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# Meaningful learning beyond the textbook: a case study of student experiences during an authentic historical inquiry on local heritage

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## Abstract

Increasingly, scholars advocate placing historical inquiry to the fore as a teaching strategy. Moreover, they stress making such inquiries relevant for students by setting up meaningful activities that explicitly establish connections between past, present and future. Nevertheless, the implementation of this pedagogical approach remains limited, and little is known about how students actually perceive and work with meaningful historical inquiry. This case study, conducted as part of teacher research, aims to explore students' perspectives and to gain an in-depth understanding from their point of view during an authentic historical inquiry that revolved around local heritage. The findings show that the students became actively involved in the project, and reveal that all aspects of the work of historians, from archival investigations through to public presentation, may be offered to students. The findings also provide reflections on the implications for educational practice, particularly regarding what counts as meaningful learning for students in relation to heritage and the role of local cultural resources in the curriculum.

**Keywords** compulsory secondary education; historical inquiry; doing history; meaningful learning; teacher research; heritage education; oral history; public history

## Introduction

Increasingly, scholars advocate putting historical inquiry to the fore as a teaching strategy in the history classroom (Bain et al., 2024; Lesh, 2023; Levstik and Barton, 2015). In history education literature, this overarching pedagogical approach has various conceptualisations and is labelled in different ways. For example, Voet and De Wever (2019) refer to the broad term 'inquiry-based learning', while Levstik and Barton (2015) have addressed this as 'doing history'. However, solely relying on a disciplinary approach to teaching history does not constitute a learning environment where historical questions receive sufficient meaning. History education scholars have therefore stressed making historical inquiry tasks relevant for students by setting up meaningful learning activities that explicitly establish connections between past, present and future (Cutrara, 2020; Levstik and Barton, 2015; Van Boxtel et al., 2021, 2023; Van Straaten et al., 2016).

While this differs according to the specific national or regional context, there seems to be a dichotomy between what is written by scholars and what is employed by teachers. For example, based on their investigation of the characteristics and different conceptualisations of historical inquiry, Van Boxtel et al. (2021) state that its implementation in classroom practice remains limited and more research seems to be needed. It appears that for teachers, designing a historical inquiry in a classroom context with primary sources cannot be taken for granted (Monte-Sano et al., 2020). Gibson and Miles's (2024) literature review and interviews with 11 teachers about the limited adoption of historical inquiry confirms that there are several challenges for teachers, including perceived lack of time or teaching experience, uncertainty about the inquiry outcomes or a felt pressure about content coverage. Nonetheless, they assert that if history teachers can overcome these challenges, historical inquiry has the potential to make history more meaningful for students.

The issue of implementation into classroom practice seems also to be the case in Flanders (the northern part of Belgium), which has been extensively investigated in the past decade (Voet and De Wever, 2017, 2019). Despite the fact that history teachers in this context possess considerable freedom in the selection of content or didactic methods, and they are also free to choose whether or not to make use of a textbook as there are no conditions set by the government (Van Nieuwenhuyse, 2020), historical inquiry seems rarely to be adopted by them. Instead of critically evaluating and corroborating multiple sources, they tend to prioritise giving a chronological overview of history, mostly relying on sources found in textbooks to illustrate related historical content (Van Nieuwenhuyse et al., 2017). Consequently, sourcework might be perceived as boring by students, and they often believe that right answers can be found directly in the sources.

As a history teacher in Flanders since 2011, I have felt this tension between designing thorough, time-consuming source inquiry tasks and maintaining sufficient content coverage. Moreover, while the idea of meaningful learning through historical inquiry is widely advocated in history education literature for its potential to enrich students' curriculum, it remains somewhat difficult to grasp as a teacher in practice. During my initial teacher training (a three-year professional bachelor's degree in history and geography), I received little introduction to the discipline of history as a whole or to the various components of historical practice. Moreover, the Dutch teacher handbook by Wilschut et al. (2013), which is a much-used resource in history teacher education in Flanders, contains a rather theoretical section on meaningful learning, and offers no specific framework for setting up authentic historical inquiries. Nevertheless, the curriculum reform introduced in Flanders in 2019 emphasises historical thinking skills, which gradually makes the need to adopt a disciplinary approach among teachers more pressing (Van Nieuwenhuyse, 2020; Wilke et al., 2023).

This study draws on teacher research. According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009), this is considered to be a subgenre of practitioner research as an overarching term. Considering the aim of teacher research, the primary focus is on concerns that originate from professional practice. Teacher research has the advantage of providing an insider perspective, while also recognising the knowledge generated by practitioners. Given the ample evidence of the limited adoption of historical inquiry

among teachers, this study focuses on the students' perspective. The purpose is to explore students' experiences, and to gain an in-depth understanding of their point of view during an authentic historical inquiry that goes beyond the sourcework found in textbooks. Given its different conceptualisations, historical inquiry is understood in this study as 'a "source inquiry" in which students are asked to interrogate materials – particularly primary materials – and to construct claims' (Chapman, 2024: xxxi).

