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Who Are the Protagonists of History? Exploratory Study on Historical Relevance after Completing Compulsory Secondary Education in Spain

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Abstract: Which historical figures do Spanish students think are relevant after completing their compulsory schooling in the subject of history? The main objective of this research is to discover which four historical figures students choose as the most important in human history after completing their compulsory schooling, and the type of reasons they give to justify their answers. By means of a mixed study, this research involved asking 165 students, aged 16 to 17, which four figures they think are the most relevant in history and why. Based on this statement, a quantitative and qualitative analysis was conducted to explore the students' discourses justifying their choices using the categories proposed by Partington, Hunt and Lévesque. The results show a clear tendency in students to choose key figures in Spain's history, such as Christopher Columbus or Francisco Franco, or a prominent person, such as Adolf Hitler, as the most relevant historical figures, who appear in the curriculum in their last year of compulsory secondary education. Lastly, the argumentative approach regarding the level of historical significance focuses primarily on the impact of their actions on a large number of people during their historical moment, with no critical reflection on their long-term impact or consequences.

Keywords: historical relevance; education for democratic citizenship; historical narrative; historical thinking



Citation: Rivero, Pilar, Iñaki Navarro-Neri, and Borja Aso. 2022. Who Are the Protagonists of History? Exploratory Study on Historical Relevance after Completing Compulsory Secondary Education in Spain. *Social Sciences* 11: 175. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11040175>

Academic Editor: Alvaro Morote

Received: 3 March 2022

Accepted: 2 April 2022

Published: 11 April 2022

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1. Introduction

One of the main purposes of social science teaching is that, through the development of historical thinking skills, citizens can distinguish what is really relevant from what is irrelevant in the mid and long term, which is extremely important in a society as immediate and with such an overdose of information and fake news as ours is at the present time. This is why in teaching history, when its aim is to enable the exercise of responsible citizenship, exercises in reflection on historical relevance have been common in the English and Latin American context for some time now.

Completing an exercise that makes us consider which figures are historically relevant involves constructing our own historical narrative, which places us within the collective at the same time. This activity is not new; in fact, it is as old as the use of history as a means of constructing any collective identity throughout the ages.

As a first socialization space, school becomes the setting where students begin the exercise of constructing their own historical narrative to understand themselves and the world around them. However, now that we have mass media and culture has been democratized, school and family environments are no longer the only valid spaces for constructing a historical narrative.

Historical relevance is not merely concerned with how people and/or events are related in the past, but also with how these events and/or people relate to the present (Seixas 1998). As Seixas and Peck (2004) mention, historical significance and relevance involve an exercise of reflection on what must be remembered and why and consider a series of factors, such as how many people were affected, how long it lasted, and whether the reflection helps us understand the present (Lévesque 2008; Seixas and Morton 2012).

In other words, they are contents, processes, and a historiographical context that turn a mere event into a historical event (Cercadillo 2001). In short, historical relevance or significance is but a construct, since it is given when a certain figure, event, or process occupies a significant place in a historical narrative, which involves accepting that this relevance or significance given to someone, or something, varies depending on the temporal and social context (Seixas and Morton 2012).

The development of historical thinking, including reflection on historical significance, is an important line of work in the teaching of social sciences in Spain, linked to the work by Canadian researchers (Lévesque 2005, 2008; Seixas 1998, 2004, 2011; Seixas and Morton 2012), British researchers (Cooper and Chapman 2009), and American researchers (Barton 2011; VanSledright 2011, 2014; Wineburg 2001) with their postulates on meta-concepts or second-order concepts in history.

This is a consolidated line of research with a number of studies in the past 20 years focusing on what students consider historically relevant during their academic education, either in their first educational stages of primary and secondary school (Cercadillo 2002, 2004, 2006; Ibagón-Martín and Miralles 2021; Ortuño et al. 2016), or in their university education stage (Egea-Vivancos and Arias-Ferrer 2018; Rivero and Pelegrín 2019; Sáiz-Serrano and López-Facal 2015).

Learning to think historically, or what is known in Ibero-American teaching of social sciences as the development of historical thinking or historical literacy (Sáiz-Serrano and López-Facal 2014) “is a way of understanding history involving one’s own critical interpretation of past events, which in turn enables meaning to be given to these events” (Ortuño et al. 2016, p. 11).

