



Research article

Narrations of (in)significant pasts in young people's identity construction

Tanja Taivalantti^{1,*}, Johanna Norppa¹, Alekski Marti¹

¹ University of Helsinki, Finland; johanna.norppa@helsinki.fi (J.N.); aleksi.marti@helsinki.fi (A.M.)

* Correspondence: tanja.taivalantti@helsinki.fi

Submission date: 30 October 2021; Acceptance date: 13 September 2022; Publication date: 30 September 2022

How to cite

Taivalantti, T., Norppa, J. and Marti, A. (2022) 'Narrations of (in)significant pasts in young people's identity construction'. *History Education Research Journal*, 19 (1), 9.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/HERJ.19.1.09>.

Peer review

This article has been peer-reviewed through the journal's standard double-anonymous peer review, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

Copyright

2022, Tanja Taivalantti, Johanna Norppa and Alekski Marti. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence (CC BY) 4.0

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original authors and source are credited •

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/HERJ.19.1.09>.

Open access

History Education Research Journal is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

Abstract

This article presents a study that examined the historical social narratives of 14–17-year-old Finnish-speaking adolescents in Finland and transnational settings. Our goal was to research what kinds of narratives young people would tell when they were asked to write the history of a group or nationality most suitable for them. The research material was collected as part of data collection in 2020 from three cities: a small Finnish town, a medium-sized city in Finland and a large European city outside Finland. We analysed whether young people chose to write national, sub-national or supra-national historical social narratives. Place-based differences in results were apparent, and we analysed these differences using the concept of spatial socialisation. We also discuss the challenges that history education faces in the light of our findings.

Keywords historical narratives; young people; Finland; European School; history education; historical identity

Introduction

Identity is the theme that underlines many political phenomena today, from new populist nationalist movements, to Islamist fighters, to controversies taking place on university campuses. We will not escape from thinking about ourselves and our society in identity terms. But we need to remember that the identities dwelling deep inside us are neither fixed nor necessarily given to us by our accidents of birth. Identity can be used to divide, but it can and has also been used to integrate. (Fukuyama, 2018: 128–9)

In his book, Francis Fukuyama argues that demands of identity define world politics today. Inspired by Donald Trump's rise to power, Fukuyama (2018) tackles a difficult and broad concept of identity and its history. While identity issues are relevant to history education for many reasons, two of those have particularly influenced our research.

First, the origins of history education are closely connected to the construction of nation states during the nineteenth century, and history education has been used to legitimise power structures. In many countries, the idea of strengthening adolescents' national identity has been the starting point for history education, which has thus mediated the national master narrative (see, for example, Carretero et al., 2012). This is changing, and in several Western democratic societies today's goals of history education are more related to historical skills and historical thinking than to the content of national narrative (Seixas, 2000; Wineburg, 2018).

Second, other processes in societies, such as globalisation, migration and use of the internet, are challenging the national narratives in history education. Changes have also occurred in the field of historical culture, where the mediating channels have diversified within two generations. Forms of historical culture, such as national holidays, historical statues and monuments, or schools, are no longer as dominant in the world of young people as they used to be (Rantala, 2011a; Stuurman and Grever, 2007; De Groot, 2009; Kortti, 2021; Rantala, 2018). Still, schools, and especially history education, play a role in how different narratives and growing cultural diversity in societies will be perceived in the future. The provision of historical narratives that suit everyone's identities is a demanding challenge to history education. If this is not achieved, young people might construct their own historical social narratives based on other sources, such as family history or history culture (Barton and McCully, 2005; Epstein, 2009; Seixas, 1993). There is a risk that history education fails to increase adolescents' understanding of society and, rather, alienates them from it. It is therefore important to examine how young people construct their historical social narratives.

In Finland, national identity has continued to be an integral part of young people's attitudes. For example, the survey *Youth and History*, carried out in the 1990s, demonstrated the importance of the nation state in Finnish adolescents' responses (Ahonen, 1997). In the ICCS (International Civic and Citizenship Education Study) studies in 2009 and 2016, the majority of young Finns felt that they were primarily Finnish and secondarily European citizens. The attitudes of Finnish young people with regard to their own country were also more favourable than the average (Mehtäläinen et al., 2017: 8–9; Suoninen et al., 2010: 123, 128). Historically, Finnish national identity has been marked by a desire to stand out from Russia and to emphasise connections with Western nations (Marti et al., 2020). Several studies suggest that Finnish history education and its relationship with the national narrative is traditional (Ahonen, 1998; Van den Berg, 2007, 2012; Löfström, 2014; Rantala, 2015).

Taking into account the above-mentioned issues and attitudes of Finnish young people, in spring 2020 we conducted a study of the historical narratives and identities of Finnish-speaking young people. We visited three schools and asked the young people to fill in a questionnaire and provide an extended written response. From every school, one class – around twenty adolescents – participated. The participating schools represent different types of Finnish-speaking communities: two Finnish comprehensive schools, one in a small Finnish town and the other in a medium-sized city in Finland; and one European School in a large European city outside Finland. We wanted to explore how the different contexts of schools would affect the results.

Our research was conducted at the time when the COVID-19 pandemic caused various measures in societies. We carried out the writing assignments in the last weeks before the schools participating in the study were closed. In the historical social narratives of young people, the COVID-19 pandemic did not come up significantly. Yet it is possible that the ongoing public debate and, for example, measures to close borders framed the minds of the young people when they wrote their answers.

