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**SENSITIVE ‘HERITAGE’ OF SLAVERY IN A MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOM:  
PUPILS' IDEAS ABOUT SIGNIFICANCE**

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*Abstract*

*Pupils’ attribution of significance to sensitive ‘heritage’ of slavery may differ, particularly in multicultural classrooms. Little is known about the ways in which pupils establish a relationship with the present when discussing the significance of heritage of slavery. Starting from theories of historical significance and identity, these attributions and the interplay with the pupils’ identities were examined at a Dutch secondary school using questionnaires and interviews. Pupils primarily used two arguments: (1) significance for a specific identity or group and (2) slavery as a historical example of inequality. The interplay with their identity was ambiguous.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

One of the challenges facing history teachers is teaching about sensitive or controversial history, such as the transatlantic slave trade and slavery. In a history classroom, such topics can be emotive and controversial because there is actual or perceived unfair treatment of people by another group in the past or because the history as taught in school conflicts with family or community histories (Historical Association, 2007). Scholars in the field of history education have emphasised the sensitivity of the history of slavery because of its legacies in current society such as racism and inequality (Loewen, 2010). Recently, in the Netherlands slavery has become part of the official history curriculum and can be considered to be a sensitive topic, often discussed in terms of ‘black’ and ‘white’ perspectives in societal debates (Oostindie, 2009). Many descendants of enslaved people feel there is not much awareness of the history of slavery in Dutch society, and they find it reprehensible that it is not plainly considered to be part of Dutch heritage.

When teaching about slavery in Dutch multicultural classrooms, teachers may receive different responses from their pupils or even notice tensions among them. It is possible that certain pupils of Surinamese or Antillean descent have already heard about slavery at home or in their community or show more interest in it than others (Grever, Pelzer, & Haydn, 2011). For many other pupils, learning about slavery in school will be their first introduction to the topic. Research has shown that pupils’ attribution of significance to the past is influenced by their cultural and ethnic background and by constructions of significance that are present in society and mediated by, for example, media, peers, family and heritage institutions (Barton & Levstik, 2008; Epstein, 1998; Levstik, 2008; Seixas, 1993). However, not much is known about the ways in which

pupils attribute significance to what is presented as heritage, in particular sensitive or contested heritage.

By 'heritage' we mean the preservation, selection and construction of material and immaterial historical traces that are considered to be valuable for the present and the future by a particular community (Smith, 2006; Grever, De Bruijn & Van Boxtel, 2012). We use the term 'traces' in a broad sense, referring to 'the physical survivals of the past (buildings, historic sites, museum artefacts) and to the non-institutionalised and less tangible (customs, folk stories, festivals, symbols and ritual)' (Hamer, 2005). These traces refer to a (perceived or invented) collective memory articulated by religious or ethnic groups, families and other mnemonic communities (Halbwachs, 1980; Zerubavel, 2003). Hence, the cultivation of 'heritage' generates and justifies specific identities and is part of what has been called communicative memory: the active transmission of experienced or lived memory to the next generation of a specific community. At a later stage, heritage can become cultural memory: the integration of these historical traces in the broader culture of that community that can be acknowledged and appropriated by other communities as well (Assmann, 2008).

Attribution of significance – related to particular local, regional, national or even global identities and other present interests – is even more pronounced in the construction of heritage than it is in that of history. When teaching the history of slavery in multicultural classrooms, the question whether this history and its historical traces should be considered to be heritage can easily enter the discussion. Neglecting these issues in history education might make school history less meaningful to pupils and hinder them in connecting it to their family or community history and heritage. Further, the idea that

they are discussing things that are considered valuable in the society in which they live can motivate pupils (Hamer, 2005). In addition, explicitly denoting historical traces as heritage may enable critical reflection on what heritage is and why particular traces are preserved and by whom (Grever et al., 2012; Seixas & Clark, 2004).

We know from educational research that pupils' learning is influenced to a great extent by preconceptions (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). In museums it is also acknowledged that what visitors bring to a particular exhibition affects their experiences and learning (Doering & Pekarik, 1996; Falk & Dierking, 2013). A better understanding of pupils' attribution of significance to the sensitive history and 'heritage' of slavery in particular can inform pedagogies of teachers and educators of museums and heritage institutions. Further, this study contributes to existing theory regarding pupils' attribution of historical significance by examining it explicitly in relation to sensitive heritage. Our research question is as follows: *How do Dutch pupils in multicultural classrooms attribute significance to 'heritage' of slavery and how is this related to their – perceived – ethnic identity?* A questionnaire and interview were administered at a secondary school where a project was planned regarding heritage of slavery during history education, including a visit to a museum and the National Slavery Monument. First, we elaborate on the sensitivity of the history of slavery and heritage in a Dutch context. Second, relevant literature on pupils' attribution of historical significance related to their ethnic identity will be discussed. Then, we present the methods and results of our study.

