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DOI

[10.1080/00933104.2014.966877](https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2014.966877)

Publication date

2014

Document Version

Author accepted manuscript

Published in

Theory and Research in Social Education

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Savenije, G. M., van Boxtel, C., & Grever, M. (2014). Learning about sensitive history: 'heritage' of slavery as a resource. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 42(4), 516-547. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2014.966877>

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Learning about sensitive history: ‘heritage’ of slavery as a resource

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This is an accepted manuscript published by Taylor and Francis:

Geerte M. Savenije, Carla van Boxtel & Maria Grever (2014) Learning About Sensitive History: “Heritage” of Slavery as a Resource, *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 42:4, 516-547, DOI: [10.1080/00933104.2014.966877](https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2014.966877)

Abstract

The history and heritage of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade are sensitive topics in the Netherlands. Little is known about the ways in which students attribute significance to what is presented as heritage, particularly sensitive heritage. Using theories on historical significance, we explored how students attributed significance to the history of slavery and its remnants while engaged in a heritage project that presented this history and these remnants as Dutch heritage. Using questionnaires, interviews, group interaction and observations, we researched 55 students at a Dutch junior high school who visited a slavery museum and the National Slavery Monument. The visit reinforced the students’ ideas that it was important to preserve the historical remnants of slavery, primarily to remember that freedom and equality have not always existed and because these remnants are important to the descendants of enslaved people. Although the students gained insight into the ways in which significance is attributed to the history of slavery, they did not come to understand the lack of awareness regarding slavery in Dutch society. Although the visit stimulated critical reflection on the interplay between understandings of significance and identity, many students linked the heritage of slavery directly to a black ethnic identity.

Amidst the wooden walls of the exhibit 'Break the silence', which evokes the inside of a slave ship, an educator from the National Institute for the Study of Dutch Slavery and its Legacy (*NiNsee*) tells students about the conditions on these ships (see figure 1). The students can hardly believe what they hear as she tells them about three months of lying in chains with people defecating and sometimes dying directly above and beside one another.

Figure 1. NiNsee exhibition 'Break the silence' depicting the Middle Passage (photo Pieter de Bruijn)

The history of slavery is a sensitive topic in the Netherlands, because of its horrific aspects and, in particular, because of the role of the Dutch 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). One of the primary sensitivities is the extent to which this history is acknowledged by the majority of Dutch citizens and included into historical representations in schools and museums. Much of the dynamic of the Dutch debate about slavery is determined by a transnational discourse shaped by the context of the United States (Oostindie, 2009).

However, in contrast to the US, the slavery issue was not very prevalent in Dutch society after 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 received attention and value in Dutch society. In 2002, the National Slavery Monument was erected in Amsterdam. *NiNsee* was founded one year later with the aim of stimulating research and education about the history of slavery. Recently in Dutch history textbooks, increased 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 (Van Stipriaan, 2007). Still, many descendants of enslaved people feel there is little awareness of the history of slavery in Dutch society.

NiNsee and several other institutions offer educational projects on the history of slavery that connect with the school history curriculum. In these projects, teaching the history of slavery is often combined with attempts to create greater awareness and to stimulate the attribution of significance to what is presented as the Dutch heritage of slavery. By ‘heritage’ we mean remnants of the past that are considered valuable in the present and for the future by a particular group of people. The distinction between remnants and heritage emphasises the dynamic character of heritage; students may not necessarily consider the particular historical remnants presented in the educational projects to be heritage. We use the term ‘remnants’ in a broad sense, referring to “the physical survivals of the past (buildings, historic sites, museum artefacts), as well as the non-institutionalized and less tangible (customs, folk stories, festivals, symbols and ritual)” (Hamer, 2005, p. 159). There are various reasons for embarking on field trips and teaching history using historical remnants. For example, historical remnants can stimulate historical empathy or imagination (Marcus, Stoddard, & Woodward, 2012; McRaney, 2010; Spock, 2010). This imaginative engagement is particularly valuable for teaching about historical realities, such as slavery, that students find

difficult to understand because they are unjust, cruel or horrible in their eyes (Davies, 2000; Pettigrew, Foster, Howson, & Salmons, 2009). The idea that they are studying historical remnants that are considered valuable in the society in which they live can motivate students. Studying heritage may also stimulate students' awareness that history is built on stories that are significant to particular groups of people. This awareness can help them reflect on their own criteria for deciding what is historically significant. One of the aims of history education is to understand the ways in which history is constructed and subject to the changing viewpoints of its present creators (Seixas & Morton, 2012).

However, the ways in which the – often multi-layered or disputed – ‘heritage status’ of particular remnants of the past influences the learning of history remain understudied. The history of slavery can be sensitive or difficult in diverse urban classrooms, because of its traumatic content, and because students may identify with historical actors or respond morally to the history (Sheppard, 2010). It is to be expected that this may be intensified by an encounter with the historical remnants related to this history, especially when these remnants are presented as heritage and attributed significance - by a majority, a minority, or both but in different ways. Students of various backgrounds may have diverse understandings of the significance of the history of slavery, and these understandings can come to the forefront when this history and its historical remnants are presented as Dutch heritage. With this type of topic, which is particularly sensitive in the current multicultural society, these differences can create tension among students or between students and their teacher. Various researchers have examined students' understandings of significance in urban classrooms (e.g., Barton & McCully, 2005; Epstein, 2000; Peck, 2010; Savenije, Van Boxtel & Grever, 2014; Seixas, 1993). However, little is known about the ways in which students attribute significance to what is presented as heritage, particularly sensitive heritage.

A case study was conducted to explore students' attribution of significance to the sensitive history of slavery in an educational setting in which this history and its historical remnants are presented as Dutch heritage. Our research question is as follows: *How do students in Dutch urban classrooms attribute significance to the history and historical remnants of slavery while engaged in a heritage project that presents this history and these remnants as Dutch heritage?* We gathered data using a combination of methods during a heritage project on the topic of slavery, which included a visit to *NiNsee* and the National Slavery Monument. The data were derived from whole-class questionnaires, individual interviews, transcribed group interaction, and observations of three lessons.

In what follows, we consider the practice of teaching history using historical remnants in heritage projects within the context of history education. Second, we elaborate on students' understandings of historical significance in relation to the learning of sensitive history during heritage projects. Then, we present the methods and results of our case study.

