



This paper is taken from

*Human Rights and Citizenship Education
Proceedings of the eleventh Conference of the
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe
Academic Network*

London: CiCe 2009

edited by Peter Cunningham, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 978-0-9562789-6-8

Without explicit authorisation from CiCe (the copyright holder)

- only a single copy may be made by any individual or institution for the purposes of private study only
- multiple copies may be made only by
 - members of the CiCe Thematic Network Project or CiCe Association, or
 - a official of the European Commission
 - a member of the European parliament

If this paper is quoted or referred to it must always be acknowledged as

Virta, A. (2009) Students' conceptions of historical significance, in Ross, A. (ed) Human Rights and Citizenship Education. London: CiCe, pp 282 - 287

© CiCe 2009

CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

This paper does not necessarily represent the views of the CiCe Network.



Lifelong Learning Programme

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- The CiCe administrative team at London Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The Lifelong Learning Programme and the personnel of the Education and Culture DG of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

Students' conceptions of historical significance

Arja Virta
University of Turku (Finland)

Abstract

People's conceptions of what is significant in history are related to the historical culture in a society, and to their historical consciousness. Previous studies of significance often focus on how students' conceptions are related to ethnicity or nationality. The main question in the present paper is how adolescents assess key events in the history of their home countries. Finnish students (n = 62) often mentioned the achievement of independence, and wars, which are key events in the great national narrative. Foreign-born students' (n= 56) answers also reflected the recent political events in their respective home countries. For comparison, I refer to interview data of foreign-born students (n= 36), which suggest that history is strongly related to their identity.

The concept of historical significance and research related to it

There are no absolute criteria for assessing the importance or significance of historical events, personalities or phenomena. Instead, the subjective ideas that people have about historical significance are important as indicators of the values and the nature of historical culture prevailing in their society. What contents are seen as important and valuable makes the core of the collective memory, and this is strongly related to culture, time context, and society. Basically it is a question of choice. Also the school curricula can be interpreted to be part of the historical culture, although historical culture often is seen as the informal mediator of historical memory. (Karlsson, 2004, p 34). History is thus not only knowledge, and not only a school subject or an academic domain. Neither are our individual conceptions of history only cognitive but normally contain values, opinions, feelings or unclear images.

Especially since the 1990s, historical significance has been one of the main topics of research related to historical thinking in various countries. In the present paper I shall give an overview of some of these empirical studies, which often compare the conceptions of historical significance as related to ethnicity or nationality. A comparative perspective between the conceptions of Finnish and foreign-born adolescents is included in the present paper. Table 1 summarises some approaches to previous studies on significance, the data of which have often been gathered by semi-structured interviews or questionnaires. Pictures or lists of events have also often been included as impetus for responses. Most of the studies have drawn on a rather small data.

The studies have dealt mainly with adolescents' and sometimes with teachers' conceptions of the most significant events in national or world history. For instance, Cercadillo (2001) and Yeager, and Forster and Greer (2002), have compared the conceptions of adolescents in various countries, while Barton and Levstik (1998), Epstein (2000), and Lévesque (2005) have compared the ideas of those living with different ethnic, national or cultural background, but living in one society.

Table 1. Overview of studies on conceptions of historical significance

Study	focus	methods; data
Seixas, 1993	formation of historical conceptions in a multicultural society	interview, secondary school students (n = 6), Canada
Seixas, 1997	argumentation, explanations of significance	questionnaire, Grade 11 students (n = 82) from four schools; Canada
Barton and Levstik, 1998	how different ethnic groups saw the historical significance	group interviews supported with pictures; students from grades 5 to 8 (n = 48), USA
Epstein, 2000	how American students with Afro-American or European background interpreted history	interviews, 5 +5 students from grade 11; observations from classes, USA
Levstik, 2000	how adolescents, student teachers, and teachers evaluated the significance of historical events	interviews supported with visuals (48 students from grades 5–8; 20 prospective teachers, and 12 teachers) USA
Cercadillo,	how students assess and judge the	written responses based on source material,