### *History and Heritage of Slavery in a Dutch Context*

The Dutch Republic played an important role in the transatlantic slave trade. In current Dutch society, the history of slavery may be associated with discrimination and with Dutch citizens being seen as descendants of enslaved people or their traders (Jones, 2012; Loewen, 2010). Much of the dynamic of the Dutch debate about slavery is determined by a more transnational discourse shaped by the context of the United States (Oostindie, 2009). However, unlike in the US, the slavery issue was not very prevalent in Dutch society after the abolition in 1863. The freed slaves and their descendants lived overseas in Suriname and the Antilles. Since the arrival of postcolonial migrants beginning in the 1970s, the history of slavery has increasingly been given attention and attributed value in Dutch society. In 2002, a National Slavery Monument was erected in Amsterdam, and a National Institute for the Study of Dutch Slavery and its Legacy – *NiNsee* – was founded a year later, with the aim of stimulating research and education. Recently in Dutch history textbooks, more attention has been given to the role of the Dutch Republic in the transatlantic slave trade, slavery as a system in plantation colonies and the developments that led to abolition (Stipriaan, 2007). Still, one of the primary sensitivities surrounding this history is the extent to which it is acknowledged by the dominant native community and is included in historical representations in schools and museums. Which story is selected as the ‘official’ one and the ways in which it is attributed significance are particularly urgent and apparent in the way a topic is taught at school as a part of the history curriculum or the way it is presented in museums (Goldberg, Porat, & Schwarz, 2006; Grever et al., 2012; Littler & Naidoo, 2005; Smith, Cubitt, Fouseki, & Wilson, 2011; VanSledright, 2008; Wertsch, 2002). Pupils’ ideas regarding what may be

considered to be national history and its significance are affected by such presentations of the past. Resistance against such ‘official’ narratives may arise when they leave no room for other narratives (VanSledright, 2008).

*NiNsee* and several other institutions offer educational projects regarding the history of slavery that connect to the school history curriculum. In these projects, teaching the history of slavery is often combined with creating greater awareness and stimulating the attribution of significance to what is presented as the heritage of slavery in the Netherlands. Scholars have noted that heritage implies a particular engagement with the past that is often motivated by intentions for the future (Lowenthal, 1998; Philips, 2004; Smith, 2006). They have criticised the ‘heritage industry’ because it primarily stimulates instrumental and mythical uses of the past for political and commercial reasons (Hewison, 1987). As we discussed earlier, the construction and justification of identities play an important part in this process, which is interwoven with issues of power and social exclusion (e.g., Little & Naidoo, 2005). Within the context of museums, heritage institutions, tourism and education, heritage is often used in governmental strategies for social inclusion that may not necessarily lead to acknowledgement of diversity (Littler, 2005). When a particular heritage is claimed by a particular group, there may be a loss of multiple perspectives concerning the meaning and significance of the heritage (Van Boxtel, 2010; Waterton & Smith, 2010). However, experts in various disciplines have researched the role of heritage from a dynamic perspective. They depart from the view that material and immaterial traces of the past are not self-evident and do not have an eternal essence and believe instead that these traces answer specific needs and aims of communities who use these traces as a source for

developing identities (Littler & Naidoo, 2005; Smith, 2006). This meta-perspective implies an awareness of the multiple perspectives and changing character of the process of constructing heritage.

### *Ideas about Significance and Pupils' Identity*

Pupils begin an educational project about the history of slavery with certain ideas regarding its significance. Slavery has been described as a topic in which differences in pupils' perspectives of its history are race-related. Epstein (1998) described the perspectives of African-American pupils as 'marked by racial discrimination or oppression', while European-American pupils' perspectives reflected the idea of democratic rights for all. Other researchers studying the interplay between pupils' historical understanding and their identity have emphasised the dynamic character of identity (Barton & McCully, 2005; Peck, 2010). In a study of the relationship between ethnic identity and attributions of significance to events in Canada's past, Peck (2010) studied pupils' reflections on the interplay between their identity and their conceptions. She found that this reflection was an on-going process and that pupils referred to a particular side of their identity prevailing over others at particular moments.

Several authors have categorised the ways in which the past is attributed historical significance (Cercadillo, 2001; Lévesque, 2008; Seixas & Morton, 2012). For example, events, persons or developments can be considered to be historically significant because they 'resulted in change' or 'reveal something in the past or present' (Seixas & Morton, 2012). The attribution of historical significance for the present and future is also described as a category. When discussing the significance of *heritage* of slavery with



pupils, this ‘present significance’ may be a relevant category in particular. However, little is known about the ways in which pupils establish a relationship with the present when discussing significance. Most studies of historical significance address pupils attributing significance to historical developments, persons or events and use ‘attributing significance for the present’ as an undifferentiated category. Present related significance may be less obvious to pupils in those cases (Cercadillo, 2001). One of the key questions regarding heritage is why particular historical traces are considered worth preserving for the future and thus are constructed to be heritage. Asking pupils to reflect on the significance of ‘heritage’ can contribute to insights into their attributions of present related significance. Further, asking them for their own opinions enables them to relate to the subject personally. We expect that particularly then the influence of their ethnic identity will come to the fore.