## Theoretical framework

The extent to which textbooks are used, and how this corresponds to the shift towards a more disciplinary approach to teaching history, is difficult to determine and likely varies by context. In Canada, for example, findings show that high school students' learning experiences were predominantly shaped by textbook reading and listening to the teacher while taking notes (Lévesque and Zanazanian, 2015). However, this dependence declined following the introduction of historical thinking in the curriculum (Cutrara, 2020; Lévesque and Croteau, 2024). In England, articles from the professional journal *Teaching History* indicate that teachers during the past three decades have been increasingly designing historical inquiries that draw on diverse sources, including material culture and oral accounts (Woolley, 2024). In contrast, findings from the Observatory for History Teaching in Europe (OHTE, 2023) suggest that history teachers across European countries continue to rely on traditional methods, such as textbook-based instruction. While this publication does not specifically address the situation in Flanders, a more recent survey of Flemish history teachers revealed that they are willing to move beyond textbooks when designing lessons (Van Doorsselaere et al., 2024). However, they also indicated a reliance on online searches to find relevant sources for their teaching materials. In line with the findings of the OHTE (2023), this reliance raises new issues, such as the information and communications technology (ICT) skills of history teachers and the problematic nature of these sources, which require further attention and research.

Textbooks often provide only limited support for setting up historical inquiries (Van Boxtel et al., 2021). One possible reason for this limitation is that the responsibility for asking questions needs to be shifted to the students in order to increase motivation. Logtenberg (2012), for example, suggested that teachers should not impose questions on students during historical inquiries. This shift, which emphasises students taking a lead in formulating both questions and hypotheses, is particularly embraced in the English context (Woolley, 2024). For Levstik and Barton (2015), historical inquiries can take the form of open-ended investigations in authentic settings in a way that students are able to make sense of their immediate world. Overall, asking questions should embrace a sociocultural approach that includes students' affective perspectives, going beyond the cognitive processes emphasised in a disciplinary approach, while also incorporating the analysis of sources and the construction of well-supported claims to foster critical literacy and reflective thinking (Logtenberg et al., 2024).

From the students' perspective, textbook-driven approaches are not considered to be motivational. For example, students in the UK found history textbooks uninteresting and not very effective (Haydn, 2011). The study of Tallavaara and Rautiainen (2020) in the Finnish context revealed that the use of textbooks and the handling of large quantities of superficial content was experienced as boring, while, in contrast, varying teaching methods felt engaging. Although such findings and associated recommendations come as no surprise, they seem to have little impact on practice. According to Cutrara (2020), meaningful learning focuses on engaging students with content that holds significance for their present and future lives while connecting the past to an understanding of the present. She argues that a curriculum centred on a disciplinary approach should be complemented with a transformative pedagogy. Such an approach enables connections to previous knowledge and cultural experiences, accommodating personal explorations into familial or community history.

In this regard, various scholars have argued to not rely solely on textbooks but, in addition, to develop learning activities that are relevant for students in their daily lives (Levstik and Barton, 2015). This notion of relevance seems central to the motivation or interest of students in the history classroom. For example, in their explorative study on meaningful history curricula, Van Straaten et al. (2016) draw on a constructivist approach wherein new knowledge ideally connects with existing knowledge in a way that makes sense for students both in and beyond the classroom. They refer to relevance when history holds a certain importance for the present in general or for the everyday life of the students specifically. Based on the conceptualisation originally used in the Dutch teacher handbook (Wilschut et al., 2013), they outline relevance as: 'allowing students to recognise and experience what history has to do with

themselves, with today's society and their general understanding of human existence' (Van Straaten et al., 2016: 4). For this reason, they advocate making connections between the past, present and future.

Claims to establish explicit relationships between the past, present and future in light of meaningful history curricula draw attention to the notion of heritage. The idea comes from the fact that heritage is often conceptualised as a nexus between past, present and future. According to Lowenthal (2015), heritage focuses on how people in the present engage with diverse traces of the past, valuing and interpreting them based on their current significance and deciding what to remember and pass on. In this regard, over the past two decades proponents of critical heritage studies (Harvey, 2001; Smith, 2006) have challenged the traditional view of heritage as a place or an object defined by experts. Instead, they consider it to be an action that draws on, or is closely linked to, emotion and affect. Harrison (2013), for example, stresses the crucial role people and their contexts play in this social and discursive practice. Therefore, heritage should be viewed as an ongoing process of meaning making shaped by human agency. It revolves around how individuals, within their sociocultural contexts, relate to the past.

Inspired by critical heritage studies in their research programme on the relationship between history and heritage education in the Netherlands, Van Boxtel et al. (2016) state that heritage could bring relevance to the disciplinary teaching of history. Following this, they propose to apply historical thinking and reasoning skills to the tangible and intangible traces of the past, as they surround students in their daily life. Moreover, as engaging with heritage depends on a rather affective dimension of the past, it could prove relevant when hoping to meaningfully stimulate students in light of an open-ended historical inquiry (Barton, 2016). Nevertheless, due to its ties with identity and its focus on people's emotions and senses, heritage education also involves an uncritical approach to the past (Lowenthal, 2015). This can potentially serve nationalist aims through the use of constructed narratives, for example, in history museums (Wallace-Casey, 2019). This need not be problematic, however, if history classrooms provide space for critically examining these narratives, supported by sufficient disciplinary tools such as historical thinking skills (Seixas, 2016), or even by specific national frameworks for narrative analysis (Anderson, 2017).