2001	importance of historical events; comparison between Spanish and British adolescents, and between various age groups	interviews (72 British and 72 Spanish students, grades 8, 10, 12)
Yeager, Foster and Greer, 2002	comparison of American and British students' conceptions of significant events	semi-structured interviews, listing significant events, choosing from a given list of events. 23 informants from the USA, 21 from Great Britain, age 13–14
Barton, 2005	catholic and protestant adolescents' conceptions of significance	open ended interview or pair interview, supported with pictures; 20 + 20 persons from both religious groups, age 12–17; Northern Ireland
Lévesque, 2005	Anglophone and Francophone Canadian students' conceptions of significant events and criteria of significance	questionnaire, commenting lists of events, high school students (n = 78); Ontario Canada

Many of the studies mentioned in Table 1 suggest that adolescents have fairly uniform opinions about what has been significant in the history of their home countries. For instance, the students in the United States preferred events related to the birth and development of the nation, and to wars (Barton and Levstik, 1998; Levstik, 2000; Yeager et al., 2002). In Levstik's (2000) study, teachers' and prospective teachers' interpretations resembled each other; teachers chose from a selection of historical pictures those which were favourable for the nation, but forgot more negative events or issues (ethnic racism, the Vietnam war, economic depression). This can be interpreted as legitimising the nation. Students' choices of important events often also corresponded to the official history, certainly mediated by the history curriculum. Also popular culture seems to have had an influence, and some young informants also mentioned episodes from their own lives. (cf. Barton and Levstik, 1998; Yeager et al., 2002.) Wertsch (1994) made a conclusion that his informants had fairly homogeneous conceptions of the past. In his study, the informants described in their essays the early history of the United States. Most narratives focussed on a small selection of events, such as journeys of exploration, the arrival of colonisers, the declaration of independence, constitution, and civil war. The white population had an active role, but the indigenous people were in the role of objects.

It is obvious that ethnicity and national background have had an influence on students' conceptions of history. Although, for instance, adolescents belonging to other ethnic or racial groups may identify themselves with "us", i.e. the main population, there have been remarkable differences as well (Barton and Levstik, 1998). Epstein (2000) analysed the narratives produced by Grade 11 students in the United States of America and found out that those with European background preferred events related to the nation, civil rights and progression, while those with Afro-American background emphasised in their narratives inequality, persistence of racism, and fight for equality and human rights. This illustrates the vast differences that can prevail in historical conceptions within a single society (cf. Barton, 2005).

Individuals can also have quite different explanations for significance. Cercadillo (2001) found in her study differing types of explanations, which are partly overlapping. Contemporary significance refers to how people thought about the event when it happened, while causal significance is related to its influence on later developments. A historical event can be important as a turning point, or it can have symbolic significance, for instance as a moral example, and it can be seen as important for the present day or the future. The studies described above have given inspiration for the present study. The research issue here is to examine what events are emphasised by Finnish and foreign born adolescents. The answers given by Finnish born students are compared to those of foreign born students, who were asked to write about the significant events of their respective home countries.

Data and procedures

The data of the present paper draws on the author's study on teaching history in culturally diverse classes. The first findings reported here are based on the pilot study, where both Finnish (n = 62) and foreign-born adolescents (n = 56) from junior high school filled in a questionnaire with open-ended items. The informants had to answer the following question: Tell in your own words about the most important events in the history of your country. The foreign-born adolescents were advised to tell about the country of origin of their families. These classes were from one school, where about 47 % of all students had other than Finnish family background.

The number of students was 118. Of them 62 were of Finnish and 56 of non-Finnish background, including also refugees. Various nationalities were included (background in Kosovo, Russia, Iraq, Iran, Somalia and Estonia).

The informants were not given any ready made lists of events. They were also free to decide how many events they mentioned. A few responses were quite short, and some students misunderstood the question and only mentioned persons or issues, not events. These answers were also considered, if the contents could be understood. A few responses were rejected due to their poor written form or total misunderstanding of the question.

