

# Adolescents and family history: Memories, testimonies, narratives, and perspectives

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## Abstract

This paper discusses how family history can be selected, read, and utilised in historical education to cultivate historical thinking among pupils aged between 16 and 18 years of age. The research derives its epistemological basis from the theories of memory and history, oral and family history, theory of historical consciousness, and historical thinking. Family history was used as a bridge that connects the past with the present.

The research was carried out within the context of four family history action research projects. The narratives which were selected by pupils were analysed by the teacher/researcher, based on how the pupils orientated their lives toward the past, present, and future. From the family stories of the pupils, individual acts of heroism and acts of life were highlighted within a wider indefinite historical context. The narration of these stories within the school environment raised a variety of questions about their historical context and second-order concepts, such as change through time, significance, causes, and consequences. The multiple phases of the activities as well as the exploratory tasks carried out, contributed to the realisation that living memory requires meaningful reading by the pupils, a critical approach, and the synthesising of their individual and collective pasts. Reflection during each phase of the research, more so at the end of the activities, highlighted teaching practices through which family memories can be used in the learning process, encouraging continuous and two-way interaction of individual and collective consciousness.

**Keywords:** Life stories; Family history; Memory; Historical consciousness; Historical thinking; Teaching activities.

## Introduction: memory, history, oral, and family history

During the final four decades of the 20th century, ‘modern’ and ‘postmodern’ approaches in historiography resulted in a more critical view of history, the role of the historian and consequently of historical education and teaching. With the prevalence of the New History movement of the 1970s there was a shift in the study of the topic to emphasise the conditions and everyday lives of people in historical focus, including socially excluded groups, such as women and ethnic minorities (Iggers, 1999). Echoes of these changes are present in the teaching of history today, including a variety of historical narratives, such as “local history ‘history from below’, oral history, personal and family history, gender and history” (Repoussi, 2004: 281–282).

The purpose of this paper is to explore how family history could be selected, read, and utilised in historical education to cultivate historical thinking. For that reason, it is necessary to understand the characteristics of both family memories and family history.

Researchers have shown how people are interested in their past in contemporary contexts (Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998; Ashton & Hamilton & Paul, 2010; Clark, 2014). A literature review for this study shed light on how people interpret the past through memory and how memories are reconstructions of the past. Memory studies have focused on how the past is accessible. Noiret (2015) suggests that individual and collective memories consist of parts of the past that are active in the present, while Halbwachs (1992) argues that individual memory is not shaped in isolation, but through interactions with other people and by collective memory. Halbwachs also refers to family memories as constructed narratives that contain general attitudes and values of life in space and time, transmitted from generation to generation. Hence, the family is the first memory community for everyone, one that determines our autobiographical memory (Green, 2013: 2018).

Access to family memories is achieved through the oral history method. Oral history research allows the lived experience of social groups, who for years have coexisted but not interacted with their history — a lived experience that offers a different reading of the past to that which is officially available (Passerini, 1998; Abrams, 2010). According to Thompson (2000), one of the advantages of oral history is that it helps express the original plurality of views among everyday people, as a new meaningful reading by the pupils, in the synthesis of their individual and collective pasts. Reflection during each phase of the research, particularly at the end of the activities, highlighted teaching practices through which family memories can be used in the learning process, to encourage continuous and two-way interaction of individual and collective consciousness.

Critical reading of oral history and by extension family history, compared with other sources, mostly written, is beneficial (Repoussi, 2004; Apostolidou, 2016). In some cases, controversial points in the written sources are made clear while in other cases the different manifestations and complexities of the historical context of a period are highlighted. In the second phase of oral history (Apostolidou, 2016) a rich subjectivity emerged as the main characteristic of the approach. Green (2018) argues that although family history as oral history has drawn criticism from scholars regarding its use as a historical source in research due to its subjective nature, this limitation also highlights its potential -- especially in how subjectivity relates to the conscious choices of differentiation from the collective identity. These are of particular interest to the contemporary oral and family researcher. The study of personal and family past presents many meaningful possibilities if we are to familiarise pupils with the processes of historical inquiry -- a goal of any modern approach that seeks to cultivate the pupils' historical thinking (Counsell, Burn, & Chapman, 2016).

