History Belongs to Us: Year 9 Girls Use Historical Significance to Craft Their Curriculum

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Abstract

This action research study investigated the impact of applying the skill of historical significance to meaningfully involve girls in the creation of their Year 9 history curriculum. A class of 25 girls was given explicit instruction on evaluating historical significance and the girls were provided with multiple opportunities to evaluate the significance of the historical topics they were currently studying. The project culminated with students producing independently researched proposals for new topics they believed warranted inclusion in the school Year 9 history curriculum, and also with the History department working with the students to implement some of these changes. Data collection techniques included questionnaires, focus groups, student work samples and lesson observations. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data; findings revealed that involvement in the curriculum design process and application of historical significance enhanced student agency and developed girls' historical skills. Developing the skill of historical significance also enabled girls to distinguish between the agency of a historian and personal preferences, whilst also highlighting that comprehensive historical knowledge is crucial for students to effectively evaluate significance and exercise agency. The findings from this study are valuable for educators wanting to critically reflect on what may be considered canon in their subject, or those hoping to involve students in meaningful curricular change.

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When the International Coalition of Girls Schools proposed student agency as the action research topic for the 2025 Global Action Research Collaborative, it struck me that for girls to become *agents* of learning, they must recognise that our subject disciplines are constantly evolving fields of study that we actively participate in, rather than a fixed body of knowledge that students are expected to absorb. To challenge this misconception, I concentrated on the aspect of history that can have a profound impact on students' engagement with the subject, whilst is also an area that students have traditionally been excluded from: curriculum design.

The decisions about which topics are considered important enough to be included in the history curriculum have been widely debated and often politicised, but students are rarely involved in this process. Moreover, evaluating the significance of historical events is a skill integral to the discipline of history, so shutting students out of this process not only limits their agency; it prevents them from developing the skills of a historian.

Historical significance is a concept that evaluates the importance of an event, person, or idea in the past. It is a fluid concept, dependent on the perspective from which an event is contemporarily and subsequently viewed. It is an important disciplinary skill, but also has strong personal influences, as our judgements on what bits of the past we believe matter or hold meaning are undoubtedly influenced by our frames of reference and values (Foster, 2024). Therefore, I hoped that placing this concept at the heart of my project would develop disciplinary skills and also empower girls to play a meaningful role in creating a curriculum that was reflective of who they were.

These reflections led me to design a scheme of work based on my research question: *How does applying the concept of historical significance strengthen Year 9 girls' agency through critical engagement with the history curriculum?* Students were introduced to the concept of

historical significance in a series of introductory lessons, and then, throughout the project, they had numerous opportunities to evaluate the significance of topics currently in the school curriculum. The final phase of the project was for the girls to produce independent topic proposals to suggest new enquiries to be included in the Year 9 curriculum. This real-world outcome was vital in ensuring that an authentic sense of agency was cultivated in the classroom.

Action research was an appropriate methodology to underpin my project, as its processes ensure that research is carried out by those with a vested interest in the teaching and learning process and encourage continuous reflection to solve problems or implement improvement (Mertler, 2020).

Literature Review

For the past few years, and particularly since the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, the content of school history curricula has been widely debated. As Counsell (2012) so aptly and starkly puts it, "to decide what history is to be taught, at school, regional or national level, is to exercise phenomenal power" (p.8). Research has overwhelmingly found that students are rarely involved in curriculum design, and consequently, students have little understanding of why we study the topics we do (Harris, 2021; Slater, 2023; Teeple, 2013). The literature suggests that the impact of this is twofold: history curricula are limiting students' ability to exercise agency; and students' inability to fully exercise agency is preventing them from developing the disciplinary practices of a historian in the classroom (Harris & Renolds, 2014; Morgan, 2023).

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2019) contends that, "student agency relates to the development of an identity and a sense of belonging" (p.5). In context, Harris and Reynolds (2014) found the lack of student agency in the history curriculum had a negative impact on students, because when students do not see themselves in the history they are taught, it can alienate certain groups, particularly girls and those from

minority ethnic backgrounds. Combining this research with the findings of Davies et al. (2022) who argue that a narrow Anglocentric curriculum can encourage students to make weaker historical judgements, increasing student agency in the classroom clearly has both emotional and academic benefits.