The data does not allow deep going interpretations, but even frequencies illustrate some patterns of students' thinking. They prepared to answer the question, and some of them had not perhaps even thought about such issues previously, but therefore they may also give quite spontaneous and authentic impressions. As to their background knowledge of history, the youngest pupils (Grade 7) had not studied the recent history, and their responses were therefore often limited to older history.

The second data, which is here only used as a reference material, consist of the interviews of 36 students, who have migrant background (Virta, 2008). The interviews were conducted for the broader study on history education in diverse settings. Only issues related to historical significance are picked from it for the present article. Half of these students also answered the questionnaire used in the first study.

Findings

Students with Finnish background most frequently mentioned the achievement of independence (1917), and wars, often the winter war and continuation war in the Second World War, as the most significant events in Finland's history. About one half of the events mentioned were related to these (Table 2), and the majority in all age groups mentioned independence. The answers are certainly influenced by the history curriculum, especially because the grade 9 students mentioned those events more often than others, and they had already studied the whole history syllabus. They also gave most comprehensive responses, and their answers dealt more often with political history. The data does not reveal a coherent pattern of other events, because they were scattered. Some informants also mentioned such pieces of information as sports or the success of the music band *Lord* in the Eurovision song contest, which are more related to popular culture and students' interests.

Table 2. The significant events mentioned by Finnish adolescents (n = 62).

event	number of students 62	grade 7 (n=13)	grade 8 (n=30)	grade 9 (n=19)
Achievement of independence	46	10	22	14
Wars (total)	48	7	12	29
wars (unspecified)	(19)	(6)	(6)	(7)
Finland in the Second World War (winter war, continuation war)	(14)	-	(5)	(9)
Civil war in Finland 1918	(8)	-	-	(8)
Finnish war between Russia and Sweden 1808- 1809	(4)	(1)	(1)	(2)
war reparations paid to the Soviet Union	(3)	-	-	(3)
Other				
Swedish / Russian regime in Finland	11	6	1	4
Membership in the European Union	2	-	1	1
Presidents (Tarja Halonen; Urho Kekkonen, C G E Mannerheim)	9	1	3	5
culture (native language, religious reformation)	6	1	-	5
Industrialization	5	-	2	3
Victory in Eurovision song contest	12	2	8	2
Sports event / championship	6	1	5	-
History of cities (great fire in home city 1827; founding of Helsinki)	8	7	-	1
Ice age	3	1	2	-
Other	15	3	3	8

events mentioned altogether	170	39	59	72
"Nothing is important " / rejected	5	1	3	1

The attention given to political independence and wars resembles the findings of international studies, and are also explained by the emphasis of the history curriculum. Also Wertsch (1994) data from higher education students was mainly constructed of a small core of key events. Levstik (2001) and Epstein (2000) found out that the respondents were focussing on specific key events in national history, and Ahonen (1998) noted that Finnish upper secondary students identified themselves most strongly with some dramatic turning points in national history, such as the winter war 1939–1940, rather than with a deep on-going, long-term structural evolution in society.

Students were not asked to explain why they chose the events, only to narrate the events. Most informants only mentioned separate events, as in the following example:

Winter war. Gold medal in ice hockey 1995 and silver in Olympic Games 2006. Victory in the Eurovision song contest. Independence. (Grade 8, male)

Some students also gave explanations for their choices of events:

Becoming an independent country because otherwise we would still belong to Russia. Middle Ages because ladies wore fine dresses. Finland won the Eurovision music contest. Tarja Halonen, the first female president in Finland. (Grade 8, female)

I think there are two really important issues in Finnish history. The first one is the formation of the Finnish language, and we have to thank Mikael Agricola for it, who is the father of the Finnish language. Without him there perhaps never would have been a language which is so personal. Another very important thing is that Finland gained independence from Russia. (Grade 9, female)

The Finnish war [1808 -09, which resulted in separation from Sweden and annexation to Russia], autonomy, independence, civil war, winter war and continuation war. Industrialisation. Because all these led to obtaining and keeping independence and a wealthy state. (Grade 9, male)

Explanations varied a great deal, and they were partly ambiguous, which is suggested by the quotes above. The respondents seldom considered the significance of the event at its own time, but its effects, consequences and development. In the examples above, the development of language, independence and industrialisation are situated in a long line of development, which in Cercadillo's (2001) classification would correspond to both causal and symbolic explanations.