Theoretical Framework

Historical Remnants and Heritage as Resources for Teaching Sensitive History

Remnants of the past can be used in history education in a variety of ways. Inside the classroom, teachers can bring historical objects, invite eyewitnesses or allow students to interview an elder family member and tell their story to their peers. Outside the classroom, students can visit archives, historical sites, museums and monuments. In the Netherlands, the government is stimulating attention for 'Dutch heritage' in education and encouraging the practices described above. This paper is situated in an overlap between various fields of study, including history, heritage and history education. Although these are considered different disciplines, there is a great deal of overlap between these fields, and it is often difficult to make clear distinctions. Since the late 1990s, heritage studies has been growing rapidly as an

independent field of study (Sørensen & Carman, 2009). Substantial contributions have been made to the concept of heritage and to the specific engagement with the past that is characteristic of a 'heritage approach' to the past (Smith, 2006). Researchers hold various positions regarding the extent to which heritage and history are distinct concepts (Jonker, 2008; M. Philips, 2004; Van Nieuwenhuysse & Wils, 2012). Over the years scholars have criticized the 'heritage industry' because it mainly stimulates instrumental and mythical uses of the past for political and commercial reasons (Hewison, 1987; Lowenthal, 1998). Heritage tourism engenders a distorted view on history, bringing the past too close and too sensational. 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., Littler & 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, 2010b; Smith, Cubitt, Fouseki, & Wilson, 2011).

Although remarks on the differences between history and heritage in the engagement with the past are useful, they should not obscure the similarities. In both history and heritage, more or less critical stances towards the past can be adopted. Recently, experts in various disciplines have researched the role of heritage from a dynamic perspective: the study of the preservation, selection and construction of tangible and intangible remnants of the past that are considered valuable for the present and the future by a particular group of people (Littler & Naidoo, 2005; Smith, 2006). This meta-perspective implies an awareness of the multiple perspectives and changing character of the process of constructing heritage. Various authors stress that acknowledgement and investigation of the wide range of distances that are constructed in various historical practices are particularly valuable during a time in which

historians increasingly focus on the intimate or everyday experience (Grever, 2013; M. Philips, 2004; Van Nieuwenhuyse & Wils, 2012).

The discussion of the differences and similarities between history and heritage is helpful when studying the learning of history through heritage projects. Although history education and heritage projects are, in many ways, very different from the historical discipline and heritage studies, the tension between historical and heritage approaches to the past may play a role when teaching history in heritage projects (Jonker, 2012). This tension may be particularly evident in the Netherlands, where history education has been oriented towards the historical discipline since the late 1980s (Van Boxtel & Grever, 2011). Based on the history curriculum, the learning of history is understood as (1) building a framework of knowledge that enables students to orient in time and (2) appropriating certain historical thinking skills, comparable to the second-order concepts described by Lévesque (2008) or the historical thinking concepts described by Seixas (2008) and Seixas and Morton (2012). Students are taught to adopt a critical stance towards the past and to use skills that are characteristic of historians when studying the past. In general, teaching these skills and attitudes is not the primary objective of heritage projects in the Netherlands. In these educational practices, a heritage approach to the past often means emphasizing the value of a particular history and its historical remnants for ‘our’ interests in the present and the future in a static or essentialist way with implicit reference to a national identity (see, for example, De Troyer & Vermeersch, 2005).¹

As discussed by Van Nieuwenhuyse and Wils (2012) and by Wils and Verschaffel (2012), these different approaches to the past may not only occur in heritage projects, but may be inherent to the practice of history teaching. In many countries, these approaches and the extent to which they differ have been discussed (see Hunter, 1993; Patrick & National Trust

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¹ For a qualitative analysis of several heritage projects related to the history of slavery and the Second World War in the Netherlands, see also De Bruijn (2014).

for Historic Preservation in the United States, 1992; VanSledright, 2008; Lambert, 1996; Dyer, 1986; Hamer, 2005; Popp & Schonemann, 2009). We argue that there is a difference between presenting and approaching remnants of the past as historical sources or as Dutch heritage and find it problematic that in educational practice, teachers and educators may unconsciously adopt a ‘static heritage approach’ to the past, simultaneously seeking to teach a ‘disciplinary history approach’. In particular when teaching students to reflect on the historical significance of a particular history, these approaches may affect students’ critical understanding of historical significance and the way that it is tied to a specific time, place and person. To study these ambiguous practices, we focus on students’ attribution of significance during a visit to *NiNsee* and the National Slavery Monument within the context of their history class.

Students’ Identity and their Understandings of Significance

Several authors have categorized the ways in which historical significance is attributed to the past (Cercadillo, 2006; Lévesque, 2008; Seixas, 2008; Seixas & Morton, 2012). For example, events, persons or developments can be considered to be historically significant when they ‘resulted in change’ or ‘reveal something in the past or present’ (Seixas & Morton, 2012). However, little is known about the ways in which students attribute significance to what is presented as heritage. The categorization of historical significance has not yet been used to analyze students’ attribution of significance to heritage. These attributions of significance to heritage are a particularly rich topic of investigation because the significance of a particular heritage to a particular community is often presented as a given, although it may be at odds with the students’ own attributions. One of the key questions regarding heritage is why certain historical remnants are considered significant enough to preserve for the future. The question of significance enables students to relate the past to the present.

Furthermore, it facilitates a personal approach to this topic: what is the student's perspective on the significance of the heritage, and how does this relate to others' perspectives?