The ongoing historical narrative construction process of adolescents includes different elements, such as citizenship, nationality, transgenerational elements, history education and popular history (Grever et al., 2008; Lévesque and Croteau, 2020). In this context, we focus on the perspective of nationality and the spatial dimension, as history education is most often organised in the framework of the nation state.

Conceptual framework

Historical narratives are central to our ability to make sense of the past and orient ourselves in the course of time. The narrative form is one of the most prominent ways to build understanding of the world, including the society in which we live (Lévesque, 2017; Van Nieuwenhuysse and Wils, 2015; Rüsen, 2017). The representation produced by a historical narrative does not simply reproduce the events, but also gives them quality of meaning. The meaning is not simply assigned to them. Instead, it develops out of a complex and dynamic context of meaning already present and of meaning yet to come. The historical narrative changes the event into a carrier of meaning (Lévesque, 2017; Rüsen, 2017). One of the goals of history education is to practise historical thinking skills, which include narrative competence in respect to the presentation of the past and its experience. Collectively, significant experiences and expectations are articulated also in narrative constructions (Rüsen, 2017; Straub, 2005).

People's understanding of the past shapes their identities (Ahonen, 2012; Dawes Duraisingh, 2017; Kitson et al., 2011). Historical social narratives are a natural way for human beings to negotiate their belonging to a social group (Rüsen, 2017). Historical narratives, both personal and social, serve as identity resources (Wertsch, 2002). In this article, we focus on the historical social narratives that young people construct. The shared memories and historical narratives strengthen the cohesion of the group, as the experience of shared past is empowering. Yet they also create differences and draw boundaries between social groups (Ahonen, 2012; Lorenz, 2004). Here, we understand historical social narratives as meaningful narratives about the collective past of certain groups. We also see them as part of a person's historical identity, as it reflects how people define and see themselves.

Recent studies have explored the relationship between young people's historical narratives and national history. Their findings provide an important insight into how history and identity work in schools and other cultural settings. History education and identity are linked, but it is difficult to prove unambiguously whether history education in schools modifies the identity of young people or whether their identity plays a powerful role in shaping the way they interact with the past (Barton, 2012; Carretero et al., 2012; Epstein, 2009; Van Havere et al., 2017; Huber and Kitson, 2020; Kim, 2018; Lévesque and Croteau, 2020; Peck, 2010; Wasserman, 2018). This leaves open how history education should approach national narratives.

Anssi Paasi (1996, 2016) writes that the concept of spatial socialisation describes the process through which actors become members of territorial entities and internalise narratives and memories related to collective identities and shared traditions. The idea of nationalism is embedded in the concept of spatial socialisation; for example, Chloe Wells (2020) and Kirsi Pauliina Kallio (2014) have used the concept of spatial socialisation to analyse adolescents' historical narratives and the process of political becoming.

Chris Lorenz (2004) suggests that the dimensions of space and time can be taken as the most general markers of historiography. He uses historiography of the nation state as a point of spatial reference in his classification. According to him, spatial dimensions can in theory be differentiated at sub-national, national and supra-national levels. However, he identifies at least three kinds of problems with applying this scheme: the ideological load of various spatial concepts; the double meaning of some spatial concepts; and the essentially contested nature of some spatial concepts, such as the nation in particular.

We use these three spatial dimensions in our analysis together with the concept of spatial socialisation to reflect on young people's sense of belonging to geographical entities, such as home town, nation state and continent. The main part of this article consists of a comparison of the analysis of spatial socialisations of young people and their historical social narratives.

Research questions

One of the challenges of history education is how knowledge of history is structured, which frameworks are used, and what kinds of narratives are built. This article contributes to this discussion (see, for

example, Barton, 2012; Epstein, 2009; Huber and Kitson, 2020; Lévesque and Croteau, 2020; Peck, 2010) by displaying young people's views on historical narratives against their different backgrounds.

The main research question of this study is:

- What kinds of historical social narratives do young people construct?

Additional questions explored in this work are:

- Does their place of residence reflect their historical social narratives?
- How do processes of spatial socialisations manifest in the historical social narratives?

We analyse the results from the point of view of whether the young people attending the three schools chose to write sub-national, national or supra-national historical social narratives, and present related examples. This is important, as history education is most often organised in the framework of a nation state and therefore assumes at some level that young people with the same place of residence consider the same national historical social narrative to be relevant to them. The study assesses whether this is the case and, if not, what kinds of narratives young people see as meaningful to them.

Setting and context

The current Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (NCC) sets out that history teaching should promote the development of a sense of students' identity. The NCC in the 1990s still guided the teaching of Finnish history to strengthen students' national identity, but the concepts 'national identity' and 'Finnish identity' no longer appear in the 2004 NCC. Since then, the goal of history teaching has been to 'support the students in building their personal cultural identity' (National Board of Education, 2014: 297–9; Rantala and Ouakrim-Soivio, 2019).

Similarly, the current history syllabus of the European School aims to develop students' individual identity, more specifically that students develop an awareness of their own historical identity through the study of the historical experiences of different cultures (Schola Europaea, 2016: S4–S5).

Data and methodology

A total of 61 young people participated in the empirical part of the study, which was done in three different schools in spring 2020. One class from each school participated in the study, and teachers of the schools selected the classes. Table 1 summarises data about the participating young people and schools. Young people who attend School 3 live outside Finland but have connections to Finnish culture in many different ways, and at least one of their parents is Finnish.