However, family memories also come with limitations. Memory and history are differentiated, as Liakos states:

*The gaze of history is not the gaze of memory. The former is the public gaze. The latter is multiple, partial and particular. The discourse of history is neutral, it must create safe distances between us and then. The discourse of memory must be direct. History sets events against their context in order to understand them. History must explain, but the discourse of history, by explaining memory, relativizes experience. Memory and history claim the past, each in their own way (2015: 39).*

On the other hand, according to Repoussi (2000: 12), among other things, family history brings out the emotion in the approach to the historical past, an approach that is far from the concept of history and closer to that of memory. However, emotion is not irrelevant to the past in the context of public history, narratives about the past can be overly dominated by emotions (Liakos, 2015), adding further reservations about the use of family history (Repoussi, 2000).

Repoussi (2000) stresses that along with the risks of dealing with family history, the emergence of traumatic and difficult experiences may prove challenging for the teacher to manage in the classroom. Sensitive issues related to the variable forms of the family may add to the difficulties faced by teachers. Despite these issues, Repoussi (2000) sets out several specific objectives that can be realised within the context of engagement with family history, especially in local history programmes.

## Reading and utilising family history in education

How can family history be read in education and how can it be used in this context? Ricoeur (2009) proposed processing memory through its historicization. The current research derives its epistemological foundation from the theories of historical consciousness and especially those of Green (2018), who linked intergenerational family memory with the theory of historical consciousness. For Rüsen (1987), historical consciousness is a general category that is not only related to teaching and learning in history, however, also covers all forms of thinking about the past. In other words, historical consciousness mediates our relationship with the past, as it is through historical consciousness that the individual encounters the past and interprets it as history (Rüsen, 2005). It includes all mental processes through which the past is used as a means of orientating the present and the future, thereafter, interpreted to understand the present and establish expectations for the future (Rüsen, 2005). To understand this concept, Rüsen proposes a multi-layered scheme of dimensions and distinctions (Rüsen, 2005; Seixas, 2006; Apostolidou, 2006) as follows:

- Different levels of consciousness and awareness.
- Different dimensions (political, cognitive, rhetorical, and aesthetic).
- Different modes of articulation than usual and in more complex ways.
- Different places of meaning.

Four types of historical consciousness that express the respective ways of historical meaning-making:

- The traditional, in which there is no distinction between the past and history and where the past is treated as a set of events and interpretations that automatically make sense and function normatively for the present.
- The paradigmatic, in which paradigmatic historical phenomena are sought that form timeless rules and universal laws that apply both in the present and for the future.
- The critic, in which the paradigmatic character of history and the dominant values are questioned, and where space is created for rival narratives.
- The genetic, where the inevitability of change is the determinant, which itself produces historical meaning.

In using family history to cultivate historical thinking in history education, the current study is based on the disciplinary approach, along with second-order concepts, including evidence, historical significance, cause and consequence, continuity and change, historical perspectives, and the ethical dimension (Seixas 2010; Seixas & Morton, 2012). Recent

studies utilising family history in education and reported on in the journal *Teaching History*, include those by Edwards (2006); Johansen and Spafford (2009); Barret (2011); Mohamud and Whitburn (2014); Priggs (2020); Vlachaki and Kouser (2020); and Toettcher and West (2021). All the afore-mentioned studies highlight the advantages of using autobiographical memory in education, but also its limitations, particularly partial and selective reconstructions of the past in the present. Barret (2011) argues that the use of family history in lessons can be useful when specific activities and teaching practices directly address historical concepts such as the significance of historical events experienced by the relatives of pupils in relation to their own lives in the present. Moreover, other researchers (Vlachaki & Kouser, 2020) argue that family history can be the trigger for exploring the past and its repositioning by looking back from the personal to the collective and from the local to the global.

The use of family history was gradually implemented during an action research programme over the past four years with a total of four scenarios presented in various humanities courses.

## **Research design and methodology**

### ***Goals***

The current research aimed to assess the possibilities and limitations of using the exploration of individual family narratives within the formal context of history education. The objectives were to answer the following specific questions.

- a) How do secondary school pupils use the individual stories of their relatives as a means for orientating their lives in the present and the future?
- b) How can this orientation be critically used in educational terms?