Researchers emphasize that students in urban classrooms tell a wide variety of stories about the past and have various understandings of its historical significance (Barton & McCully, 2005; Epstein, 2000; Peck, 2010; Savenije et al., 2014; Seixas, 1993). Students' understandings of the significance of a particular history are shaped by their cultural, ethnic, religious, social or political backgrounds, their individual identities, and their age and stage of development (Barton & McCully, 2005; Epstein, 1998; Grever, Pelzer & Haydn, 2011; Peck, 2010). Lévesque (2005) emphasized that class, ethnicity, culture and language highly influence students' conceptions of the significance of history and of certain historical issues. He described how students' sense of self and their endorsement of the traditions and values of their cultural community form their appropriation of certain aspects of the collective past. These collective memories are mediated through, for example, family stories, school, the mass media and peers (Barton & Levstik, 2008; Epstein, 2006; Goldberg, Schwarz & Porat, 2008; Wertsch, 2004). In a study on the relationship between ethnic identity and attributions of significance to events in Canada's past, Peck studied students' reflections on the interplay between their identity and their conceptions. She found that this interaction was an on-going process and that students referred to a particular side of their identity prevailing over others at particular moments. Because students' identities and their understandings of significance may affect their learning and impede their engagement with alternative perspectives, it is important to address these identities and understandings (Barton & McCully, 2012; Historical Association, 2007; McCully, Pilgrim, Sutherland, & McMinn, 2002; Sheppard, 2010). When students cannot integrate their own understandings, history will be less meaningful to them (Ribbens, 2007; Seixas, 1993; VanSledright, 2008). Seixas (1993) expressed the need for a methodology that enables personal meanings to emerge in a broader and more critical setting

– that is, one in which students can close the gap between their family histories and the official history as taught in school. Allowing students to study historical remnants by themselves is one way to enable them to attribute significance to these remnants and the corresponding period of history in their own way (E. Davis, 2005).

In history education, students learn to develop historical perspective taking by studying multiple perspectives on the past and the ways in which these perspectives are affected by the vantage point of the particular interpreter (O. Davis, Yeager, & Foster, 2001; Hartmann & Hasselhorn, 2008; Seixas & Morton, 2012). The questions that students attempt to answer center on the perspective of the historical actor and on various interpretations of that perspective. In the classroom, however, students may also encounter multiple perspectives of individuals and groups in the present. Students may be more or less able to understand how others perceive and react to a situation (Gehlbach, 2004; Rios, Trent, & Vega Castañeda, 2003). Perspective taking means recognizing others' thoughts and emotions in a non-egocentric manner. When departing from a dynamic approach to heritage and identity, it is important to teach students to acknowledge multiple perspectives on the past and its remnants and the way these are given significance (Van Boxtel, Savenije & Grever, 2014).

Many students, however, may reject the idea that there can be more than one view on the past, particularly for sensitive histories. When discussing the significance of sensitive histories, students may relate to present conflicts in society or identify with certain historical actors because of their own background and historical representations (Barton & Levstik, 2008; Goldberg, Porat, & Schwarz, 2006; King, 2009). We expect that when discussing the significance of sensitive *heritage*, this situation is even more prevalent because identity and present interests are central to the construction of heritage. Barton (2007) suggested that as a student's affective filter concerning a topic grows tighter, his or her rejection of different perspectives becomes stronger. However, neglecting students' emotional responses and their

understandings of the significance of the past may lead to superficial learning and missed opportunities to help students come to grips with sensitive histories that are relevant in their society (Knutson, 2012; McCully et al., 2002). Barton and McCully (2012) found that although students in Northern Ireland were willing to learn about national history from multiple perspectives, they had difficulty fully engaging with perspectives other than their own. The authors advocate placing more attention on emotional engagement that leads students to develop the genuine curiosity necessary for a real understanding of the other.

Several authors in the field of history (education) and museum studies have discussed the ways in which museums or sites of remembrance may offer opportunities for students to experience both communality and diversity. Simon (2004) stressed the importance of a pedagogical and ethical practice of remembrance for what it means to live relationally with others from the past and in the present. Simon described 'being touched by the past' as a demand to 'take stories from others seriously, accepting those stories as matters of "counsel"' (pp. 189). During this process, the stories of others may alter people's own stories and change their views on their shared history. Another approach to this idea is offered by Rounds (2006), who analyzed people's wandering through a museum as an exploration of possibilities other than their own. Rounds described the museum as a safe place to explore otherness without the risk of immersing oneself in it as in a live encounter. One can experience differences and similarities simultaneously without fear of conflict or dominance. Lastly, Wineburg, Porat, Mosborg and Duncan (2007) described the denominating effect of sites of pilgrimage. Referring to the historian Confino (1997), these authors emphasized that common denominators are necessary if shared beliefs are to overcome rivalries and differences in memories. Sites of pilgrimage, which operate on the symbolic level, function as such denominators. When groups with opposing ideas and perspectives visit a pilgrimage site, the denominating symbolic power of the site may enable them to share the experience while

being aware of their different perspectives. However, heritage sites may also evoke emotive reactions that may intensify people's perspectives and lead to confrontations. For example, an intense debate accompanied the unveiling of the National Slavery Monument in 2002. The local Antillean and Surinamese communities felt that the Dutch government claimed the heritage of slavery by excluding many people from the official opening ('Chaos at the Unveiling of the Slavery Monument', 2002).

What might heritage projects regarding slavery contribute to students' understanding and attribution of significance to the history of slavery and its remnants? Presenting history and its historical remnants as heritage can evoke interest and motivation because heritage is related to the present and considered to be significant. In addition, explicitly denoting these remnants as Dutch heritage may enable critical reflection on what heritage is and why particular remnants are preserved and by whom (Grever, De Bruijn & Van Boxtel, 2012; Seixas & Clark, 2004). For example, sharing the decision-making process behind creating a museum exhibit with students may further their understanding of it (Gosselin, 2011). To reflect on the constructed nature of history and heritage and to recognize multiple perspectives are considered important components of thinking and reasoning historically (Van Drie & Van Boxtel, 2008). These skills will help students make sense of the narratives presented in museums, not only when visiting museum during a school field trip but also when visiting them later in life (Marcus & Levine, 2011). However, a present-orientated and static heritage approach, as opposed to a more detached and 'neutral' attitude, could also frustrate the learning of history. For example, in his study of history education in the United States, VanSledright (2008) articulated a concern that a dominant official narrative based on a 'shared national heritage' leaves no room for other perspectives and may increase resistance and alienation among groups of students that do not share that heritage.

Method

To explore students' attribution of significance to the sensitive history and historical remnants of slavery, which are presented, but not necessarily widely accepted as Dutch heritage, we conducted a case study in Amsterdam in the Netherlands in 2010. Amsterdam played an important role in the transatlantic slave trade. In our case study, we followed students who participated in a heritage project concerning the history of slavery that was embedded in their history lessons. The project included an introductory lesson at school, a visit to *NiNsee* and the National Slavery Monument, and a closing lesson at school. The slavery project provided the primary case boundaries. The school, 55 students, the teacher and museum guides associated with the project constituted the case. Within this primary case, thirteen students who were followed more closely each constituted a single case.