In order to gain knowledge of the participants' historical social narratives, places of residence and spatial socialisation, we asked them to fill in a questionnaire and to do a writing assignment (see Table 2). We designed the questionnaire taking into account previous studies and comments on their methodologies (Van Alphen and Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2019; Peck, 2018). We avoided categorising young people from top down, and instead asked them to define their nationality and sense of belonging in their own words, and to choose, from 13 options, 1 to 6 groups that they perceived as relevant to themselves. These options were similar to the Finnish 2018 Youth Barometer (Myllyniemi and Kiilakoski, 2019). This did not have an expatriate Finn option, which we added because it was important to our participants living outside Finland.

In addition, we asked for other background information, such as the gender of the young people and the profession of their parents, in order to assess the possible influence of gender or socio-economic status on the answers of the young people. While such a perspective has been used to analyse results in previous studies, these elements did not come across as meaningful factors in this study. We also felt that omitting such background information was important to protect the anonymity of the young people. It is also worth noting that we first asked the young people to fill in a questionnaire where they defined their nationality, and immediately after that we gave them a writing task. This sequence of tasks may have influenced the results of the study.

Table 1. Young people and schools which participated in the study (Source: Authors, 2022)

	School 1	School 2	School 3
Number of young people	22	19	20
Boys	10	12	9
Girls	12	7	11
Age	15–16	15–16	14–17
Geographical location	Pirkanmaa region, in Finland	Central Finland region, in Finland	Country outside Finland, in Europe
Description of the location	Town of fewer than 25,000 inhabitants	City of more than 100,000 inhabitants	City of around 1 million inhabitants
School type	Finnish comprehensive school	Finnish comprehensive school	European School
Class	9th grade	9th grade	Secondary 5th in the Finnish language section
The study was conducted	In social science lessons	In social science lessons	In Finnish and science lessons
Curriculum/syllabus	Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education	Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education	Schola Europaea, History Syllabus – S4–S5
Combinations of letters used in quotations in this article	PM	KS	EK

We formulated the written assignment in this way to obtain information on possible non-national narratives. The length and depth of writings of narratives varied significantly. Not all answers met the characteristics of a narrative, and some had many factual errors, but they still reflected the adolescents' historical thinking. Despite the weaknesses, the writings had an interesting parallel in terms of narrative patterns and frameworks. The research results could also be influenced, especially in the context of the European School, by the fact that the researcher was Finnish and the research was conducted in Finnish. The authors of this article have translated excerpts of the responses into English and adapted them to ensure the anonymity of the young people, for example, by removing in some cases names of countries or cities and other identifiable elements. In the questionnaire and writing assignments, the word 'nationality' was mentioned several times, and this may have influenced the results. As Van Havere et al. (2017) have suggested, the research methodology might have a considerable impact on qualitative research into young people's historical narratives.

We next present a quantitative analysis of the results in terms of a comparison and/or correspondence between the historical social narratives written by the young people with their place of residence and spatial socialisation. Then we provide a qualitative analysis of the written historical social narratives. In both cases, we use spatial dimensions as a starting point, and analyse the responses to determine whether young people chose to write their historical social narratives at the sub-national (regional narratives related to villages, cities or other regional entities), national (clearly linked to one or several nation state narratives) or supra-national (transnational narratives, such as European or global, which do not have national elements) level.

Table 2. Questionnaire and writing assignment used in the study (Source: Authors, 2022)

Questionnaire to gain background information
1. Name
2. Gender
3. Age
4. School
5. What are your parents' occupations?
6. Have you always lived in Finland?
7. If you have lived somewhere else, then where and for how long?
8. What language or languages do you speak at home with your parents and siblings?
9. What language or languages do you speak with your friends?
10. Do you have a passport?
11. Which country/countries do you have a passport for?
12. Define your own nationality as you experience it.
13. Do you feel that nationality is an important thing for you. Why?
14. Do you feel yourself . . . (select 1–6 valuable options for you)
Finnish
Nordic
As a resident of home community
European
Foreigner
As a resident of your village or neighbourhood
World citizen
Multicultural
As a resident of your province
Expatriate Finn
Migrant
Immigrant
None of the above
Writing assignment
Earlier in the questionnaire, you defined your nationality and in another task you selected the groups you felt you belonged to. Now please write the history of the most important group or nationality as you see it. Be prepared to tell us more about what you wrote.

Spatial socialisation and historical social narratives – quantitative analyses

As Table 3 sets out, the young people in Schools 1 and 2 in Finland often chose the sub-national options in terms of sense of belonging. They felt more connected to their home community than the Finnish-speaking young people living in the European city, who chose sub-national options more rarely. In all schools, the national option 'Finnish' was chosen the most. Of the supra-national alternatives, 'European' was the most popular alternative. In School 1, the young people did not select as many supra-national options as in the other schools. Especially in School 3, young people selected different supra-national options in a diversified manner. However, they did not feel themselves to be immigrants or migrants, but preferred the options 'multicultural', 'foreigner' and 'expatriate Finn'.

Table 3. Finnish-speaking young people's experience of belonging (Source: Authors, 2022)

Do you feel yourself	School 1 in Finland (22 participants)	School 2 in Finland (19 participants)	School 3 in large European city (20 participants)	Total
Sub-national				
As a resident of home community	15	14	2	31
As a resident of your village or neighbourhood	13	3	3	19
As a resident of your province	7	3	0	10
National				
Finnish	17	18	18	53
Supra-national				
European	8	14	15	37
Nordic	6	11	5	22
Multicultural	1	0	11	12
World citizen	2	4	4	10
Expatriate Finn	0	0	8	8
Foreigner	0	0	7	7
Migrant	0	0	0	0
Immigrant	0	0	0	0
None of the above	0	0	0	0

Note: All participants were asked if they felt that they belonged to the 13 options above; 3 options suggest sub-national level, 1 proposes a national option, and 6 are connected to the supra-national level. Respondents were asked to choose 1–6 valuable ones for them.

