Review article

(Re)mapping the terrain of historical significance: compiling an atlas of frameworks and criteria

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Abstract

This theory synthesis article aims at (re)mapping frameworks and criteria used in the conceptual landscape of historical significance. The analysis connects and unpacks a diverse range of conceptual frameworks, and concludes that these frameworks represent a broad spectrum of criteria, rather than a unified consensus. The mapping also results in two distinct areas within the landscape: the Research terrain, containing conceptual tools for research on students' perspectives on historical significance, and the Education terrain, equipped with didactical frameworks developed for the classroom. A compilation of the criteria drawn from the included frameworks is also undertaken. In doing this, the concepts of objective and subjective dimensions of epistemic knowledge are used to sort, unpack and problematise the criteria. This study provides theoretical, didactical and methodological insights into the area of historical significance, offering a tentative atlas to facilitate researchers and educators in navigating this landscape.

Keywords historical significance; historical relevance; conceptual frameworks; epistemic knowledge; theory synthesis

Introduction

Perceptions of historical significance are at the centre of history and history education, since not everything in the past can become history (Barton, 2005). Therefore, significance is the second-order concept that helps reveal the selection processes involved in doing and teaching about history. What we choose to highlight as history are the things from the past that are, in different ways, meaningful and relevant to us today.

It has been 26 years since Seixas (1997) presented a first, preliminary mapping of students' comprehension of historical significance. Seixas initiated this endeavour due to broadened and redefined boundaries in the landscape of historical significance, an influence from, among other factors, the emergence of New History. Consequently, the notion of significance appears to be in a perpetual state of flux. As Seixas (1997: 22) observes, 'standards of significance apparently in here not in the past itself, but in the interpretive frames and values of those who study it – ourselves.'

The research area of students' views of historical significance has expanded considerably since Seixas (1994, 1997) did his preliminary mappings (Barton, 2005; Sjölund Åhsberg, 2024a), adding new conceptions and frameworks. The dynamic and evolving nature of this domain calls for a comprehensive remapping to facilitate researchers and educators in navigating through, and maybe beyond, this terrain. To achieve this, Seixas's (1997) map metaphor will be employed in this article.

The aim of this article is twofold: (1) to map and provide a structured overview of the conceptual landscape in the research area of historical significance from students' perspectives and (2) to critically examine this landscape. The research questions are as follows:

- How can the conceptual landscape of this research area be mapped?
- What discernible patterns emerge when considering the frameworks used and the criteria within the frameworks in this landscape?
- How can these findings be understood and used in relation to the changing landscape of historical significance?

Three compelling reasons justify this undertaking. First, from a theoretical standpoint, critically examining prevailing frameworks and criteria could challenge and potentially expand their boundaries, thereby broadening their scope to incorporate more perspectives. A recent review of research on students' perspectives on historical significance highlighted the importance of considering students' diverse identities in history education. It emphasised the value of incorporating multiple perspectives, including voices from contemporary cultures, to help students deconstruct myths about homogeneous societies and better understand today's globalised world (Sjölund Åhsberg, 2024a). The results of previous research imply a need to include broader perspectives on historical significance (for example, Barton, 2005; Barton and Levstik, 1998; Crocco, 2018; Lévesque, 2005; Levstik, 1997; Peck, 2009, 2010, 2018; Terzian and Yeager, 2007). This calls for both further research and new approaches to conceptualise and problematise these issues in relation to future history education. Second, from a didactical perspective, clarifying and problematising concepts and frameworks of historical significance is essential in order to challenge teachers and students to think critically and 'to consider or reconsider the implicit and explicit interpretative frames and collective values they use to make sense of the past' (Lévesque, 2008: 61). In this article, didactics – specifically history didactics – refers to the educational theory and scientific discipline in German-speaking and Nordic countries, and it should not be confused with the negative connotation the term may have in the English-speaking world. The knowledge base of didactics includes an understanding of educational aims and values, and their historical, normative and ideological foundations (Gundem, 1992). Finally, in relation to both theory and methodology, the narrative literature review (Sjölund Åhsberg, 2024a) also indicated that frameworks that were developed as educational resources were often used as analytical tools without providing a clear justification. Frameworks were also combined with others without explanation or problematisation. An atlas of existing frameworks and criteria could therefore aid researchers, teacher educators and potentially teachers in selecting or combining conceptualisations in a way that is suitable for their purposes.

This article begins with a short overview of previous research, followed by methodological and theoretical considerations. In the first results section, all identified frameworks and criteria are presented and compiled in a matrix, offering possibilities for analysis by tentatively sorting and unpacking the criteria. This analysis results in the first map of the various criteria within frameworks. The second results section clusters the frameworks on a two-axis chart examining emergence and use. This clustering

produces a second map, providing a panoramic view of the research area. Together, these maps will offer a tentative atlas of the conceptual landscape of historical significance. The article concludes by identifying possible implications and new perspectives on the research area, pointing to conceptually uncharted territories of historical significance that require further exploration.

Previous research

Although the notion of historical significance commonly arises in research and teaching on history, it is often implicit and unchartered in both. Lévesque (2008) argues that one of these unexplored areas is the set of criteria used to define historical significance in disciplinary and educational settings. The focus of most studies has been on the perceptions of significance, and more specifically on what content is considered significant, rather than on how significance is determined, or the criteria used in those choices (Lévesque, 2008). Cercadillo (2000) observed that previous research has approached historical significance from either an objective or a subjective perspective. The objective perspective in determining significance aligns with 'the logic of the narrative' and 'criteria of comparisons', rather than assuming access to an absolute past. In this way, objective significance 'concerns the nature of history itself' (Cercadillo, 2000: 29–30). A subjective perspective on historical significance, which takes students' perspectives into account when determining significance, emerged in the 1990s, with research primarily conducted in the USA and Canada (Barton, 1999; Epstein, 1997; Levstik, 1997; Seixas, 1993, 1996, 1997). This research highlighted issues related to 'eurocentrism, multiculturalism, and ethnocentrism' (Cercadillo, 2000: 30). Consequently, subjective significance concerns different viewpoints and perspectives on what can be considered important – and for whom. Barton (2005) distinguished two research orientations in a review of contemporary research on students' perceptions of historical significance. The first primarily analysed students' understanding of significance as a thinking tool (Cercadillo, 2000, 2001; Seixas, 1994, 1997), categorising and framing students' types of explanations and historical reasoning. The second (Barton, 1994, 2005; Barton and Levstik, 1998; Epstein, 1998, 2000; Levstik, 2000) also focused on the content in relation to students' explanations, seeking commonalities in students' responses concerning historical significance and involving a sociocultural approach. This research often differentiated between official and everyday history, referencing, for example, Cole (1996), Wertsch (1998) and Bodnar (1992), as well as including the theory of historical positioning (VanSledright, 1998). A recent narrative review (Sjölund Åhsberg, 2024a) of 32 studies, from 2000 to 2021, on students' views of historical significance, indicates a slow but steady expansion of the field in terms of geographical representation, methodology and theoretical approaches. The review also highlights representational gaps. While students prioritise official narratives, their interest in overlooked histories suggests potential for challenging dominant views. The results indicate a need for both the integration of students' identities and a more critical, disciplinary approach to history education.