The students with non-Finnish background (Table 3) were not divided into sub-categories on the basis of nationality, because the group sizes would have become very small. School grades were neither used in classification because these students should have written mainly about their respective countries, the history of which is not systematically dealt with in Finnish history lessons. Certain regularities can, however, be observed in their responses.

Table 3. Foreign-born students' conceptions about significant historical events from their home countries.

Event / type of event (from the history of the respondents' countries of origin)	respondents (nr)
events related to independence / achievement of independence / pursuit to independence	56
wars, in general	11
violence, death, murders, terrorism	35
peace, hope for the end of war or violence (specified approach to war etc)	7
revolution (mentioned specifically)	4
regent, head of the state	3
space flights	11
statement related to culture	3
oil or nuclear energy	8
	6

sports event	2
other	15
statements totally	105
empty, cannot tell	5

The adolescents with foreign background, often refugees, most frequently mentioned wars and violent events in their responses, but at the top of the list were also independence, the pursuit of independence or the lack of it. The choice of issues on a general level is similar to those of the Finnish students, but is related to more recent events and developments – as in the case of pupils with their roots in Estonia, Bosnia, Kosovo – and Kurds.

For instance a boy with Estonian background wrote:

When Russia / the Soviet Union tried to get Estonia. In the World War II the Nazis came and tried to occupy Estonia but they failed. Russia managed to rule over Estonia for a while but not long. Till the Baltic states combined their powers and defeated Russia.

The emphasis on wars and violence is understandable, because many of these respondents, or their families, had quite recently migrated or escaped from areas, the recent history of which has included violence, civil wars, genocide or revolutions. This is expressed by a girl with Bosniac origin:

When Bosnia became independent and the war is finally over and nobody needs to suffer anymore. This is important for me, because so many has had to suffer and it is not a nice thing to see. In general, I do not care for politics, but there is too much war. It was also good that Josip Broz Tito led Jugoslavia. (girl / Bosnia)

Part of the respondents mentioned phenomena which were favourable for the old home country, in different levels, as in the following response:

The most important historical events for the Soviet Union were when it won Nazi Germany with other countries. When the Soviet Union won the World Championship gold in ice hockey. When The Soviet Union for the first time flew to the space, and the first human being in the space was Juri Gagarin. When the first Olympic games were arranged in Moscow.

The respondents from various nationalities gave widely differing responses, and the influence of ethnic or national origin is obvious. Those who had their roots in Iraq mentioned wars, and also leaders from Hammurabi to Saddam Hussein, as well as oil and the US attack. Iranian students mentioned the birth of the Iranian state, nuclear power, revolution and the abdication of the Shah. Kurds wrote about their divided country, their nation's attempt to gain independence and massacres.

Estonians wrote about independence and wars. What was distinctive in the Russian boys' answers was that they underlined victorious wars, together with technological developments and glorious sports achievements.

Some highlights from the second data, which consist of 36 interviews of migrant students, can be paralleled to the previous findings. Most of these informants said that they were interested in history but did not remember that the history of their old home countries was not dealt with in history lessons. However, most of them thought that as such it is important to know about the history of one's own country, although they felt it difficult to explain this. For instance a student whose family had migrated from Kosovo remarked that if you have a country of your own, you've got to know about it. Two male students, who had come from Iraq, expressed their pride about the long history of their country: it was there where History began.

The past did matter, but not in the same way to all. The history of the respective countries seemed to be connected to the students' identities, although adolescents do not necessarily articulate it during ordinary history lessons. The main source of this information had been the family or the media.