To perform this exercise of reviewing and interpreting the past, Seixas and Morton (2012) developed six basic principles, i.e., meta-concepts: working with sources, continuity and change, cause and consequence, historical perspective, the moral dimension, and historical significance or relevance. These are six meta-concepts or second-order concepts that summarized the idea posited by multiple authors on the need for students to develop a series of skills beyond mere conceptual knowledge or learning by rote to enable them to interpret the past (Barca 2000; Clark 2011; Lévesque 2008; Peck and Seixas 2008).

Educating students historically, or developing their historical thinking, first involves accepting that this knowledge is neither natural nor intuitive, as it requires an ongoing educational process (Sáiz-Serrano and López-Facal 2015). Second, it encompasses the exercise of critically interpreting the past by exploring what is known as substantive or first-order knowledge, for example, historical figures, dates, concepts, and data (Lévesque 2008; VanSledright 2011; Wineburg 2001). When explored from an empirical perspective—thinking, reasoning, arguing, and writing about history—the exercise of critically interpreting the past also forms part of historical literacy (Monte-Sano 2010; Wineburg et al. 2013).

The concept of a historical narrative as a means to convey meanings is closely tied to the first forays of history as a scientific discipline (López-Rodríguez 2015, 2020). Its beginnings served the then incipient nation states throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a tool for constructing national identities (Berger 2007; Berger and Lorenz 2008; López and Márquez 2018; Lowenthal 1998; VanSledright 2008), replete with emotional and identity-related elements (Barton and Levstik 2004; Rösen 2005).

Narrative thinking is a basic mental operation that organizes and gives meaning to the historical past (Carretero and Atorresi 2008; Ricoeur 1987; Rösen 2005). When students are asked to write a summary, we can observe not only what they know but also how they represent and organize this knowledge (Sáiz-Serrano and Gómez-Carrasco 2016). As Rösen

(2005) says, narrative is an instrument for constructing historical consciousness, which is also replete with emotional and identity-related elements (Barton and Levstik 2004; Rüsen 2004).

Consequently, historical narrative is a vitally important tool for learning about history (Pagès and Santisteban 2010), since it facilitates the development of some of the skills typical of historical thinking, such as interpreting sources or causal and intentional explanations (Santisteban 2017).

The latest bibliometric analyses highlight the increase in empirical studies published in journals with a renowned impact (Chaparro Sainz et al. 2020; Gómez-Carrasco et al. 2019). Numerous lines of research have been opened on the development of historical thinking in the past two decades, such as historical significance or relevance (Arias-Ferrer and Egea-Vivancos 2019; Egea-Vivancos and Arias-Ferrer 2018), narrative competence (Sáiz-Serrano and López-Facal 2015; Sant et al. 2014), historical empathy (Calderón-López and Arias-Ferrer 2017; Carril-Merino et al. 2020; Molina-Puche and Egea 2018); and historical consciousness (Miguel-Revilla and Sánchez-Agustí 2018; Sáiz-Serrano and López-Facal 2014). These lines of research in Spain are in consonance with the numerous publications on history education in other countries, such as the works of Counsell et al. (2016), Carretero et al. (2017), Metzger and Harris (2018), Apostolidou and Solé (2019), or Solé and Gago (2021), among others.

Also worth highlighting are studies on the potential of several didactic tools for developing historical thinking, such as the use of textbooks (Gómez-Carrasco et al. 2019), new technologies (Colomer et al. 2018), social media (Navarro-Neri et al. 2021) or the link between heritage and teaching history (Egea-Vivancos and Arias-Ferrer 2018; Egea-Vivancos et al. 2018; Rivero et al. 2018).

This study is, therefore, part of the line of research found in several countries in recent years on the development of historical thinking in students by authors including Barton and Levstik (2004), Lévesque (2005), Phillips (2002), Barca and Schmidt (2013), Sung (2020), and Alvé (2021), and in Spain by Cercadillo (2001, 2006), Rivero and Pelegrín (2019), Arias-Ferrer et al. (2019), Ibagón-Martín and Miralles (2021), Ibagón-Martín et al. (2021), among others.

Based on theoretical references and the aforementioned studies, this research uses mixed analysis to learn which figures students choose and the level of historical significance they bestow to justify that choice. The aim of this study is to consolidate the line of research referring to the development of historical thinking in students and it contributes a specific qualitative approach, such as the use of the criteria established by Partington (1980), Hunt (2000), and Lévesque (2008).