In total, 10 (16 per cent) respondents of the 61 participating young people were not able to complete the responses, as they were partially absent or considered the study too difficult or insignificant (see Table 4). Out of the 51 responses, 40 presented a national narrative (78 per cent), including combination narratives of two different nation states. All in all, the Finnish national narrative was the most natural starting point for these young people to construct their historical social narratives. Sub-national narratives were rare: only 3 young people (6 per cent) wrote the narrative of their home town or neighbourhood. Supra-national narratives were written by 8 young people (16 per cent). Most popular was a combination of European and Finnish narratives.

Although young people in Schools 1 and 2 show signs of local spatial socialisation, this does not reflect their historical social narratives, as only three young people wrote historical narratives of their home town. Also, when young people were asked to define themselves, they often did it in relation to the national level, and not to the sub-national level. This supports the notion that young people primarily perceive national narratives as their historical social narratives.

All young people show signs of national spatial socialisation, and this is clear in their historical social narratives. In Schools 1 and 2, most of them wrote historical Finnish narratives. These young people define themselves as Finnish, and in many cases they wrote in the questionnaire the short statement: 'I am Finnish'. The question of nationality was easy for them, and it did not require contemplation. Another definition of a young person's nationality explains the reasons: 'I feel completely Finnish, because I have lived in Finland all my life. Everyone in my family is Finnish and lives in Finland, so I feel strongly Finnish' (KS6). The results suggest that young people who live in Finland have strong national spatial socialisation.

Table 4. Historical social narratives written by young people (Source: Authors, 2022)

Historical social narratives	School 1 in Finland	School 2 in Finland	School 3 in large European city	Total
Narrative of your neighbourhood		1		1
Finnish + narrative of your home town		1	1	2
Sub-national narratives total		2	1	3
Finnish narrative	18	16	4	38
Finnish + other national			2	2
National narratives total	18	16	6	40
European narratives	1			1
Finnish + European			5	5
Narratives not connected to any entity			2	2
Supra-national narrative total	1		7	8
Not significant			2	2
Writing task was too difficult	1	1		2
Absent	2		4	6
Total	22	19	20	61

Four young people attending School 3 and living outside Finland wrote a traditional historical Finnish narrative, and in their definitions also reflected strong national spatial socialisation. It is noteworthy that their spatial socialisation is not to their country of residence, but instead to the origin country of their parents (Finland). Other young people in School 3 wrote supra-national historical social narratives more often than those in the schools in Finland, and they reflect a more flexible national spatial socialisation. They are not strongly connected to one or two geographical or national entities. When they are asked to describe their nationality, they combine different options that they have in their lives. For example, a young girl defined her nationality as follows:

This question is difficult for me. I do not consider myself a citizen of any country. I'm half Finnish and half English, but I was born in Belgium. I feel quite an outsider when I'm in Finland to see my family. It is similar in England. Belgium is my home, but I am not Belgian either. If you ask me where I come from, I say from Belgium, and if you ask me what my nationality is I say Finnish and English. But I can't choose just one. (EK1)

Also, other texts written by young people living outside Finland show how young people can use different strategies to describe their nationality in different situations. One adolescent wrote:

Usually I define myself as half Finnish and half Israeli. I will go deeper and say that my grandfather, for example, is Dutch if anyone is interested. If I don't bother to explain anything to someone when someone asks about my citizenship I say I'm Belgian. (EK3)

The descriptions indicate that young people can have several nationalities in their lives, and can describe themselves differently in various situations. Young people living outside Finland had more diverse definitions of nationality and sense of belonging, which comes across in their narratives.

The results suggest that young people living in one country can have a national spatial socialisation to nations other than their place of residence, or a flexible spatial socialisation. This should be taken into account in history education, as more and more classrooms in Finland and other countries have children who have, or whose families have, experience of migration.

Qualitative analysis of historical social narratives

Sub-national narratives

Sub-national narratives were rare in our study, and only three young people wrote them. One young person from a medium-sized city in Finland wrote a descriptive narrative of his neighbourhood which did not have historical elements, but which mentioned characteristics that make it special:

I live in a neighbourhood with a lot of houses and mostly elderly people, but there are children as well. There are a lot of houses designed by Alvar Aalto and . . . fields, hills, and beaches . . . There are nice people living there and there is a good team spirit. (KS3)

Another adolescent from the same city explained why she wrote a national narrative even though she also experienced a sense of belonging for her home town:

I feel stronger that I am Finnish or a resident of my own city, but I do not know the history of my own city. Thinking about the Finnish history makes me proud that we are independent. Pride, on the other hand, evokes strong feelings of patriotism. (KS17)

National narratives

In this study, we found two types of national historical narratives – the traditional national Finnish narrative and narratives which combined two different national narratives. The adolescents' historical national narratives followed largely the traditional national Finnish narrative, with the same historical events mentioned in the responses. One young person living in Finland wrote:

Finland has first been part of Sweden. Russia won the Finnish War, when Finland came under Russian rule. Before independence, Finland had an autonomous administration, but it would still be owned by Russia. In 1917, Finland became independent. After that, there was a Civil War in Finland, when the Finnish people were divided into Reds and Whites. After 10–15 years, a Winter War broke out, which reunited the nation. The Winter War lasted less than a year. After that, there was a short peace time and then the Continuation War. The Continuation War lasted for more than three years, and after that, Finland lost land to Russia. Finland paid off the war reparations in 1952. Then things started to go better, but the 1990s came with a recession. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the euro came to Finland when Finland joined the EU. (PM6)

This response represents a typical Finnish narrative, which most young people wrote. It is a snapshot of Finnish history, which is constructed around significant historical events. Another adolescent summarised the Finnish narrative in an effective manner:

I don't know the order of everything, but Finland was under Sweden and under Russia. Finland has been under ice. Finland was at some point in the Winter War and the Continuation War, for example. Finland lost Karelia and other areas from the north in the war. Finland became independent in 1917. Now everything is fine. (PM5)

As the adolescent herself remarked, she did not get the chronological order correct, but she still wrote what she thought was essential.