### ***Research tools***

Three methods were used to collect data. The first was based on semi-structured interviews during which pupils selected testimonies from their family histories. The second involved observation by the teacher of the pupil's interaction in the classroom during dialogue. And thirdly, each pupil kept a logbook to record their own observations.

### ***Methodological framework***

The investigations and the narrations of their family histories were carried out by groups of pupils between the ages of 16 and 18. The purpose was to assess the possibilities and

limitations of using these narratives within the context of formal history education. Action research was chosen as the methodological framework. Its implementation included specific procedures such as action, observation, and self-reflection, leading to further discussion and thereafter changes and improvements in teaching practices. Of the three main approaches of action research of the Habermas paradigm (the technical, the empirical, and the practical), we opted for the latter, the practical. This approach is scientifically based on the interpretative example and aims to develop practical knowledge and education theory through the processes followed (Creswell, 2011).

### *The sample*

During the past four school years, four separate family history projects were carried out as part of the humanities courses.<sup>1</sup> Family history was used during the 2018–19 school year as a first-grade project in modern Greek language and literature. A total of 15 pupils took part and the project was entitled *Small and big narratives: Family history*. During the following school year (2019–20), a total of 25 pupils were familiarised with the concept and application of oral history as part of their second-grade course in modern Greek language and literature. This project was entitled *A family object: Family history*. The use of oral history was further developed within the context of the third-grade subject of modern Greek history during the same year. During the subsequent year (2020–21), a total of 17 pupils took part in a project entitled *My story, our stories, the large story*, as part of the modern Greek language and literature course. However, with the spread of Covid-19 and the school closures, family history interviews and oral testimonies had to be conducted remotely. During the 2022–23 school year, an opportunity presented itself to once again work on family history in an educational programme with five pupils, during which the historical archives of the European Union were utilised. In total, the studies which spanned four school years, included 65 pupils of the first, second, and third grades of high school.

## **Evidence-gathering and educational activities**

The action research activities consisted of four phases of action and reflection. Each reflection phase was followed by feedback on the research process with new questions and

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<sup>1</sup> An action research programme was initiated during the 2017–18 school year in collaboration with a colleague from primary education, during which we dealt specifically with oral histories related to migration (Kouseri & Vlachaki, 2018, Vlachaki & Kouseri, 2020).

new action plans for utilising family history. Each of the activities included the following four objectives along with interconnected feedback loops:

1. Introduction to the project.
2. The collection of life stories (data analysis by the teacher).
3. The presentation of life stories and feedback from the school team — Activities.
4. Rewriting the life stories — Presentation — Reflection.

#### 1) Introduction to the project

In the first phase of the projects *Small and big narratives: Family history 2018–19* and *A family object: Family history 2019–20*, the pupils were coached on the purpose and procedure of the interviews to document the oral testimonies of their relatives. This was to introduce the pupils to ways of exploring and recording their family past as well as to encourage them to engage with earlier unfamiliar time periods. The research materials used included oral testimonies, witness evidence, photographs, objects, and documents, amongst others.

For the projects, *My story, our stories, the large story 2020–21*<sup>2</sup> and *Family history 2022–23*,<sup>3</sup> the introductory lesson included a presentation of the work of pupils from previous years. These examples also provided the context in which theoretical issues could be explained regarding the purpose and conduct of the interviews and the steps involved, the concession agreements and interview protocols, along with data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Also outlined were the diary, the interview and its transcription, summary and interpretation, along with any photographic material used. These steps were analysed both theoretically and experientially by creating teams of three pupils, each with an interviewer, an informant, and an observer during the trial interview and the remote procedure. Participants had the option to use material culture as a trigger for the

2 Although the Covid-19 pandemic's closing of schools halted the project *My story, our stories, the large story (2020–21)*, it was decided to continue by using remote interviews. We turned to the guide from the British Library team responsible for the oral history sector, and the advice from the British Oral History Society. was used. This guide, entitled, "Advice on remote oral history interviewing during the Covid-19 pandemic (version 5)" offered advice on remote oral history interviewing during the Covid-19 pandemic Version 7 (8 February 2021) (Updating version 6 which was posted online on 15 May 2020, and version 5 which was posted online on 4 April 2020) <https://www.ohs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Advice-on-remote-interviewing-during-the-Covid-19-Pandemic-v.70D0A-FINAL.pdf>

3 During the 2022–23 school year, family history was the subject of an educational project that our school in Agia Paraskevi in Athens undertook in conjunction with the European University Institute (EUI) and the Historical Archives of the European Union in Florence. Pupils had to prepare family trees (family history), narration of family heirlooms (material culture) and interviews for family history (oral history).

autobiographical history of the family.