Method

A theory synthesis article aims to achieve conceptual integration across multiple theories, providing new perspectives on a concept or phenomenon (Jaakkola, 2020). This article explores the concept of historical significance and the diverse frameworks and criteria used to grasp its complex nature. The synthesis process, involving new ways of linking as well as 'summarizing and integrating existing knowledge of a concept' (Jaakkola, 2020: 21), provides a comprehensive view of existing knowledge and fresh insights into historical significance. In this article, conceptual frameworks are described as providing a structured arrangement of interconnected concepts, offering a representation of how ideas in a study are related (Grant and Osanloo, 2014), while (conceptual) models are in some instances used to describe visual and/or didactic representations of conceptual relationships. Criteria are here presented as 'defined and useful "analytic" concepts' for analysing historical significance from different perspectives, inside and outside the history community (Lévesque, 2008: 46, 56).

This theory synthesis article was conducted through the following phases: (1) search for and retrieval of frameworks; (2) analysis of themes within the frameworks; and (3) analysis and identification of different themes among and between the frameworks. First, to identify relevant frameworks, three criteria had to be met. The frameworks must: (1) contain criteria relating to historical significance; (2) be used or referenced in academic literature on historical significance in relation to students; and (3) be published

in English. These frameworks were discovered in two stages. The first stage built on a prior systematic narrative review of 32 English-language, peer-reviewed and empirical articles published from 2000 to 2021, focusing on students' perspectives on historical significance (Sjölund Åhsberg, 2024a). In some of these articles, conceptual frameworks were used or referred to. In these 32 articles, the frameworks by Cercadillo (2000), Counsell (2004), Lévesque (2005), Partington (1980), Phillips (2002) and Seixas (1994, 1997) were included. To broaden the scope of the data, reference chaining was employed in connection with these 32 articles. This second stage related to: (1) academic literature, including articles and books; (2) both empirical and non-empirical research; and (3) the teaching of historical significance. Backward reference chaining from Cercadillo (2000) led to the inclusion of the conceptualisation of historical significance by Danto (1985), and the frameworks by Ellis (1992) and Lomas (1990). Although he is a philosopher of history, Danto's (1985) typology of historical significance is included since it is influential in relation to later works, such as Cercadillo (2000). Forward chaining, which involved works that cited or discussed the original sources, resulted in the inclusion of Lévesque (2008). Within this book, a reference to Denos and Case (2006) was identified. Later, an updated edition of this book was identified (Stipp et al., 2017). Further forward chaining from Cercadillo (2000), Counsell (2004) and Partington (1980) led to the addition of Peck and Seixas (2008) and Seixas and Morton (2013). This last publication led to the inclusion of Van Straaten et al. (2016), and the latter article introduced Nordgren (2021). In total, 14 frameworks were identified and added to the table.

The second phase involved analysing themes within the frameworks. To achieve this, a qualitative thematic analysis was conducted in three steps. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), a theme captures recurring patterns in the empirical data that are significant in relation to the study's aim and research questions. In the first step, an abductive and iterative analysis identified two overarching and broader themes that relate to the criteria of all the included frameworks: objective and subjective dimensions of significance. This division has previously been used by Seixas (1994, 1997) and discussed by Cercadillo (2000). In a second step, all frameworks were compiled into a comprehensive analysis matrix in order to structure the analysis and facilitate the identification of other potential themes. The dimensions were added as rows, while the included frameworks were added as columns, arranged according to the year of publication. The criteria of these frameworks were then placed within the matrix in relation to the dimensions and to the criteria in the other frameworks. In the third step of the analysis phase, additional themes or dimensions were generated abductively during the compilation and analysis of previous research and theory. This process enabled the identification of dimensions and patterns present within the various frameworks. It also allowed for the identification of missing themes. The identified dimensions were assigned different fades of grey to provide visual guidance (see Table 1).

In the third phase of this theory synthesis, the focus was on exploring possible ways to compile a comprehensive, bird's-eye map of the conceptual landscape of this research area. Such a mapping could have been done in relation to a multitude of rationales, for example, by highlighting temporal, geographical or theoretical connections or by conducting a network analysis. This article focuses on themes that may be useful for educators and researchers seeking to understand and use the conceptional tools related to historical significance. The readings of the included literature and frameworks produced two analytical themes to be used in the mapping: *purpose/use* and *origin/process* (for compiling the framework). These themes were then elaborated into a two-axis analysis chart (see Figure 1).

The horizontal axis of *purpose/use* refers to how the framework is intended for use, as outlined in the article or book introducing it. This includes its role as an analytical tool in research, or, on the opposite side of the axis, as an educational tool for teaching historical significance. The vertical *origin/process* axis is used to identify the different approaches employed in the development of these frameworks. This process could be either empirically generated, employing a bottom-up approach that starts with empirical observations or data to generate the framework, or as a typology or conceptual development, which involves a top-down approach, where the researcher utilises one or more existing theories or bodies of knowledge to develop the framework. The two-axis analysis chart displays these four distinct positions. The mapping of the frameworks in the two-axis analysis chart involved an iterative process, starting with the articles and literature where the frameworks were published and incorporating insights from discussions in previous research to identify connections between them, and considering potential positions within the chart. To illustrate potential connections between different frameworks, arrows denote where an explicit reference to another framework is made. A dashed arrow line signifies an indirect reference, which mentions research without explicitly citing a specific work as the basis for typology building. This mapping allowed two potential terrains to be charted. These will be discussed

below in the 'Results' section, offering one tentative bird's-eye map of the conceptual landscape of historical significance.