A curriculum that does not encourage learner agency has been found to have a significant impact on groups that have often been marginalised in the classroom, with Willis et al. (2023) noting a tension between learner agency and a preference from girls to be compliant. Hempel-Jorgensen (2015) also claims that pedagogical practices and curricula, which are more likely to be performative, can strongly constrain the capacity of learners in disadvantaged contexts to exercise learner agency. These findings highlight that involvement in curriculum design can be transformative for girls – developing disciplinary knowledge to demonstrate authentic agency and enabling them to craft a more inclusive curriculum.

From a disciplinary perspective, agency is crucial to developing the skills of a good historian. Rather than assuming there is a fixed body of knowledge or interpretation of history that students must know, "a historically literate person actively uses evidence from multiple sources to construct a personal understanding of what occurred" (Bennett, 2014, p.54). Approaches using multi-perspectivity as opposed to broad grand narratives have been shown to enhance historical agency (Boadu et al., 2020). Similarly, Knight (2008) argues that to prevent pupils viewing "knowledge transmission as learning and curriculum as fact" (p.20) instructional learning objectives should be avoided, and instead "expressive objectives" that encourage students to solve problems will lead to higher levels of self-efficacy. The importance of enabling students to exercise agency in an authentic manner is echoed in multiple other studies (Barnes, 2020; Manyukhina et al., 2020; Willis et al., 2023), convincing me that my intervention had to involve a genuine invitation to students to reform the school curriculum, rather than being limited to prescriptive tasks with no potential for broader impact.

The literature suggests the concept of historical significance can be an effective pedagogical strategy to encourage learner agency. In recent years, advice on how significance should be taught has gone through many different iterations, but in the eyes of many history educators, "one thing never changes: it is hard" (Historical Association, 2016, p. 57). Worth (2023) argues that the largest source of confusion about significance has been a failure to realise that "historical significance cannot be a fixed, permanent property of the thing itself" (p. 19). Instead, significance is constantly made and remade. The importance of recognising historical significance's fluidity is echoed by many (Counsell, 2004; Historical Association, 2020; Slater, 2023), making it the ideal intervention to employ when exploring student agency, as agency is equally not a fixed attribute; it is sensitive to time, place, and context (Willcocks, 2017).

Slater (2023) is a teacher-researcher who most clearly makes the connection between historical significance and student agency within the curriculum. The goal of his research was to investigate whether, if students understood why events may be seen as significant, they could develop the agency to challenge this label if they saw fit. An important distinction between Slater's research and my own is that, while Slater's students were able to critique their curriculum, their suggestions for amendments did not lead to real-world changes. However, to fully develop student agency, multiple studies emphasise the importance of moving students beyond the evaluation of existing ideas to the co-construction of new ones (OECD, 2019; Vander Arck, 2015; Willis et al., 2023). Therefore, my class needed to understand that their proposals during the project could lead to concrete change in the curriculum.

One of the most important caveats to my research was the understanding that, "student agency does not mean that students can voice whatever they want or can choose whatever subjects they wish to learn" (OECD, 2019). For example, previous studies exploring student voice in curriculum design found that students were more likely to prefer more personal strands

of history that linked with their family background (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Lee & Shemlit, 2007; Morgan, 2023), which can be detrimental in several ways: it can limit the breadth of topics studied, particularly in schools with a less diverse population, and it can discourage compassion and understanding of other cultures, which can create "a tendency for students to perceive some topics as "theirs" and other topics as "belonging to someone else"" (Lee & Shemlit, 2007, p. 17).

