


Special issue: *Historical education in historical perspective*

Research article

Historical narratives: how Portuguese students aged 10 and 15 make use of national history

Ana Isabel Moreira,^{1,*}  Isabel Barca² 

¹ Researcher in History Education, CITCEM (Transdisciplinary Research Centre: Culture, Space and Memory), University of Porto, Porto, Portugal

² Senior Researcher in History Education, CITCEM (Transdisciplinary Research Centre: Culture, Space and Memory), University of Porto, Porto, Portugal

* Correspondence: ana_m0reira@hotmail.com

Submission date: 2 April 2024; Acceptance date: 24 July 2024; Publication date:
12 September 2024

How to cite

Moreira, A.I. and Barca, I. (2024). Historical narratives: how Portuguese students aged 10 and 15 make use of national history. *History Education Research Journal*, 21 (1), 10.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/HERJ.21.1.10>.

Peer review

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

Copyright

2024, Ana Isabel Moreira and Isabel Barca. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence (CC BY) 4.0

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

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/HERJ.21.1.10>.

Open access

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

Abstract

The main purpose of this study is to demonstrate how students make use of their knowledge about national history, while considering relevant perspectives in history education about the development of historical consciousness. A total of 103 students attending the sixth or the ninth grade in Portuguese schools were asked to 'spontaneously' write about the history of Portugal. This allowed the understanding of their historical literacy and the identification of the development of their historical consciousness. The data analysis was mainly based on a qualitative approach inspired by the grounded theory, carried out through a process of coding of the narrative elements in order to find meanings on conceptual trends. Generally, the results suggest the prevalence of similar schematic

templates in the students' narratives. At the same time, the research process highlighted two main categories: the assumption of a certain national identity and the understanding of intertemporal relations for personal orientation. Within the former, students either appear tied to fixed conceptions of the past, more often in the sixth grade, or to present a more historically balanced pattern, although still somewhat ethnocentric. In the latter, the idea of connecting the past and the present appears to be the overall trend, particularly in the ninth grade.

Keywords students' historical narratives; historical consciousness; uses of history; history in basic education in Portugal; history education

Introduction

Within the scope of history education, the collection and conceptual analysis of the historical narratives written by young students remain relevant, as it is necessary to understand how students make sense of the history they learn. Indeed, in a time of growing nationalist and populist visions – in Portugal, for instance, such ideas have recently gained political representation for the first time since the end of the dictatorship – it becomes paramount to analyse young people's understanding of the history of their country, so that historical consciousness can be developed with an empirical basis, specifically one that favours a historical rationality able also to be used in the practical life of each human being. Although the collected data refer to a study which took place in the relatively recent past (2015/16), some of the present historical ideas – stemming from the classroom, television or social media, and from everyday conversations – are still illustrative of the perspectives shown by the young population involved in this research.

Here we focus our attention on the historical ideas displayed by students, especially when asked to make use of them in imagined informal contexts. Furthermore, this research was carried out within a frame of theoretical assumptions shared by current perspectives on history education, based on the need to understand students' conceptions in history. Our view is that the teaching of history must seek to build a bridge between what students learn and what historians do, which means that it should be concerned with learning about the past through the use of evidence, the creation of explanations for what has happened, and the design and communication of a coherent and multifaceted picture of a given past.

This study aims to provide further knowledge to professionals and students linked to history or interested in the topic, grounded on empirical elements about historical knowledge and its uses. For that purpose, this included narratives of young people aged 10/11 and 14/15, respectively in the sixth and ninth grades in Portugal, which represent the end of the two final cycles of Basic Education, in which all students attend systematic history learning. Until now, in relation to issues of historical consciousness, studies have focused on historical narratives of Portuguese students in one or other cycle, but not in both. In Portugal, Basic Education comprises nine school years, from the first grade to the ninth grade. It is divided into three sequential cycles: the first one, also known as primary school, includes the grades from first to fourth (students aged 5/6 to 9); the second one consists of fifth and sixth grades (students aged 10/11); and the third one refers to seventh, eighth and ninth grades (students aged 12 to 15).

Our aim, then, is to attain some understanding about how young students 'use' history in their narratives, what is more significant to them in the national past and, at the same time, how far their narratives appear to be consistent with historical evidence and with a variety of viewpoints.

Conceptual framework

History education: concepts, methods and strategies

Since the last decades of the twentieth century, there have been theoretical assumptions underlying research on historical cognition in the scope of history education in various countries, and Portugal is no exception. The empirical studies focusing on students' ideas about specific concepts and methods of history appear to have influenced ideas about the main factors that encourage their progression in

historical understanding. Indeed, those studies promoted a replacement of the relevance of the age factor with educational strategies coherent with principles of situated cognition and the nature of history. This allows students to (gradually) develop meaningful historical knowledge, implying the establishment of conceptual relations between past and present with prospects of future, which translates into the development of historical consciousness (Lee, 2016; Seixas, 2012). History education, then, pays attention to student ideas about handling evidence, with multiple perspectives and significance, along with many other concepts of historical thinking (Seixas and Morton, 2013).

Although it is a context characterised by several interrelated phenomena, the classroom can/should therefore become the place that fosters a positive change of students' previous ideas, particularly sustained in relevant historical knowledge (Levstik, 2011). With that in mind, researchers in Portuguese-speaking countries are acknowledging that teaching of substantive history needs to be more frequently linked to strategies that foster a genuine active role of students' historical thinking (Aguiares, 2017; Barca, 2005; Fronza, 2016; Lagarto, 2019; Moreira, 2018). Such strategies can be understood as specific tasks oriented towards the inclusion of a disciplinary approach (for instance, through cross-examination of historical sources or through argumentation over several interpretations), for which empirical research about students' ideas in history may provide valuable clues (Chapman, 2016; Cooper and Chapman, 2009; Seixas and Morton, 2013).

