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# What makes a testimony believable? Spanish students' conceptions about historical interpretation and the aims of history in secondary education

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## ABSTRACT

Epistemic beliefs about history can have a profound impact on the way students understand and approach this discipline in the classroom. During the last decades, significant efforts have been made in order to conceptualise different epistemic stances, which can be linked with historical thinking concepts such as the use of evidence. Recent research indicates that epistemic beliefs in history are not only connected to an understanding about the nature of the discipline and the debate about objectivity, but also to the conception of evidence and interpretation in history. This study makes use of a qualitative design in order to examine the conceptions and ideas regarding history of 107 fourth-year secondary education students from three different regions in Spain. Participants were asked to discuss and analyse recent and contrasting interpretations of sources linked to the Spanish transition to democracy (1975-1982), a recent and controversial period. Information was obtained using a structured questionnaire, and responses were transcribed, codified and qualitatively analysed using emerging categories with ATLAS.ti. Results indicate that a majority of students argued that all testimonies can be equally valid in history, even if they show different interpretations or contradictory visions. Only a reduced number of participants focused on the notion of evidence as a determining factor that can indicate whether a testimony is believable, in line with a criterialist epistemic stance. Spontaneous and implicit references to the notions of objectivity and subjectivity in history were also analysed. Results also show diverse conceptions about the aims of history: many secondary education students explicitly indicated that history can be a useful tool to avoid the mistakes of the past, and argued that it should not be imitated. Some participants argued that history can help understand our present, while only a minority of students explicitly argued that each particular historical context should always be taken into account before drawing any lesson from the past. Finally, a discussion is provided about the possibility of examining students' epistemic beliefs by allowing them to address history first-hand. The study concludes that some of the conceptual shortfalls that were detected in secondary education students could be addressed by fostering historical thinking and understanding, and by allowing students to work with sources and testimonies.

## KEYWORDS

Epistemic beliefs, history education, historical thinking, use of evidence, epistemic cognition

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## Introduction

Over the last few decades, numerous efforts have been made in order to conceptualise and analyse the way students and educators think about history, and to develop comprehensive theoretical frameworks capable of characterising their ideas about the nature and practice of this discipline. Following an approach first originated in the United Kingdom in the 1970s with *The Schools Council History Project,* which later influenced and was influenced by other national traditions (Lévesque & Clark, 2018), researchers started focusing on second-order concepts such as evidence, empathy or causation to delineate key historical thinking concepts (Lee, 2005; Seixas, 2017a).

Many of the studies that have examined how students think about these concepts have also addressed topics such as epistemic beliefs in history due to the connection and, sometimes, assimilation between second-order concepts and ideas related to how history is constructed over time (Mathis & Parkes, 2020; VanSledright & Maggioni, 2016). Characterising and then exploring these ideas can, in fact, provide multiple opportunities to understand how students think about the nature of history, something that can help detect students' learning difficulties and preconceptions, and inform teaching practices. For that reason, this research focuses on secondary education students, and aims to examine their ideas regarding validity and interpretation in history, while also analysing their conceptions about the aims of history. By doing this, the goal of the study is to also consider participants' epistemic beliefs, in connection with some of the ideas in discussion.

### *Characterising epistemic beliefs about history*

The scientific literature exploring the conceptualisation of epistemic beliefs in history, while not as extensive as that focused on non-domain-specific epistemic beliefs, has recently made significant advances. By focusing on history education as a field with its own characteristics, researchers have been able to adapt general stages of epistemic cognition, such as the pre-reflective, quasi-reflective and reflective levels conceptualised by King and Kitchener (2002), and conceptualised specific stances, that is, epistemic positions to be adopted, for this particular discipline.

In this regard, Lee and Shemilt (2003) were among the more prominent researchers who developed a comprehensive model that tried to explain progression in the way students understand the second-order concept of evidence in history. By defining a series of different stages, Lee and Schemilt tried to characterise diverse ways in which students perceived historical evidence (as pictures of the past, information, testimony, scissors and paste, evidence in isolation, and evidence in context). This model was very influential in the development of a new theoretical framework by Maggioni and her colleagues, with the understanding that the concept of evidence "is a pivotal idea in epistemic cognition in history" (Maggioni et al., 2009, p. 196).

Maggioni, who had been interested in the assessment of epistemic beliefs about history for a long time, proposed a conceptual model based on three different epistemic stances (Maggioni, Alexander, & VanSledright, 2004; VanSledright & Maggioni, 2016). The *copier* or *objectivist* stance is described a static conception of history in which an objective truth is seen as possible to achieve. The second vision, referred to as the *borrower* or *subjectivist* stance, can be characterised by a sceptic and sometimes relativistic approach, in which opinions and interpretations assume a key role. Last of all, people that adhere to the *criterialist* stance are expected to have a more nuanced vision of history, both in relation to its nature and to how knowledge is obtained and interpreted, building on the framework of Lee and Shemilt (2003).

Research indicates that epistemic beliefs in history are not only connected with an understanding about the nature of the discipline and the debate about objectivity, but also with the conception of evidence and interpretation in history (Miguel-Revilla, Calle-Carracedo, & Sánchez-Agustí, 2021). Due to the particular nature of history education, the notion of validity can be highlighted as one of the key elements that can shape the way students think and reflect about how historical knowledge is constructed. This, in turn, is connected to the way students believe evidence is used in history, and related to their beliefs about the role of subjectivity or objectivity in this discipline, elements that can play a fundamental role in historical interpretation. For instance, in line with the latter, authors such as Martens (2015) have proposed stages or levels of understanding regarding interpretation. In this categorisation, very similar to the framework developed by Lee and Shemilt (2003) and the one proposed by Maggioni et al. (2004), history can be seen as a picture of the past, as the historian's intention, as interpretation of the past or, finally, as a construct.