Considering all the above, the aim of this research is to explore which historical figures students believe are relevant after completing their compulsory schooling, and which approach they use for historical significance when justifying their answer. Therefore, in order to fulfil the aim of this investigation, the research questions structuring this study are: Which figures do Spanish students think are historically relevant after completing their compulsory schooling? Which approach, referring to the level of historical significance (Hunt 2000; Lévesque 2008; Partington 1980), do they use to justify their answer?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Sample

To answer this research questions, we used the responses of $n = 165$ students aged 16 to 17 who agreed to reply to the questionnaire anonymously. The questionnaire was completed at the start of the academic year after they had completed all their compulsory schooling years in Spain. As the number of boys and girls was similar (80 boys and 85 girls), and there was no significant difference in the answers to the questionnaire, the students were taken as a single group ($n = 165$). All participants were informed about the research following the general recommendations of the ethics committees.

2.2. Questionnaire and Method

The information was collected using an ad hoc-designed questionnaire for anonymous completion by the students during an estimated time of 20 min. The aim was for them to reflect on the following statement and write their answer:

Choose four historical figures you think are very important and answer these questions: What did this historical figure do? Why is he/she important for you? Reflect on whether he/she affected many people, caused a significant change in people's lives, had consequences that extended over a period, serves to make us realize something important, etc.

Previously, the researchers tested one class in each of the schools participating in the study, with 50 students in total. Both schools are located in neighborhoods characterized by sociocultural diversity with a considerable number of immigrant families, mostly from Latin America and North Africa, together with families from Eastern Europe. The schools participating in the research are representative of the city where the study was made.

As a result of this pilot test, the researchers changed two points: First, the number of characters to be provided by each participant was reduced, because it was found that the last answers were left blank, or the explanations were too short. Second, the researchers included a reminder of what each category of analysis consisted of in the design, because it was observed that in many cases, especially with regard to the last answers, there were explanations and evaluations that dealt with issues far removed from the main topic. The tests were administered by the same teachers who subsequently collected the data for the study, and they did so a year before the data collection that constitutes the research. The information collection instrument was previously validated by 10 researchers in education who suggested adjustments concerning the fulfilment of ethical criteria in the research.

This research used a mixed method (Tasshakori et al. 2021). It complements the quantitative and qualitative approaches already advocated for in the teaching of social sciences by authors, such as Grant (2001), Barca (2005), Barca and Schmidt (2013), Barton (2005), Sáiz-Serrano and López-Facal (2014), or Solé and Gago (2021), among others.

The qualitative analysis was performed using a categorization system based on the proposals made about historical significance by Partington (1980), Lévesque (2008), and Hunt (2000), that is, talking about an approach centered on importance when the argument focuses on the figures' value in their era; using an approach based on profundity to refer to the impact (superficial or deep) the figures had in their era; an approach centered on durability to talk about whether the figures and their actions have permanence over time; an approach mainly focusing on highlighting the number of people impacted by the figures in question; and, lastly, an approach based on the chosen figures' relevance, i.e., on the value he/she currently has or is given. This categorization is the most common in research and teaching proposals in the Anglo-Saxon sphere, as can be seen in the work proposals on historical relevance proposed by the Canadian research group Historical Thinking Project (Center of Historical Thinking Consciousness 2016).

The results and the statistical summary of this research was constructed using instruments provided by the IBM SPSS STATISTICS 26 for Windows. In the end, to make the statistical analysis more agile, historical figures that were not mentioned by at least 5% of the students were disregarded as analysis units.

3. Results

3.1. Which Historical Figures Do Students Think Are the Most Important after Completing Their Compulsory Schooling?

The first datapoint worth highlighting is that out of the 165 students participating in the study and replying with at least one historical figure (600 responses in total), 121 different figures were counted, out of which only 15 were mentioned by over 5% of the students (Table 1).

Table 1. Which figures do students think are historically relevant after completing their compulsory schooling?

Answers							
Historical Figure	<i>n</i>	Percentage	Percentage of Cases	Historical Figure	<i>n</i>	Percentage	Percentage of Cases
Adolf Hitler	100	15.0%	60%	Benito Mussolini	11	1.8%	7.3%
Christopher Columbus	88	13.8%	55.3%	Miguel de Cervantes	10	1.7%	6.7%
Francisco Franco	38	6.3%	25.3%	Socrates	10	1.7%	6.7%
Napoleon	32	5.3%	21.3%	Clara Campoamor	9	1.5%	6%
Isaac Newton	20	3.3%	13.3%	Catholic Monarchs	9	1.5%	6%
Albert Einstein	18	3.0%	12%	Karl Marx	9	1.5%	6%
Stalin	13	2.2%	8.7%	Gandhi	8	1.3%	5.3%
Marie Curie	12	2.0%	8%	TOTAL:	600	100%	400%

As can be seen in Table 1, two historical figures stand out from the others, as they were mentioned by over 50% of the students: Adolf Hitler (60%) and Christopher Columbus (55.3%). Far behind these percentages are choices including Francisco Franco (25.3%) and Napoleon (21.3%). Only two more figures exceed 10%: Isaac Newton (13.3%) and Albert Einstein (12%).

