Review article

Students' views of historical significance – a narrative literature review

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Abstract

This narrative literature review describes and critically discusses 21 years of international research addressing students' views of *historical significance*. The data consist of 32 educational research articles published between 2000 and 2021. The review shows that the research area has been slowly expanding since the beginning of the millennium in regard to the number of articles and geographical representation, as well as methodological and theoretical plurality. The review identifies some representational imbalances and power gaps in this research area. Most studies represent North America and Western Europe. LGBTQ+, environmental and class-related perspectives are not found in the research. The analysis shows that students primarily identify historical substantive knowledge as significant if it is connected to official narratives. The content of these narratives is also seldom challenged. Students' interest in the 'darker pages' of history, in vernacular history and in history in other places could be interpreted as providing ways to challenge these traditional narratives. Almost all researchers conclude that it is important for history education to include students' different identities as

perspectives, and to take a more disciplinary and critical approach. According to the reviewed research, this could open the way for a history education that is more relevant for students, and that meets at least some of the future challenges of a more globalised and diverse history classroom.

Introduction

> History education has an important role to play in confronting the current political, cultural and social challenges facing Europe; in particular, those posed by the increasingly diverse nature of societies, the integration of migrants and refugees into Europe, and by attacks on democracy and democratic values. (Council of Europe, 2018: 5)

This excerpt from *Quality History Education in the 21st Century: Principles and guidelines* gives history education a difficult but deeply important task: to provide students with historical knowledge that can be helpful when handling today's and future social challenges relating to the increasingly diverse nature of societies in Europe. It is therefore important to examine what histories and what substantive knowledge in history are significant for students according to themselves (see, for example, Lee, 2004), as well as to look at the implications this could have for future history education. This article will address these issues through a review of research articles concerning students' views on *historical significance*.

A more globalised society with new cultural and political challenges provides, or even demands, new ways of looking at and asking different questions of historical sources. New societal positions also challenge ideas about what content to include or exclude in history education. In this way, the concept of historical significance can be one way to bridge the gap between then and now, and to help us as researchers, teachers and students to regard history, and specifically what we see as significant history, as constantly moving and changing. In the framework for historical thinking, *significance* is mentioned first of the six established historical thinking concepts (see, for example, Seixas and Morton, 2013). Conceptions of significance are, according to Barton (2005: 9), 'at the heart of all history – and history education', since no historian, teacher or student can attend to all people and all events that have existed in the past. Didactical choices must be made: *what* is of importance in history, for *whom* is it important, *how* could we teach it and *why* should we do so? Depending on the answers to these questions, some stories will be considered worth exploring, while most parts of history will fall into oblivion. What we choose to highlight are the things in the past that are significant, or relevant, for us today. How we reason, or what criteria we use to make these choices, depend on who we are, how we position ourselves, and in what context (Barton, 2005; Barton and Levstik, 1998; Lévesque, 2005).

The purpose of this literature review is to outline, describe and critically discuss 21 years of international research addressing historical significance from a student perspective. The four main didactical questions – *What*, *Who*, *Why* and *How* (Uljens, 1997) – have been used as a structuring framework, and have guided and helped to organise the research process in a systematic way. The following four research questions will therefore be discussed.

1. What conceptions of history/histories, and what substantive knowledge in history, are seen as significant?
2. Who are the different stakeholders in the reviewed research: who is included in and/or seen as significant in history and history education?
3. Why is research on significant history important?
4. How can (future) history education be designed?

This article consists of four sections. First, a short overview of previous research is given, intended to provide a background to the research area. In the second section, a description of the method of the review is given. The third section reports on the results in two parts: (1) an outline of the current research area, positioning the reviewed articles in time and place, and describing applied perspectives, methods

and theories; and (2) the results of a thematic analysis concerning the results and the implications of the reviewed articles. Finally, in the fourth section, the results are discussed in relation to previous research and the challenges that history education might face in a future, more globalised society.

Background

This review delves into the second-order concept of historical significance. In one of the first articles that explored historical significance empirically, it was defined as 'the valuing criterion through which the historian assesses which pieces of the entire possible corpus of the past can fit together into a meaningful and coherent story that is worthwhile' (Seixas, 1994: 281). Research has examined students' different conceptions of historical significance (Barton, 2005; Barton and Levstik, 1998; Cercadillo, 2000; Lévesque, 2005; Levstik, 2008; Seixas, 1994, 1997), with some studies highlighting the implicit vernacular histories that students use for assessing historical significance (for example, Barton and Levstik, 1998; Lévesque, 2005; Peck, 2010). A few studies have developed and employed conceptual frameworks when investigating students' perspectives on significance (Cercadillo, 2000, 2001, 2006; Lévesque, 2005, 2008; Seixas, 1994, 1997). Earlier frameworks for historical significance (for example, Danto, 1985; Partington, 1980) often had historiographic origins, and primarily focused on objective criteria. In contrast, more recent frameworks (for example, Cercadillo, 2000, 2001, 2006; Counsell, 2004; Lévesque, 2005; Peck and Seixas, 2008; Phillips, 2002; Seixas, 1997) have included subjective criteria, where historical significance depends on the student assessing it.