In the introductory lesson, students read short quotations from an enslaved person, a doctor and a ship's captain regarding the conditions on a slave ship and observed four images of the interior and the construction of a slave ship. In triads (i.e., cooperative learning groups of three students each), they responded to a few questions regarding these sources, such as why the sources held different perspectives. The students also wrote down what they expected to find during their visit to *NiNsee*. This task was designed to collect data regarding the students' expectations. The students also read sections of the diary of Linda Brent (the pseudonym of Harriet Ann Jacobs, who escaped slavery and became an abolitionist) and a reward notice by her former master Dr. James Norcom issued for Jacobs' return.

In the museum lesson, four groups attended a guided tour of the '*Break the silence*' exhibition at *NiNsee* and a tour of the National Slavery Monument. They viewed several paintings by modern Surinamese artists and a short introductory animated video clip. Each activity was led by a different guide. The *NiNsee* tour was an existing educational program.ⁱ

The last two activities were excluded from the analysis because not all students attended them.

In the closing lesson, the students in triads discussed which subtopics or perspectives on the history and heritage of slavery they found relevant to an exhibition on the subject. First, the students had to decide independently and then together which topics they thought were the most important. Then, they were asked to make a collage and prepare a written explanation. This task to discuss the design of a museum exhibition was developed to collect data on the students' understandings of the significance of the history and historical remnants of slavery and how they discussed these understandings with their peers.

Participants

The group of students who participated in the project consisted of 55 students from two classes at a junior high school in Amsterdam. The school was a mid-sized, Catholic public school for higher general education (HAVO) and pre-university education (VWO). The population of the school reflected the diverse social, cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds of the surrounding urban area. In 2010, 11% of the inhabitants of Amsterdam were of Antillean or Surinamese descent (Central Statistical Office).

The participants were second-year HAVO students aged 13 to 14 (class A: 28 students and class B: 27 students). Thirty-three percent of the participating students were female. The classes were culturally and ethnically diverse; the students' backgrounds included Dutch, Moroccan, Surinamese, Turkish and Antillean backgrounds. Sixteen percent of the students were of Antillean or Surinamese descent. Half of the students 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 students studied history chronologically starting from prehistoric

times and primarily focusing on Western Europe and the Netherlands. At the time that our research began, the students were studying the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, in which the topic of slavery is included as part of the history of America.

Thirteen students were selected to be followed more closely during the heritage project. For this selection, we focused on differences in the students' responses on the questionnaire. Furthermore, we considered variety in the students' gender and the birth country of the students' parents. With this process, we aimed to obtain insight into the variety of perspectives that students potentially bring to the classroom and to determine whether we could relate differences to the students' self-reported ethnic identities. Out of these groups, four triads were formed of students with diverse perspectives and backgrounds. Using the internally diverse triads, we aimed to explore the students' encounters with and acknowledgement of other perspectives.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data were collected using various instruments at various points during the heritage project. Measurement techniques were triangulated to complement the findings of each instrument with the others to gain insight into the case in its full complexity and to strengthen the qualitative approach of the study. The data were considered as a whole as a means of observing the full range of variation in the students' learning within the context of their perspectives prior to and after the project. A whole-class questionnaire was conducted at the beginning of the project and after the closing lesson in school. In addition to the questionnaires, the 13 students selected for detailed study were interviewed individually before and after the project and were observed working in their triads on the heritage project lessons. The museum educators were also observed. At the moment of the first questionnaire, the students knew they were going to visit *NiNsee*.

Questionnaire. Significance. To examine the students' understandings of the significance of the history and historical remnants of slavery, the questionnaires at the beginning of the project and after the closing lesson included a question that asked how important it was for them to preserve the historical remnants of slavery. The students evaluated eleven reasons for preserving these remnants on a 4-point scale (see table 1). The eleven reasons were based on conceptualizations of historical significance by Seixas (2008), Seixas and Morton (2012), Lévesque (2008) and Cercadillo (2001), which were rephrased to be specific to the historical remnants of slavery. The reasons for significance include the considerations that a history or remnant affects many people, has deep consequences, provides insight into the past or present and is of value for specific persons in present society. Students may not only attribute significance by relating historical remnants to a particular community, such as 'descendants of enslaved people' or 'the Dutch', but they may also connect historical remnants to their personal life. They may establish a personal connection when they link particular historical remnants to their own identity, concerns, values or interests (E. Davis, 2005; Van Boxtel, 2010a). In addition, the students were allowed to write their own reasons.

Table 1. *Reasons for the Preservation of Objects and Stories of Slavery*

I think it is important that objects and stories of slavery are preserved
1. Because they remind us that freedom and equality have not always existed
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 to understand the present
8. Because they are very old
9. Because they belong to 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

Taking other or multiple perspectives on significance. The eleven reasons associated with the significance question represent various perspectives on the significance of the historical remnants of slavery. We counted the number of reasons for preservation with which the students agreed to examine whether the students approached the question regarding significance from multiple perspectives. A student's agreement with a greater number of reasons was interpreted as indicating a richer understanding of the historical significance. Because the reasons reflected various perspectives on significance, it may be assumed that a student's agreement with a greater number of reasons indicates an understanding that the question of significance is complex and may be approached from multiple perspectives.

Interview. Each of the interviews was approximately 20 minutes long and primarily focused on clarification of the questionnaire responses. For example, we asked '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?' In the interview after the closing lesson, we compared the responses to the questionnaires at the beginning of the project and after the closing lesson. We asked, for example, 'In the previous interview, you explained to me that you thought this was not important. Can you describe what made you change your mind?' and 'Your response is the same in both questionnaires. Is it correct that you still feel the same about this question?' With regard to their responses regarding the significance of the historical remnants 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 adoption of multiple perspectives. Lastly, we asked them to describe their ethnic identity and to reflect on its effect on their responses on the questionnaire (see Peck, 2010). In the interview after the closing lesson, we also asked students for their experiences during the lessons. The students' reflections on the visit added to our impressions from the video recordings.