For the purpose of our analysis, we singled out pupils’ ideas about the significance of the history and heritage of slavery. However, these ideas are very much interrelated with other aspects of historical thinking. For example, when arguing for the significance of a particular development, pupils need to back up their argument. They are dependent on their ability to contextualise or to evaluate and interpret historical evidence (Van Drie, Van Boxtel & Stam, 2014). Additionally, pupils’ ideas about significance can affect their ability to engage with diverse perspectives of the past (Barton & McCully, 2012). Although this study focusses on pupils’ ideas about significance, these ideas are only one element of their historical understanding.

## 2. METHOD

A questionnaire and individual interviews were administered in Amsterdam in 2010. The participating pupils were going to participate in a project about the history and ‘heritage’ of slavery within the context of their history education, including a visit to *NiNsee* and the National Slavery Monument. At the time of data collection, the pupils already knew they were going to visit *NiNsee*. In a letter from the teacher, the pupils’ parents were asked permission for their children to participate in the study. The pupils were assured that their answers would only be used for this study and that their names would be changed in any publication of the research.

### *Participants*

The participants were 55 pupils from two classes at a secondary school in Amsterdam. The school was a mid-sized, open catholic school for HAVO – higher general education – and VWO – pre-university education. The population of the school reflected the diverse social, cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds in this urban area. In 2010, 11% of the inhabitants of Amsterdam were of Antillean or Surinamese descent (Central Statistical Office).

The participants included second-year HAVO pupils aged 13 to 14 years. The participants were 28 pupils from class A and 27 pupils from class B. 33% of the participating pupils were female. The classes were culturally and ethnically diverse – e.g., pupil backgrounds included Dutch, Moroccan, Surinamese, Turkish, and Antillean backgrounds. 16% of the pupils were of Antillean or Surinamese descent. Half of the pupils expressed no religious beliefs, 16% were Muslim and 15% were Christian. The

same history teacher taught both classes. History was a compulsory subject taught for two hours per week. In the first years of their secondary schooling, these pupils studied history chronologically starting from prehistory and primarily focusing on Western Europe and the Netherlands. At the time that our research began, the pupils were studying the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, in which the topic of slavery is included as part of the history of America.

### *Data collection and Analysis*

#### *Questionnaire*

To examine pupils' ideas regarding the significance of heritage of slavery, they were asked how important it was for them to preserve the historical traces of slavery, and they evaluated eleven reasons for such preservation on a 4-point scale – see table 1. The eleven reasons were based on conceptualisations of historical significance by Seixas and Morton (2012), Lévesque (2008) and Cercadillo (2001), which were rephrased to be specific to the historical traces of slavery. We included more disciplinary, societal and personally motivated reasons for attributing significance. Additionally, the pupils were allowed to write in their own reason.

Second, pupils' interest in learning about slavery was measured using eight items on a 4-point scale – see table 2. This measurement was used as a context for the significance question. We examined whether pupils, when learning about slavery, were particularly interested in, for example, history, monuments, objects, universal values or their own relationship to the topic. Cronbach's alpha was .81, which is considered good.

*TABLE 1: Items on the significance questionnaire*

- 
- I think it is important that objects and stories of slavery are being preserved
1. Because they remind us there hasn't always been freedom and equality
  2. Because they mean a lot to the people who descend from enslaved people
  3. Because slavery changed the lives of many people
  4. Because they will help us to understand how slaves were traded and why
  5. Because I would find it a pity if they were gone
  6. Because slavery has had many consequences
  7. Because they will help us to understand the present
  8. Because they are very old
  9. Because they belong with the Netherlands
  10. Because they mean a lot to my family
  11. Because they will help me to understand who I am
- 

*Note.* 4-point-scale: completely disagree, disagree, agree and completely agree

*TABLE 2: Items on the questionnaire for measuring the interest in learning about slavery*

- 
1. About freedom and equality, I want to
  2. About objects and stories of slavery, I want to
  3. About the history of slavery, I want to
  4. About what slavery has to do with me, I want to
  5. About why objects and stories of slavery are preserved, I want to
  6. About the museum NiNsee about slavery, I want to
  7. About how people commemorate slavery, I want to
  8. About the slavery monument in Amsterdam, I want to
- 

*Note.* 4-point scale: know nothing at all, know nothing, know something, know a lot

### *Interview*

Based on the results of the questionnaire, thirteen pupils were selected for individual interviews. We selected pupils who gave different answers to the questionnaire and were of diverse cultural background to obtain insight into the variety of ideas that pupils possibly bring into the classroom and to see whether we could relate differences to the pupils' perceived ethnic identity.

The interview was 20 minutes long. The pupils were asked to explain their answers to the questionnaire. For example, 'The next two questions concern the preservation of objects and stories of slavery. You indicated you find it important to preserve these. Could you explain your answer to me?' With regard to their answers

about the significance of the historical traces of slavery, we asked if they thought others would agree with them and, if not, who would not and why. These questions allowed us to gain more insight into their multiple perspective taking and into their ideas regarding how one's opinions are formed. Last, pupils were asked to describe their ethnic identity and to reflect on its influence on their answers to the questionnaire (see Peck, 2010).

