when the history of a people is being reconstructed, multiple sources are used.

This scientific view of history suggests that to the majority of participants, access to the past reality is fundamental to obtaining true statements about past events and that multiple sources of evidence provide access to the past actuality. In relation to this, Edward maintained, "Objectivity is achieved when the historian is convinced after using all the sources that this is what actually happened." This orientation reflects the position of historical thinkers who emphasize the need to capture the richness and texture of the past based on available evidence (e.g., Plumb, 1969). More findings relating to the role of historical evidence are explored under the next theme.

**Evidence is incomplete but constructive and verifivative.**

Participants noted that some events left their traces behind and such traces provide significant evidence to ascertain past reality. They expressed that validating evidence from multiple sources strengthens the reliability of accounts. Participants therefore took an empiricist posture, priming their argument on the corroborative role of evidence including historical traces, relics or remnants, and eyewitness accounts. Albert's response is informative:

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Corresponding author: [gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au)

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You will have ensure that you rely on multiple disciplines to be able to crosscheck the information at hand from various sources. Doing this increases the likelihood of getting a reliable account in the end. Such an account can be believed or depended on to interpret or understand other events.

Citing a specific example, Barns added:

For instance, Europeans came [here] and engaged in slave trade. What is the evidence? You move to the coastal areas and we have the forts and castles. All these tell you that there was indeed slave trade in Ghana. That is why it is good that researchers of history depend on a number of sources to increase the veracity of the accounts produced by them.

This result indicates that participants recognized the need to subject multiple sources of evidence to analysis in order to ascertain their historical utility.

Even though all participants acknowledged the role of evidence, their perspectives varied. Out of the total number of participants, 20 believed that the use of multiple historical evidence is a necessary condition for objectivity since it helps to convey the past reality. Four participants, however, had a dissenting opinion. Their argument was grounded on the relativity and incompleteness of evidence and the difficulties presented by historical interpretations. These participants believed that although history is factual, evidence is often relative and therefore, with time, new discoveries might render an earlier claim redundant. In Kaitlan's view, "There are some truths or realities about the past that are revealed in the course of time and this might refute earlier claims." Rene added, "Fact in itself is relative. People are even challenging facts now." There were other views that sources themselves could compound the problem of objectivity, as Emily noted: "Even the materials we use, and the ones we find on the internet, we cannot say they are very authentic." This belief suggests that evidence is fragmentary, that sources are not preordained for objectivity, and that careful interrogation of the sources of evidence is requisite. This group of participants regarded history as not objective, as Lorna succinctly stated: "I do not think history can be objective."

In relation to pedagogy, most participants mentioned that they use materials such as photos, videos, and documentaries to support their lessons. In addition, they indicated that they give students tasks to practice how multiple sources could be used to reconstruct the past, and they also embark on occasional visits to historic sites such as slave castles, museums, and other heritage locations in the local community. Jake described the sources he used in class: "There are

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Corresponding author: [gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au)

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a lot of videos to show and sometimes newspapers that reported on the events. There are a lot of them in the library so I sometimes bring them out for them [students] to compare and see things that happened.” Notwithstanding their views on the use of evidence, practical use of evidence during lessons was less apparent. Of the 20 participants observed, only Bernard and Emy used primary and secondary sources to complement their lessons. Bernard, for instance, gave seven different secondary source materials on the *Bond of 1844* to students and asked them to examine the sources and draw out their own analysis of the texts for group presentations in class; however, such analysis did not emphasize rival perspectives on the topic, nor did it draw students’ attention to the incomplete nature of evidence. Emy, for her part, presented four samples of traditional medicinal plants to support her teaching and invited students to demonstrate how such medicines are used in their communities. In effect, even though participants’ conceptions of evidence suggest that evidence is fundamental to historical constructions, there was minimal use of it in the observed classroom teaching. Their interview responses regarding the use of evidence in history teaching therefore did not match with their classroom practice.

**Historians are self-conscious, active agents in their study of the past.**

Even though most participants expressed optimism about the contribution of evidence to the doing of history, they made references to the fact that historians have a role to play in the study of the past, particularly in their selection and interpretation of evidence. Participants made an initial note that not all past happenings are historical and that only important aspects of the past form part of history. For instance, Cosmos noted: “History is about important activities in the past. So if it did not have effects on the lives of the people, it is not termed as history.” This view is indicative of the agency of historians in the selection of events through their inferential judgment as to the worth of such events, which is only possible subjectively. Further, participants noted that the backgrounds, interests, and purposes of historians could inform their perspectives on what they study about the past. Barns used the foreign authorship of Ghana’s history as illustration:

When the Europeans began to write our history, there were some areas that they ignored because they thought it was not relevant to their objective. Most of these had to do with our culture. To them, if it is not what they do in their country, [then] it is primitive, it is backward and so it should not even be recorded.