Figure 1. The two-axis analysis chart
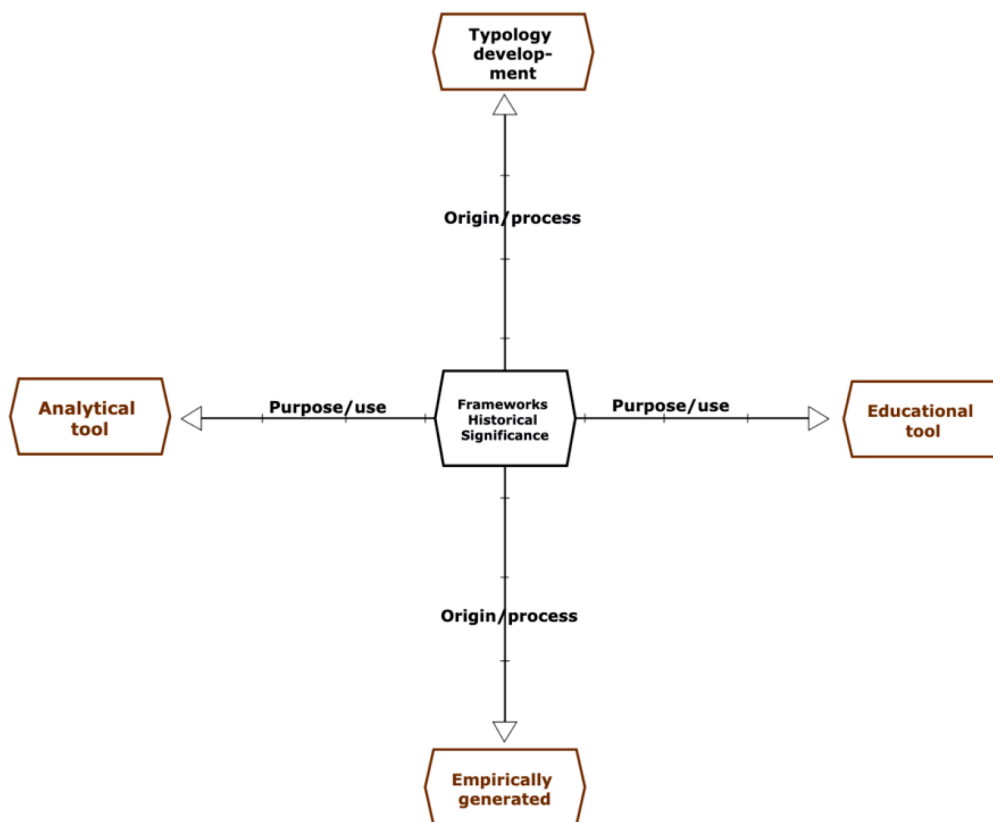
Theoretical points of departure

Our approaches, and practices in relation to, history are connected to the epistemic norms we uphold (Van Boxtel and Van Drie, 2018). The epistemic stances in the discipline of history have also evolved over time: from Ranke's nineteenth-century belief that the past could be reconstructed 'as it really was', to the introduction of subjective perspectives in the first half of the twentieth century, to postmodernism's later challenge to the very notion of historical 'truth'. Today, Reisman and McGrew (2018: 532) describe an 'uneasy consensus' in which we assume that the past can be reconstructed by asking historical questions of sources, while recognising how our own subjective positions shape interpretations.

In research on historical significance, Seixas (1994, 1997) categorised, and Cercadillo (2000) discussed, students' perspectives based on the distinction between objective and subjective dimensions. This distinction serves as a starting point for the first part of the analysis in this study: categorising criteria for historical significance within the framework matrix (see Table 1). In this mapping, the subjective dimension in the matrix reflects criteria that highlight diverse 'points of view' (Cercadillo, 2000: 156), where the subject(s), or knower(s), engage in meaning-making, interpretation and the imposition of meaning on objects. The objective dimension, in turn, should be 'understood in the context of a historical narrative' (Cercadillo, 2000: 29). It aligns with Megill's (2007) third sense of objectivity, disciplinary objectivity, where the community of historians reaches consensus on knowledge claims and methods.

This analytical distinction can be problematised by linking it to the concept of epistemic cognition in history, as outlined by VanSledright and Maggioni (2016). In this context, knowledge construction in history is understood as an interpretive process involving both historical evidence (the object) and the student (the subject). Epistemic cognition, or the process of knowledge construction in

history, is categorised into three main groups: objectivist, where students believe history can be constructed objectively as it 'happened'; subjectivist, where construction of historical knowledge is seen as depending on individual perspectives, allowing for multiple interpretations; and criterialist, where historical knowledge is considered to emerge through the interaction between the knower and historical evidence, guided by criteria established by historians. Thus, in this mapping, the objective dimension of significance should be understood as a criterialist position rather than the objectivist dimension of knowledge production in history, as defined by VanSledright and Maggioni (2016), while the subjective dimension is defined similarly.

The two-axis chart for mapping the conceptual landscape draws inspiration from Lévesque (2008) for the horizontal axis. Lévesque (2008) suggests that frameworks for historical significance can function as implicit disciplinary tools, as analytical concepts in educational research and as criteria used in history education. For the purpose of this article, the latter two functions have been employed for the purpose/use axis. For the vertical axis, which describes the process of developing the conceptual frameworks, I draw on descriptions of theory generation and theory development in grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Nathaniel, 2023). The lower end of the vertical axis consists of conceptualisations generated from empirical data, an inductive process where indicators in the data are clustered and conceptualised as substantive codes. In this study, these derive from and describe students' conceptualisations of historical significance. The other end of the axis represents the process of theoretical sampling, addressing gaps in theory, and thereby developing typology.

Results

I will first present the results of the analysis of the criteria within the included conceptual frameworks and then report on the results of the mapping and clustering of the same frameworks.

Exploration within the frameworks: identifying and mapping possible patterns among the criteria

The frameworks were compiled into the matrix with the aim of identifying possible patterns: similarities and differences, gaps and possible problematic areas. The starting point for this compilation and the following analysis was the reading of Seixas (1994, 1997) and Cercadillo (2000, 2001), which gave the overarching categorisation of the *objective* and *subjective dimensions*. This division proved compatible and useful when assembling the rest of the frameworks. During the compilation process, it became evident that a third dimension was needed to incorporate the relevance criterion. A tentative temporal dimension was therefore added between the two overarching ones. In this way, the matrix in Table 1 serves both as an analytical tool and as a result in terms of its content and organisation.

One result of the analysis of the matrix is a general emphasis on, and a more detailed specification of, the criteria in the objective dimension, which is also represented in all frameworks. The subjective dimension generally encompasses more diverse and scattered criteria. It is primarily Cercadillo (2000, 2001, 2006) and Lévesque (2005) who include more specific and detailed subjective criteria. (Lévesque presents and uses the framework for historical significance in Lévesque [2005], but develops the criteria in a later publication [Lévesque, 2008].) Five frameworks lack a subjective dimension and – if you exclude the uncertain placement of the last two of Danto's (1985) criteria – only reflect the objective dimension and the temporal dimension (Danto, 1985; Ellis, 1992; Lomas, 1990; Partington, 1980; Phillips, 2002). Three frameworks are interpreted as merging the subjective and the temporal dimensions (Peck and Seixas, 2008; Seixas and Morton, 2013; Van Straaten et al., 2016). This can also be said about Seixas's criteria (1994, 1997), depending on how one interprets them. There are no frameworks that only cover the subjective dimension.