As Seixas (2012) claims, history in the school context will thus embody several formative potentialities, allowing the development of historical consciousness, namely through increasing attention given to evidential grounds and the refusal of assimilation of simplistic explanations. This in turn can lead to a patriotic identity in an exclusivist sense.

Historical consciousness and history education

Most studies carried out in Portuguese-speaking countries – as well as in other countries, such as Canada, Germany and Sweden (Ercikan and Seixas, 2015) – were inspired by Rüsen's work about historical consciousness. According to Rüsen (2005: 25), historical consciousness 'reveals to us the web of temporal change within which our lives are caught up, and (at least indirectly) the future perspectives toward which that change is flowing'. The gradual complexity of historical consciousness developed by each person is very much related to the increase of individual experience with regard to the temporal dimension and its peculiarities, the use of evidence, the characteristics of the social domain, and also an evolution of the adopted historical identity (Rüsen, 2010; Seixas, 2012).

Moreover, Rüsen (2005) stresses the function of historical consciousness as a way to provide a comprehensive *temporal orientation* to human beings in two spheres: external, related to the discovery of several layers of temporality in life; and subjective, providing self-awareness of one's *historical identity*. In the process of formation of historical identity, human beings achieve an understanding of a larger self, beginning to consider themselves as part of a much bigger whole 'beyond the limits of birth and death, beyond mere mortality' (Rüsen, 1993: 68). Rüsen (1993: 68) further clarifies this idea:

a more familiar example of such 'temporal immortality' (as historical identity can be characterized) is national identity. Nations often locate their wellsprings in a hoary and ancient past and project an unlimited future perspective embodying national self-assertion and development.

In this sense, when awareness of a national whole is formed, either politically independent or not, national identity becomes a layer of each person's collective identity. The disciplinary matrix of history defined by Rüsen (2010) can help us understand how national identity (and other forms of collective identity) is constructed and spread across national settings. In other words, a human being's practical need for self-orientation leads to a search in historical knowledge for more reliable clues to better inform their ideas about the past and enable more knowledgeable actions in everyday life.

Also, according to Rüsen (2005), narratives are the way through which historical consciousness materialises its function of temporal orientation for each subject. Hence, a coherent historical narrative will not be a simple enumeration of what happened in the past, but rather a consistent report where a certain sequence of events and states of affairs is marked by distinct significances and particular contextualisation, since the intention is to reach a meaningful 'usable past'.

In short, *the practical function of historical knowledge is to be used in life for temporal orientation*. It encompasses several ideas, such as historical significance and temporal connections, and including

horizons of expectation, and it interacts with various spheres of personal performance, such as identity in its multiple layers. Regarding the complexities of identity formation, in alignment with Rösen's (2005) theory and with Seixas (2005), Lee (2004: 11) points out that the general framework for history education 'has to be at the level of humanity, not of individual collectivities or groups, whether the nation state, ethnic or religious groups, or social classes'. Students, then, will have a higher possibility of better understanding 'the others' beyond exclusivist interests or restricted belonging groups. This will make them more capable of mobilising the potentialities of historical empathy and humanist dialogue, both of which appeal to the cooperation between diverse identities.

The experience of history in school may play a relevant role in the personal development of students, so an approach that recognises the value of relating the past with the present, and with hypothetical futures, will be essential to enable a dynamic interpretation and usage of historical knowledge. Therefore, in narratives written by young students, the evidence of an ontogenetic type of historical consciousness can be perceived as a goal to achieve, with the broad aim of allowing individuals to become cognitively better equipped to face contemporary challenges. To portray this type of historical consciousness, students' historical narratives should suggest:

1. evidential grounds, accounting for a multifaceted past
2. rational argumentation
3. the agent's voice
4. moral values of humanity, according to a historical temporal orientation
5. a transformative attitude when dealing with present issues, instead of adopting a passive role.

Master narratives and national history

History learned at school, along with other subjects, plays a fundamental role in the construction of national identity. In a certain way, as López Facal (2012: 52) claims, 'the nation is an idea, a feeling, it is not a material reality; it is a political and ideological reality ... and the teaching of history has been serving that idea'. Understanding history as such only enables the reinforcement of national identities, 'in a game of identification, projection and symbolization' (Moreira, 2018: 69), and the tacit accomplishment of that function may happen with the spread of a national master narrative. In many cases, perhaps, the master narratives can achieve only a set of mechanistic manifestations of a banal nationalism, already built by each one because of the need for identification with a certain political community, as Billig (2014) suggests. According to Billig (2014), the concept of *banal nationalism* might be understood as common-sense identification with the nation that is merely a community shared in the form of a simplistic idea and/or feeling.

In fact, according to Wertsch (2002), transverse historical narratives emerge as social tools that include contents selected to fulfil certain goals, in a kind of *schematic narrative template* or, in other words, a knowledge shared by a specific community that defines how the past is represented and understood. Since past times, while assuming an official format that defines a nation state, those reports of a community have marked the public uses of history, both in educational contexts and in informal daily life (Carretero, 2017; Sáiz, 2015). This happens mostly because the means of diffusion often assume a non-critical recovery of the past, characterised by the simplification of historical facts, and by the romantic dimension and appreciation of the group itself to the detriment of others, on essentialist grounds (as if the nation were a fixed entity) quite distant from historical evidence. Then, the identification process between the people of today and those of yesterday is achieved in a kind of *timeless national identity* that may nevertheless condition the way in which the past and the present are interpreted (Carretero, 2017). For instance, when the pronoun 'we' is used in narratives, it suggests the inclusion of the person in the group being described, demonstrating identification with the nation.

