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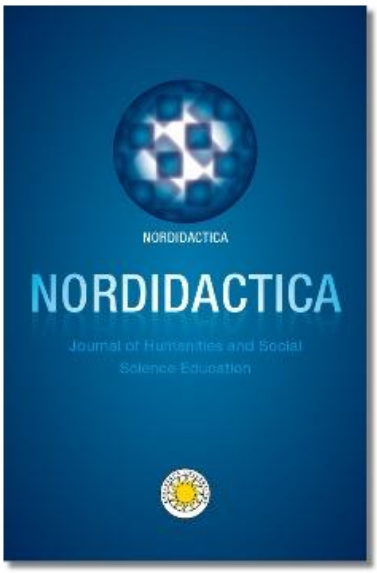

Nordidactica

- Journal of Humanities and Social Science Education

2024:1

Nordidactica – Journal of Humanities and Social Science Education
Nordidactica 2024:1
ISSN 2000-9879
The online version of this paper can be found at: www.kau.se/nordidactica

NORDIDACTICA – JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCE EDUCATION
ISSN 2000-9879
2024:1 1-24

“We say that we are a tolerant country”: National narratives and middle-school students’ perspectives on historical significance

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Abstract: This study examines middle-school students’ perspectives on significant history in the context of Swedish history. Data was generated from 14 focus groups in five middle schools, with students (n=53) aged 11-12, who first completed a picture-selection task and then participated in semi-structured focus-group interviews. Analysis was conducted using Lévesque’s (2005, 2008) theoretical framework for historical significance. The article presents three key findings related to the students’ perspectives. First, two additions to Lévesque’s framework, ethical and affective significance, are suggested. Secondly, the study highlights the strong influence of current issues, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, on students’ selection of historically significant content. Thirdly, the study reveals that students employed two conflicting national narratives when discussing significant historical events. One historical narrative centered around forming and transforming the nation and improving life in society, often including Gustav Vasa and the Reformation. This narrative aligns closely with the official history covered in Swedish history education. In contrast, students also embraced a counter-narrative with ethical dimensions, focusing on the silent and silenced narratives of alternative and ethically questionable histories, including themes of human and minority rights, colonial history, and personal experiences of war. These topics were not represented in the pictures included in the study, which represented an “official” history, yet the students expressed a strong desire to learn more about them. This study contributes to the understanding of middle-school students’ perspectives on significant history and underscores the importance of considering ethical and affective dimensions in historical significance frameworks.

KEYWORDS: HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE, HISTORICAL THINKING, HISTORY EDUCATION, NATIONAL NARRATIVES, CURRICULUM, ETHICAL SIGNIFICANCE, AFFECTIVE SIGNIFICANCE

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Introduction

It is not possible to teach and learn about everything that has happened in the past. Choices must be made. But what, and whose, history is significant history, and how is that history decided upon? This, of course, depends on who you ask. In this article, Swedish middle-school students, aged 11-12, participate in focus groups to discuss and reflect on significant history. Students in Swedish history education classrooms carry with them several histories: the *"official" history* (Barton & Levstik 1998; Barton & McCully 2005; Terzian & Yeager 2007; Wertsch 2002), which relates to the syllabus and a national, collective Swedish history, and *vernacular histories,* based on the students' life experiences (Bodnar 1994), which relate to collective memory (Wertsch 2002). The students bring these histories with them from home and from their communities, representing many different experiences and multiple cultural backgrounds (see, for example, Barton & Levstik 1998; Lévesque 2005; Peck 2010; Sant, González-Monfort, Santisteban Fernández & Oller Freixa 2015; Virta 2016). Classrooms in Sweden, and in Europe, have become more diverse over the last few decades (Council of Europe 2018). These many possible histories highlight the importance of the historical thinking tool *significance,* as it emphasizes and clarifies the inevitable role of selection as a part of doing and teaching history. The concept of significance can also be helpful in pointing out the reciprocal relationship between the historical content and "the interpretive frames and values of those who study it-ourselves" (Seixas 1997, p. 22). These tensions point to the nature of the concept: as complex and not fixed, constantly on the move, but "one that can mean diverse things to various people in different eras" (Yeager, Foster & Greer 2002, p. 200). To explore students' ideas about historical significance "may provide insight into their overall frameworks for historical understanding" (Barton 2005, p. 9).

The aim of this study is therefore to explore middle-school students' perspectives on historical significance in relation to Swedish history, using the theoretical framework of Lévesque (2005, 2008). The study is guided by three research questions:

- What historical content do the students perceive as significant?
- What criteria do the students use when discussing and assessing historical significance?
- What possible national narratives do the students employ when discussing historical significance in relation to Swedish history?

Previous research

The international research concerning students' understandings of historical significance has been slowly expanding since the beginning of the new millennium, in terms of number of articles, geographical representation, and methodological and theoretical plurality (Sjölund Åhsberg, forthcoming). A few reviews of the research area have been conducted since the beginning of the 1990s, either as a part of a study (Barton

2005; Cercadillo 2000), as a part of a broader review (VanSledright & Limón 2006)[1], or as a narrative review (Sjölund Åhsberg, forthcoming). Several of the studies on historical significance have a comparative perspective, for example, between different nationalities (Barton 2005; Barton & McCully 2005; Cercadillo 2000; Grever, Haydn & Ribbens 2008; Serrano & Barca 2019; Yeager, Foster & Greer 2002), different language, ethnic, or regional backgrounds (Barton & Levstik 1998; Dan, Todd & Lan 2010; Epstein 2000; Grever, Haydn & Ribbens 2008; Lévesque 2005; Levstik & Groth 2005; Peck 2009, 2010; Sant et al. 2015; Savenije, Van Boxtel & Grever 2014; Terzian & Yeager 2007; Van Nieuwenhuyse & Wils 2015; Virta 2016; Zanazanian 2015), different generations (Olofsson, Samuelsson, Stolare & Wendell 2017), students and teachers (Levstik 2000), different religious perspectives (Barton 2005), or experts and novices (Sheehan 2011).