Table 1. The analysis matrix for frameworks of historical significance

Dimensions / Frameworks (by year)	Partington (1980)	Danto (1985)	Lomas[1] (1990)	Ellis (1992)	Seixas (1994, 1997)	Cercadillo (2000)	Phillips (2002)	Counsell (2004)	Lévesque (2005)	Denos and Case (2006) and Stipp et al. (2017)	Peck and Seixas (2008)	Seixas and Morton (2013)	Van Straaten et al. (2016) and Nordgren (2021)
Objective dimension	*Objective criteria:* Profundity; Quantity; Durability; Importance to people in the past	Consequential significance and Revelatory significance	Affected many people; Lasted a long time; Importance for people at the time	*Intrinsic significance (?):* Historical significance; Contemporary significance	Objectivistic	Causal significance (?); Contemporary significance	Remembered by all; Terrifying; Events that were far reaching; Ground-breaking and stunning change	R(emembered) *; R(esulting in change); R(emarkable) *	*Disciplinary significance:* Profundity; Quantity; Durability; Importance	Remembered *; Consequences: Scope of impact and Magnitude of impact; Consequences: Lasting nature of impact; Prominence at the time: Immediate recognition and Duration	Resulting in change	Resulted in change; Significance as: Constructed *	Significance/ Importance
Temporal dimension	Relevance		Relevance	Intrinsic significance (?)	Narrativistic (?)	Present significance	Affecting the future	R(evealing) R(emarkable) *	Relevance	Revealing	Revealing	Revealing	Relevance
Subjective dimension	Pragmatic significance and Theoretical significance (in relation to the historian) (?)[2]				Subjectivistic (?)	Revelatory significance (?); Symbolic significance; Pattern significance		R(emembered) *; R(esonant)	*Memory Significance:* Familial interests; Symbolic significance; Contemporary lessons	Subsequent profile: Remembered *		Significance as: Constructed * and Varies over time and from group to group	

Notes: (*) indicates that the criteria are placed tentatively in two places within the framework and (?) indicates an uncertainty in the position. Underscoring indicates an overarching criterion, while oblique lines indicate a merging of temporal and subjective dimensions. [1] Criteria are set against a general standard: moral/ethical judgements. [2] These two criteria are difficult to place in the matrix. They describe the inevitable subjective dimensions within the discipline (see Megill, 2007). These criteria could therefore also be seen as belonging to the objective dimension.

Another result is the temporal dimension in the matrix. The significance of an event in historiography does not only depend on what happened in the past, but also on how the present makes use of the event based on different needs, orientations and priorities in the present (Lévesque, 2008). This outlines the scope of the temporal dimension, encompassing the relevance criteria, which appears in various forms in all frameworks except those by Danto (1985) and Seixas (1994, 1997). Placed midway in the matrix, this dimension requires a combination of objective or disciplinary knowledge and subjective assessment based on the evaluator's present perspective or positioning. What distinguishes this intermediate position from the other dimensions is the interpretive process that moves back and forth in time, linking the past to the present when deciding on historical significance.

A pattern concerning changes over time has been identified. The earlier frameworks (Danto, 1985; Ellis, 1992; Lomas, 1990; Partington, 1980) aim at describing different historiographic constructs of historical significance, and they do not include a subjective perspective, although Danto (1985) and Lomas (1990) point to the fact that a decision about significance always involves a subjective or evaluative position within the discipline of history. During the early 2000s, numerous new frameworks were developed that showcased a wider variety and scope, incorporating all three dimensions when conceptualising historical significance. Only one framework (Van Straaten et al., 2016; later developed by Nordgren, 2021) has been added more recently. Some frameworks include ambiguities: the criteria *Remembered* (Counsell, 2004; Denos and Case, 2006; Phillips, 2002 – although I interpret Phillips's [2002] criterion as within the discipline, following his question with regard to Partington's [1980] Durability criterion) and *Constructed* (Seixas and Morton, 2013) could be placed in both the objective and the subjective dimensions.

In conclusion, the compilation and iterative analysis of the matrix reveals that some frameworks are comprehensive with broad categories (Peck and Seixas, 2008; Seixas, 1994, 1997; Van Straaten et al., 2016). Others provide detailed subcategories that encompass the full range of dimensions (Cercadillo, 2000; Counsell, 2004; Denos and Case, 2006; Lévesque, 2005; Phillips, 2002; Stipp et al., 2017). The earlier frameworks primarily focus on the objective and temporal dimensions, and the emphasis on these dimensions is prevalent in the included frameworks. However, later frameworks incorporate criteria that address the subjective dimension, considering students' perspectives on historical significance.

From this 'mining' of the frameworks, the focus will now be redirected towards the results of the second part of the analysis, attempting instead to provide a bird's-eye view of the area.

## Overview of a conceptual area: mapping terrains of historical significance

The mapping in this section is the result of the positionings of the frameworks on the two-axis chart described in Figure 1. Connections between the frameworks were added. Together, these provided a tentative map of the area of historical significance. This map also includes two identified conceptual terrains of historical significance. Next, I will first present some general findings, followed by descriptions of the two terrains: the *Research terrain*, focusing on researching students' perspectives on historical significance, and the *Education terrain*, concentrating on the teaching of historical significance. I will then discuss these maps, highlighting potential similarities, connections and gaps.

The Research terrain, which includes references such as Cercadillo (2000, 2001, 2006), Ellis (1992), Danto (1985), Lévesque (2005, 2008), Seixas (1994, 1997) and Van Straaten et al. (2016), is comparable in scope to the Education terrain. The Education terrain encompasses works such as Counsell (2004), Denos and Case (2006), Lomas (1990), Partington (1980), Peck and Seixas (2008), Phillips (2002), Seixas and Morton (2013) and Stipp et al. (2017). Some frameworks have been placed on the border of two areas. Counsell's (2004) and Phillips's (2002) frameworks were not only shaped by previous research, but also in close relation to classroom experience. Seixas and Morton (2013) and Partington (1980) are placed in the middle of the educational and analytical purpose/use axis since the criteria are interpreted as having double (potential) purposes. In the mapping, they are included in the Education terrain due to the explicit educational purposes for the frameworks expressed in the publications where the frameworks were first described. Based on the information in these publications, all frameworks, except for one (Seixas, 1994, 1997), appear to have originated, at least in part, from a process in which the typologies were primarily developed based on previous literature and theories.