Most crucially, student voice can undermine the professional, academically rigorous method of the historian, who may be influenced by their personal context, but will ultimately need to make judgements on historical significance based on reasoned criteria (Allsop, 2010; Pearson, 2012). Therefore, the generation and application of criteria to justify students' judgements of significance was a vital measurement of student agency in this project. Students were provided with well-established frameworks of "significance criteria", such as Counsell's (2004) 5 Rs of significance, but to fully model the skills of a historian and to demonstrate agency, they must move beyond using supplied criteria to generate their own (Historical Association, 2020). This underscores the rationale for my whole project, which was to develop the notion that agency is *beneficial* in the classroom, towards the idea that agency is *essential* for students to demonstrate the disciplinary practices of a historian.

Research Context

Wimbledon High School is an independent girls' day school located in south-west London. The school is academically high-achieving and the school community is progressive and forward-thinking.

The participants in my project were 25 students aged 13–14 years old in my Year 9 History class. Year 9 is the final year of secondary school before the curriculum is largely determined by national exams, so this was an ideal cohort as they were mature enough to take on the responsibility of something as complex as curriculum design, whilst still being at a point

in their school journey where there was enough flexibility to make significant changes to the curriculum.

I conducted my research across the 16-week autumn term. Many of the students were new to me at the start of the project, but as I also became Head of Year 9 just before the start of the project, I was able to develop strong pastoral relationships with the participants and had regular interactions with them outside our timetabled history lessons.

I taught another Year 9 class concurrently, who were taught the same scheme of work to ensure no student was advantaged or disadvantaged based on their participation in the project. Permission to participate in the project was gained from students and parents through an "opt-out" letter and all data collected from students were anonymised.

The Action

The research project with a series of lessons providing explicit instruction on the concept of historical significance. The girls were introduced to Counsell's (2004) 5 Rs framework (remarkable, remembered, revealing, resonant, resulting in change) to model how a range of criteria can be used to ascribe significance to the past, but to avoid pitfalls found in previous research, students were not expected to use the 5 Rs as a set list of criteria for significance; thus, allowing them to recognise the fluidity of historical significance and generate their own criteria.

As a baseline exercise, the girls were asked to reflect on and evaluate the significance of the topics they had studied in the previous year, introducing them to the curriculum design process. During the project, students completed three different enquiries, and at the end of each enquiry were asked to complete a reflective exercise evaluating the significance of the topic they had just studied. There were also multiple opportunities within each enquiry to evaluate the historical significance of a particular aspect of the topic. Typically, historical significance is taught as a discrete concept in one enquiry over the year, such as an enquiry on

“How significant was the reign of Elizabeth I?” Therefore, integrating the concept of significance into multiple enquiries and consistently returning to it as part of end-of-unit reflections was a noticeable change.

The most exciting part of the action for students was the opportunity to produce an independently researched topic proposal to suggest changes to the Year 9 curriculum. This was completed as a homework assignment over four weeks, broken down into manageable weekly tasks. They were told from the outset that if their proposal was convincing, their suggested topic could be introduced to the school curriculum.

Data Collection

Throughout the thirteen weeks of my action, I collected qualitative and quantitative data, utilising a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data offered useful insights on trends and patterns within the class of 25 students, but I maintained a primary focus on qualitative data, as student voice was essential in determining levels of student agency in the class. Mertler (2020) highlighted the importance of polyangulation to provide consistent and reliable data, so I employed a variety of data collection methods: questionnaires, focus groups, student work, reflective journals, classroom observations, and field notes.

Students at my school had not been asked to provide input into the history curriculum before, so one aspect of baseline data collection was to establish if students believed they currently had agency within the history curriculum, and if they believed student agency in the curriculum was even desirable or important. Therefore, before the action began, students completed a questionnaire with open and closed questions, providing qualitative and quantitative data to understand student preconceptions. In addition, to capture baseline data on students’ ability to write about the significance of historical events, they submitted a written evaluation on the historical significance of the topics they had studied in the previous year.

These data were then compared with written evaluations they completed at the end of the project.

Throughout the intervention, different classroom activities gave students many opportunities to generate criteria for historical significance and apply those criteria to different topics they were studying, helping them judge if the topics deserved a place in our school curriculum. These activities were a valuable source of data: verbal contributions were collected through field notes, observations and transcribed focus group interviews, whilst students' written thoughts were collected through student work, questionnaires, and reflective journals. This allowed me to consistently track students' ability to evaluate historical significance over the thirteen weeks.