Reviews have previously been conducted over this research area. Cercadillo (2000) includes a review in her thesis that goes further back than Barton (2005). She discusses previous research in relation to 'objective' (Beck and McKeown, 1994) or 'subjective' significance (Barton, 1999; Epstein, 1997; Levstik, 1997; Seixas, 1993, 1996, 1997). VanSledright and Limón (2006: 555–6) give an overview of the research on historical significance (although not only on students' perspectives) as a part of a review of cognitive research in history and geography, referring to Barton and Levstik (1998), Cercadillo (2001), Epstein (1998), Levstik (2000), Seixas (1997) and Yeager et al. (2002). In this narrative review, a review by Barton (2005), addressing research on students' conceptions of historical significance, is referred to, both to provide an overview of previous research, and to allow for the possibility of making comparisons. Barton's (2005) review, including nine studies between 1995 and 2005, distinguishes two tracks in the research. The first (Cercadillo, 2001; Seixas, 1994, 1997) mainly analysed students' second-order understandings, focusing on different categorisations or *types of explanations of historical reasoning*, and not on substantive content. According to Barton (2005: 15), 'none of these studies … include an attempt to explain their findings theoretically'. The second track is a set of studies conducted in the United States (Barton, 1994, 2005; Barton and Levstik, 1998; Epstein, 1998, 2000; Levstik, 2001 – this book chapter was also published in 2008 in Researching History Education [Levstik, 2008]) that focus on the *content of students' reasoning*. All these studies are based on a sociocultural approach, referring to Cole (1996), Wertsch (1998) and Bodnar's (1992) distinction between *official* and *vernacular history*, and to VanSledright's (1998) theory relating to *historical positionality*. According to Barton (2005), these studies, focusing on content and searching for common elements in answers, offer more insight into students' historical frameworks than the first set. Since the aim of this article is to explore the current research area of historical significance, this review starts at the beginning of the millennium. With only three articles in common – Epstein (2000), Levstik (2001) and Yeager et al. (2002) – this review picks up almost where Barton's (2005) review leaves off.

Method and material

This study is conducted in the form of a systematic narrative review. The aim is to use the advantages of both the narrative and the systematic review method in this article. The narrative review, with its interpretive aim of critically analysing and discussing a comprehensive area of research, relies on the researcher's judgement and expertise to identify and synthesise relevant studies, and typically presents the findings in a descriptive and qualitative manner (Bryman, 2012; Shadish et al., 2002). The systematic or standardised process of searching, selecting and appraising the research used in systematic reviews is used to strengthen it (Bryman, 2012). The systematic reporting of this review is done with the help of relevant parts of the PRISMA statement, a checklist and a flow diagram developed to improve the transparency and reproducibility of systematic reviews and meta-analyses (Moher et al., 2009). This

has been useful for emphasising the importance of clearly stating research questions, search strategies, and inclusion and exclusion criteria. In addition, the intention with this review, with its possibilities for meta-analysis, is to produce new perspectives and new interpretations, and to find gaps that would not be possible to observe in the original studies on their own (Noblit and Hare, 1988, adapted by Beach, 2017).

The inclusion criteria for the reviewed articles is as follows: (1) peer-reviewed articles (except for the works by Levstik [2000, 2001] that are published as book chapters in peer-reviewed books); (2) addressing historical significance; (3) with student respondents; (4) and in relation to some form of overall (often national) history; (5) which explore historical significance empirically and in a way that involves some form of substantive (content) knowledge; (6) in the English language; and (7) published between the years 2000 and 2021. Articles that study how teachers use or teach historical significance, and articles that primarily discuss significance from a theoretical point of view, are not included. No delimitation for the students' ages has been made and, to include a broader scope of research, student teachers have also been included. The aim has been to use articles from as many international contexts as possible, although with the practical limitation of only including those written in English. Another limitation is the focus on articles, which means that dissertations, for example, are excluded (for example, Cercadillo, 2000). With searches carried out on 25 November 2021, using the search string ('histor* significan*' OR 'histor* relevan*') AND (teach OR teaching OR education), the result was as follows.

- ERIC (EBSCO): 137
- ERC (EBSCO): 154
- Education Database (ProQuest): 83
- Scopus: 137.

This makes a total of 511 records identified through database searching. After searching for duplicates with EndNote, there was a result of 366. After an additional manual search for duplicates, the result was 340 potential articles. By going through the titles in this list, 32 articles were considered to have the potential to meet the criteria of the review. To decide whether this was the case, the abstracts of all articles were read. If it was unclear from the abstracts whether the criteria were met, the whole articles were read through. Of 32 screened articles, 15 articles met all criteria, and were included in the review. The next step was a screening for potential articles among those referred to in these 15 articles. Through this citation and reference chaining, an additional 15 articles were included. Two articles were identified through other sources. Zanazanian (2015) was found through the review by Peck (2018), and Virta (2016) was identified through a future citation search based on Barton (2005), which was identified as a key article in the research area. This made a total of 32 articles included in the review. In the searches, no articles in the form of a review that focused specifically on historical significance were found. The review and analysis of each article has followed these analytical questions:

1. In what national context(s) was the research done, and when?
2. What research methods and methods of analysis were used?
3. What research theory/theories was/were used, and from which perspectives?
4. What are the results/assumptions about historical significance according to the research?
5. What, according to the author(s), are the implications of the research for history education?