The interviews were conducted by the first author. After a pilot interview with three pupils together, it was decided that individual interviews would be used. The individual interviews enabled us to discuss pupils' ideas in depth and without active interference by others. However, there are also disadvantages to an individual interview, as pupils might feel uncomfortable or intimidated by being alone with a researcher asking questions about their opinions. Pupils of this age may find it difficult to discuss their ideas in an interview, particularly if it concerns a sensitive topic (Garbarino, 1989). The questionnaire was used to give the pupils something to hold onto. Further, we tried to 'play down' our role as researchers and emphasised our interest in the pupils. We used open questions and encouraged them to ask questions and make comments during the interview. Additionally, the interviewer was present in the back of the classroom during several lessons to let the pupils become accustomed to her presence and for her to become more familiar with the communicative norms and patterns of the pupils (Eder & Fingerson, 2002). Naturally, the interviewer's identity played a role as well. Considering that the topic was slavery and many pupils brought up the issue of inequality between black and white people, the white identity of the researcher may have had an influence. Although none of the pupils expressed this concern, they might have had the feeling of talking to one of the two 'sides'.

The 13 recorded interviews were transcribed and analysed using ATLAS.ti qualitative analysis software. The raw data were read thoroughly, marking pupils' remarks about the significance of heritage of slavery and regarding their perceived ethnic identity. The analysis focused in particular on the many ways in which pupils related to the present in their attribution of significance. Literature on pupils' ideas about historical significance in relation to their perceived ethnic identity was used as a sensitising framework (Cercadillo, 2001; Levstik, 2008; Lévesque, 2008; Peck, 2010). First, we used the types and categories of 'present significance' described by Lévesque (2008) and Cercadillo (2001) – i.e., the significance for the present or the future. However, in the vague groups of quotations that were the result of this initial coding, the varieties remained concealed. To obtain a better understanding of pupils' attribution of present significance in relation to their identity, all of their reflections regarding this topic were marked. The codes that resulted from this open coding were grouped into broader categories through constant comparison of old and new codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). During this phase we constantly returned to the data to check if the new categories still represented the pupils' ideas. By comparing the pupils several themes were identified in the data, which were again checked by returning to the initial coding and data. For example, we found that certain pupils struggled with different 'implications' of their perceived Dutch identity. They felt they attributed significance to heritage of slavery because of this identity, but they simultaneously assigned a Dutch identity to historical actors whom they condemned for their actions. We checked this emerging theme by rereading our initial coding of all of the pupils and the corresponding interview transcripts. Six interviews were analysed by a second rater using the themes that resulted

from the analysis by the first rater. The two raters agreed on the assignment of most of the codes. Disagreements were resolved by discussion and did not result in additional codes.

### 3. RESULTS

The results of the questionnaire revealed that the pupils were interested in learning about slavery (M=2.83, SD=.74), in particular about values of equality and freedom as they related to the topic and about objects and stories related to slavery. Further, they thought it significant to preserve the historical traces of slavery, in particular based on values of equality and freedom and for the descendants of enslaved people – see table 3. The significance for pupils’ own families and for better understanding themselves received the lowest score. Almost none of the pupils wrote in their own reason. We conducted an ANOVA to investigate the differences in attributed significance between pupils of Surinamese and Antillean backgrounds (n=9) and pupils of other backgrounds (n=46). The pupils of Surinamese and Antillean backgrounds scored significantly higher than those of other backgrounds on item 10 regarding the significance for pupils own families ( $F(1.52)= 16.07, p=.000$ ).

*TABLE 3: Pupils’ ideas about and reasons for preserving objects and stories of slavery - 4-point scale*

Item	M	SD
I think it is important that objects and stories of slavery are being preserved	2.91	.78
1. Because they remind us there hasn't always been freedom and equality	3.09	.59
2. Because they mean a lot to the people who descend from enslaved people	3.04	.68
3. Because slavery changed the lives of many people	2.91	.62
4. Because they will help us to understand how slaves were traded and why	2.85	.66
5. Because I would find it a pity if they were gone	2.67	.75
6. Because slavery has had many consequences	2.66	.73
7. Because they will help us to understand the present	2.61	.83
8. Because they are very old	2.45	.80
9. Because they belong with the Netherlands	2.15	.77
10. Because they mean a lot to my family	1.74	.76
11. Because they will help me to understand who I am	1.70	.66

The analysis of the interviews indicated the ways in which the pupils related to the present when talking about whether it is important to preserve heritage of slavery and why. It turned out that the pupils primarily used two arguments in attributing present significance: (1) significance for a specific identity or group, and (2) slavery as a historical example of inequality – see table 4. In the next two paragraphs, we will discuss these two themes. Table 5 provides the results of the questionnaires of the thirteen pupils who were interviewed, who were all born in the Netherlands.