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Further regarding the above, Rene indicated that focus on only what historians select as important for study has led to the marginalization of certain people and groups in the past. She noted:

I think that some people have been undermined because the emphasis is on those who occupied key positions or played key roles. For example, I cannot talk about the independence of Ghana without giving credit to Nkrumah. But what about the other people that worked with him? They [historians] do not really consider them.

This view reinforces the assertion that historians select and marshal facts in accordance with their purposes and interests and leave out aspects that do not fit within their scope. This is consistent with E. H. Carr's (1987) fishmonger's slab analogy, which suggests that history does not exist as a finished product but depends on historians' choices:

The facts are really not at all like fish on the fishmonger's slab. They are like fish swimming about in a vast and sometimes inaccessible ocean; and what the historian catches will depend, partly on chance, but mainly on what part of the ocean he chooses to fish in and what tackle he chooses to use - these two factors being, of course, determined by the kind of fish he wants to catch. (p. 23)

Historical interpretation is another form of agency that is exercised by historians. Results showed that the multiplicity of interpretations and distortions among accounts that are produced by historians blur objectivity. Albert, for instance, noted, "There seem to be some ambiguities or differences in some accounts that are written by different historians, and in some cases, a particular historian might sound contradictory in the presentation and interpretation of facts." Also, participants subscribed to the view that the circumstances and position of the historian could influence how they project the past. Thompson was succinct: "Imagination, political thought, religious affiliations, and the background that we come from have influence on how we construct history." This suggests that historians' personal and interpretative orientations are difficult to eliminate in their dialogue with the past and from what they construct about the past, and that this is a difficulty historians grapple with: "When doing research, we try to separate our personal feelings but that is not easy to achieve. History is research. So the writer will certainly be influenced by his [*sic*] personal feelings or perspective," Rene submitted. Seminal historical thinkers argue on the same line of thought and maintain that the social and historical environment of historians influences their selection and interpretation of evidence (Black & MacRaild, 2017; Carr, 1987; Collingwood, 1946; McCullagh, 2004; Walsh, 1992), even though

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Corresponding author: [gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au)

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Mandelbaum (1977) observes that historians make an independent appeal to evidence despite their personal experiences and perspectives. Gregory shared Mandelbaum's (1977) idea and noted that as far as evidence is overriding, interpretation is necessary in order to bring nuance and meaning to past events. Gregory highlighted the role of imagination in the reconstruction of the past:

Imagination should guide you to say what it is. ... A little bit of imagination will give a clearer picture... You need some facts to drive your imagination. So a historian has to be a little bit creative and imaginative to understand how a group of people lived and maybe can give a good account of it.

Gregory's response shows that evidence and the interpretive role of historians could play complementary roles to give a meaningful representation of the past. Yet, evidence is of primary significance and must form the basis of all interpretations. Findings indicate that the possible effects of historians' personal attributes on historical interpretations could obscure objectivity, though not render the narrative entirely relative. In connection with this, Bernard noted, "Though we are encouraged to be creative and imaginative... care must be taken that in process, we do not distort the objective nature history." Boniface added that is possible to achieve objectivity in history if one is committed to it: "If you aim at objectivity, and you have the facts, and you want to interpret the facts as it were, you can realize objective history."

In the face of the difficulty in arriving at a single interpretation of events, participants recognized that students need to be exposed to different historical accounts or rival perspectives about the past. Barns highlighted why this is necessary:

History is constructed. ... If you do not let them know the various accounts about a particular event and you let them look at one side [of it], they will conclude that it is the right information... That is why we have to let them understand the variations and different approaches historians use in presenting their work so [that]... they can draw their own conclusions.

Even though this response is instructive, lesson observations revealed that only three participants presented contrasting perspectives while the remaining participants focused on single narratives. For instance, in one of his lessons, Bernard accounted for how two accounts on the *Bond of 1844* differed in terms of how it led to the British control of Ghana or formally ushered in colonial rule. Bernard explained that one version argues that the Bond of 1844 marked the beginning of the British takeover of the country, while another account argues that the Bond

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Corresponding author: [gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au)

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did not contribute to colonial rule. He then encouraged students to share their views on the two perspectives. Unlike Bernard, some participants asked students to keep their interpretations of events for their personal use and rather narrowed their teaching to the contents of the curriculum and textbook. Of note is Rene's response: "I tell them not to take my interpretation nor theirs but they should take that of the syllabus because that is what they are going to be examined on." Further analysis showed that the reason for the focus on the curriculum was to meet accountability demands. Hence, the recognition for alternative interpretations and rival perspectives, though significant, lacked wide implementation in participants' classrooms.