The descriptive information from Questions 1–5 was assembled in tables, and then compiled and analysed. Regarding Questions 3 and 4, a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was implemented to reveal themes or perspectives that underpinned the students' views on historical significance, as well as themes in relation to implications for history education.

Results

In the first part of the results section, an overview of the included articles will be given, first by describing different perspectives in the research, and then by presenting when and where the research is from, and what methods, theories and perspectives have been used. The second part includes the results of the thematic analysis involving the results and the implications of the reviewed articles.

Part 1: A descriptive overview of the research area

An introduction to the reviewed articles through perspectives and themes

The articles included in this review are presented in Table 1. This provides the national/regional contexts, and gives short descriptions of aims and what substantive knowledge the significant history is explored in relation to. The table is divided into two themes, indicating two overarching foci of the studies:

(1)   focus on students' reasoning on historical significance in relation to students' identities and/or ethnicities and/or language backgrounds (18 articles);
(2)   focus on exploring students' explanations or processes of historical reasoning and/or significant content (14 articles).

It is common to explicitly explore students' views on historical significance in relation to narratives/themes, often national, and different kinds of identities. A more articulated comparative approach is often used in the analysis of the empirical data, some exploring ethnic/racial perspectives (Epstein, 2000; Grever et al., 2008; Levstik and Groth, 2005; Peck, 2009, 2010; Savenije et al., 2014; Terzian and Yeager, 2007) and/or language/ethnic/regional perspectives (Lévesque, 2005; Sant et al., 2015; Zanazanian, 2015), religious perspectives (Barton, 2005), intergenerational perspectives (Olofsson et al., 2017), or student/teacher comparison (Levstik, 2000) and/or cross-national comparisons (Barton, 2005; Barton and McCully, 2005; Grever et al., 2008; Serrano and Barca, 2019; Yeager et al., 2002; also, Levstik [2001] indirectly compares results from students in New Zealand with results from prior research in a US context) or an expert/novice perspective (Sheehan, 2011). This can be compared to Barton's review (2005), where only two (Epstein, 1998, 2000) out of nine studies explored ideas of students of different ethnicities.

Contexts of (and in) the reviewed articles: when, where and who?

There seems to be a slight increase over time in production of articles about students' views of historical significance, with 13 of the 32 articles being published in the last five years of the defined period. The country with the strongest research environment, in terms of the number of articles produced, is the US (*n* = 7). In Europe, the articles are produced primarily in the north-western parts, although the Iberian Peninsula also has a strong representation. There is a somewhat higher production of articles regarding historical significance in European countries (17, of which one is a comparative study that includes the US) compared to studies in North America (12, of which one is the above-mentioned comparative study with Europe). (For a list of all the reviewed articles, and countries of origin, see Table 1.) Four articles from the rest of the world were found using the selection criteria. All in all, the reviewed research included 15 different countries. (This could be 16, depending on whether Britain – probably referring to the UK in Barton and McCully [2005] – and England count as different countries.) In four cases, the studies compare students' views on historical significance in two different national contexts (see articles marked with * in Table 1). No articles meeting the criteria have been found from some rather large countries, for example, France and Germany.

The research that the articles describe involves everything from 5 participants to 660, with an average of 129.5 and a median of 67 participants. Participants' ages are from 9 to adult, and the most frequently occurring age range is 16–18. The results of Barton's (2005) review show that fewer and younger students participated in the research between 1995 and 2005 (participant number range 10–144, average 56, median 48; age range 10–17).

Table 1. Thematic introduction of the reviewed articles

	Articles with aims that focus on historical reasoning in relation to *students' identities* and/or ethnicities and/or language/cultural backgrounds				Articles with aims that focus on exploring students' explanations or *processes of historical reasoning* and/or significant content		
	Author(s):	The article aims to:	Historical significance in relation to:		Author(s):	The article aims to:	Historical significance in relation to:
1	Barton (2005)	examine how students make decisions about significance of people, events and developments.	people, events and developments in the history of Northern Ireland.	1	Apostolidou (2012)	discover the ways in which students construct an understanding of historical significance in known and unknown material being taught.	events in Greek and world history from 1789 to now.
2	* Barton and McCully (2005)	examine students' constructions of historical themes or concepts, and the connections they made between those and their own identities.	people, events and trends in history of Northern Ireland and Britain.	2	Avarogullari and Kolcu (2016)	explore how students determine and employ historical significance.	persons of significance in Turkish history.
3	Dan et al. (2010)	re-examine different result of students' understandings of national history and their perception of national/ethnic identities and judgement of significance.	people and events in US history.	3	Bergman (2020)	discuss how students perceive and understand historical significance (without prior instruction).	events or developments in the past (in Sweden).
4	Dawes Duraisingh (2017)	understand in what ways young people relate their own life to the historically significant past.	historical or personal events in US history.	4	Dan and Todd (2011)	investigate students' use of narratives and criteria when selecting historical significance.	figures and events in US history.
5	Epstein (2000)	investigate how young people reflect on the meaning and significance of history, and how they make sense of the nation's legacy of racial diversity.	events and people in US history.	5	Egea Vivancos and Arias Ferrer (2018)	analyse which historical events future primary teachers consider to be significant, and in what terms.	events in the history of Spain.
6	* Grever et al. (2008)	establish the role of national identity within identity formation in young, multi-ethnic people, and to explore students' ideas about which facets of history are of interest to them, what history should be taught in schools, and views on the purposes of school history and history in general.	facets, periods and kinds of history of interest to students (in England and the Netherlands).	6	Fertig et al. (2005)	explore what students regard as significant history in their community, and how they evaluate significance.	people, issues and events in the local community (in rural US).