The individual interviews enabled us to discuss each student's understandings and experiences in depth and without active interference by others. However, there are disadvantages to individual interviews because students might feel uncomfortable or intimidated by being alone with a researcher asking questions about their perspectives. Students of this age may find it difficult to discuss their ideas in an interview, especially if it concerns a sensitive topic (Garbarino, 1989). Therefore, the questionnaire was used as a reference during the interview. Furthermore, we attempted to 'play down' our role as researchers and emphasized our interest in the students by displaying amazement and ignorance regarding what they were telling us. We used open questions and encouraged students to ask questions and make comments during the interview (Eder & Fingerson, 2002). Clearly, the interviewer's identity was also of importance here. The interviews were conducted by the first author. The perceived white identity of the interviewer may have had an effect considering that the topic was slavery and many students brought up the issue of inequality between black and white people. Although none of the students expressed concern regarding these different identities, they may have had the feeling of talking to one of the two 'sides'.

The 26 interviews were transcribed and used to check and complement our impressions from the questionnaires and observations. The analysis of the interviews focused on the students' understandings of the significance of the history and the historical remnants of slavery; the way these were related to students' self-reported ethnic identity; and students' acknowledgement or articulation of other perspectives on significance. Further, we searched for remarks regarding a specific role or effect of learning about the slavery past when this past is presented as Dutch heritage.

Observation and group interaction. During the museum visit, the entire class was videotaped. When possible, the taping focused on the students who were interviewed. Further,

the group work of four triads during the closing lesson at school was videotaped (two in each class). This observation of the museum visit and the cooperative learning was chosen as a measurement instrument because group discussions may reveal both the students' own understandings and their acknowledgement of other perspectives encountered within a triad. Our analysis of the group work focused on the sharing of understandings of the significance of the history and historical remnants of slavery and the acknowledgement of other and multiple perspectives on this significance. The literature regarding students' discussion of different perspectives on the past was used as a sensitizing framework (Barton & McCully, 2012; Goldberg, 2013).

The museum educators were also videotaped during the museum lesson. The analysis of the educators' talk focused on the specific historical content (such as the Middle Passage, plantation work, slave resistance); the combining of multiple perspectives of historical actors; the contextualization of historical actors, events or developments; discussion of multiple perspectives on significance; the interactive construction of significance; and the presentation of the history and historical remnants of slavery as Dutch heritage.

Results

In this section, we first describe the students' attribution of significance, its relationship with their identity and their acknowledgement of other perspectives before the museum visit. After presenting an impression of the guided tour, we discuss these same aspects observed during the visit and afterward. Lastly, we turn to students' ideas regarding the presentation of the history and historical remnants of slavery as Dutch heritage.

At the beginning of the project: descendants and equality

Before the start of the project, students found it important to preserve the historical remnants of slavery, particularly in relation to the values of equality and freedom and for the descendants of enslaved people (see table 2). The significance for the students' own families and for developing a better understanding of themselves scored the lowest. Very few of the students provided their own reasons.

Table 2. *Students' Understandings of the Reasons for the Preservation of the Historical Remnants of Slavery at the Beginning of the Project and after the Closing Lesson*

Reason	Mean ^a	Standard deviation	Mean ^b	Standard deviation
I think it is important that objects and stories of slavery are preserved	2.91	.78	3.08	.74
1. Because they remind us that freedom and equality have not always existed	3.09	.59	2.96	.96
2. Because they mean a lot to the people who descend from enslaved people	3.04	.68	3.02	.82
3. Because slavery changed the lives of many people	2.91	.62	2.85	.72
4. Because they will help us to understand how slaves were traded and why	2.85	.66	2.81	.81
5. Because I would find it a pity if they were gone	2.67	.75	2.58	.82
6. Because slavery has had many consequences	2.66	.73	2.54	.96
7. Because they will help to understand the present	2.61	.83	2.62	.79
8. Because they are very old	2.45	.80	2.53	.91
9. Because they belong to the Netherlands	2.15	.77	2.43	.80
10. Because they mean a lot to my family	1.74	.76	1.74	.74
11. Because they will help me to understand who I am	1.70	.66	1.74	.63

Note. ^aAt the beginning of the project. ^bAfter the closing lesson. 4-point-scale: completely disagree, disagree, agree and completely agree

In terms of the significance for the descendants of enslaved people, a student said, for example,

“Because there is much emotion... many, many families have been affected by this and it is important that these objects and stories are preserved because they are of value for those people.”

When students related the significance of the historical remnants of slavery to the issue of equality, slavery became a historical example of inequality that could be used to argue for

equality. Some of the students related present issues of inequality in society to the topic of slavery. One student said:

“Now everybody is equal, but of course other people have their own opinion, for example, that they do not want anything to do with blacks.”

I: “Uhuh, ok, what do you think of then?”

S: “For example, here in Amsterdam, there are a lot of foreignersⁱⁱ, and then there are people who say, ok, it is just normal, but then you have other people who think, like, ‘it is the Netherlands all right, it is not another country, and they come here’, and those people maybe think they come here and then they cause trouble. Yes, because there are, of course, youngsters who do that, but those people see those young people and other young people as one.”

This remark demonstrates how the student relates past and present through the general themes of inequality and racism. Many students used this kind of moral argument in their attribution of significance to the history and historical remnants of slavery. The remnants would remind people to strive for equality and freedom all over the world.

On average, students agreed or strongly agreed with six reasons for preserving the historical remnants of slavery in the questionnaire, and therefore, they valued multiple perspectives in their understandings of significance. However, in the interviews, the students’ capacities to consider other perspectives varied. Some students were thoughtful when trying to adopt another perspective. For example, a student of self-reported Dutch identity said that he could imagine that the descendants would rather forget about slavery and ignore the historical remnants, but at the same time, he thought that they had the right to know what happened to their ancestors and the remnants therefore should be preserved.