The first aspect of note is that the most repeated options seem to fall into one of two thematic categories: contemporary history (e.g., Adolf Hitler, Napoleon, Stalin, and Mussolini) or Spanish history (Christopher Columbus, Francisco Franco, Miguel de Cervantes, Clara Campoamor, and the Catholic Monarchs). The third thematic category encompassing a larger number of historical figures is science (Isaac Newton, Albert Einstein, and Marie Curie).

A possible explanation for these categories is that they are the last subjects students take before completing their compulsory schooling, since in Spain students in the fourth and final year of compulsory secondary education only work on contemporary universal history. Furthermore, in the first year of the Spanish baccalaureate, the students participating in this research studied the subject of scientific culture, which explains the continuous appearance of essential figures in the history of science, such as the ones mentioned above.

An in-depth analysis of the results reveals who is the students' first choice when selecting a historically relevant figure (Table 2).

Table 2. First historical figure chosen by students.

Historical Figure 1			
Figure	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage
Christopher Columbus	39	23.6%	23.6%
Adolf Hitler	37	22.4%	22.4%
Francisco Franco	13	7.9%	7.9%
Napoleon	8	4.8%	4.8%
Clara Campoamor	5	3.0%	3.0%
Isaac Newton	5	3.0%	3.0%
Total	165	100.0%	100.0%

In this case, we can observe that figures "belonging" to Spanish history appear in the first five options, namely Christopher Columbus (23.6%), Francisco Franco (7.9%), and

Clara Campoamor (3%). The other two most-chosen people as the first option are Adolf Hitler with 22.4% and Napoleon with 4.8%, key figures in contemporary universal history.

Last, we have produced a summary with the most chosen options by the students in second, third, and fourth place. For a faster analysis, we have only included figures that were mentioned more than five times (at least 3%) in the summary table (Table 3).

Table 3. Figures most chosen in second, third, and fourth place.

Historical Figure 2				Historical Figure 3				Historical Figure 4			
Name	<i>n</i>	%	V *.%	Name	<i>n</i>	%	V.%	Name	<i>n</i>	%	V.%
Adolf Hitler	33	20.0	20.1	Christopher Columbus	19	11.5	11.9	Adolf Hitler	11	6.7	7.3
Christopher Columbus	23	13.9	14.0	Adolf Hitler	19	11.5	11.9	Marie Curie	8	4.8	5.3
Francisco Franco	8	4.8	4.9	Francisco Franco	13	7.9	8.1	Christopher Columbus	7	4.2	4.7
Isaac Newton	7	4.2	4.3	Napoleon	13	7.9	8.1	Stalin	7	4.2	4.7
Napoleon	7	4.2	4.3	Isaac Newton	6	3.6	3.8	Albert Einstein	7	4.2	4.7
Albert Einstein	6	3.6	3.7	Albert Einstein	5	3.0	3.1	Napoleon	7	4.2	4.7
Karl Marx	5	3.0	3.0	Socrates	5	3.0	3.1	Miguel de Cervantes	5	3.0	3.3
								Francisco Franco	5	3.0	3.3
								Benito Mussolini	5	3.0	3.3
Total	164	99.4	100	Total	160	97	100	Total	150	90.9	100
System losses	1	0.6			5	3			15	9.1	
Total	165	100			165	100			165	100	

* Valid percentage.

As in the previous case, the most chosen figures were Adolf Hitler and Christopher Columbus, followed by Francisco Franco, Isaac Newton, and Marie Curie. Again, except for Christopher Columbus, the students opted for figures related to the subjects they had recently studied, namely contemporary history in the last year of compulsory schooling, and scientific culture, a subject they had just begun studying when the research was conducted in their first year of the Spanish baccalaureate.

3.2. Referring to the Level of Historical Significance, Which Approach Do Students Choose to Justify Their Answer?

In the second part of this study, we wanted to analyze which approach, with reference to the level of historical significance (Hunt 2000; Lévesque 2008; Partington 1980), students select to justify their choice (Table 4).

Table 4. Historical significance chosen by the students to justify their answer.