In the past decade, heritage education approached from its transdisciplinary nature and both in formal and non-formal settings has gained considerable research attention in the Spanish context as well. These studies are primarily driven by the fact that heritage is mostly employed in an illustrative and uncritical way (Cuenca-López and López-Cruz, 2014). With this as a starting premise, various scholars (Chaparro-Sainz et al., 2022; Felices-De la Fuente et al., 2020; Gómez-Carrasco et al., 2020) have therefore advocated for the introduction of heritage to overcome traditional teaching strategies that seem present in history education. Interestingly, this potential of heritage appears also to be shared by active teachers. For instance, Guerrero-Romera et al. (2021) found that history teachers preferred heritage, artistic productions and museums as educational resources over textbooks. In this respect, heritage is ascribed the potential to introduce renewed teaching practices that actively engage students with contemporary issues and contextualised learning to gain a critical understanding of history and culture (Delgado-Algarra and Cuenca-Lopez, 2020). In the past decade, however, teachers' perceptions became an interesting focal point of research (Felices-De la Fuente et al., 2020), but students' perspective was mostly lacking. Although a better understanding of students' experiences could contribute to the potential of such learning activities, little is known about how they actually perceived and worked with historical inquiry.

To engage in authentic and critical investigations that revolve around heritage, ideally, connections have to be made with museums, archives, other heritage institutions, local history volunteer organisations or the school neighbourhood. Research on collaborations between schools and institutions such as history museums is increasing, with instructional practices placing growing emphasis not only on cognitive learning, but also on the affective engagement of students (Geerts et al., 2024). However, even when students show interest in investigating a history museum's curatorial practice, a challenge remains in developing their historical thinking skills, which is not the same as engaging them in historical inquiry (Wallace-Casey, 2019). Establishing meaningful connections between schools and potential partners is relatively uncharted in scholarship at the intersection of historical thinking and the heterogeneous field of public history (Demantowsky, 2018; Wojdon, 2018). Moreover, it is not something that teachers are familiar with or find easy to combine with textbook usage (Walsh, 2017). For example, when setting up historical inquiries with archival material, it is hard to assess what the outcome will be. Besides teachers' perceptions, few empirical studies have focused on student experiences. Nygren (2014) explored the use of primary sources from authentic archives, both traditional and digital, in light of

historical thinking skills. Although using archival material was new, and therefore somewhat challenging even to the upper secondary students in an advanced history course in Sweden, they experienced it as positive and stimulating. In this regard, Cutrara (2019) advocates going beyond historical thinking by encouraging educators to direct students' attention to how knowledge is constructed. She emphasises the importance of students critically engaging with the subjectivities tied to power in archival sources and the created metadata.

Further, in light of setting up meaningful inquiry in history education, attention is also drawn to conducting oral history projects. For example, a questionnaire study involving 280 students in the Netherlands revealed that, although their experiences were rather passive (for example, listening to recorded oral accounts), most students felt positive about conducting an actual oral history project at school and found it potentially interesting (Huijgen and Holthuis, 2016). Edwards (2006) reported that during an oral history project, students took more control of their learning and came to appreciate why learning history at school matters, as the outcome involved the development of an archive and radio documentary. The oral history method is a valued teaching approach with the potential to bring history to life for students. Despite increasing research and adoption aligned with historical inquiries over the past two decades, particularly in the North American context (Llewellyn and Ng-A-Fook, 2017), the method remains challenging for teachers, who often lack adequate support (Martin et al., 2021). In this regard, Huijgen (2018) suggested that schools partner up with local sociocultural actors and present the findings to a wider audience. Several history education scholars (Levstik and Barton, 2015; Lucas, 2016) have argued for such a public-oriented output of historical inquiries, for example, through podcasts or exhibitions, as a result of those partnerships.

## Research context and questions

In Flanders (Belgium), full-time secondary education (12–18 years old) consists of three stages. The new curriculum was gradually rolled out in the field in September 2019, starting with the first stage (12–14 years old). The second stage (14–16 years old) followed two years later, while the old framework was progressively phased out. For history education, the new curriculum and standards implicitly emphasised historical thinking. This study, however, was conducted in the final year of the third stage, when the reform had only reached the first year of the second stage.

To address the central purpose of this article, the following research questions were formulated:

- What are students' opinions about local heritage as a focal point during a historical inquiry?
- How do students experience using archives during a historical inquiry?
- How do students experience engaging with oral history during a historical inquiry?
- What are students' opinions about public-oriented output as an end goal during a historical inquiry?

## Method

### Design

The study presented in this article follows a qualitative approach, situated within the interpretive research paradigm. This approach lends itself well to gaining insight into the way people give meaning to their social environment (Ritchie et al., 2014). Moreover, investigating these social processes allows interaction between the phenomenon of interest and the context wherein it takes place. Considering the different modes of social science inquiry, a case study seems the most appropriate in light of this research aim. Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier (2013) advocated that case studies are well-suited for educational research by practitioners, as they are immersed in the world of those being researched.