Some studies have investigated students' different conceptions of historical significance (Barton 2005; Barton & Levstik 1998; Cercadillo 2000; Lévesque 2005; Levstik 2008; Peck 2010; Seixas 1994, 1997), and analytical frameworks for researching students' thinking concerning significance have been constructed (e.g., Cercadillo 2000; Lévesque 2005, 2008; Seixas 1994, 1997). In this study, one of these frameworks for significance (Lévesque 2005) is used when analyzing the data. Most studies on students' views on significance have been conducted in a school context, mostly on students aged 16-18 (Sjölund Åhsberg, forthcoming). A few studies have, like this one, examined younger students aged 10-14 (Barton & McCully 2005; Barton & Levstik 1998; Bergman 2020; Levstik 2000, 2008; Sant et al. 2015).

In all these studies of younger students, significance was, in different ways, explored in relation to national narratives. Sant et al. (2015) found that the historical narrative of Catalonia was a patriotic and dualistic one, with a "plot of decline". The results suggested a strong influence from a vernacular narrative, with "women, ethnic minorities, and other social, religious, and cultural groups" missing from the students' narratives (Sant et al. 2015, p. 354). The students' narratives imply that they don't see themselves as being, or becoming, "active citizens in their society" (Sant et al. 2015, p. 355). In Northern Ireland, Barton & McCully (2005) concluded that students' identifications narrowed over three years of schooling, as community background became increasingly important. The historical identification also varied according to "gender, selectivity of school, and geographic region" (Barton & McCully 2005, p. 95). In a study by Levstik (2000) that compared young students and teachers, both groups expressed faith in the U.S. national narrative of emancipation and progress. As in Barton & Levstik (1998), students also articulated an interest in alternative, vernacular histories, including more diverse and sometimes negative images of what it means to be an American citizen. The teachers and teacher candidates rejected these images and applied "the code of silence", avoiding topics in American history that they thought could disturb students or their parents, and make the teachers themselves uncomfortable

[1] This is a review of cognitive research in history and geography, covering historical significance, but does not have a specific focus on the students' perspectives.

(Levstik 2000). Levstik (2008) also examined historical significance in relation to New Zealand's national and colonial history. The results indicated that the students held self-perceptions where the country and its history were situated on the margins, not only from a geographical point of view. History had, according to the students, a moral importance where "fairness" was one important criterion for determining historical significance. In addition, they used the narratives "learning from others" and "teaching the world". The students were also less interested in the history of their own country in comparison with world history.

Bergman's (2020) study of historical significance in a Swedish context showed that students in Grade 5 understood history as political history, with mainly male actors. Significant history was seen as being decided on by a collective "we" and not by the students themselves. The students also described Swedish history as having a continuous development from bad to something better. History had a clear dichotomy between good and bad, failure and success, and followed a commonly occurring national historical narrative focused on individual heroes and villains. The students also pointed to the opportunity to learn from both morally bad and morally good events in history. Big, public, and sometimes exciting and bloody events were seen as significant. The quantity of people affected was a factor when deciding on significance, as well as a contemporary aspect of history (Bergman 2020). Olofsson et al. (2017) concluded that students had an interest in a traditional kind of historical content that was close to "a national and Nordic historical narrative" (Olofsson et al. 2017, p. 246). Olofsson et al. (2017) saw this as being a result of strong selective traditions in history education, circling around recurrent national narratives: 1) the long peace and 2) the narrative of progress. Sweden was thereby depicted as a "country that has left conflict behind" (Olofsson et al. 2017, p. 253). Danielsson Malmros (2012) has distinguished five metanarratives about Swedish history that were used in history textbooks and by high-school students: the story of neutrality, the story of the welfare state, the story of a pioneering country in democracy, the story of the stranger, and the story of the world's most equal country. Åström Elmersjö (2013) notes mythologized emancipation motifs in Swedish history textbooks that involve similar historical content: Christianity, Gustav Vasa, and the introduction of suffrage.

Background

The overarching aim for history education in Swedish compulsory school is, according to the curriculum, Lgr11 (Skolverket 2019), for students to develop their knowledge of different historical contexts, as well as their historical consciousness.

According to the history syllabus[2], students should be given the opportunity to: 1) develop a historical frame of reference including different historical interpretations, 2) critically review, interpret, and evaluate sources, 3) reflect on different uses of history,

[2] Students in this study have followed the syllabus Lgr11. The new syllabus, Lgr22, was implemented after this study. The goals for Lgr11 apply for students in Grades 0-9.

and 4) use historical concepts to analyze how historical knowledge is arranged, created, and used (Skolverket 2019). The Swedish history syllabus (Skolverket 2019) incorporates five out of the six commonly used historical thinking concepts, namely *evidence*, *continuity and change*, *cause and consequence*, *historical perspectives,* and *ethical dimension*, while excluding explicit mention of *historical significance* (Seixas & Morton 2013).

Swedish primary schools[3] have an interdisciplinary syllabus, where history is studied alongside religious education (non-confessional), geography, and civics. In Grades 1-3, history is focused on local history; timewise, this historical content spans the period from the emergence of man, the Stone, Bronze, and Iron Age, including the transition to agriculture. Middle school[4] has a separate syllabus for history education, and the historical content to be studied is divided into three temporal themes[5]: "From ancient times and the Middle Ages, until about 1500", "Nordic and Baltic Sweden, circa 1500–1700", and "Increased exchange and the transformation of agriculture, circa 1700–1850". This part of the syllabus is centered around the Nordic countries, including the creation of the Swedish national state and the development of Sweden as a democratic country (Skolverket 2019). Since the students in this study are about to finish, or have just finished, their sixth and final year of middle school, this historical content should have been covered at the time of the study. Short follow-up interviews with the teachers showed that all except one school had not had time to cover the last temporal theme of the syllabus.