Category	Historical Significance Frequencies						
	Answers		Percentage of Cases	Category	Answers		Percentage of Cases
	<i>n</i>	%			<i>n</i>	%	
Importance	229	39.2%	156.8%	Quantity	88	15.1%	60.3%
Profundity	150	25.7%	102.7%	Durability	22	3.8%	15.1%
Relevance	95	16.3%	65.1%	TOTAL:	584	100%	400%

The first striking aspect of the overall results is the predominance of the justification focused on highlighting the historical figures' importance in their era (39.2%) with justifications such as: "he was the most important figure of his era" (Student 79, age 16) referring to Adolf Hitler, "he was the most important emperor of his time" (Student 140, age 17)

referring to Napoleon or “he was a very important dictator in his country and for the whole of Europe” (Student 24, age 16) referring to Stalin.

The second type of justification most used by the students is the one in which the profundity category predominates, emphasizing that the figure in question caused a change in the society at that time (25.7%). As can be seen in Table 5, this is the reasoning most used to talk about Christopher Columbus with explanations including: “Thanks to him America was discovered and changed the map because, until then, it was believed that there was nothing between Asia and Europe” (Student 2, age 16) or “After discovering America, Spain became the first world power thanks to the gold and silver of Peru” (Student 33, age 17). It is also interesting to note how, in the field of science, arguments referring to profundity and durability are the most used with explanations including: “Thanks to his scientific theory, many others were later developed” (Student 98, age 17) to refer to Isaac Newton or “Thanks to his discovery, today we can do X-ray tests outside the hospital” (Student 105, age 16) to refer to Marie Curie.

Table 5. Most mentioned figures and the level of historical significance chosen.

Historical Figure		Categories					Total
		Importance	Profundity	Durability	Quantity	Relevance	
Adolf Hitler	Count	42	28	10	78	30	188
	%	22.5%	14.9%	5.5%	41.5%	15.6%	
Christopher Columbus	Count	24	42	1	5	16	88
	%	27.3%	47.7%	1.1%	5.7%	18.2%	
Francisco Franco	Count	13	9	0	11	5	38
	%	35.1%	24.3%	0%	29.7%	10.8%	
Napoleon	Count	24	3	0	3	2	32
	%	76.5%	8.8%	0%	8.8%	5.9%	
Isaac Newton	Count	6	8	1	0	5	20
	%	31.8%	36.4%	4.5%	0%	27.3%	
Albert Einstein	Count	6	3	1	2	6	18
	%	30%	25%	5%	10%	30%	
Stalin	Count	7	2	0	3	1	13
	%	53.8%	15.4%	0%	23.1%	7.7%	
Marie Curie	Count	3	4	1	2	2	12
	%	25%	33.3%	8.3%	16.7%	16.7%	
Benito Mussolini	Count	6	0	0	3	3	12
	%	50%	0%	0%	25%	25%	
Miguel de Cervantes	Count	4	1	1	0	4	10
	%	40%	10%	10%	0%	40%	
Socrates	Count	8	0	1	0	1	10
	%	80%	0%	10%	0%	10%	
Karl Marx	Count	6	0	0	0	3	9
	%	66.7%	0%	0%	0%	33.3%	
Clara Campoamor	Count	2	2	0	1	4	9
	%	22.2%	22.2%	0%	11.1%	44.4%	
Catholic Monarchs	Count	5	1	0	2	1	9
	%	55.6%	11.1%	0%	22.2%	11.1%	
Gandhi	Count	4	1	1	1	0	7
	%	57.1%	14.3%	14.3%	14.3%	0%	

Far behind these percentages, the students used the relevance category to underscore the historical figures' influence on the present (16.3%). For example, we find explanations including "it was very important because today there are still Jews looking for their relatives who were murdered during the Holocaust" (Student 29, age 17) to refer to Adolf Hitler. With similar percentages, the quantity category was also used to highlight the number of people affected by the chosen historical figure (15.1%). Finally, the least used category by the students was durability, which allows us to question whether meta-concepts or second-order concepts, such as continuity and change or historical time, are being worked on in the classroom (3.8%).

Lastly, we analyzed the approach to the level of historical significance selected by the students in the case of the most chosen historical figures (Table 5). In this case, only those figures mentioned by at least 5% of the students are shown in the summary table.

The results show the preeminence of significance referring to the figures importance in their era, above other approaches. However, in the case of the figure of Adolf Hitler, 41.5% of the responses emphasized the number of people that were affected by his actions, primarily because of the Holocaust and the casualties of the Second World War: "He was the person who did the Holocaust, he killed millions of Jews" (Student 39, age 17) or "It was because of him that the Second World War started, in which almost every country in the world except Spain took part" (Student 8, age 16).