The connecting arrows within the chart indicate two main findings: Partington (1980) and Counsell (2004) have had an important influence, both directly and indirectly, on subsequent frameworks in both terrains, while Lévesque's (2005, 2008) framework is influenced by many other researchers in both

terrains. It can also be noted that the frameworks by Van Straaten et al. (2016) and Nordgren (2021) are outliers in the analytical, research-related corner, while Seixas (1994, 1994), who made the initial empirical mappings of students' views on historical significance, stands alone in the lower, empirical section of the chart. There are no frameworks in the lower empirically generated/educational section of the chart (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Map of the landscape of historical significance. The two terrains are marked by two different shades of grey
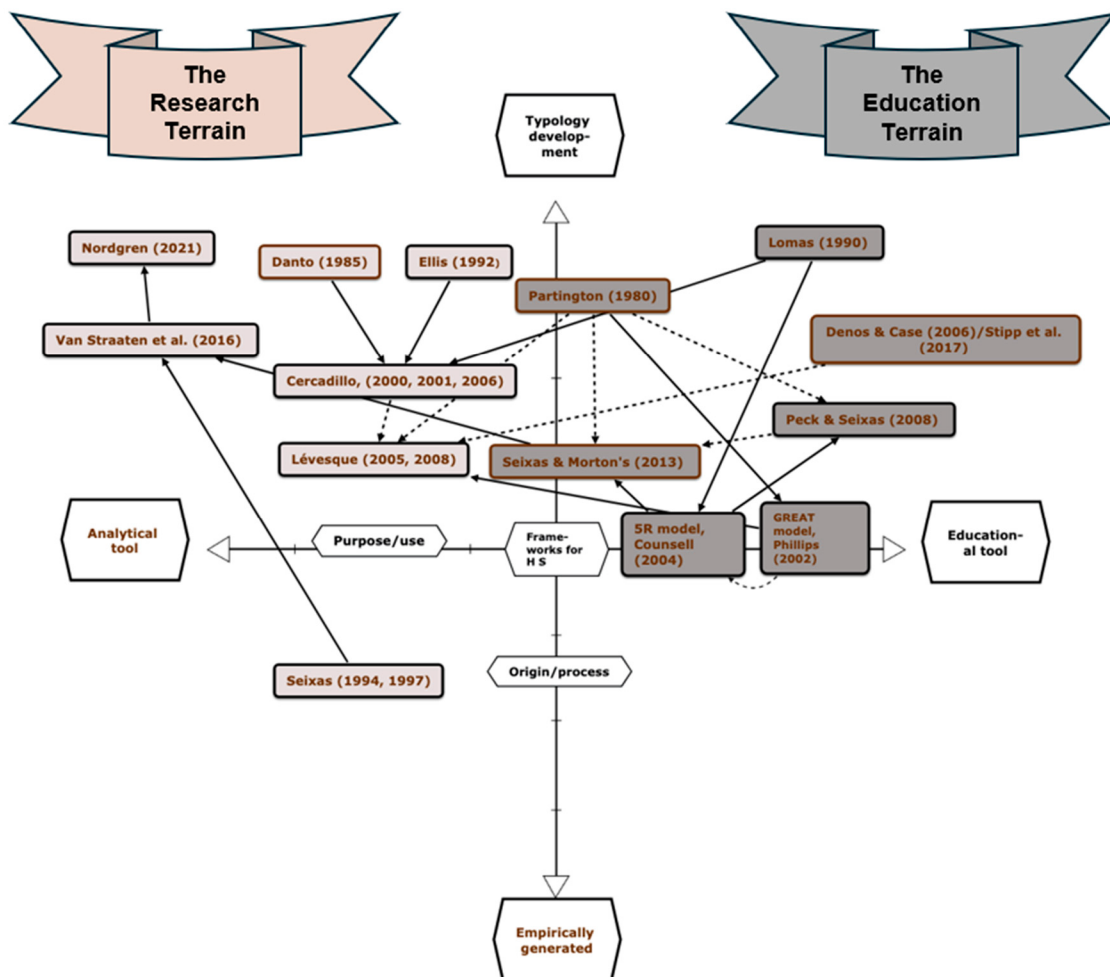
The Research terrain

The frameworks in this terrain, located on the left-hand side of the chart, focus on how to analyse and discuss students' perspectives in research on historical significance. As I interpret this part of the two-axis chart, it contains three areas – one central extensive area that includes the frameworks generated through typology development and two small satellite areas: Van Straaten et al. (2016) and Nordgren (2021) in the upper left corner of the chart, and Seixas (1994, 1997) alone in the empirical section of the chart.

The more extensive area in this terrain centres on two detailed frameworks (Cercadillo, 2000, 2001, 2006; Lévesque, 2005, 2008) that are primarily generated through typology development, both being composites of, or inspired by, prior frameworks and theory. The frameworks by Cercadillo have been used for analysing students' different perspectives on historical significance, for example by Apostolidou (2012), Cercadillo (2000) and Peck (2010), and used in the discussion by Egea Vivancos and Arias Ferrer

(2018). The framework by Lévesque (2005) has been used by, for example, Avarogullari and Kolcu (2016), Lévesque (2005) and Sjölund Åhsberg (2024b).

Cercadillo (2000) explored the understanding of, and progression in, students' cognitive understanding of historical significance and stressed the importance of significance being understood relative to events in an account. Cercadillo's framework of historical significance, based on philosophical and historical theory, and created in relation to the work by Danto (1985), Lomas (1990) (see the 'Education terrain' section) and Ellis (1992), contains six criteria for significance: *contemporary*, *causal*, *pattern*, *symbolic*, *revelatory* and *present* (in Cercadillo [2000], this latter criterion is called Significance for the present and the future). This typology was used by Cercadillo (2000) in her analysis of empirical data generated from students in Spain and England. In a subsequent article, Cercadillo (2006) discussed the earlier findings and placed them in a broader perspective. Additionally, a new criterion, *revelatory significance*, was incorporated into the conceptual framework. In this article, the criteria were also consolidated into a descriptive model.

Danto's (1985) typology for historical significance, which was developed in relation to the analysis of narratives in historical writing, primarily took a historiographical perspective and did not incorporate a contemporary viewpoint. According to Danto (1985), historical significance can only be ascribed to an event in hindsight. This implies that its significance becomes apparent when viewed in relation to subsequent historical events. Ellis (1992) shared this perspective.