According to earlier research, in the Finnish context, significant political events such as independence, the Winter War (1939–40) and the Continuation War (1941–4) against the Soviet Union have been key elements in the historical identity of young people (Ahonen, 1998; Van den Berg, 2012; Hakkari, 2005; Rantala, 2011b). Sirkka Ahonen (2020) has studied myths of Finnish history, and has noticed that the typical structure of the Finnish narrative does not support global historical awareness. For example, the Second World War is often presented in the Finnish context as two separate Finnish–Russian wars, which are called the Winter War (1939–40) and the Continuation War (1941–4). They appear as a Finnish phenomenon, although they were side episodes of broad all-European developments. Ahonen (2020) suggests that the national frame of the past can block a global view of human affairs, which can affect the fact that students do not perceive that different things are related to each other, but see Finland as a separate entity.

As previously mentioned, flexible spatial socialisation of adolescents comes across in their historical social narratives. We suggest that, in the same way as they used various strategies to describe their nationality, they also used various strategies to construct their historical social narratives. One strategy they used was to combine two different national narratives. One girl wrote the following historical social narrative:

I feel multicultural as my parents come from different continents. . . . They are such different countries, but I'm glad that I come from both of them. I know quite a lot more about the history of one country than the other . . . There was a war of independence. Then in the last century we had a dictator . . . Now we have democracy . . . Finland was part of Sweden and then Russia. And then we had a war against them (Second World War) and we won. (EK6)

Young people construct their historical social narratives based on many different elements, where the origin of parents is important in light of this study. Young people feel loyal to their parents' background, to which the parents also, consciously or unconsciously, socialise them. Young people, particularly those living outside Finland, negotiate their historical social narratives using different elements provided by parents, place of residence and school. But the same need to negotiate is also present in Finnish classrooms, and we cannot assume that all young people have the same background.

Young people constructed narratives which are a combination of narratives of two nations when one of the parents was from outside Europe. One adolescent felt that the European narrative was not a good option, as it did not cover her family background. Interestingly, two young people in School 1 and living in Finland had parents who came from different countries. They wrote Finnish narratives, although they defined themselves as half Finnish. They had different approaches to constructing their historical social narratives from young people living outside Finland.

Supra-national narratives

In this study, we detected two types of supra-national historical narratives – European, and narratives which were not connected to any geographical, national or institutional entity. Eight young people (only one of whom lived in Finland) wrote supra-national narratives.

The young people combined Finnish and European narratives, such as this girl living in a European city:

As far as I know, the Kalevala is important in Finnish history. But I remember little of Finland's history. Also important was the Finnish Civil War, which had Reds and Whites, but again, I do not remember what happened. Aleksis Kivi is an important person in Finnish history and a day has been named for him. From the history of Europe I know the French Revolution. The French were not proud of their king and they wanted things to change for the better in France. One of the saddest and most enduring events was when Adolf Hitler wanted to kill and eventually killed millions of Jews. Jews were taken to the concentration camp. (EK15)

Previous studies indicate that European identity is not dominant, but a good complementary option (Sassatelli, 2009; Spohn and Eder, 2005). Also, the Finnish 2018 Youth Barometer considered that European and national identities do not compete with each other, and that experiences of 'Finnishness' and 'Europeanness' are strongly connected (Myllyniemi and Kiilakoski, 2019).

Against this background, we suggest that the European narrative is one way for young people to combine different countries and cultures in their lives. In this study in particular, young people's responses were influenced by the fact that they attended the European School. Presumably, it provides young people with elements to construct their European identity. The European narrative suits young people both of whose parents are from European countries. This study suggests that young people with at least one parent from outside Europe do not see Europeanness as a viable option for them, even if they attend the European School.

The processes of building historical narratives are unique, and therefore generalisations must be made with caution. For instance, one girl from School 1 wrote a European narrative, although all other young people living in Finland wrote national or local historical social narratives:

The most important group to which I belong is Europeans. The history of Europe is magnificent, ambitious and at times drastic. People gradually inhabited Europe and the first

civilisations were born. Things have evolved from it gradually and sometimes there has been a setback due to wars, inflation and deflation. I see European history as quite positive if World Wars are not taken into account. (PM9)

In addition to the European narrative, this study detected two supra-national narratives, which two young people from outside Finland wrote, which were not connected to any geographical, national or institutional entity. The first adolescent defined herself as an expatriate Finn:

I think this is difficult, but I decided to talk about expat Finns, as it is one of the groups I encircled. I think you can be Finnish though you do not live in Finland or have never gone to a Finnish school. I am an expat Finn. My mother has told me about my ancestors, who travelled to America and stayed there and raised families. I think they are expat Finns. Such cases also occur in other families. (EK1)

The second adolescent took the multicultural perspective in her historical social narrative, and reflected on the history of multicultural people:

It is difficult to tell the history of multicultural people, but I try. I would say at first people with different nationalities got married to unite kingdoms and form alliances. People from opposite sides could fall in love or they are forced into marriage during the long wars. When the kingdoms conquered others like Europeans did in America multicultural relationships could emerge. Today people marry for love and different countries are more multicultural. Multicultural marriages are more acceptable. If World War II had not taken place, my grandfather would not have moved to Israel (which otherwise would not have existed), my grandparents would not have met and my father would not have been born. (EK3)

Based on this and previous research, teaching history of migration can have a lot to offer when it comes to developing history education. Terry Haydn (2020) writes that migration is a significant but difficult topic in history education. Migration has also become an important aspect of social policies in many countries in recent years. It is important to make connections across time, and up to the present, when exploring the issue of migration. According to Markus Furrer (2020: 89), 'without a historical understanding of migration, society itself cannot be understood'.