## 2) The collection of life stories

During the writing stage, the pupils expressed unseen aspects of their stories, their way of thinking surrounding different issues and their attitudes and feelings through their texts as narrators of their objects or their heroes. In this way the pupils were involved in decision-making and then proceeded to write their own narratives without explicit guidance.

## Data analysis by the teacher

After the data was collected, the narrative texts were analysed to identify the ways in which pupils approached the past and how they orientated themselves in time through them. Their accounts of the past are examples of how historical knowledge, thought processes, and consciousness are expressed, as suggested by research in the field of history education (Gómez Carrasco, López Facal, & Sáiz Serrano, 2017). The aim was to use the characteristics of the narratives to provide feedback on approaches to teaching history.

An initial vertical analysis of the family histories was drawn up based on the analysis of the themes in each story. The timeframes covered by these narratives varied, from those focusing on the Asia Minor catastrophe, the immigration of Greeks from Alexandria in 1955 and the subsequent integration of refugees into Greek society from Asia Minor Catastrophe (1922), to the German occupation of Crete (1941–44) and the Civil War (1946–49) which began after the Second World War. Others included the migration of Greeks to Germany in 1960 and their experiences within the context of modern Greek history up until the seven-year dictatorship in 1967–1974, and finally the emigration from the Balkan countries in 1991 and Syria in 2005.

A horizontal analysis of these histories was also attempted (i.e. comparison between the histories told) to highlight common and different themes. In most cases, the narrative texts were subjected to a qualitative assessment (Tsiolis & Siouti, 2013) and to conduct a content analysis. (Robson, 2007). The analysis was based on the work of Green (2018) who identified the following three common aspects of historical consciousness in the family narratives that she studied as:

- a) The temporal connections recognised in the narratives between past, present, and future.
- b) The moral values that are considered essential components of the process of orientation to historical consciousness.

- c) The concept of place (nature, environment, and landscape), since the orientation towards it plays a role in constructing identities and historical consciousness.

## Summary of the results – Mapping historical consciousness

From the criteria set for data analysis, the following conclusions were reached:

- a) The temporal connections recognised in the narratives between past, present, and future:

From the qualitative analysis of the autobiographical texts, it was clear that most of the stories narrated by the pupils incorporated a linear concept of time from the past into the present. Third-person narrations were also employed with the pupils assuming the role of informant. From the family stories of the pupils, individual acts of heroism and acts of life were highlighted in a wider historical context which, however, did not have further explanations in most of the narratives. There are, however, also stories of everyday life after the Second World War and during the dictatorship period (1967–1974) as the grandparents and great-grandparents of pupils had lived during these periods. For example, in response to a photograph of a man from Messenia a 16-year-old pupil wrote the following about her grandfather who participated in the resistance against the Germans:

*My grandfather was born in 1925 and grew up in Chandrinou, a village in the prefecture of Messinia. In 1943, it was organised in EPON and functioned as a link, i.e. transmitting information and food, to the rebels who had left for the mountain, to resist the Nazi invaders. For this action he was imprisoned for a short time in the prisons of Pylos (southwest Messinia). After the war, while he wanted to study at the Polytechnic and had successfully passed his exams, he was unable to realise his dream due to his family's poor financial situation. Thus, he kept his father's shop, and indeed with great success, since residents from the neighboring villages also came to shop. (Tasos, 18-year-old secondary school pupil, C' Lyceum, A family object: Family history project 2019–20).*

In recounting the stories of their relatives, the pupils painted a picture of a past of war, poverty, and forced movement. Their stories go beyond living memory as they speak of ancestors, most of whom they did not know as many were born during the early to mid-20th century. The range spanned four generations. Green (2018) refers to similar experiences from her research. It is significant that three pupils with immigration histories mentioned both their parents, hence, they saw their past collectively. In the following example a pupil refers to the wave of immigration to Greece when Ceausescu lost power in Romania. The pupil describes the story of her parents rather than focusing on the collapse of the regime.