Lévesque's (2005) conceptual framework was used for exploring how francophone and anglophone students ascribed significance to selected events in Canadian history. The framework consists of two overarching concepts of significance: disciplinary and memory significance, each of which encompasses several underlying criteria. Lévesque's conceptualisations of historical thinking (2008) in general, and historical significance in particular (Lévesque, 2005, 2008), systematically discuss and expand on Seixas's prior seminal work (see, for example, Seixas, 1993, 1994, 1997), as well as the work of other scholars in the field of history education. Lévesque (2005) uses Partington (1980), through Phillips (2002), to specify the criteria of disciplinary significance: *importance*, *depth, quantity, duration* and *relevance*. In Lévesque (2008), Partington (1980) and Hunt (2000) are referred to as having been influential for Phillips (2002). In contrast, the everyday or vernacular memory significance is rooted in a more personal and practical application. It operates intuitively and unconsciously, manifesting either on a collective level or within close, personal and intimate spheres to shape a shared past. This perception of significance is less receptive to re-evaluation (Lévesque, 2008). Lévesque (2005) does not specify the origin of the naming of the three underlying criteria of memory significance: *familial interests*, *symbolic significance* and *contemporary lessons*, but, in a later publication, Lévesque (2008: 56) specifically refers to related criteria by Cercadillo (2001) and Denos and Case (2006). When problematising memory significance, he refers to research by, for example, Barton (2001), Barton and Levstik (1998), Cercadillo (2001), Epstein (1998), Lee (1984), Lévesque (2005), Levstik (2000), Rosenzweig (2000), Seixas (1994, 1997), Wertsch (1998) and Yeager et al. (2002). Lévesque (2005) portrays school history teaching as a platform for the transmission and mediation of culture through implied political historical significance. In this context, memory significance can be seen as either contrasting with, or more aptly, complementing the disciplinary criteria.

Seixas (1994), in the lower left-hand side of the chart, conducted one of the earliest empirical studies on how students understand and reason about their attributions of historical significance. He identified two main approaches to ways of reasoning about historical significance: narrative explanations and analogical explanations. The results emphasised that a history education that includes both objective and subjective dimensions of historical significance holds a potential for students to link their particular histories with larger historical narratives. In a subsequent study, Seixas (1997) expanded his earlier work and mapped three different ways, each with two different levels, in which students discussed historical significance. Seixas (1994, 1997) primarily emphasised the didactical how and who questions, but did not focus as much on what the students talk about, that is, the historical content. Seixas's framework is used in the research of, for example, Apostolidou (2012), Avarogullari and Kolcu (2016) and Peck (2010).

Van Straaten et al.'s (2016) dichotomous framework, placed in the upper left-hand side of the chart, refers to Seixas (1994) and Seixas and Morton (2013). This framework stands out in the data in several different ways. For one thing, historical significance as an overarching concept is here referred to as importance. Van Straaten et al. (2016: 481) then subdivide importance into two aspects: 'importance for developments and people in the past' and 'importance for the present'. The former refers to 'understanding the past as an aim in itself', and it pertains to the knowledge and procedures essential for comprehending a historical phenomenon. The latter, however, relates to what renders history important

in the present, based on the person who interprets history. For this, Van Straaten et al. (2016) prefer to use the term relevance. From a student's perspective, this would allude to what aspects of a historical narrative are connected to them personally, how the historical narrative intersects with contemporary society, and perhaps even a broader comprehension of human existence (Van Straaten et al., 2016). Van Straaten et al. (2016) use these aspects to explore how to make history education more relevant to students with regard to objectives and teaching strategies in history education. Nordgren (2021) later further developed this framework for examining powerful knowledge in relation to curricula in history education. Nordgren (2021) more clearly distinguished between history as intrinsically significant when a justification or logic is historical and grounded in principles that structure the academic discipline of history, or as extrinsically relevant, when it is rooted in what Nordgren (2021: 184) identifies as a 'horizontal discourse', or everyday knowledge in society at large in the present, and thus extrinsic to the historical discipline. A similar discussion about intrinsic significance can also be found in Cercadillo (2006).

The Education terrain

The frameworks within the Education terrain, in the upper right-hand side of the two-axis chart, focus on how to help students to understand historical significance. This terrain has a long history, and it contains frameworks that take their starting point from an implicit or explicit use of significance within the discipline of history. Although the focus for these frameworks is on how these criteria could be used and understood in the classroom (see, for example, Bradshaw, 2006; Counsell, 2004; Phillips, 2002), some have also been used as analytical tools when researching students' perspectives on historical significance (see, for example, Bergman, 2020).

Partington's (1980) framework plays a central role in this terrain, having been referenced by various historians, researchers and teacher-researchers over time. It addresses historical significance by emphasising the inherent tensions within the discipline of history, such as those between historiography and the school subject of history. Partington (1980) recognised the need to balance these tensions, but also potential difficulties in relation to presentism, objectivism, egalitarianism and ethnocentrism. To address these challenges, he introduced three significance criteria: *importance*, *relevance* and *objective criteria*, with the latter comprising three sub-dimensions: *depth*, *quantity* and *duration*. Partington's (1980) framework serves both as an analytical and an educational tool, placing it in a borderline position on the two-axis chart.

Phillips (2002) built on Partington's (1980) criteria when developing his mnemonic GREAT framework, or model, combining the English name for the First World War, 'the Great War', with Partington's (1980) five criteria. The didactic motive for developing the framework, and for the lesson plan that followed it, was to help students to answer the enquiry question: Why was this war called the Great War? By using the criteria: *Groundbreaking*, *Remembered by all*, *Events that were far reaching*, *Affected the future* and *Terrifying*, different perspectives on the significance of the war could be examined.

Lomas (1990) pointed out some key concepts or basic ideas that enable a profound understanding of historical significance for students: *relevance*, *importance*, *affecting many people* and *lasting for a long time*. Lomas (1990) also emphasised the necessity of historical context knowledge to assess and comprehend significance. Lomas (1990) underlined the inherently subjective, moral/ethical nature of determining significance, which is influenced by scale and contextual relationships. For instance, small events can gain significance in hindsight, while seemingly significant events can diminish in importance (Lomas, 1990).

Counsell (2004) introduced the 5R framework, comprising the criteria *Remarkable*, *Remembered*, *Resonant*, *Resulting (in change)* and *Revealing*. This framework was created so that it could have 'universal application' and contribute to ongoing discussions among educators (Counsell, 2004). Counsell (2004) drew inspiration from Lomas's (1990) framework, which she regarded as the 'most theoretically consistent and practically realistic'. The 5R framework, described as a tentative yet useful 'pedagogic model', is designed to help students focus on 'the "*historical*" in "*historical* significance"' in the classroom (Counsell, 2004: 33; emphasis in the original).

Peck and Seixas (2008) developed a framework to be used in classrooms by condensing Counsell's (2004) and Partington's (1980) frameworks to only two criteria, *resulting in change* and *revealing*. Seixas and Morton (2013) expanded this approach, offering a broader and more pragmatic framework built on four 'guideposts', with inspiration primarily from Counsell (2004), but also from Partington (1980) and Cercadillo (2001). While the first two, *resulting in change* and *revealing*, are criteria in the same way

as in Peck and Seixas (2008), the last two, *constructed* and *varies over time and from group to group*, delve into the epistemological aspects of historical significance. They address how historians establish significance within narratives, and how it is constructed from various subjective perspectives (Seixas and Morton, 2013).