7	Lévesque (2005)	explore how English-speaking and French-speaking students respond to contradictory accounts of their past, and what criteria they use to decide upon significant history.	events in Canadian history.	7	Kim (2018)	explore what criteria students use in judging historical significance, and compare these ideas in national history and in the history of other countries/regions.	events and people from Korean and world history.
8	Levstik (2000)	investigate and compare adolescents', teachers' and teacher candidates' understandings of historical significance and implications of the disparity between who students are and who their teachers understand Americans to be in national history.	events and people in historical pictures from US history.	8	Magalhães (2012)	understanding how the master narratives of Spanish and Portuguese students converge or differ from one another, and how they relate to national identity and temporal orientation.	Portuguese, Spanish and world history.
9	Levstik (2001)	explore students' ideas and understandings of national history, influences from world cultures on conceptions of a national past, and the use of national narrative in assigning historical significance.	people, ideas and events in New Zealand national/international/colonial history.	9	Olofsson et al. (2017)	analyse adolescents' and older people's views of Swedish history, highlighting the role played by schools in construction of narratives.	summarise Sweden's history.
10	Levstik and Groth (2005)	investigate how students negotiate the tensions between ethnic and national history (in building conceptions of democratic citizenship).	people, events or ideas from Ghanaian history.	10	Rivero and Pelegrín (2019)	determine historical contents that are considered relevant, and relate them to the typology of the narratives.	events, figures and phenomena in Spanish history.
11	Peck (2009)	examine the relationship between students' ethnic identity and three narratives of Canadian history used when selecting historically significant events.	events in Canadian history.	11	* Serrano and Barca (2019)	understand in what ways students' national master narratives in both countries converge and differ.	events, situations and characters in Portuguese and Spanish history.
12	Peck (2010)	explore the relationship between students' ethnic identities and their understanding of historical significance.	events and themes in Canadian history.	12	Sheehan (2011)	investigate what historians, teachers and students see as significant in the past and that could best inform the present.	aspects of New Zealand history.
13	Sant et al. (2015)	study (1) the historical narrative of Catalan students; and (2) the reception of official Catalan narratives compared with students' narratives.	what students remember about the history of Catalonia.	13	Van Havere et al. (2017)	examine constructions of narratives of young adults, underpinnings of existing narrative templates, reflections on whether national past can be narrated in different ways, and the extent of shared reference knowledge.	national history ('as you know and see it').

14	Savenije et al. (2014)	understand how Dutch students in multicultural classrooms attribute significance to the 'heritage' of slavery, and how this is related to their perceived ethnic identity.	the heritage and/or history of slavery (in relation to Dutch history).	14	* Yeager et al. (2002)	identify and analyse what adolescents judge as historically significant from their contemporary perspective; understand criteria and reasoning used.	events (cross-national comparisons between England and US).
15	Terzian and Yeager (2007)	understand how minority students attribute significance to various aspects of US history.	events, people and documents in US history.				
16	Van Nieuwenhuyse and Wils (2015)	understand how young peoples' narratives are connected to their identification and sense of belonging.	events in Belgian/Flemish (and international) history.				
17	Virta (2016)	explore migrant adolescents' perspective on history education with special reference to their families' home countries.	events in history of home country and/or Finland.				
18	Zanazanian (2015)	grasp how English-speaking students narrate Quebec's history, and how it impacts negotiations of language group identity and agency.	what students know about Quebec's history.				

* Studies which compare students' views on historical significance in two different national contexts.

Methodology used in the reviewed articles

In most of the reviewed articles (*n* = 19), a *multi-methods* approach is used (defined in this article as using two or more methods in the research). A common combination of methods (*n* = 6) is a *picture-selection task* combined with *semi-structured interviews*, both individual and in groups, and a *ranking task*. It is common to include a *picture-selection task* (*n* = 10) among the methods. These tasks include between 15 and 51 captioned pictures. This can be compared with Barton's (2005) review, where three articles out of nine used a set of captioned pictures (Barton and Levstik, 1998; Epstein, 2000; Levstik, 2001), and two articles used lists (Seixas, 1997; Yeager et al., 2002). *Interviews* are the most common method (*n* = 17), either individual or in groups, and almost always in a semi-structured way. Interviews are used as a complement in all the 11 studies that use three methods or more in combination. *Written narratives* or *prompted writing/drawing tasks* (*n* = 13) are also frequently used in the research. It is most common to use qualitative methods of analysis (*n* = 25) in this area of research. The methods are often described, but not always specified by name. The most often used methods of analysis are different kinds of thematic or content analysis.