To answer the research questions, this study relies on the guidelines described by Yin (2018). According to him, a case study focuses on a contemporary real-world phenomenon that cannot be controlled and is situated in an authentic setting. A single and embedded case study was selected (Yin, 2018). The students selected ($n$ = 4) for in-depth investigation serve as units of analysis, while the teacher as a researcher is also part of the case. As all students participated in the same project, there is only one bounded context instead of a multiple design. Nevertheless, the boundaries between context and the phenomenon being studied are not always evident in real life.

## Setting

The study was conducted in a secondary school located in a suburban context consisting of approximately 1,200 students, which can be described as medium sized in Flanders. Although I was engaged in several history classes during the school year 2021/2, I opted to conduct the case study in a cultural sciences class in the final year of the third stage (12th grade). This subject forms, together with behavioural sciences, the specific core of the human sciences courses of study in general secondary education. Cultural sciences is strongly related to history education, as it expects to study real-life problems through contemporary and historical sources. However, it offers the advantage of adopting a more interdisciplinary scope, and it is especially aimed at introducing students to scientific research skills. This choice can be justified as the subject and the participants are well suited to serve as a critical case. Flyvbjerg (2006: 231) describes critical cases as samples selected based on a 'most likely' or 'least likely' scenario. Since historical interest is essential for historical inquiries (Logtenberg, 2012), this sample of students of the human sciences course of study is likely a strategic choice for gaining a deeper understanding of the research questions.

Informed by the theoretical framework underpinning this study, and strengthened by professional-oriented literature on conducting historical inquiry in classroom practice, I designed a school project. The project revolved around disappearing heritage: a textile factory from the beginning of the nineteenth century. After the company moved, the vast building halls in the town centre had long served as a sociocultural meeting place, housing different initiatives of the local community (for example, musical ensembles, youth festivals, sports competitions, weddings and radio broadcasting stations). However, due to their deteriorating state, the municipal council decided to have them demolished and replaced by a residential area.

The project was adapted to the level and experience of the students involved (Van Boxtel et al., 2021), and it consisted of four phases starting from a problem-oriented approach characteristic for a cultural sciences class studying real-life issues. The first phase introduced the students to a genuine and close-to-home problem: pictures of the deteriorating state of the building and the motivated decision of the municipal council. This problem served as a catalyst for a brainstorming session, where students identified areas of interest to investigate. The second phase aimed to visit and document the site. The students decided to take pictures with their smartphones and some artistic photographs with the school cameras. Third, the historical inquiry was set up, resulting in five questions derived from the initial areas of interest during the brainstorming session. These questions were structured chronologically, aligning with the biography of the heritage site. Each question would be researched by a small group of students, and it would be focused on issues of change and exploring the meaning and memories that the site held for members of the local community. To provide substantive answers, the students engaged with the municipal archive and the digital archive of the regional cultural heritage platform. In this regard, they were given practical guidelines (for example, on filing systems or Boolean operators) and methodological guidelines (for example, on oral history), as they relied on online documents provided by local heritage organisations and engaged with oral accounts. In the final phase, the students collaborated with the local youth centre to present their textual and visual work in a public exposition, making their research accessible to the broader community.

The objective of the project was for students to collect, analyse and synthesise multiple sources, make well-supported claims and critically write a coherent narrative. The final outcome was presented as a group paper, serving as the product of their historical inquiry. Beyond this focus on cognitive processes within a disciplinary approach, I also wanted the students to understand what heritage is, and how it is created as a sociocultural practice (Smith, 2006). This approach emphasises the present-day meaning-making process of people. Additionally, by encouraging students to ask questions about the heritage site, the project aimed to incorporate their affective perspectives, embracing the beliefs and experiences they brought to the classroom (Logtenberg et al., 2024).

## Participants

Although the class was ethnically and culturally diverse, with backgrounds including Belgian, Polish, Turkish and Caribbean, all the students had Belgian nationality, while some held dual nationality. For the project, the students were divided into five groups to stimulate the social nature of historical inquiry (Van Boxtel et al., 2021) and to keep the open-ended process structured and manageable

(Gibson and Miles, 2024). The division was based on the research question they had formulated after an introductory classical brainstorming session. For in-depth investigations of their experiences and behaviour during the project, one student was randomly selected from each group to participate in the case study. All students were between 17 and 18 years old during the project. Their engagement was voluntary. One student decided to drop out during the study for personal reasons. Four students, one male (Jacob) and three female (Fatma, Emma and Lieke), completed the data collection procedure. All names used in the study are pseudonyms. The study was approved by the ethical committee of the Faculty of Arts and Philosophy of Ghent University. Before the start of the project, the selected students received information about their participation and signed an informed consent. It was emphasised that they could withdraw at any time, and that this would not affect their grades. As it involved the personal data of minors (students under 18 years old), an informed consent was signed by their parents or guardians. Finally, to carry out the data collection in the context of the school, the principal signed an informed consent as well.

## Data collection

Relying on a case study design implies that there is a need for multiple data collection tools to gain a rich understanding of the complexity of the research context (Ritchie et al., 2014; Yin, 2018). The data for the current study consisted of a reflective log, questionnaires and observations, with a focus-group interview at the end (Cohen et al., 2011).