Method

This study generated data through focus-group interviews conducted in 2021 in five middle schools located in and around Gothenburg, Sweden's second-largest city. The aim of the project was to amplify many diverse voices and, in that way, to capture conditions prevalent in many contemporary Swedish middle schools. In light of this aim, schools and students from various settings were included in the study: semi-rural (the H-school), suburban (the V-school), suburban and cooperative (the K-school), urban private school (P-school), and socio-economically challenged areas (the M-school). All students in the participating classes were invited to take part, and the teachers assisted in forming mixed-gender focus groups consisting of the students who had provided signed consent forms. A total of 53 Grade 6[6] students participated in the study.[7] The research methodology employed in this study, including the elicitation technique involving pictures (Barton 2015; Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2018, p. 631)

[3] Grades 0-3, ages 6-9.
[4] Grades 4-6, ages 10-12.
[5] Temporal themes translated from Swedish by the author.
[6] The H-school had mixed-age history education where students in Grades 5 and 6 followed the same syllabus.
[7] 29 girls and 24 boys.

and the interview questions, draws inspiration from previous research in the field (e.g., Barton 2005; Barton & Levstik 1996, 1998; Levstik 2008).

Focus groups were selected as the research method for this study due to their suitability for exploring specific themes within a socio-cultural context. The interactive nature of focus-group discussions allows students to delve into their respective justifications for the historical significance of certain historical content. This fosters dynamic and engaging conversations that may not be as readily achieved in individual or group interviews. The focus groups were conducted in two stages during the same session. Both stages were audio recorded and later transcribed in Swedish. In the first stage, the different groups were presented with a set of 26 captioned, laminated historical pictures.[8] These pictures, showing events ranging from 10,000 years ago to the early 20th century, were carefully chosen to align with the historical content covered in the Swedish history curriculum up until 6th grade (Skolverket 2019). Special consideration was given to including diverse perspectives, a balanced gender representation, and a range of topics such as both "traditional" and "progressive" historical themes, including, for example, aspects of colonialization. Additionally, one picture depicting local history was included and this was changed for every school. These were local photographs from the first half of the 20th century that included some landmark in the vicinity of the school that students could recognize today. The purpose of the historical pictures was to stimulate students' interest, provoke reflections, and facilitate recollection of historical events.

The pictures were briefly introduced by reading the captions on the pictures in chronological order. After the presentation, the students in the group were asked to collaboratively select eight images that they deemed representative of "important history" for a fictional exhibition to be displayed for classmates and interested relatives. The decision about whether this selection should be defined as "Swedish" or encompass broader historical contexts was left to the group for discussion and deliberation. The selection process served as the foundation for the second stage of the study, which involved conducting semi-structured focus-group interviews.[9] During these interviews, the students were asked a series of questions regarding their motivations for selecting or not selecting specific images. They were also encouraged to share their thoughts on the possible choices made by other groups, identify any significant historical events or topics that were *not* represented among the images provided, and discuss the sources of their historical knowledge.

In this project, akin to earlier studies by Barton (2005) and Barton & Levstik (1996, 1998), the focus was not on assessing whether students "got it right" in terms of recalling specific, significant historical content. Instead, the emphasis was on comprehending which aspects of history, both official and vernacular, the students considered significant and how they reasoned in making these choices. Consequently,

[8] See Table 2. The pictures include photographs as well as drawings and paintings, both in color and in black and white.
[9] All interviews were carried out by the author.

the students' discussions about missing or excluded pictures were as valuable as considerations regarding which pictures the students chose. The selection of the 26 pictures to use in the study was made in accordance with the syllabus content (Skolverket 2019) to accomplish two objectives: 1) to provide a broad range of potentially relevant historical reference points for students' reflections and discussions, and 2) minimize my own preconceived notions about significance. The selection of any set of pictures would have shaped the students' discussions in unique ways, and therefore the appropriateness of the selection made here can of course be debated. However, the necessity for selection implies that none of the images can be considered a neutral reflection of Swedish history.

Theoretical frameworks

In the following section, I will outline the two theoretical frameworks, one for historical significance and one for national narratives, that will be utilized at different stages of the analysis.

Framework for historical significance

There is no consensus on the specific criteria deemed valid for determining historical significance (Lévesque 2005). Older frameworks for historical significance have in general a stronger emphasis on and a more detailed specification of objective criteria (e.g., Danto 1985; Ellis 1992; Lomas 1990; Partington 1980). This objective dimension of history is closely linked to the academic discipline. Previous research also presents didactical frameworks for working with historical significance in the classroom, such as the *GREAT* model by Phillips (2002), and the *5-R* model by Counsell (2004). Other frameworks are used for analytical purposes. Some of these are comprehensive, with broad categories (e.g., Peck & Seixas 2008; Seixas 1994, 1997; Seixas & Morton 2013), while others include both a subjective and objective dimension *and* more specific and detailed criteria. Such analytical frameworks have been developed by Cercadillo (2000, 2006) and Lévesque (2005). Both these frameworks include subjective criteria that consider and describe the wide range of students' different vernacular perspectives on historical significance. In this study, I employ Lévesque's (2005, 2008) theoretical framework to analyze the data. This framework is preferred over Cercadillo (2000, 2006) because it offers a comprehensive view of significance by distinguishing between two primary conceptualizations: *disciplinary significance*, encompassing objective criteria, and *memory significance*, which involves subjective criteria. What further differentiates this framework is its explicit distinctions *within* these two aspects, each of which comprise various underlying criteria. Memory significance, consisting of three criteria, delves into the subjective dimension and the collective memory function of significance, examining how students personally connect with the past in their socio-cultural context (Lévesque 2005, p. 4). Memory significance represents an everyday or popular understanding of significance, widely used in society (Lévesque 2005, 2008). Disciplinary significance, on the other hand, encompassing objective disciplinary

significance, aligns with the principles and procedures employed by historians and understood within the context of the historical narrative (Lévesque 2005, 2008). The five criteria for disciplinary significance are based on Partington (1980), through Phillips' (2002)[10], conceptions of significance.

TABLE 1

The framework for historical significance by Lévesque (2005, 2008) with indicators for analysis added by the author. Table by the author.