Still, regarding the different uses of history, other possibilities can be mentioned that differentiate several communities, apart from this construction of identities. As Nordgren (2016) points out in accordance with Rösen (2005), history might also allow an explanation of the world interpreted through historical references and analogies, thus showing a well-developed historical consciousness. Alternatively, it can be used to transform the world, as argument and counter-argument, symbol or example of change, although frequently making use of the previously mentioned exclusivist narratives.

Several empirical studies of students' master narratives have been carried out in different national contexts and at different educational levels. These have highlighted a tendency for a linear convergence of history in two different evaluative approaches – optimistic and pessimistic – both tacitly defending a

certain moral superiority of the nation. An optimistic approach is linked to the ideal of freedom and/or progress, for instance, in the USA (Barton and Levstik, 2004), Australia (Clark, 2008), the Netherlands (Kropman et al., 2015), the Republic of Ireland (McCully and Waldron, 2013), or in the triumph over alien forces, such as in Russia (Wertsch, 2002). A pessimistic approach is connected to non-independent nations tending to oppose the 'us' (victims) to the 'others' (imperialists), for instance, in Québec, Canada (Létourneau, 2006; Lévesque et al., 2013). In another case, in Northern Ireland, students' narratives portray a troubled and politically motivated history, in a deeply divided society (McCully, 2008). As the author points out, however, those narratives may also reflect a more rational use of the contemporary states of affairs (to which the approach of disciplinary history may not be alien).

In Portuguese-speaking countries, several studies on students' narratives were broadly inspired by Rösen's theory (2005, 2010) and Wertsch's (2002) work. These earlier studies were collected in the scope of the Historical Consciousness: Theory and Practices (2003–2007) project (POCTI/CED/49106/2002), funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology (Portugal). In most cases, they have suggested a broadly consensual master narrative about the national past (Barca, 2009, 2015; Barca and Magalhães, 2005; Gago, 2018). In Portugal, for instance, the schematic narrative templates still maintain marks of high ethnocentrism, with only residual references to contemporary international cooperation or the colonial war (an objective historical fact which is relevant as a factor in the democratic turning point in 1974).

Method

The research question was: *How do Portuguese students aged about 10 and 15 tell the history of their country?*

The study assumed a qualitative, transversal approach with a phenomenological focus on the interpretation of the specific epistemological dimension revealed in student reports (Flick, 2015). Inspired by the perspective of Rösen (1993), according to which a narrative is the materialisation of historical consciousness, students were asked to write an individual narrative to 'tell the history of Portugal'. This request was prefaced by a short motivating introduction which was designed for each school year, considering the respective context of personal experience. This format intended to meet the conceptualisation provided by the disciplinary matrix of historical consciousness, which proposes a dynamic dialogue between the practical needs of the subject, the search for a better answer to these needs in history, and the use that the subject makes of this combination in a practical situation (here only imagined).

The students involved represented the target groups under consideration – students aged 10/11 or 14/15, respectively attending sixth or ninth grades, each one of these corresponding to the final year of a compulsory schooling cycle in which students finish the study of history with different approaches: history and geography of Portugal in the former, and history with an integrative approach to national and world history in the latter. In Cycle 1, students study a social environment subject area, where history appears in very brief topics (the formation of Portugal, the maritime expansion, the implantation of the Republic, the revolution of 25 April 1974). In Cycle 2, the school subject is history and geography of Portugal, in which they study, in chronological order, the time period from the Iberian origins and the formation of Portugal until the Portugal of today, along with the same topics of Cycle 1 (including references to slavery). In Cycle 3, the same topics as in Cycle 2 appear, but in a wider development and context, such as the European context of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, the global world of the fifteenth century onwards, including the industrialised world of the nineteenth century, and contemporary international cooperation, mainly within the European Union and among Portuguese-speaking countries.

The student participants were selected in five schools located in the metropolitan areas of Lisbon and Porto, where history teachers volunteered and allowed access to their classrooms. Other criteria, such as a heterogeneous sociocultural background, overall academic results and gender, were also considered. The final group of participants consisted of 103 students (Table 1).

Table 1. Distribution of the participant students by grade and gender

	Female	Male	Total
Cycle 2	30	17	47
Cycle 3	23	33	56

Having been given a time limit of about an hour, students were asked to write an individual narrative to 'tell the history of Portugal', a request prefaced by a short motivating introduction designed for each school year, considering the respective context of personal experience:

Imagine that a Hungarian boy called Andras comes to visit Portugal for the first time. You can talk with him about your country. What would you tell him about the history of Portugal? (Sixth grade)

Imagine that you are on holiday in an international camping site, and one evening you both decide to tell each other the history of your own country. What will you present? (Ninth grade)

These differences in phrasing sought to motivate participants to write in accordance with their age aspirations. Likewise, previous empirical testing for task validity was carried out. The elaboration of individual narratives by students became the motto for the presentation of built or spontaneous perspectives which could not be reduced to a statistical result, as they potentiate the identification of meanings (Blaxter et al., 2008).