We observed a relationship between students’ understandings of significance and their self-reported ethnic identity, although this relationship was often ambiguous. We conducted

an analysis of variance to investigate the differences in attributions of significance between students of Surinamese(-Dutch) and Antillean(-Dutch) backgrounds (n=9) and students of other backgrounds (n=46). Students of Surinamese(-Dutch) and Antillean(-Dutch) backgrounds scored significantly higher than other students on item 10, which concerns significance to their own family ($F(1.52) = 16.07, p=.000$). Four students with a self-reported Surinamese or Antillean identity established a personal connection because of enslaved ancestors. However, three of them simultaneously tried to create a distance between themselves and this history. For example, one student said that perhaps her family had been enslaved a long time ago, but she thought that that was far too long ago to still care about. She said it was very possible that her friend who was “100% Dutch” had given exactly the same answers in the questionnaire. Three students with a self-reported Dutch identity struggled with the question regarding whether they should feel responsible for slavery or the transatlantic slave trade. For example, one student said that it was shameful to think that the Dutch had many slaves and that because he was Dutch, he had also abused people. He corrected himself and said “my ancestors”, but then he used “we” again. Later in the interview, he wondered whether perhaps his ancestors had been slave traders, and he wanted to know whether “he had anything to do with it”. Interestingly, he did not consider slavery to be a part of the history of the Netherlands because he thought one could not speak of an intense, long-term relationship between Africa and the Netherlands. In terms of history, the Dutch involvement in the slavery era was too insignificant to be seen as part of Dutch history. However, when thinking of Dutch identity in a more symbolic way, slavery was an issue that affected him as a Dutch youth and made him feel ashamed. These results indicate that many students related personally to the subject.

At the beginning of the project, the students nearly unanimously attributed significance to the history and historical remnants of slavery for various reasons, but they did

so particularly in relation to the concepts of equality and freedom and for the descendants of the enslaved. In several cases, the students' understandings of significance were clearly related to their self-reported ethnic identity. A few of the students did not want to emphasize this relationship or wanted to distance themselves from it.

The tour: concrete and engaging stories affirming students' ideas

The guided tour through the *NiNsee* exhibition began with a brief, non-interactive reflection on the necessity of breaking the silence regarding the history of slavery in Dutch society. This reflection also discussed the existence of modern-day slavery in the form of child labor, child soldiers and human trafficking in sex workers, thereby connecting the history of slavery to present issues of equality and freedom. In another connection between history and contemporary life, the tour guide noted that many of Amsterdam's beautiful mansions were built by people involved in the slave trade, thereby providing a visible reminder of the Dutch Republic's role in the slave trade. During the guided tour, students were offered opportunities to imagine the history of slavery via detailed stories presented by the guide and via role-play, paintings and drawings of historical texts and images. In a few cases, the guide used objects, for example a whip, to help tell a story, but a great deal of the authentic tangible and intangible historical remnants that are available in the institute were excluded from the tour. The role-play included, for example, the students re-enacting an auction, re-naming enslaved persons at a slave market and demonstrating slave punishments. Topics that were addressed consisted of the slave raids and slave trading in Africa, the Middle Passage, slave markets and plantations in America and the punishment of the enslaved. The dominant perspective in the guide's stories was that of the enslaved persons. On occasion, the guide explained the actions of the slave traders and owners, but she focused on the pain and suffering that these actions brought upon the enslaved. The exhibition presented other

perspectives, but these were not discussed by the guide, nor were the perspectives or interpretations that the pictures or objects represented. There was also no further discussion regarding the attribution of significance to specific remnants of slavery by various groups in society. The guide used the pictures and objects as visualization tools to support her story. At the beginning of the tour, the guide presented the transatlantic slave trade in a wider context by explaining the global relationships and the system of trading and using people from one continent as a workforce on another. During the rest of the tour, however, the actions of the historical actors and the historical remnants in *NiNsee* were infrequently placed in context.

At the National Slavery Monument in the park, the students' experiences were guided by allowing them to walk around the monument, touch it and discuss its meaning. The monument consists of three parts with several life-size figures (see figure 2). At the rear of the monument stands a group of men, women and children roped together; in the centre, a human figure passes through a winged arch. At the front, there is a large human figure with outstretched arms. Some students quickly came to the conclusion that the monument narrated the path from slavery to freedom. Others described such details as "wings" and the "hurt backs" and noticed "some people being held back" and "being belittled". The guide then explained the three parts of the monument as symbolising the path from slavery to freedom, making gestures while walking from one side to the other. The guide emphasized the significance of the monument by providing historical context, noting that the monument's construction aligned with a global trend to acknowledge the legacies of the transatlantic slave trade and the institution of slavery. Her presentation explained the perspective of enslaved people and of those who advocated for the erection of a monument to acknowledge the history of slavery. Launching an interactive discussion on the meaning of the monument and its three elements, the tour guide asked the students to provide their first impressions. The guide allowed the students to discover what the monument meant to them by examining the

monument and choosing a particular position to stand near the monument. This process prompted a discussion about freedom, concluding with the tour guide's remark that slavery still exists in the modern day. In addition, the guide explained her personal relationship to the monument, noting that she was a descendant of a slave owner and a female slave. The guide added that instead of carrying the weight of past slavery on her shoulders, she preferred to focus on the future. She also explained that a commemoration service was held at the monument each year and that individuals who visited the monument often left roses or found peace through reflection.

Overall, the guides affirmed the students' attributions of significance related to the values of freedom and equality and to descendants of enslaved people. The perspective of the enslaved and their descendants was emphasized. The guides attempted to stimulate the students' personal engagement with the role-play and the positioning-activity at the monument. While the tour through the exhibition did not allow the students to examine the historical remnants by themselves, the visit to the monument did. The visit to the monument also enabled the students to share their understandings of the significance of the history and historical remnants of slavery. With the connections between the past and the present at the beginning of the tour through the exhibition, the guide attributed significance to the history of slavery and implicitly presented this history and its remnants as Dutch heritage. With the discussion of the National Slavery Monument, *NiNsee* also emphasized the 'heritage-status' of the history of slavery in Dutch society. The guide provided a personal, national and global perspective on the significance of the monument, but did not include the perspective of Dutch citizens who are not aware of or do not care about the Dutch history of slavery. The students were not stimulated to reflect critically on 'the' Dutch heritage of slavery or contextualize this conception.