Conclusions and discussions

Strong national spatial socialisation nurtures the use of a national framework in young people's historical social narratives. The Finnish national narratives written by Finnish young people were traditional, containing significant political elements and not generally supporting global historical awareness. In this sense, these narratives were different from adolescents' historical social narratives in other countries, such as Canada, where several historical social narratives exist (Lévesque, 2017; Lévesque and Croteau, 2020), and Belgium, where they are less national and more transnational (Van Havere et al., 2017; Van Nieuwenhuysse and Wils, 2015). It would be interesting to see more research into what kinds of historical social narratives could be found in Finland among people from different backgrounds, such as Sámi Indigenous people, Swedish-speaking people and Russian-speaking people.

Based on our study, we consider that young people's place of residence, language, origin of parents and the school they attend influence the construction of their historical narratives. These factors enabled the formation of a national narrative, especially for young people with strong national spatial socialisation. Indefinite spatial socialisation, however, creates the need for young people to negotiate various strategies to construct their historical social narratives. Our study suggests that the starting point of negotiations is that young people could identify themselves with a group or groups whose historical narrative they seek to tell. For example, if the parents of a young person were from European Union countries, they could write European historical social narratives. This strategy did not seem possible for young people whose parents came from outside the EU.

History education based on one national narrative might exclude young people with indefinite spatial socialisation. In addition, reinforcement of the national narrative for young people with a strong spatial socialisation might narrow their global historical awareness and offer them an oversimplified national historical social narrative. So, we should consider what kind of history education we need today,

especially as the current Finnish NCC sets out that the goal of history teaching is to support students in building their personal cultural identity (Ahonen, 2020; Rantala and Ouakrim-Soivio, 2019).

History education can challenge young people to think about historical narratives, and their construction and purpose (Van Havere et al., 2017; Lévesque, 2017; Shemilt, 2000). It is important to recognise that the formation of historical social narratives is a political matter, which is laden with power claims and represents a constant state (Rüsen, 2017). Therefore, history educators should be aware of the existing national narratives. Strategies should be developed to deconstruct existing narratives and to teach young people to process historical social narratives in a critical manner. History education could deconstruct the idea of a fixed monolithic national identity and historical narrative. It is important to recognise that there have always been minorities, migration and connections between countries, which causes diversity. History education can help young people understand global and societal issues better. It also offers the possibility for young people with a flexible spatial socialisation to find points of reference in history education and to understand their own backgrounds (Ahvenainen, 2016; Van Havere et al., 2017; Huber and Kitson, 2020; Peck, 2010). Understanding the nature of historical social narratives helps young people to think about the process of formation of narratives and to create their own narratives, instead of confining themselves to existing ones.

Coming back to Francis Fukuyama's (2018) words about the importance of identity politics in societies around the world, in the current political climate young people would benefit from a critical dialogue in classrooms about different historical social narratives. It would empower them to recognise and deconstruct historical social narratives about the national past (Van Havere et al., 2017; Huber and Kitson, 2020; Löfström, 2014; Rantala and Van den Berg, 2015), and to construct their own ones. This could develop students' narrative competence, which will be a much-needed skill in the future, and give them space to contemplate their own process of constructing their historical social narratives.

Funding

This work was supported part by the Kone Foundation (Grant 202010003).

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The authors conducted the research reported in this article in accordance with the ethical guidelines stated by the Ethical Review Board in the Humanities and Social and Behavioural Sciences at the University of Helsinki.

Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

References

- Ahonen, S. (1997) 'Historical consciousness of Finnish adolescents'. In M. Angvik and B. von Borries (eds), *Youth and History: A comparative European survey on historical consciousness and political attitudes among adolescents*. Vols A and B. Hamburg: Körber-Stiftung, A257–61.
- Ahonen, S. (1998) *Historiaton sukupolvi? Historian vastaanotto ja historiallisen identiteetin rakentuminen 1990-luvun nuorison keskuudessa* [The no-history generation? The reception of history and the