In Portugal, previous studies about the national past focused only on the recent past narrated by future teachers and ninth- and tenth-grade students. By including sixth-grade students, this transversal research provides new data on whether master narratives are maintained or evolve through school years, allowing the creation of hypotheses, rather than intending to generalise.

The collection of data took place in the last month of the school year 2015/16.

The analysis of the narratives, regarding their conceptual complexity, was conducted through segmentation and coding of discursive contents, according to the triple coding procedures suggested by the *grounded theory* (open coding, axial coding, selective coding). They were then decomposed in progressively more complex units of meaning, and selected by systematic comparison, which allowed the elaboration of an interpretative theory (Strauss and Corbin, 2002). In other words, based on the obtained information, it was possible to provide meaning and significance to the initial reading based on theoretical principles nowadays considered broadly consolidated.

As such, in this specific research, the coding of student narratives was carried out as a way to identify the main categories and subcategories in accordance with the mutual properties encountered. The notions which were conceptually related, or which seemed to be meaningful due to their repetition, were annotated, clarifying the cumulative theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2008; Strauss and Corbin, 2002). As well as considering contributions of the previous studies mentioned above about student narratives as comparative examples, such a coding process was also discussed between the researchers and, later, in a national scientific seminar about history education ('Para começar, educação histórica dos 3 aos 15' seminar, held in May 2019, CITCEM, University of Porto).

The tripartite analysis then began with the phase of open coding, in which student reports were read and segmented to generally identify the more relevant historical ideas. Afterwards, the axial coding was organised into several categories, their peculiarities and relations, determined from conceptual criteria such as narrative form, chronology, the more explanatory or descriptive content, and others, all of which emerged as hypotheses to explore. Finally, the process of selective coding led to the selection of two main categories, related to Rösen's theory of historical consciousness: *History and Identity* and *Temporal Orientation*. A set of subcategories was created for each one, suggesting three conceptual levels: in the category *History and Identity*, *glorious past*, *objective past* and *emergent multiperspective*, in ascending order; in the category *Temporal Orientation*, *facts of the past*, *spectators of the past in the present* and *horizons of expectation*, also in ascending order.

This resulting set of categories and subcategories, schematically portrayed in Table 2, is the conceptual model arising from the research process.

Table 2. A conceptual scheme of students' historical narratives

Historical narratives	
History and Identity	Temporal Orientation
Emergent multiperspective	Horizons of expectation
Objective past	Spectators of the past in the present
Glorious past	Facts of the past

Results

Through the analysis of student narratives at the two educational levels, it was possible to identify a similar schematic narrative, in the sense stated by Wertsch (2002). Generally, the reports showed a clear formal structure, but some only presented more or less objective timelines. Students recurrently referred to specific periods in the history of Portugal. Although not all of these appeared in every narrative, four main moments were often identified: the formation of the Portuguese nation state, associated with the figure of the first Portuguese king, Afonso Henriques, in the twelfth century; the maritime expansion (commonly identified as 'the Discoveries'), and the territorial and economic climax in the sixteenth century; the New State and the dictatorship of Salazar in the twentieth century; and the democratic turn that began with the revolution of 25 April 1974.

To guarantee the anonymity of the participating students, each narrative excerpt is only identified by grade (6 or 9) and gender (F or M). For better understanding and fluency, the excerpts were translated into English after the coding process, by the authors of this article. The excerpts below portray a summary of that chain of historical events, which appears to be the most significant to the students:

Many years ago, our first king was Afonso Henriques. ... A few centuries later, the Discoveries started. Then, Oliveira Salazar established a dictatorship in our country. Then, April 25th came, and both the military and the people fought for their freedom. (6F)

Portugal started to be formed when Afonso Henriques conquered all lands to the south ... in fights with advances and setbacks. After its formation, several wars and rebellions, the golden age for the Portuguese came. During the time of the Discoveries, the Portuguese discovered ... At the time of World War II, Portugal lived under a dictatorship with Salazar, which ended with a revolution by the Portuguese that freed us from this dictatorship but also spoiled the country's economy until today. (9M)

Despite considerable similarity in the schematic narrative, specific ideas were expressed distinctively in the reports from the two grades under consideration. Sixth-grade students positively refer to the economic situation in the first decades of the dictatorship more often than the ninth-graders, who, however, were the only ones to critically mention slavery and the colonial war:

Salazar was an important man, because our country was in crisis, and he lowered the expenses and increased the revenues. (6M)

Portugal entered WWI, but not WWII, because Salazar made us stay out of that war. Looking at his positive side, he became well known in Portugal for helping the national economy, but also by his negative side as we stayed in a military dictatorship that chased everyone, with censorship, torture, misery, and death. (9M)

However, Portugal also had fewer good phases in which many people, not only the Portuguese, but others who lived in the colonies, were exploited. The Portuguese kings were sometimes friendly to the people, but other times showed great ostentation and contempt. (9F)

These historical ideas – and some omissions (of slavery or decolonisation, for instance) relevant to the explanation of temporal relations – might be supported by the mandatory syllabus and related textbooks

and teaching, as well as by the influence of public history manifested in celebrations or media opinions. In part, certain omissions may be following a 'bleaching [of history], in the last decades, by some historians and revisionist or neo-authoritarian social movements' (Moreira, 2018: 158).

Both the content selection and the type of judgements made by the students about past deeds and/or states of affairs illustrate the way in which they build their national identity and other forms of temporal orientation, and how far they are influenced by an objective historical understanding in a multiple perspective, not limited to a single story of the past.

History and Identity

As previously mentioned, in the category *History and Identity*, the three subcategories considered were *glorious past*, *objective past* and *emergent multiperspective*.