Discussion

There are some similarities in the Finnish and foreign-born students responses, although they were writing about different countries. Finnish students most often mentioned wars and the gaining of independence as the most significant events in national history, in accordance with the great national narrative. Foreign-born students' answers were more varied, but frequently also related to wars in the history of their home countries. The Finnish students' answers are clearly influenced by the school curriculum, but they also wrote about more informal history. The migrant students drew more on the history they had learned outside of school. Particularly the interview data suggest that some migrant students were very proud of the long history of their countries, and for many of them, history and knowing about history were strongly related to identity. The students' answers, although rather short, can be seen as pieces of evidence of the historical cultures in the society, and among the minorities. They can also be seen as evidence of the functions of the past for minorities, who use history basically in the same manner as nation-states, for enhancing cohesion within the group and intensifying the sense of identity.

However, individual students' interpretations of history cannot be derived directly from their cultural or ethnic backgrounds. What is evident is that teachers should be more conscious about the history that their students may carry with them to history lessons, and also about the unofficial sources of historical information, feelings and attitudes related to and based on history.

References

- Ahonen, S. (1998) *Historiaton sukupolvi? Historian vastaanotto ja historiallisen identiteetin rakentuminen 1990-luvun nuorison keskuudessa*. Historiallisia Tutkimuksia 202. Helsinki: Suomen Historiallinen Seura
- Barton, K. C. (2005) "Best not to forget them": Secondary students' judgment of historical significance in Northern Ireland. *Theory and Research in Social Education* 33, 1, pp 9–44
- Barton, K. C. and Levstik, L. S. (1998) "It wasn't a good part of history": national identity and students' explanations of historical significance. *Teachers College Record* 99, pp 478–513
- Cercadillo, L. (2001) Significance in history: Students' ideas in England and Spain, in Dickinson, A., Gordon, P. and Lee, P. (eds) *International Review of History Education. vol. 3. Raising standards in history education*. London: Woburn press, pp 116–145
- Epstein, T. (2000) Adolescents' perspectives on racial diversity in U.S. history: case studies from an urban classroom. *American Educational Research Journal*. 37, 1, pp 185–214
- Karlsson, K.-G. (2004) Historiedidaktik: begrepp, teori och analys, in Karlsson K.-G. and Zander, U. (eds) *Historian är nu. En introduktion till historiedidaktiken*. Lund: Studentlitteratur, pp 21–66
- Lévesque, S. (2005) Teaching second-order concepts in Canadian history: The importance of „historical significance“. *Canadian Social Studies. Special issue: New Approaches to Teaching History*. 39, 2, winter 2005. www.quasar.ualberta.ca/css. Downloaded 10.6.2006
- Levstik, L. (2000) Articulating the silences. Teachers' and adolescents' conceptions of historical significance, in Stearns, P. N., Seixas, P. and Wineburg, S. (eds) *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History. National and International Perspectives*. New York: New York University Press, pp 284–305
- National Core Curriculum for Basic Education*. Helsinki: The Finnish National Board of Education 2004
- Seixas, P. (1993) Historical understanding among adolescents in a multicultural society. *Curriculum Inquiry*. 23, 3, pp 301–327
- Seixas, P. (1997) Mapping the terrain of historical significance. *Social Education*. 61, 1, pp 22–27
- Wertsch, J. V. (1994) Struggling with the past: some dynamics of historical representation, in Carretero, M. and Voss, J. (eds) *Cognitive and Instructional Processes in History and Social Sciences*. Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp 323–337
- Virta, A. (2008) *Kenen historiaa monikulttuurisessa koulussa*. Kasvatusalan tutkimuksia 39. Turku: Suomen Kasvatustieteellinen Seura [Whose history? Teaching history in culturally diverse schools. Research in Educational Sciences 39]
- Yeager, E. A., Foster, S. J. and Greer, J. (2002) How eight graders in England and the United States view historical significance. *The Elementary School Journal* 103, 2, pp 199–219