Theories and perspectives used in the reviewed articles

The analysis shows that from a theoretical point of view, there are almost as many reviewed articles that have a theory-building aim (*n* = 13), primarily mapping different dimensions of (national) narratives, as an aim that is primarily theory-testing/using (*n* = 11), using prior frameworks of criteria for significance or narratives, or a combination of both. (The former group can perhaps be compared with Barton's [2005: 13] first set of studies in his review, focusing primarily on the types of explanations that 'provide insight into the structural variety of students' explanations'. Research that aims at pattern-searching and/or mapping of different strategies has been searched for in this review.) The rest of the articles (*n* = 8) have a focus on students' reasoning and ideas about historical significance, and how they change depending on different circumstances. *Sociocultural theory* is used as a theoretical vantage point in four of the reviewed articles. Wertsch's sociocultural theory (for example, Wertsch, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004) concerning narrative templates is often referred to (*n* = 16). *Historical thinking* is explicitly used as a perspective in 14 of the reviewed articles, but researchers in that field (for example, Barton, 1999, 2005; Barton and Levstik, 1998; Epstein, 1997, 1998; Peck, 2009, 2010; Yeager et al., 2002) are cited in eight more articles. The theoretical framework *historical consciousness* is used explicitly in four articles. (For a short overview of the research field of historical consciousness in relation to historical thinking, see, for example, Lévesque and Clark, 2018.) For example, Rüsen's various works (Rüsen, 1993, 2004, 2005, 2017) concerning 'narrative typologies', are referred to in eight of the articles. To conclude, the analysis shows that new theoretical frameworks have been introduced in this research area since Barton's (2005) review.

Part 2: Results of the thematic analysis of the reviewed articles

The reviewed articles are different in their aims and scopes, which explains differences in how the results are framed and reported on. The most common way to ask for students' views on historical significance is in an open-ended way (*n* = 16). In some cases, this is done in the form of open-ended narrations (*n* = 13), as in Olofsson et al. (2017: 246), where students are asked to 'Tell Sweden's history up to the present the way you remember it, view it, or understand it.' Other researchers frame their questions in a narrower way, asking the students to make open-ended lists (*n* = 3): 'Who, do you think, are the most significant ten people in the history?' (Avarogullari and Kolcu, 2016: 70), and thereby get very specific answers. Both questions give a result of what content students see as historically significant, but the scope of the content, and how it will be framed and narrated, depend on how the question is phrased initially.

What (in) history is seen as significant by the students?

History education plays an important role in the transmission and perpetuation of national narratives in both conscious and unconscious ways (Wertsch, 2002). These national narratives frame how, in this case, the students in the articles talk about 'us' and sometimes 'them', but they also frame what (in) history is seen as significant. In many of the studies that investigate historical significance, the reasoning about significant (national) history is therefore often explored in relation to different national narratives (see, for example, Barton, 2005; Kim, 2018; Olofsson et al., 2017; Sant et al., 2015). The references to Wertsch (for

example, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004) and national narrative templates are an important part of the theoretical framework in many of the reviewed articles: 16 articles use Wertsch (for example, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2012, 2017) in their analysis or research design ('schematic narrative templates' or 'master narratives'), or as a reference in the theory section of the article. In the section below, I first give an account of the different conceptions of history/histories that students found significant in the reviewed articles, and I then exemplify what concrete substantive knowledge *in* history is stated to be significant in the articles that specify this.

Conceptions of history/histories

Three overarching themes emerged during analysis of students' use of significant history, or histories: *vernacular history* (here defined as local history and/or history close to the students' family life), *official history* and *history of other places*. In nine articles, students point to the significance of vernacular history in different ways: as *cultural history*, or as a wide range of *unofficial* strands of history (Apostolidou, 2012; Grever et al., 2008; Lévesque, 2005; Rivero and Pelegrín, 2019; Sant et al., 2015), or the history of refugees' *home country* (Virta, 2016). Levstik (2000: 300) points to a tension regarding students' interest in *alternative histories*, including, for example, 'race, dissent, gender and class', when interviewed teachers and teacher candidates rejected these, and avoided possibly divisive or coercive histories. Dan et al.'s (2010) study shows that African American students rate significantly higher on *family as a historical source* than European American students. In Ghana (Levstik and Groth, 2005), the 'emerging "official" history' also includes vernacular histories, which is unusual in the reviewed articles. In four articles, the results suggest that students find official history, the history often taught in school, significant (Avarogullari and Kolcu, 2016; Bergman, 2020; Olofsson et al., 2017; Yeager et al., 2002). This history is perceived as political history, close to the official one, often characterised by male actors. History in other places is seen as significant in three articles (Levstik, 2001; Sheehan, 2011), including equality in all historical contexts and times, with slavery as an example (Savenije et al., 2014).

What then, according to the reviewed articles, is seen as significant (in) history? One comprehensive conclusion is that the choice of significant substantive knowledge is influenced by the researchers' aims and interests, the questions and the options given in the study, and the (geographical, national and other) positionings and prior knowledge/school background of the informants. Many of the articles that specify substantive knowledge point out that students have an interest in the traditional kind of history that is close to a national narrative. In relation to Swedish history education, Olofsson et al. (2017) explain this as a result of *strong selective traditions*, which revolve around a recurrent national narrative. In US and British contexts, Yeager et al. (2002: 213) point out that a potential collective '"authoritative grand narrative" pervades a given society or culture and is consistently reinforced in the official school curriculum'. Another explanation can be teachers applying 'the Code of Silence', avoiding histories or substantive knowledge that can bother students and their parents, and make the teachers themselves uncomfortable (Levstik, 2000).