Conceptions of significance					
Disciplinary significance			**Memory Significance**		
Criteria	**Description**	**Indicators** When students:	**Criteria**	**Description**	**Indicators** When students:
Importance	How important was the event to people living in the past?	use the past tense and their discussions involve people living in the past.	*Intimate interests*	Dealing with family, religion, culture, ancestors, etc.	talk about historical events/people/developments in connections to their family or ancestry, religion, culture.
Relevance	To what extent has the event contributed to a greater understanding of the *present?*	use (at least in part) the present tense, referring to something/ someone[11], known to them in the world today.	*Symbolic significance*	Used for national justification.	talk about the nation of Sweden historically and what has been significant in shaping the country as they perceive it today.
Quantity	How many people's lives were affected?	refer to the quantity of people affected.	*Contemporary lessons*	Simple analogies that can be used to guide our actions in today's society.	express that 1) something in history 2) can teach us something today
Durability	For how long have people's lives been affected?	refer to the duration of the event.			
Profundity	Was the event superficial or deeply affecting? How were people's lives affected?	refer to the depth of the impact of the historical event over time.			

To apply this theoretical framework in the analysis, indicators for the criteria were developed in an abductive manner, through a dialogue between Lévesque's (2005,

[10] In Lévesque (2008, p. 45), Partington (1980) and Hunt (1999) are referred to as having influenced Phillips (2002).
[11] This "thing/person" can be seen as the evidence that Lévesque (2005) refers to.

2008) descriptions of the criteria and the data. These indicators were used for coding the data, and they are described in detail in Table 1 above.

National narratives

In many previous studies, students' perspectives on historical significance have been explored in relation to different conceptions of *national narratives* (see for example Barton 2005; Barton & McCully 2005; Dan & Todd 2011; Kim 2018; Levstik 2000; Sant et al. 2015). In this paper, I will make use of theory related to national narratives (Wertsch 2004) to summarize what possible "usable" accounts concerning Sweden are employed by students when discussing and attributing historical significance. Wertsch (2004) distinguishes between *specific narratives*, which can be seen as stories about specific places, people and times that are prone to change, and *schematic narrative templates*: repeated and hard-to-change "storylines" that structure the specific narratives regardless of time and place. Prevailing and overarching narrative templates are called *master narratives*, or *national narratives* (regarding a nation's master narrative/s). These different narrative templates are examples of socio-cultural tools that are used unreflectively and unconsciously in society by interacting with history cultures and society's collective memory. They are thus reciprocal in the way they shape how we think, and think about ourselves, and how we express ourselves (Wertsch 2004). They can also help with "accurate accounts of the past as well as accounts that are 'usable' in the present for various political and cultural purposes" (Wertsch 2002, p. 66).

Analysis

The analysis of the data has been conducted in four steps. First, to be able to identify *what historical content the students perceive as significant*, the focus groups' image choices were first quantified and tabulated. This result is presented in Table 2 below.

Secondly, to analyze the criteria the students used when discussing historical significance, the transcribed data was coded in relation to Lévesque's (2005, 2008) criteria for historical significance, utilizing the indicators developed for this purpose. Coding was performed using NVivo software. In Table 1 above, each indicator is linked to the respective criterion and the associated description (Lévesque 2005, 2008). In the coding, a reference a) consists of one or more consecutive sentences referring to the same topic, and b) can be a representative of one or more criteria, themes, or sub-themes.

In the third step, I coded each criterion to produce themes to identify which historical content the students talked about in relation to the various criteria. As an example, the *Quantity* criterion has two themes: one named *war* and one named *disease.* In the themes, students refer to the number of people who died as a result of, or other measures of the size of, the wars or diseases that they regard as significant.

And lastly, the three previous steps of the analysis, including historical content, criteria, and the different themes, were re-analyzed through repeated close reading of the data. As a result of this fourth step, I was able to identify two synthesized national narratives in the analysis.

Results

I will first report on the findings regarding what historical content the students perceive as significant, and then on what criteria for historical significance the students used. Under each criterion, the different content-related themes will be exemplified and described. I will then report on data that did not fit into Lévesque's (2005, 2008) framework, and, following this result, new criteria will be tentatively proposed. To sum up, possible national narratives that the students employed when discussing historical significance will be reported on.

Historical content

TABLE 2

Significant historical content. The 26 pictures included in the study, presented in order of frequency of selection. The picture column gives a short description of the pictures. Table by the author.

No.[12]	Historical content	Picture	Frequency of selection (n=14)[13]
21	Compulsory schooling for all	An old photo of children in school	11
8	Gustav Vasa and the rise of the Swedish state	An old painting of King Gustav Vasa	10
5	The Black Death	A photo of a medieval church painting	9
18	Vaccines and population increase	An old painting of a vaccination	9
17	Slavery and colonialization	An old painting of a slave at court	6
26	Local history	An old photo from local history	6
20	Child labor	An old photo of working children	6
1	The Stone Age	A photo of a buried skeleton	6
15	Witch trials	An old etching/drawing of witches	5
4	The introduction of Christianity	A photo of a stave church	5
9	The Reformation	An old etching/drawing of Martin Luther	5
2	The Bronze Age	A photo of rock carvings	4
7	The Kalmar Union	An old picture of Queen Margareta	4
3	The Viking Age	An old etching/drawing of a Viking ship	4
11	The Eve of the Industrial Revolution	An old painting of people in a mine	4
13	A Swedish colonial legacy	An old drawing of a Swedish colony	4
12	Children's living conditions	An old painting of children playing	3
10	The Swedish Era of Great Power	An old painting of Queen Kristina as a child	2
14	The founding of Gothenburg	An old etching/drawing of the old town	2
22	Development of railways	An old photo of a train	2
6	The Hanseatic League	An old etching of a Hansa signet	1
19	The Probate Reforms	A drawing of the changes in the landscape	1
23	Harsh living conditions in the countryside	An old photo of people working on a farm	1
25	Urbanization	An old photo of people in the city center	1
16	The end of the Era of Great Power	An old painting of Karl XII	-
24	Agriculture	An old etching/drawing of a landscape	-

[12] The numbers show the chronological order of the pictures, which is the order in which they were presented to the students.
[13] Group 1 from the M-school only choose seven pictures.