*TABLE 4: Pupils' arguments for the present significance of history and heritage of slavery in the interviews (n=13)*

Argument	Subcategory	Example	Pupils
1. Significant for a specific identity or group	Pupil him/herself	'Then I can get a much clearer image I think because then I see it right before me'.	10
	Undefined / everybody	'Because I think it's unfair; I think everybody should know about it'.	7
	Dutch	'The Netherlands should be remembered of it because it is just an important time. It wasn't a good time, but it does belong with the Netherlands'.	3
	Descendants of enslaved people	'Those persons who have been through that always carry it with them so to say; it is like a sort of memory'.	12
2. Significant as a historical example of inequality	As a milestone in the development of equality for all	'Maybe without slavery there still would be no freedom or no equality'.	7
	To denounce inequality all over the world in the present time	'It's just bad that still not everybody is equal and people are used in fact'.	5
	As a basis for moral judgment of the past, projected on the present time	'The most Dutch people traded those slaves to America and so they need to know, realise that they did something bad and that they maybe come to regret it a little'.	3



TABLE 5: Interviewed pupils

Pupil <sup>a</sup>	Gender	Parents' birth country	Religion	Interest <sup>b</sup>	Significance <sup>c</sup>
Vasanta	F	Suriname – Suriname	I don't know	3.00	3
Clarence	M	Ghana – Ghana	Christian	2.25	3
Renata	F	Spain – Netherlands	Catholic and Buddhist	3.25	4
Lana	F	Netherland – Netherlands	Not religious	2.75	4
Jerri	M	Turkey – Netherlands	Not religious	3.00	2
Noa	F	Serbia – Netherlands	Orthodox Christian	3.50	4
Bas	M	Netherland – Netherlands	Not religious	2.63	3
Giulio	M	Suriname – Netherlands	Not religious	2.63	3
Berneen	F	Ireland – Ireland	Christian	2.88	3
Thijs	M	Netherlands – Netherlands	Christian	3.00	3
Evelyn	F	Curacao – Netherlands	Christian	3.00	3
Tara	F	Suriname – Netherlands	Not religious	3.13	3
Anouar	M	Morocco – Morocco	Muslim	3.38	3

<sup>a</sup> All names are fictitious

<sup>b</sup> Mean score on interest questionnaire

<sup>c</sup> Score on significance question

### *Different Groups Related to Heritage of Slavery*

When the pupils attributed present significance to heritage of slavery, they often referred to a specific group of people and reasoned why slavery heritage was part of the identity of that group. For example, the pupils said that heritage should be preserved because it helps people to discover or remember who they are. In described types or categories of present significance, the issue of for *whom* something is significant is not always explicitly addressed. Although researchers depart from the notion that significance is not fixed, they use phrases such as 'significance for our interests in the present and the future'. To whom does the term 'our' refer?

The pupils in this study attributed significance to heritage of slavery for themselves, for the Netherlands, for the descendants of enslaved people, and for undefined groups designated as 'we', 'one', 'people' or 'everybody'. When the pupils attributed significance to heritage of slavery for themselves, it was mostly in terms of learning. Four pupils also wondered if their ancestors had somehow been involved in the

history of slavery. When the pupils referred to an undefined group, it was mostly in the context of learning and knowledge. Further, they used the undefined group in the contexts of commemoration, the prevention of slavery, and equality.

The pupils mentioned two groups or identities that are more closely related to the topic: the Dutch and the descendants of enslaved people. Clarence and Lana for example, thought it important to preserve heritage of slavery for both of these groups. When discussing the significance for the Netherlands, Lana said that, although what had happened was very bad, the Dutch still needed to be reminded of this important time that was a part of their past. Her classmate Clarence went a step further by saying

‘The most Dutch people traded those slaves to America and so they need to know, realise, that they did something bad and that they, well, maybe come to regret it a little.’

Clarence also thought heritage of slavery would be valuable for the descendants. He reasoned that perhaps some of the slaves had brought objects with them from Africa, and, if so, their children would want to know more about those things. Lana elaborated a similar argument:

‘If you descend from somebody who was, for example, a slave, then you think like I'm lucky not to live in that era so to say, um, but if you hear, for example, a story or something of someone from your family or you just read it, well then it is kind of important that you know what that person has been through.’

The significance for descendants was mentioned by all but one of the pupils who were interviewed. Three pupils attributed significance to heritage of slavery for the Netherlands. These results match those of the questionnaire. The significance for

descendants scored very high, whereas the significance for the Netherlands received a relatively low score – see table 3. In the interviews, it became clear that seven pupils were not aware of the role of the Dutch Republic in the transatlantic slave trade, which may explain these results. This group included all four of the pupils with one or two parents from Suriname or the Antilles.

### *Good or Bad? What Matters is Equality*

One theme was omnipresent in the data: the importance of equality. During the interviews, all of the pupils talked about equality. Some explained their interest in the issue, and others described feelings and thoughts regarding the importance of equality. Four pupils explicitly related this theme to heritage of slavery as a reason to preserve it. They thought that heritage of slavery may help people to remember the importance of equality.

Regarding the extending of equality to more and more people, the pupils expressed different perspectives – see table 4. Clarence, Lana, Tara and Giulio emphasised that black people are still discriminated against and that people are not treated equally in some places of the world. Six others did just the opposite, focusing on change, as did Vasanta:

‘Because, well, everybody is equal nowadays, and it is just important, well, how it started, and so, I just find that really interesting yes, just the main - that everybody became equal and free.’