Figure 2. The National Slavery Monument in Amsterdam (photo Geerte Savenije)

Students' learning:

New personal and societal perspectives on significance. After the project, the students still valued the preservation of the historical remnants of slavery (see table 2). The data showed that the students learned about and discussed perspectives on the significance of slavery that were different from their own. The students read between the lines of the guides' words and discerned messages about the Dutch heritage of slavery. After the closing lesson, a significantly higher number of students (27), compared with 16 at the beginning of the project, noted the importance of preserving the historical remnants of slavery because this history is part of the Netherlands. For example, a student wrote "Because I find it important that the Netherlands think about what they have done in the time of slavery". Another student wrote "Slavery often happened because Dutchmen had slaves from the Antilles and herewith [the commemoration at the monument] this is remembered and history is sort of cleansed of it". Several students explained that before the lessons, they had not known that the Netherlands had participated in the transatlantic slave trade. Further, eleven students had not

known about the monument, and two students had not known about the museum. These responses suggest that presenting the historical remnants of slavery as Dutch heritage seemed to have stimulated students' reflections and understandings of the significance of the history of slavery. The students learned that significance is attributed to the history and historical remnants of slavery in Dutch society and they found this insight to be worthy of mention. Additionally, one student had not known "that it [slavery] was such a taboo", referring to a different perspective in Dutch society. The interviews also revealed that although several students had previously believed that former slaves and their descendants sought to forget about slavery, the students now believed otherwise. After viewing the preserved objects and the monument, the students realized that at least some of the descendants sought to remember the history of slavery. For example, when describing the visit to the monument, one student noted the following:

"I saw it, and I saw those roses on it, and then I thought, well, if a rose, well many people do think about it, and it is really important for them. Because of the roses, it looked really sad."

This student was touched when she saw that people had left roses at the monument. These roses may have reminded the student of the way people visit graveyards or attend WWII commemorations. They made her realize that people in the Netherlands commemorate the history of slavery and that this history is still alive for these people.

Although the guides described the context of the construction of the monument, they did not share the decision-making process behind the preservation of the remnants in the exhibit. Neither did they discuss the perspective of people who do not consider the history and historical remnants of slavery to be Dutch heritage. Although the students focused on the historical remnants of slavery during their *NiNsee* visit, they did not ask questions regarding why these remnants were preserved and exhibited there. However, the students brought in

different perspectives on the history of slavery. During the visit to the monument, for example, when the guide said that slavery was not a pleasant story to be told, one student agreed with the statement but added that slavery had also brought significant wealth to Europe. The guide encouraged caution on this matter and awaited research to form an opinion. Notably, the perspective mentioned by the student is an important issue in contemporary debates on the Dutch role in the transatlantic slave trade (Emmer, 2012).

The students' existing understandings of the significance of the historical remnants of slavery were reinforced by the museum visit. Further, these understandings were enriched with perspectives on the significance in society. Presenting the history and historical remnants of slavery as Dutch heritage stimulated the students' reflection on the ways in which people attribute significance to historical remnants of slavery in Dutch society. The emphasis on the 'heritage status' of the history and historical remnants of slavery in Dutch society conveyed a powerful message that was easily understood. The students' remarks regarding the role of the Netherlands demonstrate that the heritage project stimulated the students' reflection on the responsibility of Dutch citizens in the present with regard to the history and legacy of slavery. Although the guides did not encourage a critical approach to the Dutch history and heritage of slavery, the results suggest that some students were interested to learn about different perspectives.

Connecting heritage of slavery to identities. The project provided several examples of how students related (their own) identities or present societal conflicts to the topic of slavery. In one triad, for example, two students (student 2 and 3) indicated that their ancestors had been enslaved; however, the students noted that they did not relate more closely to the topic because of this factor. Image 8 (see figure 3) prompted the following discussion among these three students in the closing lesson*:

1: 'We choose this topic because...'

2: 'It is important that descendants can narrate this.'

3: 'That descendants...'

2: 'But that would mean that it is important that I and my children can narrate it... well!'

3: 'Yeah' [student giggles]

1: 'Yes! We choose this topic because it shows that people can narrate it without having been involved in it themselves'.

2: 'No, because the image was, um, that people, that relatives can narrate it'.

1: 'For that very reason. So we choose this topic because it shows people can talk about it without having been able to have been involved in it themselves'.

*Self-reported identity: 1 Moroccan; 2 Spanish-Surinamese-Dutch; 3 Dutch-Antillean.

Figure 3. Image 8 'Stories of Dutch families about slavery' from the task in the closing lesson (drawing by Wim Euverman)

Students 2 and 3 did not agree with student 1. In the end, the students indicated that it was important that descendants could narrate the stories of slavery. Although the students believed that past and present events were related through family memory, when they applied this

concept to themselves, the students did not experience the general continuity that had been discussed. However, the students also did not accept or understand student 1's solution that people can share their knowledge of history without having been personally involved in historical events. The response of student 2 indicates the belief that relatives possess a special status in relating stories because they were personally involved in the history.

Students from Antillean(-Dutch) and Surinamese(-Dutch) backgrounds scored significantly higher on item 10 (see table 2) regarding family in the questionnaire after the project ($F(1.51) = 17.68, p = .000$). Some students expressed explicit ideas regarding how descendants were personally related to the subject and projected these ideas to their classmates; however, these ideas did not always match others' experiences. For example, one student believed that an African student would feel personally related to the subject because he was African; however, the African student in question said he knew that his family was not traded to America (because they still lived in Africa) and that he personally had nothing to do with slavery. Another student believed that descendants of enslaved people would seek to learn more about freedom, whereas his group member, who was a descendant, suggested that studying freedom meant less to him than learning about the lives and situations of the enslaved persons. These students did not exchange their ideas during the heritage project and did not discover the misconception. However, other students became more aware of the complex relationship between identity and conceptions of significance. For example, one student found meaning amidst personal comments that the guide had made but not emphasized, strengthening the monument's significance:

“Yes, that woman had then, I think, um, she descended from slavery too, and I think to her it was very important, that statue, and if it would break down or if they would say ‘no we do not want that statue there anymore’ then it would

really hurt her, I think; a thing like this seems very important to me, that it will be preserved, these sort of things”.

The student’s use of words related to descent (“from slavery”) is interesting because the guide had indicated that she was the descendant of a slave owner and his female slave. Although the students had drawn clear-cut lines between the descendants of the enslaved and those of their owners, an encounter with an actual descendant challenged this idea.