The eight most selected pictures are evenly distributed regarding historical time: spanning from the Stone Age, through the Middle Ages and early modern times, to local history in more recent times. There are no other apparent, overarching patterns regarding, for example, preferences for vernacular versus a more traditional history in this selection of pictures. The aim of this study is, however, not to examine significant historical content by itself, but instead to explore the students' different perspectives when they assess certain historical content as more significant than others. It must be noted here that the historical content students discuss as being significant, or not significant, often went far beyond the historical content of the 26 images used in the focus groups. These discussions were often answers to the question: what historically significant content is not represented in the pictures? We will now turn to the results of the analysis using Lévesque's theoretical framework (2005, 2008).

Criteria and content in relation to students' perspectives on significant history

I will now present the different conceptions of significance that were used by the students in this study. These results will be presented with the underlying criteria in relation to different content-related themes. In summary, the students used *memory significance* (125 ref) almost as often as they used *disciplinary significance* (128 references) in their discussions.

Disciplinary significance

Disciplinary significance has five underlying criteria: *importance*, *profundity*, *quantity*, *durability*, and *relevance*. In this study, relevance**,** a criterion that contributes to a greater understanding of the present, was the most used criterion (in all 52 ref). It was primarily used when students discussed and reflected on content in the theme *culture, religion, and ways of thinking* (13 ref) which included Christianity/Protestantism, antiquity, and the French Revolution. The students seem to regard this historical content as having shaped the ways of living and thinking in Swedish contemporary society:

> *H41*[14]*: Okay, I think Christianity is important because, umm, partly because it is such a major religion. We have got many Christian holidays like Christmas and Easter, umm, and I think that's important. And [H4C: yeah], also because we can, you know, we can look at the history of Christianity and compare it to other information we have about the past.* (H-school, Group 4)[15]

Other big themes where, for example, *knowledge as a way to make people's lives better* (9 ref), *history and developments* (6 ref), *oppressions* (6 ref), and *war and power*

[14] H stands for the H-school, 4 is the number of the focus group, and 1 is the student. C is the interviewer.
[15] The translation of the quotations from the data aims to capture the conversational tone and the essence of the original Swedish text while providing an understandable English version. The interjections and hesitation markers have been retained to maintain some of the original feel.

(5 ref), where students talked about historical content like the Holocaust, Sweden becoming a state, war in general, and more specifically war in Palestine and in Bosnia.

The use of the *importance* criterion is a way to evaluate the significance of past events/people in the eyes of the people living at the time. This criterion is surprisingly rare in the data (in total 24 ref). A few related themes have been found, where the students focus mainly on different forms of change in (past) society at large, often regarding Christianity and the Black Death. The most common theme was *how life in the past was improved* (11 ref):

> *P24: Ah, but the population was [felt] better, or people didn't die from, umm, illness... I mean, what disease was it? P2C: Yeah, it was smallpox. [P24: Yes], but they also invented other vaccines later on. P24: Yes, they P21: reduced the spread of different things like that.* (P-school, Group 2)

The criterion *profundity* (in total 20 ref) was relevant mostly in situations where the students talked about the *shaping of society* in different ways (11 ref), most often about the impact of the reformation and/or the introduction of Christianity in Swedish society.

> *V11: Mmm, I'm thinking about the Reformation. [V1C: Yes], because it's like our relig... well, not ours, but Sweden's religion. It probably had quite a significant impact.* (V-school, Group 1)

The *quantity* criterion refers to the quantity of people affected by the historical event or person that is perceived as significant. Most often this use of quantity (in total 16 ref) is observed in discussions focused on long, or big, *wars* (6 ref), *eras* (5 ref), or *diseases* (5 ref), for example the Black Death and/or the COVID-19 pandemic:

> *K2C: How... umm, the Black Death. Why is this important history?* K24*: Mmm, it affected so many people. [K2 many simultaneously: Yeah, ah] and a lot of people died of course, so it's important to know that it was a difficult time, you know*. (K-school, Group 2)

In the *durability* criterion, the significance depends on the time span of a historical event. When the students in this study used duration as a reason for significance (16 ref), this was mostly done in relation to different '*eras'* (5 ref), like the Viking Age or the Stone Age.

> *H21: [...] the Viking Age lasted for a long time, and this was also a very long period. Like, I think these two, these two are two of the most important.* (H-school, Group 2)

Memory Significance

Memory significance has three underlying criteria: *intimate interests*, *symbolic significance*, and *contemporary lessons*. The criterion *intimate interest* (49 ref) is related to events, persons, or developments in connection to the students' family, religion, culture, or ancestry. The most common theme in relation to this criterion was *wars* (17 ref). The students often talked about relatives with personal experiences from different wars (11 ref).

> P31*: I think it's important... [my comments removed] I think the Balkan War is important, people need to know about it [P3C: yes] and what happened, so we need to delve deeper into it [the student has roots in the Balkans]*. (P-School, Group 3)

These reflections about the significance of *wars* were often given as answers to the interview question "What significant history is *not* included among these pictures from Swedish history". The informants with an immigrant background wanted to point out the importance of, or of knowing more about, wars[16] that they, or their family, had fled from. Older relatives' experiences and tales from the Finnish winter war were mentioned in five of the groups. Students also found wars, predominantly World War II, significant in cases when relatives knew a lot about the war and had told interesting stories about it.

Not surprisingly, students also used intimate interests in relation to *local history* (8 ref), typical of the suburb, village, part of town, or the cultural context where they live. In this theme, the students therefore often explained why they find something significant with the statement "since we live there".

> *M1C: Ha, but hey, here we also have important history... [the suburb]. Why is this important history? M13: Because we live here. M1C: Yes. M11: The closeness to the place where I grew up, and, ah, since I was little, I have lived here. M1C: Have you lived here your whole life? M13: Yes, my whole life. M11: Exactly.* (M-school, Group 1)

The history of the students' *ancestry* was also perceived as historically significant (8 ref) together with *knowledge from* (5 ref) and *about* (4 ref) family history. This was expressed as a desire to be able to learn more of their own ancestry and roots, for instance students with a minority background like Romani or Sami, or students with an immigrant background from, for example, Kosovo, Palestine, or Kurdistan. The criteria of *intimate interests* also concerned themes like *religion* and *gender*.