In the case of Christopher Columbus, the approach most used was profundity (47.7%), highlighting the change the era involved and not the number of people impacted or, given that the students are Spanish, the repercussions he has had on the present, for example linguistically and culturally: "His discovery changed the map of the world to the way we see it today" (student 10, age 17) or "Thanks to him Christianity spread all over the world" (student 134, age 16). This also implies scant reflection on the consequences of colonialism, despite there being a significant percentage of students whose families come from Latin America.

In the case of political figures, such as Francisco Franco, Napoleon, Stalin, Mussolini, and the Catholic Monarchs, the predominant approach refers to the importance they had in their era (35.1%, 76.5%, 53.8%, 50% and 55.6%, respectively) with explanations including "they were the most important kings in Europe in their time" (Student 66, age 16) or "They were important because they believed in the idea of Christopher Columbus and thanks to this it was possible to discover America" (Student 32, age 16) to refer to the Catholic kings or "Among the dictators in Europe in those years, he was the most powerful, that's why he was called the Duce" (Student 113, age 17) to refer to Mussolini, and not so much their repercussion, the number of people affected or their significance in the present.

It is also interesting to note that for the scientific figures (Isaac Newton, Albert Einstein, and Marie Curie), the most-used argument refers to the change their scientific contribution brought in their era (36.4% in the case of Newton and 33.3% in the case of Marie Curie) and not so much to current scientific research, as is the case with Albert Einstein (30% of the arguments use the relevance of this figure in the present as the predominant approach).

In short, although in the figures most mentioned by students we can observe the predominant use of arguments extolling the importance of these figures in their era, the use of the other categories is significant, which enables us to emphasize that the teaching is heterogeneous as there is no single discursive or didactic approach.

4. Discussion

As mentioned in the results section, the historical figures chosen by the students have been grouped into three thematic categories: contemporary history, Spanish history, and figures belonging to the scientific field. The incipient number of relatively similar research studies on the teaching of social sciences has not only enabled us to establish some comparisons between their results but also to add new aspects to the debate.

One of the most recent studies on which figures students think are historically relevant was conducted by [Ibagón-Martín and Miralles \(2021\)](#). They asked a sample of over

700 Colombian students aged 15 to 17 to choose the five most important figures in Colombia's history. In summary, the results show that four out of the five most repeated figures are men belonging to the political sphere (Simón Bolívar, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, Christopher Columbus, and Gabriel García Márquez). This choice of men partly coincides with the results of this study, in which the figure of Adolf Hitler was the most chosen, alongside others that can be classified as belonging to the political sphere, such as Francisco Franco and Napoleon. The Ibero-American cultural connection is obvious in the figure of Christopher Columbus since he appears as one of the most chosen in both studies.

Curiously, the figure appearing as the most repeated fourth choice is Policarpa Salavarrieta, considered a heroine during the independence process of Colombia due to her role as a spy. Consequently, we can speculate whether, for example, the figure of Clara Campoamor (chosen by 6% of the sample) would have been chosen by more students if we had asked about the most important figures in the history of Spain.

We also compared the results of our research with another recently published study conducted by [Ibagón-Martín et al. \(2021\)](#). They asked students aged 15 to 16 in Murcia (Spain) who they think are the five most relevant figures in the history of their country. Furthermore, the research sample they obtained enabled them to compare the answers given by Spanish students and students from Latin America, Asia, Africa, and other countries in Europe.

In the case of the Spanish students, the most mentioned figures were Francisco Franco, Christopher Columbus, and the Catholic Monarchs. Again, as in the research with Colombian students, the most chosen figures belong to the political sphere and are mainly male. Furthermore, out of the top twenty figures chosen, only two women are mentioned: Isabella I of Castile and Isabella II, if we view the Catholic Monarchs as an institution and not as a man and a woman. These are quite similar results to the ones obtained in our study, since the most mentioned female figures are Marie Curie and Clara Campoamor (Table 1).

The study by [Ibagón-Martín et al. \(2021\)](#) also highlights how immigrant students gradually transform their national "native" identity to the "converted" one as the number of years they reside in Spain increases. As a result, students from Latin America, Africa, and Eastern Europe who have lived in Spain for fewer years tend to choose figures related to their native country's independence processes, while students with more years of residence in Spain (10 to 15 years) choose figures such as Christopher Columbus, Francisco Franco, and Isabella of Castile (315–316).