The questionnaire was semi-structured. The closed questions involved a five-point Likert scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*, and the questions were followed by space to clarify the given response. The selected students were asked to keep track of their activities and personal experiences or reflections in a log. The log and questionnaires were integrated into one document and handed on paper to the participating students. They were asked to fill out the different sections gradually as the school project proceeded, and they were also given sufficient reminders accordingly. This offered the advantage of flexibility, as the students could answer the questions according to their own schedules.

Qualitative participant observation was used to provide insights into interactions and behaviours in a natural context that went beyond the written account in the log and questionnaires. However, it was not the core of the data collection strategy, but served as a supplementary method to observe the experiences taking place in situ, which are characteristic of heritage education. This project involved two outside classroom activities: visiting the heritage site and investigating source material at the municipal archive. Both observations were semi-structured, with a focus on social interactions and activities related to historical inquiry, while data were collected by taking fieldnotes with an observation guide.

The focus-group interview was held after the school project was concluded. It pairs well with questionnaires and observations to offer method triangulation. In this research, it aimed to confront the students with each other's learning experiences and opinions in such a way that rich and spontaneous interaction would be initiated. Moreover, it helped to make sense of the way the participants understood and interpreted their experiences by providing them with an informal and accessible context in which they could engage with each other. The focus-group interview was recorded and transcribed manually verbatim.

## Analysis

The data were scanned into a digital format, then uploaded and managed using the software package Atlas.ti 23. The interpretive approach adopted in this study allows a deep understanding through the perspectives of the participants and their lived experiences and perceptions. Moreover, it draws on a close interaction of the researcher with the phenomenon under study while allowing thoughtful engagement with the data and the construction of meanings and interpretations (Ritchie et al., 2014). Reflexive thematic analysis was therefore chosen as the most appropriate method to analyse the data collected. The analysis employed a predominantly inductive approach and was informed by the methodological guidelines developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). In their approach, they stress the method's flexibility and the individual researcher's subjectivity to engage with the data (Braun and Clarke, 2021), making it especially suitable in tandem with teacher research.

This study follows a recursive and non-linear process consisting of six phases. First, the research questions served as a lens to familiarise with the data, and an index was constructed to keep the analysis manageable. Second, initial codes at the sentence level were generated close to the data and organised according to the research questions via a hierarchical coding structure. Third, distinctive themes were developed based on codes that shared common meaning and reflected recurring patterns in the dataset, rather than single comments serving as standalone themes. Fourth, the themes were reviewed by assessing how they related to the research questions, and they were subsequently further refined in a fifth phase. Finally, relevant data excerpts were selected in support of the generated themes. These data excerpts, presented in Tables 1–4, serve as illustrative rather than representative examples of the students' opinions and experiences. An audit trail using memos was maintained to promote reflexivity and transparency.

# Results

## What are students' opinions about local heritage as a focal point during a historical inquiry?

In general, all students indicated that they had no previous experience with conducting a historical inquiry at school like the one in this study. Consequently, they mentioned that it was hard for them, especially in the beginning, as they expressed that they had no idea where to start such an investigation. For example, Fatma stated: 'Because we had never done that, before it was via the internet or Google looking for things, but now we really went out and took action.' The students also experienced difficulties selecting relevant sources from an apparent overload of information. However, the explicit focus on local content was also talked about during the focus group. All students indicated that it brought a sense of familiarity to the project, which stimulated their interest and involvement.

Further, during the focus group, the students talked about how they thought the conducted school project related to the school subject of history. There was a consensus that the latter apparently aims to acquire historical facts, while learning research skills is limited. Lieke continued that the focus of the subject of history during their previous years was mostly on European and Belgian history, and not on local content. When asked if this felt like a shortcoming, Jacob elaborated on the limited usefulness of knowing local facts by stating: 'If we all went to teach about our own provinces or cities, nobody could talk about the same history.' Additionally, he stressed the importance of learning global history in secondary education. When questioned if a historical inquiry would also work with global content, Lieke and Emma responded that it probably was possible, but that being able to actually visit and experience the topic under study was fun and added value to the project.

Although the focal point of the project was an old factory near the school, all the students regarded it to be a part of the surrounding culture worth investigating. During the in-situ observation at the heritage site, the students indeed seemed to be excited, and they often interacted with fellow students. Moreover, in the end, Fatma asked me to come along to show me some abandoned objects she had found. In the questionnaire, she responded: 'At first I did not feel that much involved in the project. But as soon as we went to the site and I saw the location with my own eyes, I became enthusiastic.' According to the other questionnaire responses, taking photographs to document the soon-to-be-demolished site was considered a worthwhile activity for the students. On the one hand, this was felt personally, as they somewhat proudly stated that they were the last ones to visit the location. For example, Jacob answered when asked about his feelings during the visit, 'I have seen the end of the building.' On the other hand, most students also expressed the relevance of their work for future generations, both in the questionnaire and in the focus group.

Regarding the questions on the perception of heritage, the students indicated that they never really reflected on it explicitly. However, they were all able to indicate that it had to do with people in the present who experience something from the past because it holds a certain importance, and they therefore want to save or remember it. Although they acknowledged that the implications could be positive as well as negative, such as excluding others, they were not convinced that heritage was linked to identity, and Lieke even stated, 'I do not really think about that.' Finally, the students solely focused on tangible heritage. It was only after confronting them with their descriptions during the focus

group, that Lieke, followed by Fatma, added this was also the case for intangible heritage, such as traditions.