All students had the opportunity to take part in a focus group. In the focus groups, I used semi-structured questions, offering opportunities for clarification and follow-up questions that helped to ascertain the depth of student conceptual understanding. The first focus group looked to establish how much agency students felt they had in the history classroom, whereas in the later interviews, my focus was on whether students could demonstrate agency by evaluating the significance of topics we were studying. These interviews were recorded and transcribed to ensure accuracy of the data.

At the end of the action, I collected written student proposals on changes they would like to make to the school history curriculum, along with a final questionnaire. To answer my research question, I collected data that revealed the students' own reflections on their level of agency in history, along with data that showed the extent to which students could use the concept of historical significance to evaluate the current curriculum offering.

Data Analysis

I used the inductive analysis technique of "organise, describe, interpret" (Mertler, 2020) to analyse my data. The data were coded to help me organise and interpret them thematically, and I made links between the coded data and the research question to establish common patterns surrounding the impact of the action on levels of student agency in the history classroom. Data from the early, middle, and later stages of the intervention were used to track changes in student perceptions and demonstrations of agency. I used reflexivity by consistently revisiting my early interpretations and sharing my analysis with a critical friend so that the data remained credible.

Discussion of Findings

From my analysis, I identified four themes, which I developed into thematic statements to discuss my findings.

Involving Girls in the Curriculum Design Process Significantly Increases Their Sense of Agency

Inviting students to critically evaluate the existing history curriculum enhanced the girls' feelings of agency. In the pre-intervention survey, only one girl believed that students currently played a part in deciding the topics we studied, whereas almost all believed that students should have a role in this process. Interestingly, all girls said that they believed the topics we currently studied were interesting and valuable, which suggested that their desire to be more involved in curriculum design was primarily driven by wanting to engage with the process, rather than being outcome-driven, indicating that the chance to exercise agency was integral.

The girls took this opportunity seriously, and spoke excitedly about being involved, explaining that "it's just coming from our ideas, so then that really makes a topic feel more about *us*," and telling me that "it's important for students to have an input, because it makes them feel heard." Their enthusiasm was evident in the final topic proposals, as every student

submitted a detailed, well-researched proposal on a topic of their choice, and most of their suggested enquiry questions had the precision and historical richness to merit inclusion in the school curriculum.

In the final survey, almost every student spoke positively about the process, and numerous comments gave indications of increased levels of agency, such as “it gives a voice and sense of power to the students,” and it “gave us the freedom to show what we passionately believe is important.” Two students said they felt “honoured” to be involved in the process, showing the positive impact teachers can have by showing they trust students to be involved in important decisions. The two students who were less positive said that they were “nervous” and did not enjoy the “pressure” of the proposal, which highlights the importance of equipping students with the required skills to tackle tasks with confidence.

Student agency appeared highest when students were generating their own questions that needed solving, with one girl in a focus group describing “when you're kind of doing your first bit of research and you're starting it. You're like, Oh my gosh, I need to know this, this and that,” suggesting that agency can be developed when students set their own parameters for the investigation. This came through in the girls’ topic proposals when they were asked to suggest what existing topic should be replaced by their proposed topic. Rather than following this directive, many students suggested how other topics could be consolidated or adapted to prevent their complete removal from the curriculum. The girls who chose to change the framework of the task to best reflect the range of topics they thought were significant showed them exercising agency in a truly authentic manner.

Increasing Student Agency Transforms Girls from Students of History into Historians

Riley (2021) highlights the importance of agency to a historian, explaining that “all through this process, the historian is making choices – what to include, what to avoid, what to write about” (p. 283). Therefore, as students realised that they could actively make choices

about which elements of the past are significant, they exercised agency, but crucially they also demonstrated the fundamental skills of a historian.