Berneen named both of these themes. She said that all are equal now, but she also discussed social problems that are still present, such as discrimination.

Although all of the pupils discussed the theme of equality, it was difficult for them to explain its relationship to the history or heritage of slavery or why equality was so important to them. Sometimes it sounded as if they recited a lesson hammered into them at school, but many of the pupils were articulate and sounded convinced of their statements. Three of the pupils said they did not want to know anything about slavery, because it was such an unfair system. Thijs for example, said

‘I think it's such a weird subject really that I think, in fact, that I know enough about it. [...] I think the only thing one needs to know about slavery is that it was really, uh, really unfair.’

Jerri shared this perspective regarding the preservation of heritage of slavery:

‘It's so bad; then why would you preserve it? Yes, I don't think that you should preserve it when it's so bad.

I: No, and why not then?

J: Just I, well, a few things maybe, but only from what the ships looked like and that kind of things, but, and where and how they were loaded into them, but not those whips really or something, that kind of things or, well yes, I just think it's bad.’

Jerri distinguished more neutral historical traces from traces that were directly linked to the historical events or processes that he judged as bad. He did not want to know more about the latter. For many pupils, slavery was primarily a historical *example* of inequality, almost a symbolic metaphor, as in the remarks above. Its historical reality did not need to be understood.

In the context of this symbolic approach, it is relevant that nearly all of the pupils exclusively ascribed heritage of slavery to the descendants of enslaved people. Only Jerri did not, because he thought they would not want to preserve anything that reminded them of the horrible events their ancestors had to experience. He thought only people who got rich because of slavery or who approved of it would want to preserve heritage of slavery. Along the same line of reasoning but arriving at a different conclusion, Thijs stated that, although the Dutch played a role in the history of slavery, they did not have the right to claim heritage of slavery. Although he could imagine that the descendants would just rather forget about slavery and let heritage of slavery be, on the other hand he thought that they had the right to know what happened to their family, and, heritage of slavery therefore should be preserved. By the line of reasoning of Thijs and Jerri, the question for whom it might be significant to preserve heritage of slavery turned into a moral judgment in which the pupils chose the side of the descendants. However, most of the pupils emphasised the importance of equality instead of passing judgment with reference to particular present communities or identities. One pupil, Anouar, stated that it could be significant to preserve heritage of slavery for both the descendants of enslaved people *and* the descendants of slave owners. Interestingly, six pupils were unaware that some of the descendants of enslaved people are of Surinamese or Antillean descent, currently live in the Netherlands, and were in fact in their class. As mentioned earlier, many pupils did not know about the role of the Dutch Republic and thus the possibility of having classmates whose ancestors were slave traders. Yet, at least six pupils *were* aware of their own and others' identity and the ways in which they thought it related to the issue of heritage of slavery, which is our focus in the next paragraph.

### *Who Am I in this Play?*

We found three ways in which the pupils' ethnic identity related to their attribution of present significance. The pupils either (1) felt there was no relationship, (2) felt part of a group related to the topic or (3) displayed a flexible relation – see table 6. In cases of 'no influence', we specified why the pupil did not see a relationship. When we thought there *was* a relationship we assigned two codes: one for the pupils' perception and one for our own interpretation.

*TABLE 6: Pupils' perceived ethnic identity and its influence on their ideas about significance*

Pupil	Short indication of perceived ethnic identity	Influence of identity
Vasanta	Pupil did not know: maybe Dutch	No influence: does not want to name it / Part of a group: descendants of enslaved people
Clarence	Dutch-Ghanaian	No influence: family not involved / Flexible: various identities emerge – changing perspectives
Renata	Spanish-Dutch	No influence: no explicit idea about it
Lana	Surinamese	Part of a group: descendants of enslaved people
Jerri	Turkish-Dutch	No influence: does not want to name it
Noa	Dutch	Part of a group: Dutch
Giulio	Surinamese-Polish-Dutch	Part of a group: descendants of enslaved people
Berneen	Dutch-Irish	No influence: family not involved
Thijs	Dutch	Part of a group: Dutch
Evelyn	Dutch-Antillean	Part of a group: descendants of enslaved people
Tara	Spanish-Surinamese-Dutch	No influence: family not involved
Anouar	Moroccan	No influence: family not involved
Bas	Dutch	Part of a group: Dutch

Seven pupils felt part of a group related to the topic. For example, Vasanta said that her ancestors had been taken to Suriname to work as slaves and she explained how this affected her life as a descendant. She talked about the ways slavery changed the lives of many people and referred to herself as an example because she would not have lived in the Netherlands if it were not for slavery. In this way, she drew a line from the lives of

her ancestors of centuries ago to her own life. The same type of reasoning occurred in the pupils who regarded themselves part of 'the Dutch', although in an uncertain and uncomfortable way. Noa, for example, struggled with a feeling of shame because of her Dutch identity:

'I think, well, I'm Dutch too so I should be ashamed about it as well, but on the other side I think, well, in fact I have nothing to do with it; at least I haven't done it and if I... if I had lived back then I would have done something about it; I would have said "you should stop; we are all just equal". But I wasn't there so I can't do anything about it.'