**Table 1. Students' opinions about local heritage as a focal point during a historical inquiry**

| Curriculum activity | Theme | Example |
|---|---|---|
| Visiting in situ | Stimulated by nearby culture | 'And this was just so nice that we knew that building and that we could actually go there.' (Lieke) |
| | Engaging with others | 'She asked me to come along with her to show me some abandoned objects she had found.' (Fatma) |
| | Relevance for the future | 'This way we could capture one last time what the building looked like.' (Emma) |
| Investigating local content | Affective reactions | 'So that we actually really felt like yes, that has added value and provides a bit more involvement.' (Jacob) |
| | Implications for the curriculum | 'If we all went to teach about our own provinces or cities, nobody could talk about the same history.' (Jacob) |
| Perceptions of heritage | Describing its nature | 'To which society attaches great importance.' (Fatma) |
| | Realising its implications | 'It creates a sense of togetherness.' (Fatma) |

## How do students experience using archives during a historical inquiry?

In the questionnaire, all students remarked that they were not aware that there existed something such as a municipal archive or a digital archive of the regional cultural heritage platform. Moreover, during the focus group, the students stated that they were not able to form an image of an archive before the project. When confronting them with the idea that the school has an archive as well, and that they have to deposit their materials and notes at the end of each school year, they realised that they had encountered a similar archival practice before. In this regard, Lieke stated, 'That does make sense, but I hadn't really thought about it.' It was only when visiting the municipal archive and coming into contact with the archivist and its practice that they started to question how an archive works. The observation showed that most students seemed interested, as they asked one or more questions during the short guided tour. For example, Emma wanted to know more, and she wondered what training the archivist had received.

The actual search for archival sources took place in the reading room of the archive. Although the students experienced this as pleasant, they also found it rather difficult to find and select relevant information in light of their research question. For example, although she had ample practice and experience from assignments in the history classroom, Emma expressed, both in the questionnaire and in the focus group, that she struggled with contradictory sources (for example, in newspapers), and with comparing their reliability. Therefore, the amount of time (120 minutes) at the archive was perceived as limited. However, selected documents were scanned and sent to them by the archivist, so that they could extend the investigation in more depth at school. All the students indicated that the municipal archive brought added value to the school project. In addition, the archival sources (for example, pictures, newspapers and letters) provided by the regional cultural heritage platform were also accessible in school during classroom activity via a digital database. The use of such a digital database was perceived as being predominantly smooth, enabling them to work more efficiently, as Lieke stated, for example. All students indicated that the digital database and its contents were useful for completing the project.


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**Table 2. Students' experiences using archives during a historical inquiry**

| Curriculum activity | Theme | Example |
|---|---|---|
| Perceptions of archives | Awareness of archives | 'I didn't know that existed.' (Lieke) |
| Visiting the archive | Questioning how an archive works | 'We learned how an archive works and could look into sources.' (Lieke) |
| Using archival sources | From traditional archives | 'Yes, I also found it difficult to really find sources.' (Emma) |
| | From digital archives | 'We found many names and useful articles there.' (Lieke) |

## How do students experience engaging with oral history during a historical inquiry?

Considering the collection and use of oral accounts from local informants, the students perceived it as a way to get additional sources that would be helpful, as these could shed some more light on lesser-known aspects. In this regard, Lieke expressed that the oral accounts made certain parts of the investigation more concrete, and that the personal approach helped to 'put a face on' the informants and their stories. Moreover, during the interviews, the informants often brought objects or photographs that contributed to the investigation. Interestingly, all students reported that the collection and use of oral sources had not spurred their own involvement with local history. However, they did mention that conducting an oral history project helped them to gain an understanding of how others' engagement with the local past is a rather personal matter, and that these perspectives could differ from their own take. In summary, all students remarked that engaging with oral history was experienced as useful to the project.

**Table 3. Students' experiences engaging with oral history during a historical inquiry**

| Curriculum activity | Theme | Example |
|---|---|---|
| Collecting and using oral sources | Gaining additional knowledge | 'These were people who knew more, so that had added value.' (Emma) |
| Engagement with the local past | Personal involvement | 'I found it instructive and interesting to be able to discover the history of my living environment, but I will never conduct research into it on my own.' (Fatma) |
| | Perspectives of others | 'People like to talk about the past.' (Lieke) |

## What are students' opinions about public-oriented output as an end goal during a historical inquiry?

In the questionnaire, all students remarked that they considered the exposition to be of added value to the project in general. When asked why this was the case, Jacob responded, 'Because we had put our time and effort into it.' The possibility to publicly valorise their work seemed to be perceived as stimulating. For example, Emma stated that, at the end, 'You can see where you had worked towards all those months.' Moreover, all students pointed out that they were more or less driven by the chance of informing the local community, and indicated that they were curious during the project about what others would think of their work.