- construction of historical identity by young people in the 1990s]. Helsinki: Suomen historiallinen seura.
- Ahonen, S. (2012) *Coming to Terms with a Dark Past: How post-conflict societies deal with history*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Ahonen, S. (2020) 'The construction and deconstruction of national myths. A study of the transformation of Finnish history textbook narratives after World War II'. *European Politics and Society*, 21 (3), 341–55. [CrossRef]
- Ahvenainen, T. (2016) 'Afrikka kansallisessa katseessa: Afrikkalaisperäiset vähemmistöt, lukion oppikirjat ja kulttuurinen tieto Suomessa' [Africa in the national gaze: African minorities, high school textbooks and cultural knowledge in Finland]. Master's dissertation, University of Tampere.
- Barton, K.C. (2012) 'School history as a resource for constructing identities: Implications of research from the United States, Northern Ireland, and New Zealand'. In M. Carretero, M. Asensio and M. Rodríguez-Moneo (eds), *History Education and the Construction of National Identities*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 93–107.
- Barton, K.C. and McCully, A.W. (2005) 'History, identity, and the school curriculum in Northern Ireland: An empirical study of secondary students' ideas and perspectives'. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 37 (1), 85–116. Accessed 20 September 2022. http://pdfserve.informaworld.com/98529_731225290_714029596.pdf. [CrossRef]
- Carretero, M., Asensio, M. and Rodríguez-Moneo, M. (eds) (2012) *History Education and the Construction of National Identities*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Dawes Duraisingh, E. (2017) 'Making narrative connections? Exploring how late teens relate their own lives to the historically significant past'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (2), 174–93. [CrossRef]
- De Groot, J. (2009) *Consuming History: Historians and heritage in contemporary popular culture*. London: Routledge.
- Epstein, T. (2009) *Interpreting National History: Race, identity, and pedagogy in classrooms and communities*. New York: Routledge.
- Fukuyama, F. (2018) *Identity: Contemporary identity politics and the struggle for recognition*. London: Profile Books.
- Furrer, M. (2020) 'Migration: "A difficult topic in history lessons?"'. *International Journal of Research on History Didactics, History Education, and History Culture*, 41, 77–91.
- Grever, M., Haydn, T. and Ribbens, K. (2008) 'Identity and school history: The perspective of young people from the Netherlands and England'. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 56 (1), 76–94. [CrossRef]
- Hakkari, J. (2005) 'Suomalaisten nuorten historiakulttuuri: Historian kohtaaminen ja käyttö 8-luokkalaisten nuorten arkipäivän elämässä' [The history culture of Finnish youth: The reception and use of history in the everyday lives of eighth graders]. Master's dissertation. University of Helsinki, Department of History.
- Haydn, T. (2020) 'Telling the truth about migration: A view from England'. *International Journal of Research on History Didactics, History Education, and History Culture*, 41, 13–37. Accessed 20 September 2022. https://research-portal.uea.ac.uk/files/195248752/Accepted_Manuscript.pdf.
- Huber, J. and Kitson, A. (2020) 'An exploration of the role of ethnic identity in students' construction of "British stories"'. *Curriculum Journal*, 31 (3), 454–78. [CrossRef]
- Kallio, K. (2014) 'Rethinking spatial socialisation as a dynamic and relational process of political becoming'. *Global Studies of Childhood*, 4 (3), 210–23. [CrossRef]
- Kim, G. (2018) 'Holding the severed finger: Korean students' understanding of historical significance'. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 50 (4), 508–34. [CrossRef]
- Kitson, A., Husbands, C. and Steward, S. (2011) *Teaching and Learning History 11–18*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Kortti, J. (2021) 'Historical culture and the mediated narratives of nation'. *Faravid*, 52, 37–50. Accessed 20 September 2022. <https://faravid.journal.fi/article/view/112683>.
- Lévesque, S. (2017) 'History as a "GPS": On the uses of historical narrative for French Canadian students' life orientation and identity'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (2), 227–47.
- Lévesque, S. and Croteau, J.-P. (2020) *Beyond History for Historical Consciousness: Students, narrative, and memory*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Löfström, J. (2014) 'How Finnish upper secondary students conceive transgenerational responsibility and historical reparations: Implications for the history curriculum'. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 46 (4), 515–39.
- Lorenz, C. (2004) 'Towards a theoretical framework for comparing historiographies: Some preliminary considerations'. In P. Seixas (ed), *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*. Toronto: University of Toronto