### **Discussion**

Participants believed that there is a knowable past reality and that historical evidence is the route to accessing this reality. The idea of uncovering this past reality was complex, however, as participants, though widely empiricist in orientation, displayed elements of skepticism about the validity and durability of the representation of such reality. On the one hand, participants alluded to an objective history underpinned by standards by which *truths* about the past can be obtained. On the other hand, they acknowledged the personal influences of historians on the selection and interpretation of evidence. These views represent both a positivistic intent of capturing the wider truth and a postmodernist view that ideas and thoughts influence history (e.g., Black & MacRaild, 2017; Butterfield, 1931; Mandelbaum, 1977; McCullagh, 2004; Plumb, 1969; Windschuttle, 2000). However, the view that there exists a set of standards that guides historians' work does not accord with Walsh's (1992) argument that there are no agreed canons of interpretation and that impartial history is impossible.

The results show that unlike facts of the natural sciences, which lend themselves to certainty, the mutability of the inaccessible past and analysis over time make historical objectivity problematic. Participants acknowledged the provisional nature of evidence and recognized the need to crosscheck multiple evidence in order to establish its reliability. This is instructive due to the possible discovery of new evidence and counterfactuals or alternative versions of history. This result resonates with Carr (1987), who highlighted the possibility for historians to identify shortfalls in earlier constructions about the past on account of new evidence:

The historian who contests, say, the verdict of one of his predecessors will normally condemn it, not as absolutely false, but as inadequate or one-sided or misleading, or the product of a point of view which has been rendered obsolete or irrelevant by later evidence. (p. 120)

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Corresponding author: [gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au)

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To this end, Carr advances a view of history in which historians remain in an unending discourse with facts, a position that departs from the positivistic ideology that meaningful facts exist independent of the historian. Also, judging historical accounts as accurate portrayals of the past without considering the limitations of available evidence, according to McCullagh (2004), is naïve empiricism since the past cannot be described in its exactness on the basis of fragmentary evidence. Further, VanSledright and Reddy (2014) concluded that past objects cannot be trusted to tell their stories in an unmediated way. Nonetheless, participants' differing views on the centrality of evidence and the selective and interpretive agency of historians are representative of an approach to conceptualizing and understanding the past which Munslow (2003) describes as constructionism. According to Munslow (2003), constructionism offers a textualized access to the past through dialogue between historians and the past; by their conceptualization of evidence, historians exert some form of intervention on the *truths* they cast about the past. Participants' reference to the influence of historians' personal and interpretive attributes on past accounts is indicative of this intervention. The results also reflect the position of criterialist teachers who conceived of history as the product of the interaction between the historian and their object of inquiry (Maggioni et al., 2009; VanSledright et al., 2011; VanSledright & Reddy, 2014).

Principally, the results indicate that in the view of participants, it is possible to access the past reality on account of evidence and that the intervention of historians in interpreting the past is constructive rather than destructive in history. This result is significant because it suggests that in the view of participants, history is characterized by "soft" interpretive perspectives that are often based on available "hard" evidence. This further means that even though evidence is important, any approach to studying the past cannot be done in the void of interpretive attention. The foregoing result is consistent with the study of Voet and De Wever (2016), which found that while history is empirical, it is reflected through the interpretation and judgment of the historian. However, though revealing, the result does not appear to support the outcomes of other previous research. McCrum (2013), for instance, found that secondary teachers rejected the possibility of knowing the past reality and, hence, denied the likelihood of attaining objectivity in history.

Exposing students to multiple perspectives and alternative histories, as indicated by participants, is instructive. Nevertheless, exploration of rival interpretations in the classroom was evident in the lessons of only three participants. Even in these limited cases, there was not a clear analytic focus, and this concealed the contested nature of historical knowledge. Also, the use of the

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Corresponding author: [gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au)

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curriculum and textbooks as the final arbiter for rival interpretations appears to suggest that to some participants, the curriculum and textbooks were presenting an incontestable truth. This finds confirmation in Barns's response: "I think those [events] that are presented to us for us to teach the students are objective. ...The topics look at the accurate information." Perhaps, apart from accountability demands, the view that the content of the curriculum was accurate contributed to participants' narrative approach to teaching and to the limited extent to which students' interpretations were elicited in the classroom. This approach does not support the disputed nature of history. For instance, Ahonen (2017) observes that teaching history as "grand narratives are unsuitable as truths" (p. 58) since history is not forthrightly objective. Drawing on Habermas and personal experience in history teaching, Ahonen (2017) argues that rather than teaching history as grand narratives, the use of deliberative discussions could initiate an open-ended dialogue by which students can explore multiperspectivity.