Significant substantive knowledge

As a result of the analysis, three themes regarding significant substantive knowledge in history have emerged: significant substantive knowledge in relation to *national and/or political contexts*; in the *'dark pages' of history*; and in *vernacular or other contexts*.

Most results concerning significant substantive knowledge seem to be influenced by the national context, where historical figures and events are chosen from an ethnocentric and nationalist perspective (for example, Apostolidou, 2012; Avarogullari and Kolcu, 2016; Olofsson et al., 2017; Rivero and Pelegrín, 2019; Sant et al., 2015). One example of this is the choice of Christopher Columbus and the discovery of America as the most significant historical person and event in Spanish and Portuguese history (Rivero and Pelegrín, 2019). Informants also choose significant substantive knowledge of a *political kind*, although still with an influence from the national context (Bergman, 2020; Egea Vivancos and Arias Ferrer, 2018; Levstik and Groth, 2005; Sant et al., 2015; Serrano and Barca, 2019). As an example, Flemish students selected 'male, political and military approaches to the national past' as significant substantive knowledge (Van Havere et al., 2017: 281).

The second theme includes students' interest in the 'dark pages' of national history (Grever et al., 2008: 84). These 'dark pages' can include *continuous, political conflicts* (Barton, 2005), *war* (Virta, 2016), *exciting and bloody events* (Bergman, 2020) and *traumatic events* (Sant et al., 2015). Dark schematic narrative templates are also used in choosing significant substantive knowledge (Kim, 2018; Levstik and Groth, 2005).

Students' interest in substantive knowledge in vernacular history is focused on in three articles, concerning: *life in their hometown* (Fertig et al., 2005); *home countries* (Virta, 2016); and *symbols of the region* (Sant et al., 2015). Students are also open to influences from the *world outside* regarding substantive knowledge (Levstik, 2001) and in *twentieth-century events and colonial legacy* (Sheehan, 2011).

Who is significant in history?

This section will account for the 'who' in significant history: who is included and/or seen as significant in history and history education? This 'who' has several layers. It starts on the collective level with how the participating students narrate the stories of 'us' as a group or as a nation. The focus then moves to the individual level, towards the students themselves in relation to significant history. Finally, the aim is also to examine whether, and in what way, significant history is gendered according to the students.

Who are 'we' in significant history?

One way of expressing a 'we' is to narrate a story about 'us' as a nation. These narratives are told in different ways. Students in some articles recount positive historical narratives about the country, described either as stable or improving: 'a national narrative of national uniqueness and progress' (Terzian and Yeager, 2007: 76); *emancipation and progress* (Levstik, 2000); *national development and continuous success* (in regard to the US students in previous research with which Barton [2005] compares the results); *unity and social cohesion* (Rivero and Pelegrín, 2019); and (1) *the long peace* and (2) *narrative of progress* (Olofsson et al., 2017). There are also narratives that tell a tale of regression or conflict: *continuous, political conflicts in history* (Barton, 2005), and a patriotic and dualistic historical narrative including traumatic events which together gives *a plot of decline* in Catalunya (Sant et al., 2015). The two narratives used most frequently by Flemish adults are '*Lines of Fracture*' and '*Foreign Occupations*' (Van Havere et al., 2017: 278).

There are also students in some articles that express more *ambiguous narratives*: 'we won freedom and democracy (but now we also have an economic crisis)'; 'Worldwide there is technological progress, but there is also war and terrorism' (Magalhães, 2012: 11–12); 'tragedy, struggle and achievement of freedom and equality as a cultural tool' (Kim, 2018: 527). There are also examples of narratives with a fluctuating tendency: *initial conquests*, a *golden period of maritime discoveries*, and a *recent dictatorship overcome by the restoration of democracy* (Serrano and Barca, 2019), as in Ghana, where the national narrative goes from a bad situation to hopes for something better, with the *need for unity* but also *the value of diversity* (Levstik and Groth, 2005). Students in Canada use three different narrative templates: '*Founding of the Nation*', '*Diverse and Harmonious Canada*' and '*Diverse but Conflicted Canada*' (Peck, 2009, 2010). National narratives expressed by the students can also take more of a moral stance: *learning from others*, *teaching to the world* and *using fairness* as important criteria for determining historical significance (Levstik, 2001). Sweden is portrayed as a 'country that has left conflict behind' (Olofsson et al., 2017: 253), while Barton's (2005) study shows that the girls who participated expressed a 'moral' stance when selecting historical significance, focusing on *memory*, *justice*, and *the importance of helping others*.

Who am I as a student in relation to significant history?