- Press, 25–48.
- Marti, A., Norppa, J. and Taivalantti, T. (2020) 'Läntinen identiteetti, tiedonalakohtaiset taidot vai historian käytön ymmärtäminen? Opetussuunnitelmat historianopetuksen orientaatioiden ristipaineessa' [Tensions in history curricula between collective identity building, disciplinary skills development, and postmodern knowledge]. *Kasvatus & Aika*, 14 (2), 75–98.
- Mehtäläinen, J., Niilo-Rämä, M. and Nissinen, V. (2017) *Nuorten näkemys Euroopasta nyt ja lähitulevaisuudessa. Kansainvälisen ICCS 2016 -tutkimuksen Eurooppa-arviointi* [Young people's vision of Europe now and in the near future. European assessment of the international ICCS 2016 study]. Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä, Finnish Institute for Educational Research.
- Myllyniemi, S. and Kiilakoski, T. (2019) 'Maahanmuutto ja kansalliset itsemäärittelyt' [Immigration and national self-definitions]. In E. Pekkarinen and S. Myllyniemi (eds), *Vaikutusvaltaa Euroopan laidalla: Nuorisobarometri 2018* [Influence on the edge of Europe: Youth Barometer 2018]. Helsinki: Nuorisotutkimusseura.
- National Board of Education. (2014) *National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014*. Helsinki: Finnish National Board of Education.
- Paasi, A. (1996) *Territories, Boundaries and Consciousness: The changing geographies of the Finnish–Russian border*. Chichester: John Wiley.
- Paasi, A. (2016) 'Dancing on the graves: Independence, hot/banal nationalism and the mobilization of memory'. *Political Geography*, 54, 21–31. [CrossRef]
- Peck, C. (2010) "'It's not like [I'm] Chinese and Canadian. I am in between": Ethnicity and students' conceptions of historical significance'. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 38 (4), 574–617. [CrossRef]
- Peck, C. (2018) 'National, ethnic, and indigenous identities and perspectives in history education'. In S.A. Metzger and L. McArthur Harris (eds), *Wiley International Handbook of History Teaching and Learning*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 311–33.
- Rantala, J. (2011a) 'Children as consumers of historical culture in Finland'. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 43 (4), 493–506. [CrossRef]
- Rantala, J. (2011b) 'The reflection of a warlike historical culture in the attitudes of Finnish youths'. *Journal of Social Science Education*, 10 (4), 41–9.
- Rantala, J. (2015) 'Young Finns see the First World War as insignificant for Finnish history'. *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte*, 28 (1), 80–90. [CrossRef]
- Rantala, J. (2018) 'Historiapoliittikkaa koulun opetussuunnitelman avulla' [History politics in help of school curriculum]. *Politiikka*, 60 (2), 112–23. Accessed 20 September 2022. <https://researchportal.helsinki.fi/en/publications/historiapoliittikkaa-koulun-opetussuunnitelman-avulla-2>.
- Rantala, J. and Ouakrim-Soivio, N. (2019) 'Historical thinking skills: Finnish history teachers' contentment with their new curriculum'. *The International Journal of Research on History Didactics, History Education, and History Culture*, 40, 33–52. Accessed 20 September 2022. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337769012_Historical_thinking_skills_Finnish_history_teachers%27_contentment_with_their_new_curriculum.
- Rantala, J. and Van den Berg, M. (2015) 'Finnish high school students' and university students' ability to handle multiple source documents in history'. *Historical Encounters*, 2 (1), 70–88. Accessed 20 September 2022. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/284731704_Finnish_high_school_and_university_students%27_ability_to_handle_multiple_source_documents_in_history.
- Rüsen, J. (2017) *Evidence and Meaning: Theory of historical studies*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Sassatelli, M. (2009) *Becoming Europeans: Cultural identity and cultural policies*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Spohn, W. and Eder, K. (eds) (2005) *Memory and European Identity. Effects of Integration and Enlargement*. London: Routledge.
- Schola Europaea (2016) History Syllabus – S4–S5. Accessed 8 June 2021. <https://www.eursc.eu/Syllabuses/2016-09-D-21-en-3.pdf>.
- Seixas, P. (1993) 'Historical understanding among adolescents in a multicultural setting'. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 23 (3), 301–27. [CrossRef]
- Seixas, P. (2000) 'Scheweigen! die Kinder! or, Does postmodern history have a place in the schools?' In P. Stearn, P. Seixas and S. Wineburg (eds), *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History*. New York: New York University Press, 19–37.
- Shemilt, D. (2000) 'The caliph's coin: The currency of narrative frameworks in history teaching'. In P. Stearn, P. Seixas and S. Wineburg (eds), *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History*. New York: New York

- University Press, 83–101.
- Straub, J. (2005) 'Telling stories, making history: Toward a narrative psychology of the historical construction of meaning'. In J. Straub (ed), *Narration, Identity, and Historical Consciousness*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Stuurman, S. and Grever, M. (2007) 'Introduction: Old canons and new histories'. In M. Grever and S. Stuurman (eds), *Beyond the Canon: History for the twenty-first century*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 1–16.
- Suoninen, A., Kupari, P. and Törmäkangas, K. (2010) *Nuorten yhteiskunnalliset tiedot, osallistuminen ja asenteet. Kansainvälisen ICCS 2009 -tutkimuksen päätulokset* [The civic knowledge, participation and attitudes of the young people: The main results of the international ICCS 2009 study]. Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä, Finnish Institute for Educational Research.
- Van Alphen, F. and Van Nieuwenhuysse, K. (2019) 'Conceptualizing "identity" in history education research'. *The International Journal of Research on History Didactics, History Education, and History Culture*, 40, 81–114. Accessed 20 September 2022. https://www.academia.edu/80583769/Conceptualizing_identity_in_history_education_research.
- Van den Berg, M. (2007) *Yksi historia monimutkaistuvassa maailmassa: Historian olemus ja historian suuret kertomukset luokanopettajaopiskelijoiden historiatietoisuudessa* [One history in an all the more complex world: The nature of history and the grand narratives in the historical consciousness of class teacher students]. Helsinki: Research Centre for Social Studies Education, University of Helsinki.
- Van den Berg, M. (2012) 'Havaintoja suomalaisnuorten historiatietoisuudesta' [Observations on the historical consciousness of Finnish young people]. In P. Torsti (ed), *Suomalaiset ja historia* [The Finns and history]. Helsinki: Gaudeamus.
- Van Havere, T., Wils, K., Depaepe, F., Verschaffel, L. and Van Nieuwenhuysse, K. (2017) 'Flemish students' historical reference knowledge and narratives of the Belgian national past at the end of secondary education'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (2), 174–93. [CrossRef]
- Van Nieuwenhuysse, K. and Wils, K. (2015) 'Historical narrative and national identities: A qualitative study of young adults in Flanders'. *Journal of Belgian History*, 45 (4), 40–72. Accessed 20 September 2022. <https://www.journalbelgianhistory.be/en/journal/belgisch-tijdschrift-voor-nieuwste-geschiedenis-xlv-2015-4/historical-narratives-national>.
- Wasserman, J. (2018) 'First-year History Education students' personal narratives of the history of South Africa'. *Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa*, 14 (2), 1–8. [CrossRef]
- Wells, C. (2020) 'Vyborg is Y/ours: Meanings and memories of a borderland city amongst young people in Finland'. PhD thesis. University of Eastern Finland, Dissertations in Social Sciences and Business Studies, 233.
- Wertsch, J. (2002) *Voices of Collective Remembering*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wineburg, S. (2018) *Why Learn History (When It's Already on Your Phone)*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.