It is admissible that even though history operates on a strong, inseparable reality-interpretation connection, there could be a fuzzy boundary between acceptable interpretation and excessive interpretation (VanSledright, 2002). Nevertheless, since historical facts do not speak for themselves (Carr, 1987), participating teachers generally observed that history is an interpretive discipline as much as analysis and the resultant interpretations are built around evidence to reflect a knowable past reality.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

This study explored history teachers' reasoning and practices about historical objectivity. Participants' reasoning reflected issues about the past reality, concerns about evidence, and the influences of historians in their study of the past. Analysis shows that participants' conceptions of historical objectivity were generally constructionist in nature as they were expressed in terms of the application of evidence-based historical methodologies in discovering, rediscovering, interpreting, and reinterpreting a knowable past reality over time. Hence, in participants' perspective, history is a form of knowledge that is amenable to change upon the discovery of new evidence and on account of the perspectives or circumstances of historians.

Teachers' knowledge and understanding of the discipline and its pedagogical representations are important considerations in history teaching. Participants largely demonstrated an understanding of the contested nature of historical objectivity. However, the broadly narrative approach to history teaching at the expense of the problematization of historical knowledge through the teaching of rival perspectives and interpretations suggests the need to consider

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Corresponding author: [gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au)

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effective ways of transforming disciplinary knowledge into meaningful structures for student engagement and understanding. Admittedly, recognition of the importance of multiple evidence could have encouraged participants to use more of it in the classroom, but only a few employed evidence in their teaching. Also, the acknowledgement of multiple interpretations indicates participants' awareness of its applicability to history teaching, but it lacked wide classroom application. These have ramifications for curriculum design, professional development, and teacher education.

The current Ghanaian senior high school history curriculum states that history teaching should enable students to develop the "skill of gathering and objectively analysing historical data" (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. ii) but does not present any further information or guidelines on how teachers can help students to develop such a skill. Again, apart from the general curricular objectives, the curriculum does not give much attention to the exploration of multiple and competing perspectives, and this might have contributed to the wide use of narrative approaches among participants. In light of this, the Ghanaian senior high school history curriculum needs a disciplinary re-orientation and an increased focus on a postmodern approach to school history. This is important since most participants implemented the curriculum as designed and hence limited all interpretations to the curriculum's specifications. Also, professional development has an important role in improving practice. Opportunities for regular professional development programs in relation to new developments and directions in history and its implications for teaching and learning will keep teachers updated and possibly encourage the implementation activities that are consistent with the constructed and disputed nature of history. As Ahonen (2017) suggests, deliberative classroom discussions through the exposure and exchange of conflicting stories, discussion and assessment of evidence, and recognition of conflicting aspects of the stories could help resolve the lure of grand narratives. Further, the training of more specialist history teachers will bring innovation and disciplinary focus to the classroom and improve students' sense of agency in the creation of historical knowledge. Moreover, teacher education curricula should put more emphasis on the problematic issues in history to equip future teachers with the requisite knowledge base and skills to implement domain-specific pedagogies. Understanding teachers' conceptions of historical objectivity and improving their practices are important steps to resolving many challenges in history education since the problem of objectivity is fundamental to many of the epistemic tensions in history.

While this study is illuminating, it is not without limitations. The study relies mainly on teachers' self-reports of their conceptions through interviews, albeit with supporting insights from lesson

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Corresponding author: [gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au)

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observations. It was likely that participating teachers could not articulate their conceptions in the most expressive manner and this could have yielded partial knowledge (Heyl, 2001). Also, prolonged observational contact with each participant could have yielded additional evidence about the everyday classroom culture of teaching to inform the findings and conclusion. Further, a longitudinal study could likely reveal if teachers' conceptions are subject to change over time and the reasons for such change. Again, the study could have generated extensive data from which to generalize claims if it had been conducted in more than one region in Ghana. Nonetheless, the results of this study contribute to an underexplored area in history education in Ghana, and are important to the development of students' historical competencies, relevant to teacher education, curriculum development, and the on-going international debates on historical objectivity.

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Corresponding author: [gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au)

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Corresponding author: [gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au)

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Corresponding author: [gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au)

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Corresponding author: [gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au)

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Corresponding author: [gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au)

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Corresponding author: [gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au)

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**About the Author:**

**Gideon Boadu** is a PhD candidate at the School of Education, University of Newcastle, Australia. His research interests include historical studies and curricular and instructional issues. His current research focuses on History teachers' disciplinary and pedagogical reasoning and the empirics of classroom pedagogy in Ghana.

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Corresponding author: [gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:gideon.boadu@newcastle.edu.au)

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