Symbolic significance (51 ref) was used by the students to ascribe significance to events, persons, or developments that can be described as national and/or patriotic. In this study, students used this criterion when they discussed and reflected on what has been historically significant in shaping Sweden as they perceive it today. In the data, one historical agent stands out, occurring more often than all other historical figures: the early modern king *Gustav Vasa* (22 ref). He is associated with great personal agency and the shaping of the modern state of Sweden, securing Sweden's "independence", and the reformation process in the 16th century when Sweden went from being a Catholic country to a Protestant one. He is described as powerful, loved but also feared, like a founding father who can't be overlooked in history. The students also explain his significance with the use of history connected to Gustav Vasa, like the annual ski race, Vasaloppet, and the National Day of Sweden, on the 6th of June.

[16] Mostly the war in former Yugoslavia, the Israeli-Palestine conflict, and the Finnish Winter War.

> *V23: Gustav Vasa. V2C: Gustav Vasa? V23: He was the start of so much [inaudible], like for example, the revolution. V2C: What did you say? V23: Um, I mean the Reformation. V2C: The Reformation, yes. V23: Even though it wasn't that he wanted Sweden to become Protestant, it was, he thought it was better because he wanted money or the church's taxes so he could build large armies. [V2C: Exactly]. But it was the start of being able to believe in what one wanted.* (V-school, Group 2)

Gustav Vasa is also an important figure in another theme of this criterion, *Christianity* (6 ref), describing the significance of Sweden becoming and being a Christian country, and the change from Catholicism to Protestantism.

The second largest theme in this criterion, stands out from the others.[17] It can be described as the students referring to a *negative symbolic significance* (10 ref). In this theme, students reflected on "history that is not talked about" or history that is perceived as "silenced" in official history. Examples of this can be what Sweden did (or did not do, although they should have) during the Second World War, the country's part in the colonialization process and slavery, racism, child labor, and witch hunts in the 17th century.

> *K3C: The colonies, yes, Sweden's colonies. K34: It's also about the slave trade. K3C: Yes, absolutely. […]. K34: Ah, but then I think more like this, you know, it's evidence that Sweden hasn't always been like…K32: So innocent. K34: Exactly, so kind, you know? Ah, "we are the best country", but actually, how should I say it, we have had a dark history, Sweden says or… K34: We don't say our, um… K31: We don't always want to admit […]K32: We say that we are a tolerant country and that we have always been that way. K3C: Mmm.* (K-school, Group 2)

This negative view of Sweden's symbolical history is also visible when students talk about the history of Sweden as less interesting than other parts of the world, or that history becomes interesting when *other parts of the world are brought into Swedish history* (4 ref).

World events at the time of the interviews were reflected and underlined in the students' discussions in relation to *contemporary lessons* (in total 25 ref).[18] The dominant theme was *lessons to be learned from a pandemic* (17 ref), where students mentioned historical events like the Black Death and the history of vaccines in relations to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

> *H43: The Black Death. H42: We've already mentioned that. H44: Yes. H41: Well, but we must be able to learn from the mistakes we made back then.* (H-school, Group 4)

Another theme in the material was *lessons to be learned from (other) horrible things/events in history* (6 ref). Examples of such events are child labor, witch hunts, war, slavery, and the Stockholm Bloodbath in the time of Gustav Vasa. Lessons are also

[17] The different themes were Gustav Vasa, negative parts of the past, religion, relation to the world, symbolic significance of other countries, industry, Vikings, and minorities.
[18] Spring and late summer of 2021.

to be learned from positive events like the introduction of *education for all children* (3 ref) in 1842, where the students address the fact that the compulsory school system also implied greater gender equality.

Perspectives beyond the framework…

There are also perspectives on historical significance in the data that did not quite fit inside, or went beyond, the boundaries of Lévesque's (2005, 2008) theoretical framework. Given the presence of diverse and interconnected reflections on significance in the data, these can be categorized, either wholly or partially, within Lévesque's criteria (2005, 2008) or within newly framed criteria, which will be tentatively introduced and described below.

Most of these statements include students' perspectives on significance that have *ethical dimensions* (35 ref). Groups from all schools are represented in this tentative criterion that relates to discussions that include the historical significance of, for example, human and minority rights, gender and HBTQI equality, racism, colonialization, and child labor:

> *K31: Yeah, I'm always most interested in the racist history, you know. K3C: Mmm. K31: Because I find it so strange that, for example, if there's a darker-skinned person and a lighter-skinned person, should you just choose based on skin color? Like, nobody has chosen to have the skin color they have, you know. K32: You just kind of got it. K31: Yeah, it's not like K32: It's not anyone's fault.* (K-school, Group 3)

Students did also express a *lack of knowledge* (15 ref) about things they found tentatively significant, or in their words, interesting. This second largest category is complex since the students did not assess significance based on what they *knew* but instead from what they did *not* know but would like to know more about. In this category, the reasoning used by the students may be subjective, based on a personal interest, as in this reference where one student wants to learn more about his minority heritage:

> *M1C: But you just want to learn more. M11: Exactly, I want to learn more! M1C: Yes, yes. M11: And I think that more [of this] history should be brought up also in school.* (M-school, Group 1)

They can also take a point of departure from a more general or objective standpoint in relation to what is taught in school.

The third tentative criterion found in the analysis, *silent knowledge(s)* (10 ref), is related to the two first categories described above. Students discuss the significance of what they describe as withheld facts or "things you don't talk about". They were curious about this historical content, and they want to learn about it, but, as they describe it, this content is neither a part of the curriculum as they know it, nor present in the textbooks, nor in line with the history taught in school. In this way, this tentative criterion borders the theme *negative symbolic significance*, described above, but does not have to include the nationalistic context, even though it often does. Examples of such historical content could be slavery, colonialism, and minorities.