Denos and Case (2006) created, as part of a publication providing tools for critical and deep understanding about history in history education, a framework for the teaching of historical significance comprising three criteria: *prominence at the time*, *consequences* and *subsequent profile*, with ensuing sub-criteria. The criterion *subsequent profile* was redefined as *revealing* in the later version of the book (Stipp et al., 2017). These criteria were developed in alignment with Seixas's six overarching concepts for historical thinking.

Examining and discussing new perspectives on the conceptual landscape of historical significance

Seixas (1997) suggested in his mapping of significance that if a distinction between historical significance in relation to the students' own concerns (subjective position) and significance for understanding history in itself (objective position) is not clearly made, this could obscure a deeper historical understanding for students. This led Seixas (1997) to suggest the necessity for further research and the development of conceptual descriptions and demarcations of the concept of significance. This article is an attempt to explore and map how this subsequent research has followed through with that challenge in relation to conceptual frameworks and their criteria.

Seixas and Morton (2013: 17) observed that research on historical significance, referring to Partington (1980), Cercadillo (2000) and Counsell (2004), has generated 'five overlapping yet incongruent types' of significance. The mappings of this article reveal a variety of conceptual frameworks and criteria, and it may be concluded that only a few frameworks have been added since Seixas and Morton's (2013), and that the frameworks remain overlapping and diverse.

The aim of this article was to map and give an overview of the conceptual landscape of historical significance and to critically examine this landscape. In relation to this, two terrains have been charted, the Education terrain and the Research terrain. With the exception of Seixas (1994, 1997), the earlier frameworks in the chart (Danto, 1985; Ellis, 1992; Lomas, 1990; Partington, 1980) in both terrains have historiographic origins and therefore primarily provide framings of objective dimensions of historical significance. This can be compared to later frameworks (for example, Lévesque, 2005; Peck and Seixas, 2008) that also provide a subjective dimension. Lévesque (2008) uses the concepts when discussing the relevance criteria, and Cercadillo (2000) uses them when problematising symbolic significance. Further, Van Straaten et al. (2016) use Oakeshott's (1983) concept of practical present-past to problematise the relationship between the subjective and objective dimensions of the past.

The frameworks in the Research terrain are analytical tools most often used in empirical research concerning students in relation to historical significance. These often have a wide range but are also finely grained. Even though there are many similarities between the frameworks in this terrain, there are also aspects that do not align when comparing these frameworks. When Cercadillo (2000, 2001) discusses symbolic significance criteria, she addresses all three facets of what Lévesque (2005) refers to as memory significance. Symbolic significance, as described by Cercadillo, can be viewed both from a contemporary perspective, where an event can be seen as a symbolic sign, and from a historical perspective, and it can encompass long-lasting, milestone-like historical events or be tied to collective memory, similar to Lévesque's symbolic significance or familial interests. Cercadillo (2000: 62) perceives this approach as being 'mythic, deformed, and anachronistic', and it differs from disciplinary history, aligning more with pragmatic significance, which is in part constituted by so-called lessons of history, or contemporary lessons in Lévesque's (2005) framework. These lessons, Lévesque (2005) argues, are derived from mythical history, and can be used by politicians, historians and researchers when policy is to be written, or a particular point of view is to be adopted in the present. This resembles what Lévesque (2005) calls practical past and/or collective/selective memory concept, where history serves as a discourse for groups aiming to preserve their preferred historical perspective (Cercadillo, 2000). This way of using history could also be compared to the criterion that Lévesque (2005) has named intimate interests. Two frameworks in particular that stand out from the others, in relation to how concepts are defined, are Van Straaten et al.'s (2016) and Nordgren's (2021). Inspiration for these frameworks came from previous research in both terrains, with the significance criterion aligning with what Lévesque

terms disciplinary significance, and the relevance criterion tentatively corresponding to Lévesque's broader memory significance. In this way, both the relevance criterion and memory significance become concepts that are placed *outside* the historical discipline, while the significance criterion and disciplinary significance are placed within it (see also Lévesque, 2005). In the two-axis chart used for the analysis, two frameworks are placed on the outskirts of the Research terrain. Seixas (1994, 1997) stands alone in the lower, empirical part of the chart, and does not seem to have been widely used in either terrain. The frameworks of Van Straaten et al. (2016) and Nordgren (2021) also stand out, placed far out in the typology development/research-related corner. This position may originate from, or result in, a conceptual confusion around what I interpret as Nordgren's (2021) use, following Van Straaten et al. (2016), of *significance* (using the same term as the overall historical thinking tool *significance*). Their use of the concept implies what many other researchers (Lévesque, 2005; Lomas, 1990; Partington, 1980) refer to as the criterion *importance*. However, my interpretation is that *significance*, as Nordgren (2021) uses the term, covers the entire objective dimension in the matrix. It is also confusing that Van Straaten et al.'s (2016) and Nordgren's (2021) use of *relevance* includes the entire subjective dimension and temporal dimension, while for almost all other researchers, except Seixas (1994, 1997), who does not include this dimension, relevance is a separately defined criterion. These alternate definitions are open for further explorations and discussions in relation to the framings of different criteria.

The Education terrain includes frameworks developed for the classroom, which have different advantages depending on the didactical purpose, from specific to universal applicability. Counsell's (2004) aim with the 5R framework was twofold. On the one hand, she wanted to create a more universal framework (compare with Phillips, 2002) that could be applied to different historical events or eras. The other was a didactic ambition to shift focus from teaching why something is significant (that is, that the significance is inherent in the event/person) to a focus on *how* others (or oneself) see significance in history. Causally linking relevance in history to why a historical event is significant for us today may oversimplify content and lead to presentism. Instead, relevance should be viewed as just one of multiple perspectives on significant history, as suggested by Counsell (2004).

Another tension within the terrain exists between frameworks with differentiated and specific criteria, and those with pragmatic and overarching ones. Peck and Seixas (2008: 1027) consolidated and condensed previous frameworks while also highlighting 'a distinction … between significance that had a particularly historical character from everyday significance or importance'. Peck and Seixas's framework, which involves only two simplified criteria, covers both the objective and the subjective dimensions. This wide epistemic range also applies to Seixas and Morton's (2013) framework. Van Straaten et al. (2016) comment on this in reference to the guidelines/criteria in this framework. The first criterion, *resulting in change*, focuses on what was important in history, that is, significance 'for the historical development as such'. On the other hand, *revealing, constructed*, and *varying over time and from group to group*, pertain to history that holds meaning for the present (Van Straaten et al., 2016). I agree with Seixas and Morton (2013: 17) that frameworks with a wide epistemic range could be seen as pragmatic compromises: what they lose in analytical complexity, they potentially gain in applicability. This holds true in an educational context, but it would be less helpful in a research context.