*In the period from 1990 to 2001, an emigration process from Romania to Greece took place, mainly due to the fall of Ceausescu and communism in 1989. During this period and a two-year difference, my parents, Nikos and Elena, decided to make a change in their lives and come to Greece. (Alexandra, 16-year-old secondary school pupil, A' Lyceum, Small and big narratives: Family history project 2018–19).*

The pupils tended not to interpret the historical context of their family histories, thus no mention was made of historians in their narratives. Only one pupil attempted to interpret the historical context of her relatives' emigration. when she referred to the wave of immigration into Greece consequent to the change in the Albanian political system:

*After the liberation of Albania from the Germans, the Communist Party rose to power and the country was renamed "People's Socialist Republic of Albania" in 1976. The country's leader was Enver Hoxha of the Party of Labour of Albania. At that time, industrialization in Albania had led to rapid economic growth by supporting and significantly improving free education and health. However, his regime was described as the most authoritarian and reclusive communist dictatorship in the world. Albania of the day resembles today's North Korea. Life, however, was meagre. Salaries were very low and, although Albania was agriculturally self-sufficient, citizens suffered from hunger and poverty for many years. Enver Hoxha ruled from 1944 until the end of his life in 1985. From then on, Albania took a downturn. Following his death, Hoxha was succeeded by Ramiz Alia, who tried to follow in his footsteps. However, the changes in Eastern Europe after the fall of the "Eastern Bloc" and the bloody clashes in Romania shook the previously reclusive and isolated Albania. The system collapsed and the country sank into poverty. Young people were leaving their country en masse; among them was my father. (Sofia, 17-year-old secondary school pupil, B' Lyceum, Small and big narratives: Family history project 2018–19).*

b) The moral values that are considered essential components of the process of orientation to historical consciousness:

Connecting the pupils past with their present is usually done at the end of the narration as most pupils talk about why they chose to present this story. Many promoted the values that are important in their lives today in relation to their past. They now accept their immigrant past and respect the sacrifices of parents and grandparents and resolve to honour the sacrifices they made pupils belong. This is highlighted in the following example.

*The fact that my father was forced to leave his country, his family, the profession he loved, immigrate to a foreign country and start from the beginning sometimes saddens*

*me. However, this is a driving force for me to strive daily to achieve my goals not only for myself but also especially for them, as I feel it is my responsibility to repay them for what they have done for me, to make them proud, always keeping in my mind their sacrifices. (Sofia, 17-year-old secondary school pupil, B' Lyceum, Small and big narratives: Family history project 2018–19)*

Pupils as narrators had positioned themselves within history, highlighting the importance of migrant or refugee history as a process that helped to strengthen their positive self-image in the present and contributed to the evaluation of their past in relation to contemporary reality (intergenerational comparison). For example, 16-year-old Katerina reflected on how she thinks about her migrant past and the decisions her parents made:

*I think that my parents staying here in Greece proved to be a positive element for me and my brother, for our education and our smooth integration into a democratic society. I recognise and understand this every time we go on holiday in Romania, where I can see the differences in the way of life and the culture of the people there. (Katerina, 16-year-old secondary school pupil, A' Lyceum, Small and big narratives: Family history project 2018–19).*

Pupils recounted the stories of people in their families, listing their own expectations for the future, living in a more democratic society and with better educational opportunities.

c) The concept of place (nature, environment, and landscape) since the orientation towards it plays a role in the construction of identities and historical consciousness:

It was previously mentioned that the pupils tended not to interpret the historical context of the period in which the family history was included, thus no mention was made of historians. On the other hand, pupils tended to refer more specifically to the spatiotemporal contexts of their stories, mainly with descriptive reasoning, by referring to general information surrounding historical events related to places where their family members had moved. The following extract is a good example of this idea.