> *K1C: Well, before we started recording here, you were discussing colonialism and... you were talking about... slavery... umm... K11: It feels like oppression, you know. K1C: What did you say? K11: It feels like oppression. K1C: Which oppression? K11: Slavery. K1C: Oh, yeah. K11: That Sweden doesn't want to acknowledge it. K1C: Oh, I see. You mean that we, like, suppress that knowledge? K1 many simultaneously: Yes...* (K-school, Group 1)

Justifying significance with feelings or *emotions* about historical content was also visible in the data. The explanations, which are often not very elaborate and frequently linked to verbs like "like" and "think", are divided into two themes. In the first, the emotions can be positive, finding *exciting history* significant (13 ref):

> *H11: (. . .) and I like this one because it's exciting with skeletons [H1C: oh, I see], and then I don't know what the others are.* (H-school, Group 1)

In the second theme students selected *horrible, dark history* (5 ref) as significant. They specifically point to horrific parts of history, for example wars, child labor and witches, as fascinating and significant.

> *K23: So, I mean, I'm not, I'm quite interested in World War II because I think it was so horrible but, can you say that, ah, I think... well, I find it very fascinating to learn about it.* (K-school, Group 2)

And lastly, students also use something being *the first/the oldest* (12 ref) to explain historical significance. These explanations come close to Lévesque's (2005, 2008) disciplinary criteria *quantity* and *durability* but are, in this data set, formulated in a definite form that is interpreted as a supplementary or separate way of assessing significance.

> *P24: Ah, the first vaccine, maybe we need more vaccines for other diseases. P2: Mmm. P2C: Exactly. P21: And for emerging diseases too.* (P-school, Group 2)

Discussion

These findings lead to three important conclusions regarding the historical content that students perceive as significant and the criteria they employ in their reflections on historical significance. Firstly, it is suggested that two additional dimensions, *ethical* and *affective significance*, be incorporated into Lévesque's (2005, 2008) framework. These additions are necessary to comprehensively capture and explain the diverse range and nuances observed in the data.

TABLE 3

The framework for historical significance by Lévesque (2005, 2008) with new dimensions and tentative criteria added by the author. Table by the author.

Disciplinary significance	**Memory Significance**	**Other dimensions of historical significance?**		**Tentative additional criteria for significance**
Relevance	Intimate interests	Ethical dimensions of significance		**Ethical significance?**
Importance	Symbolic Significance	Silenced knowledge(s)		
Quantity	Contemporary lessons	Lack of knowledge		Can be seen as a part of, or added to, disciplinary significance?
Durability		First/Oldest		
Profundity		Horrible, dark history		**Affective significance?**
		Exciting history		

The tendency for students to select and discuss historical significance by using ethical norms and notions of good/bad and right/wrong was strong in the data and used by groups from all schools. This way of discussing and attributing historical significance has also been noted in previous research (Barton 2005; Barton & Levstik 1998; Levstik 2008). The ethical perspective is visible in the aim of the history syllabus and more explicit in the central content for the younger years (Skolverket 2019). There is also a strong emphasis on values, democracy, and humanity in the curricula for the Swedish compulsory school. For example, there are goals for all schools to see to that each student "can consciously determine and express ethical standpoints based on knowledge of human rights and basic democratic values, as well as personal experiences; respects the intrinsic value of other people; rejects the subjection of people to discrimination, oppression and victimization, and becomes involved in helping other people," (Skolverket 2018, p. 10).[19] All these goals seem to be visible when students discuss significant history in this study.

A second conclusion is that *current* and *comprehensive issues* in students' everyday lives, such as the COVID-19 pandemic in this study, seem to have an important impact on their selection of historically significant content. This is evident when students

[19] While other references to Lgr11 are to the Swedish version (2019), here the official English version of Lgr11 (2018) is used.

attribute importance to topics like the Black Death and vaccines, using the criteria *relevance* and *contemporary lessons*, and the tentative criterion *affective significance*. By doing so, they establish connections between historical events and the present social context, gaining insights and finding explanations for the challenging and threatening situation they encounter. Prior research by Bergman (2020), conducted before the pandemic, also highlights the contemporary aspect of significant history, where students are not only fascinated by exploring the darker aspects of national history, particularly the Black Death, but also recognize valuable lessons to be learned from it.

The third significant conclusion highlights the presence of two somewhat contradictory national narratives employed by the students when discussing and attributing historical significance (Wertsch 2004). The first narrative is centered around national development and progress: *forming and transforming the nation and improving life in society*. The students utilized all the criteria within disciplinary significance, supplemented by memory significance criteria such as *contemporary lesso*ns and *symbolic significance*. Through this narrative, they conveyed a recurring and traditional understanding of Sweden's history, emphasizing the struggles of historical agents like Gustav Vasa, religious transformations, the acquisition of knowledge, and the fight against diseases. According to the students' discussions and reflections, this history has symbolic significance that is important for understanding today's society. The prominence of students expressing progressive national narratives has been observed in research conducted in various national contexts, particularly in the United States (Barton 2005[20]; Levstik 2000; Rivero & Pelegrín 2019; Terzian & Yeager 2007). Similar Swedish national narratives, close to the history syllabus (Skolverket 2019), have previously been observed by Bergman (2020), Olofsson et al. (2017), Danielsson Malmros (2012), and Samuelsson & Wendell (2017). Stolare (2014) points to a history education in Swedish middle school that is centered on a nationally oriented historical narrative. Åström Elmersjö (2013) notes that mythologized motifs, or historical narratives, concerning emancipation in Swedish history textbooks involved a similar historical content: Christianity, Gustav Vasa and the introduction of suffrage. Olofsson et al. (2017) explain recurrent national narratives as being related to strong selective traditions in Swedish history education. In Bergman's (2020) study, students almost exclusively mention events in Swedish history as significant, which underlines the students' view of significant history as being the history of the majority. Students who perceive "traditional" historical content that is close to the national narrative as significant, can also be seen in different national contexts (e.g., Apostolidou 2012; Avarogullari & Kolcu 2016; Bergman 2020; Egea Vivancos & Arias Ferrer 2018; Levstik & Groth 2005; Olofsson et al. 2017; Rivero & Pelegrín 2019; Serrano & Barca 2019; Yeager, Foster & Greer 2002).