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The public character of the resulting exposition seemed to give the students a sense of responsibility during the project. They realised that they had to stick to their schedule in order to meet the deadline. For instance, Fatma stated that it was necessary to finish certain parts of the exposition in time, not in the same way as usual, for the teacher, but to be ready for the opening. Emma and Lieke responded that having an end goal during such a project is important. Besides issues of form, the exposition seemed to make the students more aware of the content as well. For example, Emma expressed that 'It was important to be as precise as possible in our exposition, to make sure that everything was correct.' Although the open-endedness of the investigation was perceived as difficult at the beginning, it also contributed to its authenticity, which seemed to further trigger students' responsibility at the end. For Lieke, 'Searching and digging' is part of such a genuine investigation, as 'otherwise it's not an investigation anymore, then it's just processing sources'.

The established partnerships during the project were experienced as worthwhile efforts. This was reflected in the fact that all students mentioned the useful support of the local history volunteer organisation and the youth centre. The former provided them with relevant secondary literature during their initial struggles, while the latter gave creative and logistic support near the end to work out the project. Nevertheless, setting up an exposition and keeping an overview were elements of difficulty that emerged. In this regard, the youth worker played an important role, as Jacob pointed out, 'I am glad she helped us with the project, because otherwise we wouldn't have done anything about it.'

**Table 4. Students' opinions about public-oriented output as an end goal during a historical inquiry**

| Curriculum activity | Theme | Example |
|---|---|---|
| Developing a product with public value | Valorising the effort | 'I think I will not forget the exposition, because you can see where you have worked towards all those months.' (Emma) |
| | Informing others | 'Because of this we could share our work with other residents of the area.' (Lieke) |
| | Feeling a sense of responsibility | 'It was important to be as precise as possible in our exposition, to make sure that everything was correct.' (Emma) |
| Establishing partnerships | Local history volunteer organisation | 'They gave us the materials to get started.' (Lieke) |
| | Youth centre | 'They helped us with the creative part.' (Lieke) |

## Discussion and implications

This case study explored how students experienced an authentic historical inquiry during a school project. The findings show that the students became actively involved in the project. Moreover, conducting a historical inquiry has a strong social nature, as Van Boxtel et al. (2021) have discussed, and as is illustrated throughout this case by the students' engagement. The inclusion of local heritage as a focal point seemed to give meaning to the historical questions they posed, and the visit in situ was felt to be stimulating. In general, the findings seem to affirm the assertions made by Van Boxtel et al. (2016) that nearby heritage can bring relevance to the disciplinary teaching of history, and that such inquiries can foster civic engagement (Arias-Ferrer et al., 2022; Levstik and Barton, 2015). Nevertheless, the students also indicated that conducting an authentic historical inquiry was hard, as there were limited internet sources to draw on and they had no previous experience in school. This mismatch with how they had previously learned history aligns with earlier results indicating that historical inquiry is not common practice among history teachers in Flanders (Voet and De Wever, 2017, 2019), and it suggests that both the initial ability level of students and the effects of such a task can differ significantly (Wilke et al., 2023).

A disciplinary teaching of history implies that all aspects of the work of historians, from archival investigations through to public presentation, may be offered to students. Regarding the use of archival sources, students found it both challenging and stimulating, which is in concordance with previous results in Nygren (2014). However, they also struggled to transfer what they learned from handling textbook sources to authentic sources. It seems the students did not recognise the constructed nature of the archival sources, and the implications that this has for their written narratives, as the validity of these sources was never discussed (Cutrara, 2019). Moreover, solely relying on sourcework in textbooks during their previous six years of school history did not seem to make the students aware of the role of archives and their relation to the work of historians. Although the oral accounts were authentic as well, handling them was not perceived as difficult. It appears that the students more easily considered that oral sources only provide one specific perspective, which they had to assess and compare in order to construct their narratives. Moreover, and in line with claims from Huijgen and Holthuis (2016), engaging with personal accounts seems to help make the investigation feel more concrete and approachable. The authenticity of the students' work appeared to contribute to the idea that they created an end product with public value. Consequently, setting up an exposition was perceived as motivational. This seems to confirm assertions made both within history education literature (Levstik and Barton, 2015) and beyond, such as from the place-based education paradigm (Sobel, 2013).

The findings provide implications for educational practice. First, there is a need to more explicitly address archives, exploring their connection to the discipline of history, and their potential to extend it by also questioning and deconstructing the sources supporting certain narratives (Cutrara, 2019). Although visiting an actual archive apparently brings added value, it is not always feasible or desirable, and it should depend on the level and interest of students. Nevertheless, archives or other heritage institutions have in recent years made efforts to make collections available online through digital databases. For this reason, they hold an increasing potential, and they need to be considered as an important additional resource for teachers (Walsh, 2017). Navigating such databases deserves more research emphasis within the didactics of history, so that students can become more effective users.

Second, the findings allow reflection on what students perceive as meaningful. In this case study, the students were apparently driven by the authenticity of what they were doing. The inquiry involved a nearby site which they were more or less familiar with, and it seems that the decision to demolish it brought a sense of responsibility to their work. Nevertheless, the site did not bear a heritage label, and it was not conveyed as such during the project. For teachers, this seems to draw attention to what Harrison (2013) has called unofficial heritage. Not all relationships to the past take on a formalised form, for example, by recognition through legislation, and some remain in a rather informal status, solely drawing on the significance attributed by individuals, groups or communities. Consequently, by engagingly documenting and disseminating, it can be interpreted that the students understood that the site and the associated memories had a certain heritage value for people.