In conclusion, the conceptual frameworks within the Research terrain have been either empirically generated (Seixas, 1994, 1997) or generated through typology development (for example, Cercadillo, 2000; Lévesque, 2005) with the intention to contain and frame a multitude of ways in which students talk about historical significance. These latter frameworks, inspired by and developed in relation to previous conceptual frameworks, cover a broad range from objective to subjective dimensions and exhibit a detailed categorisation. The framework for historical significance developed by Van Straaten et al. (2016), and further developed by Nordgren (2021), the most recent of the included frameworks, is distinguished by a unique terminology and conceptual framing. Here, significance encompasses the entire objective and temporal dimension, while relevance addresses the subjective dimension, thus challenging prior conceptualisations of historical significance. When it comes to the frameworks in the Education terrain, these are oriented towards facilitating effective teaching of the concept of historical significance. More recent frameworks (Peck and Seixas, 2008; Seixas and Morton, 2013) are both concise and comprehensive, addressing both objective and subjective dimensions, while older frameworks (Counsell, 2004; Phillips, 2002), developed with a more visual and direct classroom focus, mainly emphasise the objective dimensions, which limits the visibility of students' different perspectives on historical significance. The terrain includes some comprehensive frameworks with broad categories that can also allow for analytical and/or research-related use in other contexts. This also holds true

for the frameworks that can be placed on the border of the vertical axis in between the terrains. Other frameworks in this terrain are mnemonic in nature and finely grained, which facilitates classroom activities, but can obstruct analytical use.

Finding new ways through the changing landscape of historical significance?

So, what possible gaps in the conceptual landscape did the mappings reveal? A recent study examining Swedish middle school students' views on significant history found that students consistently used ethical norms and notions of right and wrong to discuss historical significance, emphasising the need for these dimensions to be included within frameworks for historical significance (Sjölund Åhsberg, 2024b). Students discussing and assigning historical significance from an ethical perspective has also been observed in previous research (Barton, 2005; Barton and Levstik, 1998; Levstik, 1999, 2001). The results of this synthesis article suggest that these two potential criteria are not explicitly included in any of the mapped frameworks, except for Lomas (1990), who briefly mentions ethical perspective as part of one of his criteria. Surprisingly, no recent empirically generated frameworks were found, nor are there any frameworks in the lower empirical/educational part of the chart. These gaps call for further exploration. Additionally, no discussions regarding potential transfer challenges or benefits of using educational frameworks for research purposes or vice versa were identified, highlighting a methodological gap in addressing the applicability and adaptation of such frameworks across contexts.

There are also some questions that remain to be clarified in relation to the theoretical conceptualisations. The criteria within the objective dimension can be interpreted as a subject-disciplinary arena, aligning with the diverse principles and procedures of history (Lévesque, 2005). In this way, it becomes visible that the objective dimension contains the criterialist dimension of epistemic knowledge (VanSledright and Maggioni, 2016), and that referring to this dimension as 'objective' is misleading. Further research is needed to explore an alternative designation for this dimension and the specific relation between the temporal dimension and the subjective and the objective dimensions. Additionally, the findings of this article call for a further development and conceptualisation of criteria in the subjective dimension.

One way to theoretically reframe and maybe deepen the understanding of these dimensions in the matrix could be to use the conceptualisations of historical past and practical past (see, for example, Nolgård, 2023; Nygren and Johnsrud, 2018). Lévesque (2008) uses the concepts when discussing the relevance criteria, and Cercadillo (2000: 62) uses them when problematising symbolic significance. Further, Van Straaten et al. (2016) use Oakeshott's (1983) concept of practical present-past to problematise the relationship between the subjective and objective dimensions of the past. One way to give perspective to the objective, or perhaps the disciplinary, aspect of significance can be to see the historical past as being 'exclusively concerned with the past' (Oakeshott, 1983: 27), and as a theoretical construction written as a result of a historical enquiry. The subjective dimension can be seen in relation to a practical past (Oakeshott, 1983: 44) containing 'symbolic persons, actions, utterances, situations and artefacts, the products of practical imagination'. White (2014) explains the concept as notions of the past that we all have in our daily lives and that we draw upon, both in personal and communal spheres, for solving all sorts of practical problems. In this way, the practical past can be used to understand the present, and ourselves in it, looking into the future (Nolgård, 2023) and in this way give new perspectives on the subjective dimension of significance. Perhaps the tentative temporal dimension, containing the relevance/intrinsic/present significance criteria in almost all frameworks, can be put in relation to White's (2014) concept of practical present-past, since it emphasises the ongoing relevance of traditions and practices from the past in shaping present actions and decisions. It thereby highlights the idea that the past is not separate from the present, but rather an integral part of how individuals navigate and make sense of their lives (Oakeshott, 1983).

What implications could the results of this article have for history education and research in this field? A recent narrative review concerning students' perspectives on historical significance strongly implies two things as important in future history education: (1) taking students' different identities into account; and (2) helping students to acquire a more disciplinary approach, including critical thinking skills and tools (Sjölund Åhsberg, 2024a). Another review study highlights a shift from theoretical and conceptual research on historical thinking to empirical, classroom-based studies, indicating a decline in the former (Carrasco and Serrano, 2023). The findings of this study align with this trend, as frameworks

for historical significance emerged between the 1980s and 2021, mainly in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Based on this, there is a need for new conceptualisations and perspectives within this research field.

The mappings in this article highlight the potential of involving frameworks with a wide epistemic range, encompassing subjective, temporal and objective dimensions, to support students with both these key tasks, presenting methodological possibilities for their implementation. This approach allows students to situate themselves within the practical past, possibly providing self-understanding (Oakeshott, 1983), while also problematising an idea of history where people both in the present and past have often been assigned specific places and roles in society and, indirectly, also in imaginary futures. Finding the way in this uncertain terrain could be of great importance; indeed, perhaps this atlas can be a help on that journey. Seixas (1994, 1997) suggested, after the first preliminary mappings of students' comprehension of historical significance, that new vantage points could redefine the boundaries of historical significance. The mappings in this article show that boundaries have expanded, with new frameworks being added in two different conceptual, but also practical, terrains. In addition, the epistemic range of the criteria within the frameworks has increased. As we move into both imagined and unimagined futures, new interpretive frameworks and criteria will certainly be needed and added.

Data and materials availability statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

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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