The personal approach of the guide also encouraged students to reflect on their personal relationship or engagement with the history and historical remnants of slavery. One student described an intense experience during the museum visit, appropriating the historical remnants as the heritage of his ancestors:

“Like with the canoe, just how they sat in it, and you could see ship decks as well, and well, I could see where my ancestors sat in, and yes, what they have been through”. (see also figure 4)

At the beginning of the heritage project, this student emphasized that the fact that he was a descendant of enslaved people affected his identity. The visit to *NiNsee* intensified this idea. Several other students noted an interest in how they might be related to the history of slavery and reported that they had discussed the matter with other family members at home after the visit to *NiNsee*. The results suggest that examining slavery as Dutch heritage stimulated students to consider whether or not they believed that the history of slavery was their heritage as well.

The heritage project contributed to the students’ understanding of how understandings of the significance of the history and historical remnants of slavery may be related to people’s identity. However, some students had simplified notions of this interplay between understandings and identities or struggled with it in terms of their own identity. Presenting the

history and historical remnants of slavery as Dutch heritage stimulated the students' personal engagement with the remnants and their attribution of significance to them.

Figure 4. NiNsee exhibition, 'Break the silence' – the 'canoe' (photo Pieter de Bruijn)

Conclusion and Discussion

In this case study, we explored how junior high school students in two Dutch urban classrooms attributed significance to the history and historical remnants of slavery while engaged in a heritage project that presented this history and these remnants as Dutch heritage. Our study demonstrates the processes that may occur when historical remnants are presented as heritage and when issues of significance and identity become central. At the beginning of the project, the students believed it was important to preserve the historical remnants of slavery, primarily to remember that freedom and equality have not always existed and because these remnants are important to the descendants of enslaved people. These ideas, which resembled those expressed by the tour guides and the exhibition, were reinforced during the project. During the museum visit, students gained insight into the ways in which

significance is attributed to the history of slavery in Dutch society and considered how these attributions are sometimes related to a person's identity or background. For some students, the touching experience of the monument enabled them to engage with another perspective, as described by Simon (2004). Several students also experienced that although people hold different perspectives on the significance of the history of slavery, they can share its heritage (Wineburg *et al.*, 2007). The visit to the monument may thus have provided a safe place for the students to explore different perspectives, as suggested by Rounds (2006), although it should be noted that the students nearly unanimously attributed significance to the history of slavery and its remnants and agreed upon the main arguments for this attribution. Notably, the main sensitivity regarding slavery in Dutch society – the lack of awareness and its background – was not discussed extensively. Although one student learned that the Dutch history of slavery was considered a taboo topic, the majority of the students did not appear to be aware of this issue. These results demonstrate the ways in which critical reflection on a particular history is hampered when this history is presented as national heritage. Because the guides attempted to show the value of this sensitive history for Dutch society, they did not consider contrasting perspectives, even when the students encouraged them to discuss these perspectives.

Some students struggled with the history of slavery and their own position towards it; they related personally to the topic, sometimes based on their self-reported Surinamese, Antillean or Dutch identity. Some students projected their understandings of significance onto other students based on their specific ethnic backgrounds or identity; however, these presumptions did not always match with the other person's experience. For example, some students who were the descendants of enslaved people did not appear to care about this history because slavery had occurred many generations before the students were born. These issues were not emphasized in the discussion at the monument and the students were not

guided into deeper reflection on the interplay between perspectives and identity. The guide adopted a dynamic approach to heritage and identity in her nuanced personal story, by simultaneously emphasizing that the history of slavery was personal to her because of her enslaved and slave owning ancestors and that she wanted to distance herself from this history and focus on the future. However, the students did not seem to fully understand this complex approach. Many students exclusively ascribed the heritage of slavery to the descendants of enslaved people and linked this heritage directly to a black ethnic identity and enslaved ancestors. These findings demonstrate the risk of reinforced stereotypes and exclusion when teaching students about sensitive history and heritage (I. Philips, 2008; Smith et al., 2011). The study shows the importance and the difficulty of reflecting with students on the interplay between identity and people's conceptions as well as on the dynamics of this interplay.

Finally, our study illustrates some practical and methodological difficulties in researching in-depth learning processes in out-of-school learning environments. For example, at the end of the museum visit, it was difficult to create a space for students to quietly fill in the questionnaire. In addition, it was challenging to capture student interaction on tape. Further, because of the lack of similar previous research in the field of heritage education, we designed our own questionnaires that require testing on a wider scale to test their validity and reliability. For example, we operationalized students' understandings of the significance of heritage of slavery as their opinion about the importance of preserving objects and stories. We used the interviews to determine when students approached objects and stories as historical sources and when as heritage, valuing the remnants with regard to society or to themselves personally. The triangulation of measuring techniques was very helpful for developing a deep understanding of this specific case. This procedure provided us with data from various standpoints to examine the case in its complexities.

Our study is limited in that it investigated only one heritage project related to the topic of slavery among a variety of potential educational projects and activities organized by schools and heritage organizations. Our aim was not to assess the quality of the project that we investigated. Instead, we intended to describe how students can attribute significance during history lessons in which historical remnants are presented as heritage in the context of a museum. Several classes in the Netherlands participate in such lessons. Our small, exploratory case study is only an initial step towards improved insight into the processes at work during such history lessons. Nevertheless, our theoretical framework and case study may be helpful to discuss criteria for good practice and characteristics of a dynamic approach of heritage in history education acknowledging multiple and changing perspectives. Our findings suggest that it is important to reflect with students on the multiple perspectives of different historical actors and different groups in society as well as their own and contextualize these perspectives to enable critical reflection on sensitive history and heritage of slavery that supports historical understanding. The quality of heritage education projects like the one described in our case study is a shared responsibility of schools and museums or heritage organizations.

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Notes

ⁱ Due to budget cuts *NiNsee* terminated these on-site museum lessons in 2012: www.ninsee.nl.

ⁱⁱ With the term 'foreigners' the student refers to first- and second-generation immigrants. Currently, this term is often used to refer to Dutch citizens from non-Western backgrounds, such as Surinamese, Antillean, Moroccan and Turkish backgrounds.