In line with the call to allow more room for emotions and affective experiences in history education through heritage (Stolare et al., 2021; Van Boxtel et al., 2016), it seems important for teachers to understand that investigating local culture with a historical dimension in the public sphere, even without recognition as heritage, could count as meaningful learning for students. Ultimately, historical inquiries should transcend disciplinary aims and act as a springboard for open reflection on what makes relationships towards the past more or less meaningful, both for themselves and for others, for example, in relation to identity or social issues (Barton, 2016; Burn and Todd, 2024; Cutrara, 2020). Instead of holding on too tightly to the discipline of history, such inquiries should serve civic engagement. This can be achieved by focusing on a dynamic and multidimensional concept of heritage as it is approached in the field of critical heritage studies (Smith, 2006; Van Boxtel et al., 2016). This way, heritage is framed as an active process, and as a way of using the past to construct meaningful interpretations that help to understand and make sense of the present. Ideally, this reflection should be guided by teachers in an explicit way, as the findings from this study show that students tend not to reflect on such things spontaneously, and their perception of the heritage concept is often still one-sided, being focused on tangible heritage.

Third, the findings bring attention to the place of local cultural resources in the curriculum. The students expressed that local content was mostly absent from their history lessons. In this regard, examining European, and, to a lesser extent, Belgian, history is in concordance with what is expected in Flanders (Van Nieuwenhuyse, 2020). Nevertheless, they also indicated that the focus had been on historical facts, while inquiry tasks were limited. It has to be stated that, although nearby heritage

as a focal point was perceived as stimulating, the students explicitly dismissed being taught more factual local knowledge. It was perceived to have little relevance in their later lives and, according to them, learning global history should be given a more prominent place. This seems to correspond with results from a study that explored students' perspectives in England, France and the Netherlands, and that recommended teaching a more global view of human development (Grever et al., 2011). The findings therefore reveal that when it is considered worthwhile for a teacher to focus on the social and cultural dimension of the local area, ideally, active learning methodologies should be used, instead of memorising facts.

## Conclusion

This case study contributes to practitioner knowledge by illustrating how students may experience authentic historical inquiries and the implications that follow from them when designing such activities as a teacher. It needs to be stated, however, that I designed the school project deliberately as all-inclusive in light of the research aim. In this regard, it is recommended to design historical inquiry projects or lesson series that draw on a limited number of disciplinary components, as Martin (2024) also suggests with the idea of bounded inquiry. Designing inquiry tasks can be challenging for teachers due to factors such as time constraints, their open-ended nature and the lack of knowledge of and experience with historical practice. This last challenge was particularly significant, as my initial teacher training took place during a three-year professional bachelor's degree in history and geography, while educational master's programmes in history were only introduced in 2019 at four universities in Flanders, alongside the gradual implementation of historical thinking skills in the curriculum of secondary education. Therefore, a key implication for history education in Flanders is the need to invest in both initial teacher training and ongoing professional development focused on designing meaningful historical inquiries.

Ultimately, this case study points to the importance of teacher-initiated inquiry (Levstik and Barton, 2015). Tallavaara and Rautiainen (2020) make a plea for more attention to the development of meaningful learning experiences during initial teacher training. To this end, and aligned with the above implications, future research should examine the support that pre-service teachers need to set up historical inquiries. Moreover, the focus needs to be drawn to their knowledge and use of heritage as a didactic resource, and which heritage partners prove to be relevant (for example, with useful digital databases) for active and meaningful learning activities (Van Doorsselaere et al., 2024). Therefore, it seems important for history teacher training to dedicate time to focus more explicitly on the relationship between the field of public history and history teaching practice in schools (Demantowsky, 2018; Wojdon, 2018).

Several limitations of this study should be taken into account. First, the qualitative research design involved a small-scale and exploratory case study approach. Moreover, the researcher took an active part in the process. Although there is no evidence that students felt restricted, it is possible that they altered their behaviour, which makes it necessary to be careful when drawing conclusions. Second, the historical inquiry in the school project was designed to be authentic in order to provide an in-depth and detailed understanding of the students' perspective. Therefore, the results are context-specific and a transfer to other settings is limited. Third, when interpreting the results, it should also be considered that the students were chosen as a critical case (Yin, 2018). While it seems safe to say that the project was generally successful in engaging students from human sciences in historical inquiry, a sample from another course of study may potentially provide different results. Finally, this study focused on students' experiences and perceptions, rather than on the learning outcomes. Consequently, the working documents, final group papers, and the public exposition produced by the students were not analysed, as this fell out of the scope of the research aim. Therefore, no conclusions can be drawn about how their work aligned with the proposed historical thinking skills in heritage education (Seixas, 2016; Wallace-Casey, 2019). More research is needed to examine whether the findings of this study also appear in other samples of students, and how they relate to learning outcomes during an authentic historical inquiry.

## Data and materials availability statement

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available in the repository Open Science Framework: https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/V9W5G.

# Declarations and conflicts of interest

## Research ethics statement

The author declares that research ethics approval for this article was provided by the Faculty of Arts and Philosophy of Ghent University ethics board.

## Consent for publication statement

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

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