I will now turn the focus to the students and their positioning(s) in relation to significant history and the narratives described above. There are examples of research where the historical narratives that the students express *are in harmony with the official historical narrative and history curricula* (Bergman, 2020; Rivero and Pelegrín, 2019; Terzian and Yeager, 2007). Flemish students use a supranational, Western-oriented identification and a sense of belonging that lies very close to the aims of the history curriculum (Van Nieuwenhuyse and Wils, 2015), while students in New Zealand express a self-perception

that the country, and its history, are *situated on the margins* (Levstik, 2001). There are also examples where the students', or groups of students', identification(s) are *in dissonance with the national narratives* (and perhaps with the curriculum): the students' ethnic identities are important in shaping their narratives. These narratives are used as 'identity resources in order to better locate themselves in particular narratives of Canadian history' (Peck, 2009: 70; also see Peck, 2010). Immigrant students in Finland find their home country historically significant, but not hearing about it in history education is regarded as 'normal', since Finland had another national history (Virta, 2016). Catalan students' historical narratives correlate with the 'official' Catalan narrative, but not with the syllabus used in school. A strong influence from a vernacular narrative and/or collective memory is suggested, and Catalan students' narratives imply that they do not see themselves as being, or becoming, 'active citizens in their society' (Sant et al., 2015: 355).

The processes of deciding what is historically significant can be complicated, and can seem to take different forms depending on the national/regional context in combination with the cultural context and the positioning(s) of the student. The students use different narratives or significance criteria depending on whether the students are English-speaking or French-speaking, and the students' *position as minority or majority* (Lévesque, 2005; Sant et al., 2015; Zanazanian, 2015), or depending on *ethnic identities* (Dan et al., 2010; Epstein, 2000; Grever et al., 2008; Levstik, 2000; Peck, 2009, 2010), *ethnicity and geographical location* (Sheehan, 2011) or a *connection to their own lives* (Dawes Duraisingh, 2017). The historical identification, for example, varies according to 'gender, selectivity of school, and geographic region' (Barton and McCully, 2005: 95). The positionings of students also seem to move over time and years of schooling, as students' community backgrounds become increasingly important (Barton and McCully, 2005).

Is significant history gendered?

There are eight articles that take gender into consideration in relation to significant history. Three of these articles have results that suggest that significant history, and historical identification, can depend on the *gender-based identity* of the student (Barton, 2005; Barton and McCully, 2005; Dan and Todd, 2011). Barton (2005) points to the fact that boys seem to focus on political history and social conflicts, while girls focus on memory, justice and the importance of helping others. Four articles point to and discuss *a gendered history education*, either oriented towards boys (Barton and McCully, 2005) or a substantive knowledge in school history that has 'male, political and military approaches to the national past' (Van Havere et al., 2017: 281; but also Avarogullari and Kolcu, 2016; Bergman, 2020). Bergman (2020) and Sant et al. (2015) highlight the fact that *women are invisible actors* in the history of the nation according to the students' narratives. Levstik's (2008) and Sheehan's (2011) results suggest that there are *no discernible gender differences* in the students' choice of significant history.

To conclude: 'who', according to the reviewed articles, seems to be significant in history? Many of the articles express that students use historical narratives which are close to the official one, often with a positive approach in their narration. A male perspective on history, and in history education, seems to prevail. When discussing the students' use of narratives, the picture becomes more complex, since their positions and different identities seem to influence the selection of significant history.

Why is research on significant history important (and for whom)?

This section will give a short account of the didactical implications of the reviewed articles. With these results as a point of departure, the focus will be turned towards what may be needed in future history education.

Didactical implications for future history education

Four articles have implications for *teachers*, *teaching materials* and *curricula* (Avarogullari and Kolcu, 2016; Dan and Todd, 2011; Sheehan, 2011; Zanazanian, 2015). In 10 articles, the main point of the implications is for teachers to *focus on the students' identities* and their perceptions of history education (Barton, 2005; Barton and McCully, 2005; Dan et al., 2010; Grever et al., 2008; Levstik, 2000; Peck, 2009, 2010; Terzian and Yeager, 2007; Van Havere et al., 2017; Virta, 2016).

Eight of the articles point to the importance of *developing perspective-taking* to improve students' participation and engagement in history education (Barton, 2005; Dan and Todd, 2011; Dan et al., 2010; Grever et al., 2008; Levstik, 2001; Peck, 2009; Zanazanian, 2015); perspective-taking could also be developed through the *deconstruction of national templates* (Van Havere et al., 2017). In addition to developing an awareness of multiple perspectives in history, the results of five articles suggest the need for more use of *historical thinking tools*, or for the introduction of a more disciplinary approach to history, in order to develop history education (Avarogullari and Kolcu, 2016; Peck, 2009; Sheehan, 2011). This includes strengthening the use of *historical significance as an explicit tool* for addressing students' misconceptions about the past (Lévesque, 2005), and introducing *non-narrative tools* (Kim, 2018). In six articles, the didactical implications of the results point to the need for *critical thinking* in history education (Barton and McCully, 2005; Sant et al., 2015; Serrano and Barca, 2019; Van Havere et al., 2017). Levstik (2000: 300) points to the importance of helping students to *formulate questions for inquiry* 'for making critical sense out of legitimation stories as well as alternative, vernacular histories'. Kim (2018) suggests including a *more global perspective on history*, introducing *different kinds of templates* to help students to construct *counter-narratives*.

With these suggested implications from the reviewed articles, let us address the third research question: Why is the research on significant history important? My conclusions from the reviewed articles strongly imply two things in particular.

- The importance of taking students' different identities into account in history education.
- The importance of helping students to develop a more disciplinary approach that includes critical thinking skills and tools.

A history education that both includes students' different identities as a perspective and involves a more disciplinary approach might, according to the reviewed research, help students to further develop critical perspectives on history, and thereby hopefully improve students' participation and engagement in history education.