Within the first subcategory, *glorious past*, 42 per cent of narratives evoked a traditional historical consciousness, grounded on an essentialist, somehow mythical, conception of the national past that sustains, and is sustained by, the students' patriotic pride. Among the students who depict the history of Portugal as a grandiose, 'glorious past', exalting the 'heroic deeds' of the Portuguese throughout history, 22 per cent were in the sixth grade and 20 per cent in the ninth grade:

In our history there was a start, of the first king Afonso Henriques, the man who started our nation. (6F)

During the discoveries, they were very brave. They thought they would face monsters because they didn't know what was on the other side of the forelands. But, besides the fears, they united the four corners of the world. (6F)

We lived up to our name and [in 1974] we conquered what we had been wanting for a long time, our liberty. (6F)

In 1143, Afonso Henriques conquered the independence of the Kingdom of Portugal showing that, despite being a small country, we were brave, and the willpower took us far. But our victories weren't only these. Long before the Spanish domination (1580–1640), we broke barriers and went to places no one else dared to go. We conquered Ceuta, India and we even discovered Brazil. There was a time when we divided the world with Spain. We wrote fantastic pieces, we resisted a powerful French invasion. Many years later, we lived a dictatorship and, joining forces, there was a revolution that ended it. (9F)

Portugal was a country of great men. Afonso Henriques, the founder of Portugal, fought even against his mother to build our great nation, in 1143, and those who don't know this date are not good Portuguese people ... Aristides Souza Mendes saved many lives by signing 'little papers' called visa [to fugitive Jews, during the times of Hitler and Salazar]. Salazar was not a 'good boy' but straightened the finances. But the biggest hero is the Portuguese people, who had the courage to go to India, survive earthquakes and overcome torture that they went through just because they thought and expressed their ideas during the dictatorship of Salazar. The people who had the strength to support the military on that day of April 25th, 1974. (9F)

In both levels of education, many examples of banal nationalism, in the sense discussed previously, can thus be found, grounded on mythical ideas of the bravery and moral superiority of the nation when fighting against external and internal enemies. Moreover, it is worth noting that some students overtly assume the discourse of the dominator.

This banal nationalism is, nonetheless, somewhat mitigated by a more objective awareness of the present context, in a position where students only consider the Portuguese perspective, and therefore the glorious one, which causes a feeling of nostalgia, when students assume a contrast between the glorious past and the humble present. Nostalgia, however, is only existent in the narratives of ninth-graders, indicating perhaps a more conscious idea of national history:

We had a lot and now we are just a small piece in the southwest of Europe. (9M)

And, as any other great empire, we lost everything, even though we fought for many years to maintain the existence of the colonies. (9F)

Portugal is known as a small country, but it actually had a glorious past. (9F)

Regarding the second subcategory, *objective past*, it appeared in 42 per cent of narratives as the recognition of contrasts, or of 'highs and lows', either throughout history or even in the same historical period. The past is described in a less apologetic sense, identifying positive and negative aspects. These narratives were produced by 15 per cent of students in the sixth grade, and by 27 per cent of students in the ninth grade:

There was a revolution without deaths and there was also a period full of slavery in which many people were illiterate and could not read. There were polls to elect presidents and wars full of deaths. Many Portuguese navigators made huge findings and even crossed the Cape Bojador, which was a very hard fight. (6F)

We went through periods when we essentially depended on others, but we were able to recover. We are a humble people and we fought for our rights until the end. (6F)

Portugal, Portugal ... a small country but with great history. Unfortunately, the history of Portugal doesn't have only great deeds that make us feel proud. Slavery in colonies, Inquisition, New State ... these are historical situations that will not be remembered for the best reasons. (9F)

When we imported gold from Brazil, we were the wealthiest nation in the world together with Spain, but we almost went into bankruptcy because our nobles and kings spent all the profits in luxury instead of reinvesting in national productions, according to what I've read in books. Salazar tried to save Portugal that plunged into a crisis after the Second World War, but he also prevented technological progress and globalisation until the end of his days. (9M)

Thus, we understand that Portugal was a country with highs and lows, but I'm proud of it. (9F)

Here, the idea of a great past is mitigated by the recognition of historical issues, such as slavery, the colonial war, and bad governance, among others, which portrays a more balanced view of the country. Despite that, the nostalgic idea of a glorious past is still present in some relatively objective narratives of ninth-graders. On the other hand, it is important to note that, in the first narrative of a student in the sixth grade, the use of 'slavery' means national misery in lower social groups, rather than an idea of enslavement of other peoples.

The last subcategory, *emergent multiperspective*, arose from the evidence of occasional clues about an intercultural sense in the participants' ideas. However, at the same time, these still maintain certain marks of ethnocentrism. In a somewhat balanced way, 16 per cent of students in both the sixth and ninth grades referred to contact and/or interaction with different peoples from a perspective of cooperation, rather than from the view of the Portuguese dominion over others. The following examples mention some intercultural encounters in early times, or account for contemporary efforts of dialogue, by mentioning, for instance, decolonisation and international cooperation in postcolonial times:

The Arabs, the Romans and the Muslims brought us much culture such as: the alphabet, Arab and Roman numbering, and subjects like mathematics. (6M)

I could begin by speaking about Romans and other peoples, but the truth is the history of Portugal started a lot after that. (9M)

To conclude, Portugal entered the EU, after which it evolved in several aspects at a global level. (9M)