On the one hand, Noa feels she shares a responsibility with all the Dutch over time, while on the other hand she thinks she cannot be held responsible for something she has not done and could not have prevented. She emphasises her incomprehension of those who are to blame and sets herself apart from them. We think this type of reasoning can be seen as a distancing technique, described by Goldberg et al. (2006). By explicitly appointing the guilty party within the group and distancing themselves from the villains, pupils cope with the fact that they subscribe to a collective memory narrative in which their own group is accused and played a negative role.

Giulio, who experienced heritage of slavery in a personal way as well, did not create any distance but nearly identified with a particular group. His father told him that Giulio's great great grandfather had been taken as a slave. Giulio thought that the most important reason to preserve heritage of slavery was its value to the descendants of enslaved people and because he was a descendant himself it was important for him also. He had several questions about what happened to his family during slavery, and he

thought that by learning more about those events, he would learn more about himself. Giulio described a direct relationship between the descendants of enslaved people in general, his family, and himself:

‘In the past, people were just very racist, and I am now black, too, and yes I just cannot understand that people did that, that they were so racist, and, well, I think it is important to remember that because they were racist to my family as well.’

He explained that the Surinamese part of his identity influenced his way of thinking about the issue. He thought that, in contrast to him, Dutch, Moroccan, and Muslim pupils would find other things more important than heritage of slavery.

Despite the examples of Noa and Giulio, we did not find that the pupils’ perceived ethnic identity had the same influence every time. Four pupils who described themselves as partly Surinamese or Antillean thought that they were descendants of enslaved people based on their ancestry, but they did not always see that affecting their perspectives. For example, Lana said that perhaps a long time ago her ancestors had been enslaved, but she thought that was far too long ago to still care about it. She said it was very possible that her friend Noa, who was ‘100% Dutch’, had given exactly the same answers. This emphasis on being just like any other pupil with regard to perspectives on slavery can be seen as a distancing technique as well. These pupils did not want to identify with a particular stereotype of the descendants of enslaved people.

Some pupils had difficulties in describing their own ethnic identity or its influence on their ideas regarding the significance of slavery heritage. Vasanta for example, said she thought that perhaps she was ‘just Dutch’, but in fact she did not really know yet. On



the question regarding the influence of ethnic identity on her ideas, she responded negatively. However, earlier in the interview she said

‘I’m like a Surinamese Hindu, and just how could it be actually that there are so many different people there, really a lot of different people and cultures, but that’s really because of, it is because of slavery as well. [...] If there hadn’t been slavery, then, were, I wouldn’t be here maybe, so then my ancestors would, great ancestors would be in Suriname neither, maybe still in Iran or something.’

It seemed that Vasanta felt uncertain or uneasy answering the question regarding the influence of her ethnic identity. Three other pupils said there was no influence because their family had not been involved. This narrowing down of the influence of identity to a question of ancestry may be a reaction to the difficulty of the question or an uneasy feeling about it as well, because when asked about others’ perspectives, the pupils did relate particular identities to particular perspectives. The emphasis on ancestry could also have been picked up from public debates in which certain descendants very much stress this bloodline.

One pupil displayed a flexible identity by describing various parts of his identity that were evident at different times. For Clarence, the subject was interesting because most slaves were taken from his fatherland. He said slavery was good because slaves were Christianised and he was a Christian himself and bad because slaves were treated like cattle and black people were still discriminated against today in America. Clarence said he did not feel a personal connection to the subject because he had no family in America. However, his answers suggest that the subject is personal to him in certain ways due to his Ghanaian and Christian identities. Last, Clarence’s strong remark that the

Dutch need to realise that they did something bad and they need to regret it shows an influence of his identity as a Dutch citizen who sets himself apart from ‘the Dutch’ in past and present.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

In this study we explored pupils’ attribution of significance to heritage of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade in a secondary school in Amsterdam. We examined in particular their ideas about present significance and its relationship with their perceived ethnic identity. The pupils generally expressed interest in learning about slavery and almost all of the pupils attributed significance to slavery heritage. Our analysis of the interview data resulted in a meaningful description of the variety of ways in which pupils attributed present significance to it. Scholars in the field of history education described present significance as an important way of attributing significance to the past, but it was not clear how pupils use this category, in particular related to heritage. In our study of heritage of slavery, two main arguments were found. It is important to recognise that the questionnaire that was administered before the interview undoubtedly affected pupils’ answers in the interviews. The two primary arguments that were evident in our analysis relate to items in the questionnaire. However, other items included in the questionnaire were not prominent in the interview. The way that the pupils talked about the two arguments we identified also indicated that these thoughts were their own.

In the first argument for attributing significance to heritage of slavery for the present, the pupils referred to particular identities, mostly to the descendants of enslaved people. Perhaps this view is because mostly these descendants, as postcolonial migrants,

have stressed the importance of preserving heritage of slavery in Dutch society. Similarly, it is striking to see the knowledge gap regarding the role of the Dutch Republic in slavery and the low number of pupils who attributed significance to heritage of slavery for the Netherlands. Possibly due to their lack of knowledge, we did not encounter many problems among pupils with the ‘official narrative’ of slavery, in which the Dutch play a minor role. Only Clarence seemed to reject this version and pointed to the need for more consciousness in Dutch society of the role of the Dutch in the slavery past. Several pupils were also aware that heritage can be claimed by particular groups of people and that this can be problematic for others who attribute significance to this heritage in a different way.