Following these conclusions, the last research question will be addressed: How then could future history education be designed, according to the researchers in the reviewed articles? And by whom? Knowledge about (the possibilities of) different perspectives, with a combination of disciplinary tools and skills to analyse and problematise, could potentially be used by students to deconstruct established narratives in official or vernacular history. This work starts at a curricular level, but it should be followed up in the classroom, with students actively involved. In this way, a more individually and culturally responsive history education can be created, which in turn might improve students' participation and results.

Concluding discussion

One conclusion drawn from this review is that the international research area addressing historical significance from a student perspective has gradually and slowly expanded since the beginning of the millennium. This expansion is multifaceted: new theoretical perspectives, such as historical consciousness, have been added, and more experiences have been made visible by using different kinds of perspectives when analysing students' identity positions. The research area also covers more countries and regions. However, there is still a much higher representation of studies from North America and Western Europe, and very few studies from the rest of the world. There are also only glimpses of significant histories from Indigenous points of view. Since the more recent research seems to include older students than before (Barton, 2005), another gap is the lack of younger students' views on historical significance. These representational gaps are some of the power imbalances that this review has identified. Another conclusion is that the students in the reviewed articles mainly identify traditional substantive knowledge as significant. Official narratives and their content are therefore seldom challenged. The studies where students use national narratives with a positive/progressing or declining tendency, or with a moral stance, could be seen to express (re)presentations of the nations' norms, traditions, practices and values (Biesta, 2020; Nordgren, 2017). As a part of history education, these official narratives constitute a base for creating *one* national, regional or local identity, which can 'permeate society', and where societal unity, status quo and cohesion might be or are encouraged (Peck, 2018). The same could be said about the research that concludes that history education is gendered, and the fact that women, according to the students in some studies, are invisible actors in national history,

while male history is more present and visible. The 'who' in the research is therefore still mainly a national, predominantly male, 'we'. These ways of reasoning about significant history could be seen as reflecting 'knowledge of the powerful', rather than powerful knowledge (Muller and Young, 2019).

There are, however, interesting exceptions to this hegemony. The alternative histories and perspectives that some of the students in the research express, either through students' identification(s) that are in dissonance with the national narratives, or students' interest in vernacular history, history of other places, and 'dark pages' of history, can be seen as indirect disruptions or challenges to the traditional, often national, narratives or canons. These results also suggest influences of a multitude of experiences of history, often provided by people in the students' families and communities (Barton, 2005). Research that notes students' use of 'counter-narratives' is also found in a review by Peck (2018: 317).

At least in part, these differences in students' reasoning when discussing significant history could be explained by variations in 'historical positionality' (VanSledright, 1998). Relatively rare perspectives in the reviewed research include race, gender and culture. One interesting example of this is the tension or gap between how young people talk about history and identity, compared to the expressions of politicians and policy makers, who often urge students to learn the 'right' stories (Lee, 2004: 155). This is often done in the form of a central national narrative (Grever et al., 2008). Another example of tension (Levstik, 2000) is the students' interest in alternative histories that include negative and diverse images of being an American citizen. In contrast, the interviewed teachers and teacher candidates reject these images and avoid the topics that the students found significant. Not connecting with these silenced topics of 'otherness' in history education could make it 'difficult to make connections between their family and/or ethnic histories and those which are taught in school' (Peck, 2018: 311–12). These silences and tensions between different positions are interesting, and they need to be researched further in other contexts.

The implications of the reviewed research indicate an unambiguous answer to why the research on significant history is important and how a future history education can be designed. Almost all studies underline the importance of taking students' different identities into account in history education and/or helping students to develop a more disciplinary approach that includes critical thinking skills. With histories, and history education, that include voices of diversity in contemporary culture, students can try to deconstruct myths about homogenic societies, and in that way potentially start to interpret today's globalised society. With these diverse perspectives on history, students might also get opportunities to acquire agency in their own lives, 'in and with the world' (Biesta, 2020: 95).

What, then, could be possible futures for research about historical significance? Relatively rare perspectives in the reviewed research include race, gender and culture. Smith Crocco (2018) emphasises the relevance of gender and sexuality perspectives in history teaching, as these touch on important power aspects – both concerning national narratives and concerning the choice of significant substantive knowledge. This in turn contributes to how students view themselves. Research concerning Indigenous students is rare in the review, with an exception for Levstik (2001). Peck (2018) also concludes that this perspective is lacking, and therefore pushes for methodical innovations to situate data in different sociocultural contexts. Although ethnicity is a relatively common perspective in the reviewed research, there is only one article (Virta, 2016) that examines a specifically migrant or refugee perspective on significant history, even though students with this background have become more common in history classrooms in the last few decades (Council of Europe, 2018). With the exception of Barton (2005), who addresses religion as a factor in the conflicts of Northern Ireland, no articles were found that discuss or problematise the results from religious, LGBTQ+, environmental or class-related perspectives.

This review, with its global scope, has contributed to highlighting these challenging, intersectional tensions and research gaps. Exploring these spaces in future research would offer important opportunities to further understand the relationships between students' different positionings and their understandings of and use of historical significance. This, in turn, can allow for a relevant history education that can help students meet many of the future challenges of a more globalised and diverse society.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

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Conflicts of interest statement

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

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