A significant but subtle change in students' learning was through their understanding of historical significance itself. Initially, participants had a misconception that historical significance was fixed, a misunderstanding that numerous studies have highlighted the importance of deconstructing (Counsell, 2004; Historical Association, 2020; Slater, 2023; Worth, 2023). In the pre-intervention survey, responses, such as "some things are worth studying because they were huge events that we should remember in history," and, "they are worth studying because it's teaching us about the important moments in history," suggested that the girls viewed the historical significance of events as fixed or objective, which could prevent them from recognising that they have can agency by challenging those judgements. However, by the final survey there were subtle changes in student language, with them now saying a topic "*can* be significant," rather than it "*is* significant," suggesting the girls now recognised the fluidity of historical significance and that they could exercise agency by forming their own judgements.

Similarly, using professional historians to model evaluations of historical significance enabled students to recognise agency being exercised by others, consequently encouraging the students to demonstrate agency themselves. Early in the project, girls could list their own criteria for historical significance but struggled to identify the criteria being used by others. As the project progressed, I noted in my reflections that, in lessons that referenced the work of historians, students were more likely to mention historical significance, even if it was not the explicit focus of the lesson. For example, when a historian described the colonisation of Africa as a "remarkable freak," the students immediately said that he must view this topic as significant.

Improving their ability to recognise historical agency in others correlated with the students' production of convincing evaluations of historical significance, as students reflected that learning about different historians "made me question why things were seen in a certain perspective," and "teaches us how news and events can completely change peoples' perspectives on something." Recognising historians as actors with agency was an important development in student understanding and was a critical step for the girls to transition from student to historian.

Broadening the Criteria Used to Ascribe Historical Significance Enables Students to Separate Historical Agency from Personal Preferences

Initially, students had a narrow understanding of the criteria that could be used to ascribe historical significance. When asked what makes something historically significant in the pre-intervention survey, students overwhelmingly mentioned the impact it has on the world today. This finding echoes the literature, which highlights that students tend to "succumb to presentism" (Worth, 2023, p. 8) by fixating on how historical events connect to today, or to overly concentrate on the "resulting in change" criterion (Bradshaw, 2006, p.18). This "presentism" certainly came through in my students' work. In a baseline piece of writing evaluating the historical significance of events they had previously studied, the girls mentioned "resulting in change" or "impact today" as a justification for significance on 20 occasions, which was far more than any other criterion. They particularly struggled to move beyond the idea that historical events had to be relevant to the present-day. In one lesson, for example, students were asked to brainstorm in groups if the colonisation of Africa was remarkable *at the time*, yet their responses argued that "European languages are still spoken," and it still "affects Africa today."

Whilst "impact today" can be a valid justification for historical significance in some cases, it can limit students' reasoning by only valuing topics they feel are personally relevant to

them (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Lee & Shemlit, 2007; Morgan, 2023). This came through in the focus groups, when girls tended to conflate historical significance with personal relevance and familiarity, as evidenced when one participant suggested it would be unfair to ask the whole class to study the French Revolution in case "someone didn't really like the French Revolution as much because it didn't really link to them."

Therefore, it was a significant change that by the end of the process, students were more likely to reference multiple criteria in their evaluations of historical significance. In the initial survey, few respondents referenced more than one criterion to show historical significance, whereas by the final survey almost all students used multiple criteria. "Resulting in change" and "impact today" were still popular choices, but they were now accompanied by a wide range of other reasons, such as its consequences being widespread or the event being unique. The increased variety in criteria used by different students highlighted their increased levels of agency, as they recognised the freedom they had to select from a range of criteria.

When students broadened the criteria they used, this also enabled them to separate personal attachments from historical significance. For their topic proposals, most students suggested a non-British topic, and in many cases, these topics reflected the personal heritage of the student. However, they used criteria rather than personal viewpoints to justify significance. For example, one student argued that Greece's rejection of fascism in the Second World War was significant because of the consequences it had for Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union. While her Greek heritage may have made her more familiar with the topic, it was not the justification for its inclusion; her arguments for its significance were rigorous and well-reasoned, supporting my hypothesis that when students generate and apply their own criteria for historical significance, they can exercise agency through the disciplinary practices of a historian, rather than in the superficial manner of expressing personal preference. Crucially, this

meant that the students could exercise agency in a way that made them more effective historians, rather than for agency's sake alone.