There was the colonial war during the dictatorship, but colonies only managed to reach independence after the revolution of April 25th. (9F)

We conquered African colonies, with which we have important relations today. (9M)

A few highlights can be identified within the category *History and Identity* to synthesise the main aspects found in the participants' texts:

1. Ideas of an objective past are often mixed with, or even replaced by, a mythical portrait, leading to identification with a glorious past, in both levels of education.
2. Students tend to assume a 'collective voice' expressed by 'we' or 'the Portuguese', which suggests a clear national identity. Individual agents are rare, with the exception of the king Afonso Henriques and the dictator Salazar, who show large visibility, respectively, as a 'hero' and as a 'villain'.
3. The ethnocentric perspective, visible in the collective voice and in the tendency to focus on aspects favourable to their country, is softened by the 'fight for freedom over internal enemies', which, replacing the older 'triumph over external forces' (in the words of Wertsch, 2002), was largely disseminated during the four decades of dictatorship.

In a quantitative overview, the distribution of the student narratives, by level, is presented in Table 3, generally portraying the students' handling of history and national identity.

Table 3. History and Identity by education level

	Cycle 2 (%)	Cycle 3 (%)
Emergent multiperspective	7	9
Objective past	15	27
Glorious past	22	20

As a whole, the ideas of a linear and glorious past, and those of a more balanced and objective past, emerge in close percentages. The perspective of welcoming cooperation with other peoples, or of their positive contribution, is residual. When comparing both grades, the ideas of an objective past prevail in the ninth grade.

Temporal Orientation

The category *Temporal Orientation* is portrayed here with the objective of relating past, present and future as guidance in everyday life. The subcategories considered were *facts of the past*, *spectators of the past in the present* and *horizons of expectation*.

The first subcategory, *facts of the past*, appeared in 54 per cent of student reports. The whole narratives centred on discrete past events with no apparent relation to the present time; 34 per cent were written by sixth-graders, and 20 per cent by ninth-graders:

The battle of Aljubarrota took place. The period of Salazar took place ... (6F)

The history of Portugal started with Afonso Henriques, who made Portugal become an independent country. After that victory, the fights against the Muslims came. In another time, the French came to invade Portugal, attacking us ... (6M)

Afonso Henriques was a relevant figure in Portugal. He conquered ... The kings Manuel, Filipe I, Filipe II, Filipe III, Carlos, etc. were also important, but Afonso Henriques was the first king and helped conquer territories ... When Filipe I died, Filipe II who was king of Spain (and Portugal) went into bankruptcy ... Filipe III wanted to get Spain out of bankruptcy, but then he died. (9M)

These excerpts portray a mechanistic form of presenting historical facts, in a chain that reveals a strict meaning of temporal interrelations.

In the second subcategory, *spectators of the past in the present*, 44 per cent of students recognise the influence in the present of what happened in the past. However, they look at past deeds and states of affairs simply as if they were passive heirs, without historical agency. This perspective is present in 10 per cent of students in the sixth grade, and in 35 per cent of students in the ninth grade, who present relatively objective manifestations:

Many years ago, our first king was Afonso Henriques. A few centuries later, king Dinis planted the pine forest of Leiria ... Then it was the New State and Oliveira Salazar established a dictatorship in our country. Finally, April 25th was when the military and the population fought for their liberty. We don't live in a Monarchy anymore, but in a Republic. (6F)

April 25th made Portugal a new country, the New State (dictatorship) ended, and the democracy was established and brought many new things to our country; a new Constitution was made and it continues until now with a few alterations. (6F)

Portugal is what it is due to the history of its people. (9M)

Finally, we come to the present, with sardines and beers ... and we also have refugees. (9F)

Hence, it seems to become clear that the temporal orientation of these students is expressed 'through the mere heritage of the interventions of the people from the past'. They are historical agents apparently without knowing it, only looking back to the course of time 'without giving clues that are factual and allusive to the creation of favourable conditions for the collective future' (Moreira, 2018: 177).

The final subcategory, *horizons of expectation*, suggests a higher conceptual level of temporal orientation, with students not only projecting the past in the present, but also looking forward into the future, and assuming their own voice. Students in the sixth grade did not include any future scenarios in their narratives; in the ninth grade, only one student projected what tomorrow can be:

Until today, Portugal has been living big periods of crisis. It is necessary to do something meaningful or it will continue with its serious problems. (9M)

It is possible to summarise the main characteristics found in the interpretative analysis of student narratives, in this case regarding the category *Temporal Orientation*:

1. The main trend seems to be the use of ideas of history either as a set of fixed past facts or as an interrelated but fixed past influencing the present. The hypothesis of possible relations between past, present and future appeared only in one narrative, in the ninth grade.
2. There is a tendency for a linear perception of time, implying an idea of progress and a feeling of confidence in the country. However, some of the ninth-graders' narratives point to the negative features besides the positive ones throughout time, while others acknowledge a contrast between progress in the past and the crisis in the present, which causes a feeling of nostalgia.
3. Regarding their own role as historical agents, students tacitly consider themselves as passive subjects, merely facing what past agents have done or left to the present time.

The distribution across conceptual levels regarding temporal orientation, in a quantitative perspective, is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Temporal Orientation by educational level

	Cycle 2 (%)	Cycle 3 (%)
Horizons of expectation	0	*
Spectators of the past in the present	10	35
Facts of the past	34	20

* Only one reference in the narratives.

Generally, ideas of a scarcely interrelated fixed past appear in a higher percentage compared to more overt notions of temporal relations. However, when examining the distribution by grade, the idea of relations between past and present prevails, but only in the ninth grade, where a single trace of horizons of expectation is also visible.