*This photograph was taken a few months before the Asia Minor Catastrophe, and it is the last photo we have from our family's life in Ankara. It has been passed down from generation to generation and it depicts my great grandparents, Stefanos and Elisavet. It ages back to the year of 1922 when Greek populations still lived at the coasts of Asia Minor. My great-grandmother, Elisavet, was born in Smyrna and after meeting my great-grandfather, Stefanos, they started building their life together in Ankara, where he was raised. However, in September 1922, the Turkish army made its way into the city. At the outset, the Turkish occupation of the city was orderly. Though the Armenian and*

*Greek inhabitants viewed their entry with trepidation, they reasoned that the presence of the Allied fleet would discourage any violence. Contrary to what they expected, the first fire broke in the late afternoon of 13 September 1922 and resulted in the Asia Minor catastrophe. The Turkish army gave orders to the ships in the harbor not to take any refugees. Not only were thousands of people slaughtered or left homeless, but many cruelties happened there as well. My great-grandparents were lucky enough to escape with their two children from Smyrna and after spending three years in other places in Greece, such as Thessaloniki and Kozani, they eventually settled in Athens with their four children by then. They soon adopted a young boy whose parents were killed during the Asia Minor Catastrophe. Some years later, my grandma was born here, in Athens, where we still reside today. (Georgia, 17-year-old secondary school pupil, B' Lyceum, Family history project 2022–23).*

Rural areas on the Greek mainland and islands feature as places of origin in these stories. These locations frame the stories and the characters, as well as the natural environment which provided for their everyday needs. The rural environment is prominent, so too are descriptions of professions, wars, and heroic acts of resistance during the Second World War and the Greek Civil War as well as the resulting movement of Greek people, immigrants to Germany, or the refugees from Asia Minor. Further movements within the Balkans took place with the fall of communism in 1989 along with the internal movement of people in Greece from the 1970s up to the 1990s, from the countryside to cities. The Asia Minor catastrophe played an important part in many of the family narratives and was the abiding trauma as refugees since they could no longer live in the place of their birth. For example, in the following passage a midwife refers to an icon of the Virgin Mary that was brought from Asia Minor and is a “place of memory” for the life there, the journey of the refugee and the struggle of creation until today.

*This icon of the Virgin Mary is the only thing left from that time. Today it is kept in our house. When we look at it, we always remember the journeys it went through, the places it got to know in order to reach our hands. The endless storms, the incomprehensible struggle for survival did not deter my family from Asia Minor to here even for a minute. They had faith with them. They knew that God owed it to them to straighten up. So, it happened. Sometime after the disaster, my family finally managed to secure a decent life. The losses and mental anguish were almost irreparable, but their faith remained steadfast. Looking at this picture we think of those places and the struggles they lived through. (Evangelia, 17-year-old secondary school pupil, B' Lyceum, Small and big narratives: Family history project 2018–19).*

d) The presentation of life stories and feedback from the school team — Activities

In the third phase the pupils presented the life stories to their classmates. They were encouraged to describe the sources and persons from whom they drew their stories as well as to describe the interview experience, circumstances, and limitations. For example, the following is a diary entry of 16-year old George:

*At first, my grandfather was a little tense as if he was giving an interview with a journalist. Slowly, however, he began feeling more comfortable, from the clarifying questions I asked him, he opened up more and even seemed to be carried away by the memories. He mentioned even more than what I asked him, not entirely relevant to the subject. I didn't interrupt him, though. Despite the fact that I had heard some of the histories before, I acted as if I were hearing them for the first time. At various points, my grandfather was moved, especially when I asked him what it was like when he left his village and how he felt about the confinement due to the coronavirus epidemic. I remained calm, but I enjoyed sharing these memories with him. Even though I hadn't experienced them, I felt I could 'live' them with him again, even after so many years. (George 17-year-old secondary school pupil, C' Lyceum, My story, our stories, the large story project 2020–21).*

In the subsequent activities the results from previous teacher/researchers' analysis were indirectly used as highlights. Pupils were asked to consider the different ways in which people relate to time, through personal and symbolic objects or oral testimonies. Being able to understand who is speaking and in what time and space, and how, and whether the personal narratives of their relatives connect with the larger story, enabled the pupils to realise that living memory requires a critical approach. Their choice of which life stories to relate highlighted how the pupils connected their own narratives through this selective look at the past.

Their narrations were followed by deeper levels of questioning and discussion on their logbooks. The following three main questions discussed concerned the use of family history:

- What does this family history tell me?
- What can I assume about what it tells me? and
- What can it not tell me?