A second argument for the present significance of heritage of slavery evolved around equality. Slavery became a historical example of inequality and was used to argue for equality. The historical context lost its relevance because the purpose was not to understand or explain the historical phenomenon itself but to use the symbolic meaning of it, the horror of it, to demonstrate the importance of equality. We found a difference between those pupils who thought everyone was equal currently in contrast with the era of slavery and those who used the topic of slavery to stress that inequality still exists. In this last perspective, the presence of the general theme of ‘equality’ is stronger than the historical reality. The emphasis on continuity between the time of slavery and the present lacks a historical perspective in which the past and present are inevitably distinct. The research by Lee, Dickinson and Ashby (1997) indicated that it can be difficult for pupils of this age to contextualise the actions of people in the past and to understand them in terms of people’s specific concerns and situations. Additionally, the pupils’ thinking in

terms of good and evil and their moralising approach to the topic resonates with earlier research by Von Borries (1994) and Egan (1997). There are examples in our study of the ways moral judgments can obstruct historical explanation and reconstruction. Along with Seixas and Clark (2004), we think it is important that pupils understand the moral dimension in history and that they learn to make informed judgments about the actions of people in the past and about heritage. As was evident in our study, pupils may have rather strong moral judgments. Educators should be aware of this, and they may use these judgments as a starting point to stimulate historical reasoning in which the historical context *is* recognised.

The interviews revealed that seven pupils considered themselves part of a group that they related to heritage of slavery. One of them identified with that group, and the others distanced themselves from perspectives specifically associated with ‘their’ group. Several pupils reported that they did not notice any influence of their perceived ethnic identity, but sometimes it seemed that the pupils could not or did not want to describe their identity and the ways in which it affected their ideas. We think that these examples broaden our insight into pupils’ use of distancing techniques (Goldberg et al., 2006). Contrary to the findings of Epstein (1998), the perspectives of the pupils in our study could not always be interpreted meaningfully along the lines of a perceived ‘black’ or ‘white’ ethnic identity. Earlier research noted that Dutch pupils of Caribbean background were significantly more proud of and felt more connected to their family history than native Dutch pupils (Grever et al., 2011). The results of our questionnaire also revealed that the pupils of Surinamese and Antillean background scored significantly higher on the item regarding the importance of heritage of slavery for their family than the pupils of

other backgrounds. However, the interview data revealed a more diverse and ambiguous image of the relationship between the pupils' perceived identities and their ideas regarding the significance of the history and heritage of slavery. This finding is in line with that of Hawkey and Prior (2011), who also draw a complex picture of the influence of pupils' ethnic identity on their positioning with respect to the national narrative.

Our study of 55 pupils is small, especially when the participants were divided into subgroups of various backgrounds. It is also limited by our sample of pupils being from one school, as pupils' learning experiences and their sense of self are partly structured by the specific school context, with its traditions, value systems and political mandates (Perret-Clermont, 2009). Our study is a first exploration of the interplay between pupils' identity and their attribution of significance to heritage of slavery. Further, the pupils in our study were relatively young and were not always able to reflect on their own ethnic identity and the ways in which it affected their ideas. Often, the pupils discussed these issues only implicitly. However, their expressions in many cases made clear that their identity did play a role. It is important to keep in mind the complexity of these processes that emerged during our interviews with respect to further research. Educators should also be aware of this complexity and acknowledge the variety of backgrounds and perspectives that pupils bring to the classroom. By addressing this diversity, pupils' personal engagement can be stimulated to enhance meaningful learning. Educators can discuss the ways in which identity may play a role in a variety of ways, without reinforcing stereotypes. Reflection on the ways in which our own viewpoint determines how we see the past is an important goal of teaching history. Educators can use pupils'

ideas regarding specific heritage and incorporate current debates about this heritage in society to achieve this objective.

Apart from certain examples of emotional responses and moral judgments, heritage of slavery did not seem to be a very sensitive topic for the majority of pupils. It is important to note that during the years that the study was conducted, public awareness of the Dutch involvement in the history of slavery increased. The debate surrounding *Black Pete* received international attention and may have reached classrooms as well. In this different context, pupils may now be more aware of the sensitivity of the history of slavery in current Dutch society. However, the two most common themes that emerged in our study, the emphasis on equality and the descendants of enslaved people, may also be seen as a 'safe' way of dealing with the topic, keeping it at a certain distance. From this point of view, it would be interesting to observe how pupils would react to heritage of slavery when encountering it in educational heritage projects as they exist in the Netherlands. Will they be stimulated to express their own perspectives, and to what extent will these be challenged by the exhibitions and educators? Further research is needed to examine the ways in which pupils' ideas will be expressed and may be transformed in educational settings in which historical traces are presented as heritage in the teaching of history.

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