Conclusion and discussion

Following the discussion of the results arising from the interpretative analysis of the student historical narratives, we now present some final, yet always provisional, thoughts, summarising the main ideas that resulted from this study – a possible outcome based on the data and arguments above, which intends

to clarify the answer to the research question: *How do Portuguese students aged about 10 and 15 tell the history of their country?*

It has become clear that the national origins, the maritime discoveries and conquests in distant lands, and the triumph of a democratic system overcoming decades of dictatorship emerge in the sixth- and ninth-graders' narratives as the essential and more significant topics of the history of Portugal. Indeed, this set of historical periods, tacitly conceived as markers for the rising, expansion and consolidation of the nation, appear to be transversally highlighted in the compulsory syllabus for history in the fifth to the ninth grades, and probably also in the classroom itself. As such, school as part of society broadly contributes to keeping and spreading those conventional schematic templates that unify the nation.

A national master narrative that expresses the idea of a glorious past with a fight for (self) freedom and power (over others) can coexist with a more moderate, but nostalgic, view that 'Portugal is a small country today, but it has a glorious history'. The Portuguese students, as is the case in several other independent countries, construct a positive national identity, due to their need as young people to develop secure collective identifications that help to respond to their demands in practical life, in order not to experience self-loss (Rüsen, 1993). Our concern here is not to criticise a moderate sense of positive national identity, which is influenced by historical knowledge and public uses of history (political speeches, flags and hymns in international sports games, celebrations, media debates). Rather, we question: the extent to which the schematic templates reflect a balanced historical approach; which substantive topics are selected or omitted, and how; and what kind of historical significance is entailed by such selection. In particular, we stress the issues related to the expansion period: how far are they explored in a multiperspectival way, integrating the views of other agents beyond the Portuguese, either in moments of tension or of cooperation? How far are a variety of sources of evidence, in terms of viewpoints, used to create encompassing explanations for those situations? To provide an example, almost all narratives refer to the Portuguese who conquered territories as 'we', but never refer to the subjugated 'others'.

Nonetheless, this study seems to enable the consideration of an apparent historical progression of student conceptions across the two educational levels. In a way, such progression might be related to historical objectivity, relations between past and present, and the emergence of self-agency to strengthen self-temporal orientation. All of these may lead to hypotheses to be further explored in future studies, as the intrinsic qualitative nature of this research does not allow the discussion of historical progression with the support of secure statistical grounds.

Aligning with the thoughts of Lee (2016), Chapman (2016) and Seixas and Morton (2013), among many others, we assume that these aspects suggest a need for reinforcement of cognitive strategies leading to historical understanding and temporal orientation which may prove more appropriate to empower young people in everyday life. Therefore, we consider the following as intellectual aspirations in the field of history education – from research to educational policies and classroom practices.

1. There is a visible need for investment in a historically objective and honest education, avoiding romanticism and resisting selective forgetfulness. Historical learning can therefore not be limited to a memorial record of a fixed past, which sometimes means camouflaged impositions and false certainties (Carretero, 2017); otherwise, a stable and favourable national identity will be formed, but in a way that might condition the development of historical consciousness based on the rational understanding and use of the past. As Lee (2005) has suggested, historical empathy intrinsically aligns with human aspirations.
2. In the permanent (re)construction by children, young people and adults in a multicultural and global society, it is desirable that the collective identity includes a variety of perspectives and an open dialogue with diverse 'others' (Rüsen, 2010).

History taught and learned in the classroom can contribute to the development of a type of historical consciousness that favours critical reasoning grounded on genuine historical evidence. It should attend to the idea that historical knowledge must promote several perspectives about the world instead of a fixed picture, since history is a tool for understanding the world and, as such, it can lead to interpretations in various ways. Then, it may allow for the elaboration of genuine historical narratives, quite distinct between them (Rüsen, 2005), but acceptable if consistently grounded. At the same time, the use of historical criteria may contribute to a more humanist temporal orientation.

Data and materials availability statement

All data generated or analysed during this study are included in this published article (and its supplementary information files).