Whilst students were able to offer more nuanced and convincing judgements on historical significance by the end of the project, this was not consistent throughout. At the end of each unit, students were asked to evaluate the historical significance of the topic we had just studied in a written reflective exercise. At the end of the first unit, over half of the girls justified their evaluations with reasoned criteria, but at the end of the second unit, only nine had a convincing justification. In my journal, I reflected that this may have been because they did not take this exercise seriously; they knew that their topic proposals could lead to meaningful change, but they did not see the end of unit reflections as consequential, so their responses were often rushed.

Comprehensive Historical Knowledge is Crucial for Students to Effectively Evaluate Historical Significance and Exercise Agency

The girls recognised that a lack of historical knowledge could limit their ability to judge historical significance and limit their opportunities to exercise agency. I often asked students about the difference between historians and students of history to see if they recognised agency playing a role in the disciplinary practices of a historian. In one focus group, the girls explained that, while they were grateful for teacher guidance, it could inhibit agency as "a professional historian wouldn't have the same…I mean, I suppose *help*, but also in a way *limitations* of the way they interpret things." They particularly attributed this challenge to the historical sources that students were exposed to, with the group loudly agreeing with one girl who said that "we do all analyse the same sources so there are only so many different interpretations that a class of 26 people can have."

Seeing the constraints teachers can inadvertently place on student agency, and the fact that the girls were so aware of these limitations, highlighted the importance of signposting

where students can access information that goes beyond what we may cover in class. Nevertheless, the fact that students were able to recognise external constraints on their ability to complete tasks suggests that this intervention developed student agency and deepened girls' disciplinary understanding.

Conclusions

This study found that student engagement with the curriculum strengthened learner agency and that the concept of historical significance can be an effective tool that empowers girls to challenge orthodox models. Without using historical significance as an evaluative tool, students' ideas about curriculum changes were often introspective and weakly supported, highlighting that student voice alone does not increase agency; they must also be equipped with disciplinary skills and knowledge.

The process of curriculum design is largely shielded from students' view, and the results from the project reinforced my belief that drawing back the curtain on this process can benefit students enormously. If we want students to love and appreciate our subject, we must show them the structures, actors and cultures that have shaped our discipline into what it is today, so that students can see themselves as actors who can not only participate in but contribute to these evolving fields.

Increasing levels of student agency during the intervention changed my response to the final topic proposals. Initially, I had planned that students would submit proposals and then the History department would decide which topics to teach and then design the resources. However, I realised that to continue to strengthen agency, students should continue to be consulted in the curriculum design process, with teachers and students jointly deciding which of the proposed topics merited inclusion.

The limited time of the study meant that it ended with the submission of topic proposals, whereas ideally, I would have captured data all the way through to the first teaching of the new topics, gaining a more comprehensive sense of the role students can play in crafting their curriculum.

Reflection Statement

There have been numerous highlights during this process, but undoubtedly the biggest has been the opportunity to hear the outstanding ideas my Year 9 girls have about history. Reading their topic proposals was a truly moving experience, as they devoted themselves wholeheartedly to showing me the topics they are passionate and curious about, sharing their interests, quirks and cultures with me. I am grateful that the action research process gave me so many opportunities to listen to such a thoughtful group of girls.

The topics we choose to study in history continues to be a politically divisive issue, and this research process has made me believe even more passionately that students must be involved in this process if we hope to create authentic, inclusive curricula. This is particularly important in the context of girls' education; every academic discipline is a constantly evolving field, and girls must recognise that they are actors with agency who can and must contribute to these fields if we hope to keep driving research forward.

I owe enormous thanks to the ICGS and GARC community, in particular my research adviser Leanne Horwitz for her consistent support and guidance, and Debbie Hill for championing research in both GARC and the GDST. It has also been a privilege to spend the past two years working with my 2025 fellows, whose passion for girls' education never fails to inspire me.

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