Although this study uses a relatively small sample that does not lend itself to generalization ($n = 56$), both these results and the ones obtained in our research force us to reflect on the type of historical discourse occurring in classrooms from preschool to the end of compulsory secondary education, since the most recurrent choices are a discoverer (Christopher Columbus), a dictator (Francisco Franco), and a king and queen (the Catholic Monarchs). As far as possible, future research should focus on the type of discourse and activities Spanish teachers use when covering the history of Spain. It could prove extremely interesting to analyze their discourses using the narrative approaches proposed by [Rüsen \(2005\)](#), for example.

The fact that three of the four most chosen figures (Adolf Hitler, Francisco Franco, and Napoleon) are classified as belonging to the political sphere can be understood, at least in part, as a result of the design of the geography and history curricula in compulsory secondary education and also of the interpretation of them in the textbooks published by the main publishing houses, which still lean towards political and factual history. The statements in the content blocks and, above all, the assessment criteria laid down by both the state and the autonomous communities, present few examples of approaching social history ([Sáiz-Serrano 2013](#)). As mentioned above, the choices mostly refer to figures in the political-war sphere coinciding, for example, with the main topics chosen by Brazilian and Portuguese students in the research by [Barca and Schmidt \(2013\)](#) to address world history being the First and Second World War, totalitarian regimes, and so on.

The results are quite similar to those obtained by Apostolidou and Solé in their study with Greek and Portuguese trainee teachers, who mostly pointed to contemporary history and discoveries as the most important subjects to be imparted at school to students received as a result of migration processes (Apostolidou and Solé 2019). Also, this preponderance of characters or events of a warlike nature can be observed in the preferences when talking about Canadian history among Canadian students, who pointed to the First World War as the main event in their country's history (Lévesque 2005).

The appearance of several figures belonging to the sphere of science, such as Isaac Newton, Albert Einstein, and Marie Curie (the fifth, sixth, and eighth figures most chosen by the students), is possibly explained by the context of the students answering this questionnaire, since they were studying the subject of scientific culture when they answered the questions and, in the case of the mentioned women scientists, also because of the stimulus provided by the celebration of Women in Science Day every 11 February, which leads teachers to develop educational activities based on this celebration (Arнау et al. 2019). This is a subject in which students may experience a learning process known as romantic understanding (Egan 1997), characterized by idealizing people, and in this case, scientific figures. It turns these researchers into a kind of legend, heroes who transformed the society of their day with their skills (Hadzigeorgiou and Schulz 2019).

If we compare the results of our research with those obtained in other studies conducted in university contexts, for example the study of 660 narratives produced by university students taking a degree in preschool teacher training (Rivero and Pelegrín 2019), we can again see the predominance of Christopher Columbus (the figure chosen most frequently to write a historical account), mostly justified with arguments about how relevant the figure is today due to the transformation brought about by his arrival in America. This is reasoning in which students aged approximately 19 to 23 are capable of relating a historical figure with the present; the students aged 16 to 17 in our research sample, however, mostly identify the historical relevance of Christopher Columbus only with the change he effected during his era without considering his impact and permanence in the present.

Following the results outlined in the previous paragraph, it is striking that the topic most chosen for historical narratives produced by university students in the study (Rivero and Pelegrín 2019) covers scientific advances, inventions, and discoveries. According to these authors, this choice results from the relationship between the fascination shown for a scientist's or researcher's work and the profundity of the changes of their advances for their contemporaries and the present day (112). It can also be understood as a consequence of the content and focus of the compulsory subject of scientific culture studied in the first year of the Spanish baccalaureate in the autonomous community where both this study and the one by Rivero and Pelegrín were conducted, although as it took place at the start of the academic year, the influence of the contents covered in this subject should not yet prove significant.

Therefore, in the study by Rivero and Pelegrín (2019) the most chosen topic is scientific advances, inventions, and discoveries, with reasoning based on the profundity of the changes these advances and discoveries caused, coinciding with some of the results obtained in this research. Table 1 shows that figures including Isaac Newton, Albert Einstein, and Marie Curie are chosen by a considerable percentage of the sample (13.3%, 12%, and 8%, respectively) with a similar justification (Table 1), primarily based on the novelty value of these scientific approaches or advances during their era, without considering their long-term significance or consequences. However, there is a considerable difference between the study by Rivero and Pelegrín (2019) and this one, since the selection of figures from the world of science in the previous research is based primarily on technical and technological advances and on inventions, and, therefore, the selection of scientists focuses on scientific contributions leading to profound and prolonged changes over time (for example, electricity, aircraft, and telecommunications). In contrast, in this research, the students chose scientists based on their contribution to the history of science and, consequently,

their historical relevance focuses on their own historical context and not on the change this involves for the future.