The analysis also indicates a more personal and engaged counter-narrative that students in the study used when ascribing historical significance*: the silent and silenced narratives of alternative and ethically questionable histories*. This narrative was

[20] Regarding the U.S. students in previous research that the results are compared with.

communicated by the students with the use of the criteria *intimate interests*, *ethical significance*, and the theme *negative symbolic significance* in relation to the pictures *Slavery and colonialization, Witch trials, Child labor*, and *A Swedish colonial legacy.* It was also connected to perspectives on historical content that were *not* directly represented among the pictures: human and minority rights, gender and HBTQI equality, and racism. When the students used *intimate interests* relating to the themes of *ancestry* and *wars*, this can be seen as an expression of the silent, or silenced, histories of students with immigrant, indigenous, or minority backgrounds. This shows the possibilities of a multitude of significant, vernacular histories in the classroom. These are not a part of history education as it is perceived by the students in this study. Such silences can be explained by teachers using "the code of silence" as can be seen in relation to possibly disturbing and uncomfortable topics in American history (Levstik 2000). Lozic's (2010) research on students' (ethnic) identifications in relation to the subject of history confirms that the historical experiences of students who have an immigrant background are missing in Swedish history education. These students want to learn more about the history of their parents' home countries since they see it as an important part of their identity. Nolgård et al. (2020) also show that the histories of indigenous and minority people are silent historiographies in Sweden and globally. These alternative images of Sweden can also be seen in the research of Olofsson et al. (2017, p. 252), where two groups of dissenting voices can be heard: one voice that questions the idea of progress, and another that questions the historical narrative itself. It can also be related to the story of the stranger, one of the national narratives in Danielsson Malmros' (2012) study. These meta-perspectives on what is included in, and who decides on, significant history differ from the results of Bergman's (2020) study, where the students "accepted what society sees as historical significance as their own definition of significance" and where the students perceived history as "a fixed story" (Bergman 2020, p. 174-175).

This counter-narrative with ethical dimensions also connects to three tenets in previous research concerning students' views on historical significance (Sjölund Åhsberg, forthcoming). One tenet is the students defining "dark pages" of history as significant (Barton 2005; Grever, Haydn & Ribbens 2008; Kim 2018; Levstik & Groth 2005; Sant et al. 2015; Sheehan 2011; Virta 2016). The second tenet is students taking a moral stance when determining historical significance, when students use the criteria *learning from others, teaching the world,* and using *fairness* in New Zealand (Levstik 2008, p. 379), and girls focusing on *memory, justice,* and *the importance of helping others* when selecting historical significance in Northern Ireland (Barton 2005). In Bergman's (2020) study, students discussed learning in particular from "morally good examples" (Bergman 2020, p. 172). Thirdly, previous research indicates that students in different national contexts perceive various vernacular histories as significant (Apostolidou 2012; Grever, Haydn & Ribbens 2008; Lévesque 2005; Rivero & Pelegrín 2019; Sant et al. 2015)**.** Research on immigrant students and historical significance is almost non-existent (Sjölund Åhsberg, forthcoming), with one exception (Virta 2016).

The counter-narrative the students express can be interpreted as a way of challenging, and expanding, the scope of history education. It can also be seen as a way

to counterbalance the picture of Sweden as a "country that has left conflict behind" and that is "a pioneer of modernity, morality and welfare" in continual progress (Olofsson et al. 2017, p. 253). When students, especially those belonging to a minority, or those with an immigrant background, acknowledge such discrepancies between an official, unifying framework, or historical narrative, and their own personal experiences of inequity, this is something emotionally powerful (Barton & Levstik 1998). It also shows that even young students can grasp the idea that "that historical accounts are not copies of the past" (Lee 2004, p. 155). These findings highlight the importance of providing students with frameworks that enable them to delve deeply into, and to challenge, the complexities of the past, both in the form of legitimating stories as well as alternative, vernacular histories (Barton & Levstik 1998). Another implication of this study is the importance of these interpretive frameworks including the diverse historical positionalities that students bring into the history classroom (VanSledright 1998).

Conclusions

Swedish middle-school students in this study express a tension between an official history close to history education, often exemplified by the contributions of Gustav Vasa and the Reformation to the development of the Swedish state, and a silenced, unofficial history that the students want to learn more about. This silenced history is either a vernacular history of the students' families, their ancestry and local history, and their narratives of war, or it is an exciting, dark history of other places or other people, often with dimensions of deep unfairness. Significant history, in the form of contemporary lessons, was used by the students in this study to try to navigate and understand a challenging and frightening pandemic. Barton & Levstik (2008) point to students' interest in ambiguous history that is puzzling to them and that they have had little experience of in their education. This observation holds true within the context of Swedish middle schools as well.

The insights generated about what students perceive as significant history in this small-scale study are influenced by several factors, including the aims and research questions of the study, the theoretical perspectives used in the analysis, and the pictures used in the focus groups. All these factors are put in relation to the positionings of the informants, their prior knowledge, and their school backgrounds. In this way, the results of this study are contextually unique and not easily transferable to other national contexts or to students of other ages. However, despite these limitations, I can conclude that the students broke through the frames of the study in many ways that were not foreseen. They talked about a more personal, recent, and geographically and ethnically diverse history than was afforded by the selected pictures. One thing that stands out in this analysis is that, unexpectedly, many of the young students expressed "a sense of the moral weight of the past" (Levstik 2008, p. 375). This moral dimension, along with an affective element, was also used when attributing and discussing significant history. These findings, extending beyond the criteria for historical significance proposed by Lévesque (2005, 2008), suggest the need to introduce two new criteria to the theoretical

framework: ethical and affective significance. Further research is necessary to explore the nature, extent, and potential relationship between these two criteria.

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