These questions explored the concept of historical testimonies and are important in developing the students' historical thinking. The dialectical interaction between the pupils and the classroom teacher enabled the initial questions which were very important, to be integrated within the process of historical investigation. Moreover, the questions posed

by the pupils during this phase helped to highlight the consequences of changes and events, both on the small and large scales on the lives of people and societies, respectively. Activities were organised to record people's life changes in time, place, and values (mapping the changes in geographical maps or concept maps) and search activities of cause and consequences by creative writing.<sup>4</sup> This encouraged dialogue and contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the historical circumstances. The discussions drew on archival educational material, such as maps and documentaries, to historicise the individual past.

The pupils individual family histories were not linked to the wider global history and their brief mention of significant events often led to conceptual ambiguities. This is why the school team requested that some parts of the histories could be more explanatory. Further activities investigating the wider historical context at the local, national, European, and global levels were planned and based on the suggested changes which emerged from the discussions and were mainly concerned with the clarification of the historical events. Thereafter, extracts from the Greek book entitled *Minima memoralia: The history of my grandfather* by Elefantis (2001) were read.<sup>5</sup> The commentary on the text and the exchange of views generated new ideas about the way in which we connect with the past through objects, and the fact that this connection requires a dialectic between 'small' and 'big stories'. Based on this discussion, the pupils returned to their texts to document the social,

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4 Several researchers have suggested the use of creative writing within the teaching of history, in order to promote historical perspective and empathy (Seixas & Morton, 2012). The historical perspective is one of the conceptual tools used in the investigation of the past and an important element in the cultivation of historical thinking (Seixas, 2006; 2010). According to Seixas (2006), this conceptual tool encourages pupils to appreciate the diversity of past human historical contexts and at the same time, to understand the range of human behaviour, beliefs, and perceptions. In addition, it broadens the horizons of thought and gives historical meaning to the ways in which we perceive modern conditions and events. Articles, letters, diaries, poems, audio and visual narratives, and role-playing are the most popular forms of historical creative writing in the classroom. By using all these different linguistic forms, pupils write in order to think and express the opinions, values, and motives of the people who lived during their chosen period (Seixas & Morton, 2012). If the pupils explore and make accurate factual reports about their characters, incorporating their own opinions as to what may have happened and why, and if they at the same time explore the socio-cultural and historical context of their stories, they begin to approach the past with greater interest. This interest may, in the case of some pupils, encourage the investigation of the past using other conceptual tools. However, it must be underlined that it would be much more productive for the pupils to be able to recognise why their stories are different, yet also how they can apply the concepts of multiple perspectives, through the documentation of the characters represented in their stories (Seixas & Morton, 2012: 156)

5 In the early 1960s, A Elefantis discovered some of the adventures of his grandfather, who fled to America at the beginning of the century. Forty years later he gathered these fragments together in a book, to tell the story of his family within the context of modern Greek history.

cultural, and historical context of their histories. Their work was enriched with evidence and historical references, and the historical and cultural contexts of the texts were more readily understood.

e) Rewriting the life stories — Presentation — Reflection

The post-writing stage explored reflection. The improved texts grew from group interaction. In a typical example of a text by a pupil dated in the civil war between 1946–49, the narrative interweaves the personal and larger history, as underlined below.

*In particular, my grandfather's family, who lived in a mountain village near Mystras in Laconia, had left-wing political beliefs and his father together with one of his brothers had fled to the mountains during the civil war, being members of the Democratic Army. In retaliation, in August 1949, he, his mother and his sister were taken, against their will, to a concentration camp in Tripoli. There, after a few days, his elderly mother and his underage sister were set free, while grandfather Yiannis, a minor at the time, a sixteen-year-old boy, was taken to Lakki in Leros for re-education. The number of minors in the Tripoli concentration camp at that time is recorded at one hundred and sixty girls from eleven to twenty years old and two hundred boys from fourteen to nineteen years old. (Foivos, 18-year-old secondary school pupil, C' Lyceum, A family object: Family history project 2019–20).*

This was followed by a discussion of the characteristics of 'small' and 'big' narratives, their potential, and limitations, focusing on the concepts of memory, history, and family history. Many activities were organised such as multi-perspective activities with reading sources and creative writing exercises that focus on the perspectives of the people experiencing the events. Finally, pupils suggested ideas for a historic novel that they may like to write in the future.