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

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

Conflicts of interest statement

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

References

- Aguiar, A. (2017) 'Construir conhecimento histórico em contexto angolano: um estudo em torno de uma experiência de "aula oficina"'. PhD thesis, University of Minho, Portugal.
- Barca, I. (2005) "'Till new facts are discovered": Students' ideas about objectivity in history'. In R. Ashby, P. Gordon and P. Lee (eds), *Understanding History: Recent research in history education*. International Review of History Education 4. London: Routledge Falmer, 68–82.
- Barca, I. (2009) 'Identities and history: Portuguese students' accounts'. *International Journal of Historical Learning, Teaching and Research*, 8 (1), 19–27.
- Barca, I. (2015) 'History and temporal orientation: The views of Portuguese-speaking students'. In A. Chapman and A. Wilschut (eds), *Joined-up History: New directions in history education research*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age, 13–35.
- Barca, I. and Magalhães, O. (2005) 'A bridge between the past and the present? The perspectives of Portuguese young people'. Paper presented at the Symposium Students' Ideas about the Meaning and Purpose of History: Findings from recent international research. AERA Annual Meeting, Montréal, Canada, 11–15 April.
- Barton, K. and Levstik, L. (2004) *Teaching History for the Common Good*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Billig, M. (2014) *Nacionalismo banal*. Madrid: Capitán Swing.
- Blaxter, L., Hughes, C. and Tight, M. (2008) *Cómo se investiga*. Barcelona: Gráo.
- Carretero, M. (2017) 'Teaching history master narratives: Fostering imagi-nations'. In M. Carretero, S. Berger and M. Grever (eds), *Palgrave Handbook of Research in Historical Culture and Education*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 511–28.
- Chapman, A. (2016) 'Historical interpretations'. In I. Davies (ed.), *Debates in History Teaching*. London: Routledge, 96–108.
- Charmaz, K. (2008) 'Constructionist and the Grounded Theory'. In J.A. Holstein and J.F. Gubrium (eds), *Handbook of Constructionist Research*. New York: The Guilford Press, 397–412.
- Clark, A. (2008) 'Teaching national narratives and values in Australian schools: What do students really think about Australian identity and character?' *Agora*, 43 (1), 4–9.
- Cooper, H. and Chapman, A. (eds) (2009) *Constructing History 11–19*. London: Sage.
- Ercikan, K. and Seixas, P. (2015) *New Directions in Assessing Historical Thinking*. New York: Routledge.
- Flick, U. (2015) *El diseño de la investigación cualitativa*. Madrid: Morata.
- Fronza, M. (2016) 'Historical learning as intersubjectivity and truth in historical culture of young students from comic books'. In M.A. Schmidt and L. Nechi (eds), *Brazilian Investigation in History Education*. Curitiba: W.A.a, 43–72.

- Gago, M. (2018) *Consciência histórica e narrativa na aula de História*. Porto: CITCEM, Edições Afrontamento.
- Kropman, M., Van Boxtel, C. and Van Drie, J. (2015) 'Small country, great ambitions: Prospective teachers' narratives and knowledge about Dutch history'. In A. Chapman and A. Wilschut (eds), *Joined-up History: New directions in history education research*. Charlotte NC: Information Age, 57–84.
- Lagarto, M. (2019) 'Profiles of teaching and learning moments in the history classroom'. *History Education Research Journal*, 16 (1), 127–38. [CrossRef]
- Lee, P. (2004) "'Walking backwards into tomorrow": Historical consciousness and understanding history'. *International Journal of Historical Learning, Teaching and Research*, 4 (1), 1–46. [CrossRef]
- Lee, P. (2005) 'Putting principles into practice: Understanding history'. In M. Donovan and J. Bransford (eds), *How Students Learn: History, mathematics, and science in the classroom*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 31–78.
- Lee, P. (2016) 'Literacia histórica e história transformativa'. *Educar em Revista*, 60, 107–46.. [CrossRef]
- Létourneau, J. (2006) 'Remembering our past: An examination of the historical memory of young Québécois'. In R. Sandwell (ed.), *To the Past: History education, public memory & citizenship in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 70–87.
- Lévesque, S., Létourneau, J. and Gani, R. (2013) 'A giant with clay feet: Québec students and their historical consciousness of the nation'. *International Journal of Historical Learning, Teaching and Research*, 11 (2), 159–75. [CrossRef]
- Levstik, L. (2011) 'Learning history'. In R. Mayer and P. Alexander (eds), *Handbook of Research on Learning and Instruction*. New York: Routledge, 108–26.
- López Facal, R. (2012) 'Nacionalismos y europeísmos en los libros de texto: identificación e identidad nacional'. *Clío y asociados: la historia enseñada*, 14, 9–13. [CrossRef]
- McCully, A. (2008) 'Trying to look at both sides: Students' ideas in Northern Ireland'. Key talk given at II Seminar on History Education Research, University of Minho, Portugal, 4 July.
- McCully, A. and Waldron, F. (2013) 'A question of identity? Purpose, policy and practice in the teaching of history in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland'. *International Journal of Historical Learning, Teaching and Research*, 11 (2), 145–58. [CrossRef]
- Moreira, A.I. (2018) 'A história de Portugal nas aulas do 2.º ciclo do Ensino Básico: Educação histórica entre representações sociais e práticas educativas'. PhD thesis, University of Santiago de Compostela, Spain. Accessed 5 August 2024. <http://hdl.handle.net/10347/18036>.
- Nordgren, K. (2016) 'How to do things with history: Use of history as a link between historical consciousness and historical culture'. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 44 (4), 479–504. [CrossRef]
- Rüsen, J. (1993) 'The development of narrative competence in historical learning: An ontogenetic hypothesis concerning moral consciousness'. In P. Duvenage (ed.), *Studies in Metahistory*. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council, 63–84.
- Rüsen, J. (2005) *History: Narration, interpretation, orientation*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Rüsen, J. (2010) *Jörn Rüsen e o Ensino da História*. Curitiba: Editora UFPR, Brazil.
- Sáiz, J. (2015) 'Educación Histórica e Narrativa Nacional'. PhD thesis, University of Valencia, Spain.
- Seixas, P. (2005) 'Historical consciousness: The progress of knowledge in a postprogressive age'. In J. Straub (ed.), *Narration, Identity and Historical Consciousness*. New York: Berghahn Books, 141–59.
- Seixas, P. (2012) 'Progress, presence and historical consciousness: Confronting past, present and future in postmodern time'. *Paedagogica Historica*, 48, 859–72. [CrossRef]
- Seixas, P. and Morton, T. (2013) *The Big Six Historical Thinking Concepts*. Toronto: Nelson.
- Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. (2002) *Bases de la investigación cualitativa: Técnicas y procedimientos para desarrollar la teoría fundamentada*. Colombia: Universidad de Antioquia.
- Wertsch, J. (2002) *Voices of Collective Remembering*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.