5. Conclusions

To sum up, the results of the research questions we asked—Which figures do Spanish students think are historically relevant after completing their compulsory schooling? Which approach, referring to the level of historical significance, do they use to justify their answer?—allow us to confirm, bearing in mind that we are talking about a concrete sample in a specific local context, that after completing their compulsory secondary education, students choose people they have studied a short while previously as historically relevant figures; in this case, they are figures from contemporary universal history, the history of Spain, and the history of science. Furthermore, when reasoning their response, the approach to the figure's historical significance tends to be assessed only in the context in which the person chosen lived, either due to their importance during that era or due to the change they evoked in their contemporaries. In general, reflection is still needed on change and permanence, on the consequences for society of the actions performed by historical figures considered relevant and on the change these actions or contributions introduced. The students do not understand the significance of the events or phenomena they set in motion beyond their historical moment. Their reasons do not provide a justification reflecting an analysis from a historical perspective, despite having completed their compulsory schooling. Furthermore, in the case of scientific figures, they frequently mention them without managing to explain their contribution or say what their discoveries mean for science and the lives of human beings, particularly in the cases of Newton and Einstein.

Both this research's results and the responses obtained by the other studies mentioned in this article show that, although teaching proposals and epistemological reflections on the development of historical thinking in students, teachers, and trainee teachers are becoming increasingly numerous, the responses continue to be mostly and primarily male figures related to the political sphere, who, according to the students, stand out due to their importance or the impact they had during their era. The influence of a curricular tradition with a gender bias could still be driving this difference, in the same way as the predominance of politics compared with protagonists of history that have performed an action in a more social sphere or one linked to the fight for social rights.

If the appearance in our study of female figures, such as Clara Campoamor or Marie Curie, is understood from new and necessary perspectives of approaching history, such as the conquest of political and social rights by women during the first wave of feminism or the institutionalized vindication, such as the day of women scientists, it is worth asking what new female figures and reasoning will appear if this type of initiative increases with the third wave of feminism or the visibility of women in the history of art.

In other words, the responses obtained in this research demonstrate a development of historical thinking that is still far removed from "learning to think historically" (Lévesque 2008). This not only demonstrates that second-order concepts are known, put into practice, and showcased (for instance, the use of sources, historical empathy, and continuity and change), but it also "breaks" with traditional discourses on forming national identity as a result of political milestones and the predominance of military conflicts, with a focus on history that is barely social and in which men generally take center stage. The inclusion of relevant figures in the world of science and a woman known for fighting for political rights marks an incipient change in the trend; however, critical reflection needs to be fostered in classrooms on the principle of agency in history and the continuity and change influencing the actions of historical figures and social groups over time.

6. Limits and Prospective

There is no doubt that this research, as an exploratory study, presents a certain number of limitations that must be considered, such as, for example, the fact that it is a considerable sample but not large enough to cover a greater number of different educational contexts

that would allow us to obtain a more complete image. Also, although we know the official curriculum applied by teachers in the schools where the research was done, we do not know if the methodology used by the teachers may have conditioned the students' responses or if, on the contrary, the previous beliefs that emerged from their homes or peer group prevailed.

However, it is precisely because this is an exploratory study that the directions of future research or the future questions to be answered are highly attractive, for example: when choosing and arguing about the chosen character, does the student's previous beliefs or the teachers' instruction have more impact? Or, for example, does the mark a student usually obtains in the history subject have an influence on the choice and argumentation of his or her answer, and does it make a difference whether the student has more or less affinity with the subject? All these questions and other lines of research are part of the lines of work that [Research group -anonymous-] research group has been working on for some years and whose advances will be published in the future.

Author Contributions: Research designed by I.N.-N., B.A. and P.R.; Conceptualization, I.N.-N. and P.R.; methodology, I.N.-N., B.A. and P.R.; formal analysis: I.N.-N.; data curation, B.A.; writing-original draft preparation, I.N.-N. and P.R.; writing review and editing, P.R. and B.A., P.R.; project administration, P.R.; and funding acquisition, P.R. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by the project PID2020 -115288RB-I00: Competencias digitales, procesos de aprendizaje y toma de conciencia sobre el patrimonio cultural: Educación de calidad para ciudades y comunidades sostenibles MINECO/AEI-FEDER and the research group S50_20R ARGOS (Gobierno de Aragón).

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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