Teachers and pupils held a reflective discussion on the importance of the educational research process and the practices that were deemed effective in empathising with both the individual stories as well as wider global history. A discussion was also had on how the pupils as narrators, had positioned themselves within history, highlighting the importance of family history as a process that helped to strengthen their positive self-image in the

present. Several activities have been in progress.<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion

This research aimed to assess how family history could be selected, read, and utilised in historical education to cultivate historical thinking among pupils aged between 16 and 18 years of age. Action research was implemented in four phases of action and self-reflection, within the context of four educational projects which included family history. Pupils were asked to collect family stories using oral narratives from their relatives. Their stories were then analysed by teacher/ researcher in relation to their vertical and horizontal contexts based on historical consciousness theory (Rüsen, 2005). The objective of the research was to answer how secondary school pupils could use the individual stories of their relatives as a means of orientation to the present and the future, and how this orientation can be critically used?

This research revealed that pupils initially presented the aspects of their family past which they had chosen to explore as informants in a linear narrative by focusing mainly on individual time and in some cases, on collective time (as in the emigration narratives). The pupils expressed their thoughts on how they evaluated the decisions made by these people and the events that shaped them. They also referred to the concept of place with the movements to different places, the description of the countryside and rural life that includes the actions of the protagonists and even the places of uprooting as places of memory (“lieux de memoire” as used by Nora (1989: 7). Taking into consideration the results of the analysis of their stories, a new cycle of activities was planned as these narratives had to be used appropriately for pupils to become acquainted with historical research and to understand these earlier historical periods which they were not familiar with.

The second question was how this orientation in the past could be critically used? Within the methodology of the approach, the scenarios presented highlighted the value of the constructive processes that framed the exploration of the family past by using biographical narratives in educational research (Tsiolis, 2006; Tsiolis & Siouti, 2013).

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<sup>6</sup>At the end of October 2022, the researcher as well as the pupils visited EUI in Florence and participated in an educational workshop, during which we presented our family interviews, heirlooms, and family trees in relation to significant events in European history. By integrating micro-histories within the historical exploration of sources and archives in a scientific way, the pupils were able to expand their understanding of historical complexity and transform pre-existing and stereotypical perceptions embedded in both individual and collective memory into meaningful historical understanding. The project was undertaken in collaboration with Vaso Siomou.

Moreover, during the phases of action research, the pupils as co-researchers acquired a more critical approach by taking part in the research of the past.

When presenting their work in the classroom, the narrators were questioned their classmates. These questions, shed light on appropriate activities that could be used to better historicise their family stories. In this dialogue with their peers and their teacher, the narratives were able to incorporate and clarify historical factors surrounding the subjectivity of the individuals through time. Whatever limitations were found, led to critical thinking since narratives surrounding the past is alternative and socio-culturally determined (Chapman, 2015). This historicization of the narratives was achieved by exploring additional historical resources (archives, maps, photograph, and documentaries) that enhanced the multifaceted nature of the learning process and the knowledge gained. Historicization was also used in resource utilisation activities which enabled the pupils to record their ancestors' life changes in time and place as well as their values. These activities enhanced the pupils' skills of searching for concepts of cause and consequences and seeking the wider historical context at local, national, European, and global levels. Finally, learners focused on the perspectives of how people experienced the events through multi-perspective activities and reading and creative writing exercises that.

The family history projects presented here had prescribed activities that led not only to the cultivation of the imagination of the pupils and their writing skills, but also to the opportunity to document their narratives. In turn, this enabled them to explore concepts such as the notion of change through time, the significance of personal stories, as well as their role within 'big' history. The family history projects provided the pupils with the opportunity to write about history in a more collective and global sense, considering the voices of people from different generations and origins. Exploring these concepts helped them to make the connection between local and world history — a necessary process for developing critical thinking (Vlachaki & Kouser, 2020; Jansen, 2010; Harnett, 2009). Family histories were used during lessons in Modern Greek History as a trigger, as sources for corresponding historical periods (whether included in the textbooks or not) or even as an occasion to approach different topics during language and literature lessons throughout the school year. It highlighted the importance of history which permeates all the humanities subjects with the multifaceted nature of the past.

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