To sum up, research into epistemic cognition focuses on the way people think and reflect about the nature and process of knowledge, but this field is vast and has adopted multiple perspectives over time regarding knowledge. Epistemic beliefs have become one of the main research lines in this area, due to their conceptualisation "as an influence upon, and result of, cognitive processing" (Greene, Sandoval & Bråten, p. 5). As such, epistemic beliefs can be defined as or refer to "beliefs about knowledge and knowing" (Hofer, 2016, p. 22), and from the point of view of this particular discipline, epistemic beliefs reflect beliefs that take into consideration how history is constructed and interpreted, among other elements related to historical knowledge. In this regard, an examination of the way key historical concepts such as validity and interpretation are understood could provide an insight to the way students think about the construction of historical knowledge, and the way these notions are connected with epistemic beliefs.

## *Understanding the effects of epistemic beliefs in history education*

Epistemic beliefs about history do not only describe the way students or educators simply think about knowledge in this particular field, but can also assume an important role in influencing the way they address history education. From the point of view of teachers, research indicates that aims of history are closely related to different epistemic stances, and that less reflective stances are usually related to traditional approaches that tend to focus on fostering national identities (Sakki & Pirttilä-Backman, 2019). Research also indicates that pre-service and in-service teachers' practices can be developed after specific interventions (VanSledright & Reddy, 2014), although Stoddard (2010) cautions that educators' epistemic stances do not always go beyond the conceptual sphere into actual teaching practices.

For students, an analysis of their epistemic beliefs about history can help identify potential shortfalls in historical understanding in order to propose solutions. While available research indicates that students usually show many difficulties and shortcomings when analysing historical evidence, using primary or secondary sources can help students become aware of how history is constructed or how to compare different or contrasting accounts (Chapman, 2011; Hicks et al., 2016; Pickles, 2010). Studies in this field indicate that many students tend to conceive historical evidence as a direct link to the past, and that they think that interpretation is not necessary, believing that sources provide direct information about what already happened (Barton, 2008).

Interventions that have focused on how to work with historical evidence in the classroom have found that it is possible to use a disciplinary approach (teaching students how to analyse sources and work like historians, for instance), and how it could help students assume a more nuanced epistemic stance (Nokes, 2014).

Specifically, some of these notions have also been a main focus of interest in the Spanish context, where the intervention described in this particular study took place. During the last decade, authors have examined Spanish prospective teachers and students' historical competences, including their ability to focus on causality, empathy, or their narrative discourse (Molina-Puche & Salmerón-Ayala, 2020; Sáiz-Serrano, Gómez-Carrasco & López-Facal, 2018), as well as how to interpret historical sources (Domínguez-Castillo et al., 2021), among other aspects. In connection, epistemological conceptions have also been the focus of specific studies with pre-service teachers (Gómez-Carrasco, Rodríguez-Pérez, & Mirete-Ruiz, 2018; Miguel-Revilla, Calle-Carracedo, & Sánchez-Agustí, 2021), something that has allowed the detection of predominant stances and conceptual roadblocks in this particular context.

## *Pedagogical approaches to make history relevant*

At the same time, promoting a much more nuanced approach to history education can also provide a path for students to appreciate the relevance of history. Research indicates that secondary education students do not always feel this discipline is in connection with their interests and daily lives (Angvik & von Borries, 1997; Haydn & Harris, 2010), something that is also sometimes detected in undergraduate students (Berg, 2019). In this regard, adopting specific strategies such as using historical analogies, using a longitudinal approach, or addressing enduring human issues can help students perceive history as something closer to their interests (van Straaten, Wilschut, & Oostdam, 2018). These pedagogical approaches can also be useful in order for students to become aware of aspects related with interpretation in history, an important part of epistemic cognition in this discipline, and especially, to question themselves about the aims of history, something that has also been explored in Spain by focusing on both pre-service educators (González-Valencia, Santisteban-Fernández, & Pagès-Blanch, 2020) and secondary education students (Miguel-Revilla, 2022).

This last element can be put in close relation to the idea of historical consciousness, which has been a central idea in history education in the last decades (Seixas, 2017b; Thorp, 2014), with the objective of making students establish a connection between the past, the present and the future. For this reason, addressing controversial issues or historical periods in the classroom can provide a helpful opportunity to promote student engagement (Miguel-Revilla, Calle-Carracedo, & Sánchez-Agustí, 2021) while also allowing teachers to make students aware of the different ways history is used in our society (McCully & Kitson, 2005), and some of the aims of history education.

## *Purpose of the study and research questions*

Taking into account the theoretical framework and studies that were reviewed in the previous section, this study aims to examine the results of an empirical intervention, and to closely examine students' epistemic beliefs in order to inform educational practices in history education. Taking into account this particular context, second-order concepts are not conceptualised in the Spanish curriculum, which mainly focuses on substantive content, and teacher practices that are promoted are not usually aimed at focusing on historical interpretation with historical sources. For that reason, the main aim of this research is to analyse the way Spanish secondary education students think about historical interpretation and about their conceptions regarding the aims of history, key aspects closely related to epistemic cognition about this discipline. The study intents to qualitatively examine students' ideas regarding these topics using a questionnaire and historical sources after learning about the Spanish transition to democracy, a historical period that took place between 1975 and 1982 and that is still influential in modern-day Spain due to its

controversial nature and connection to the present. The research questions guiding this study are the following:

1. How do secondary education students approach validity and interpretation in history? What are their ideas regarding objectivity and subjectivity in history, as well as about the use of evidence, to determine whether a testimony is believable or valid? How are some of these notions connected with participants' epistemic beliefs?
2. What are some of the key secondary education students' conceptions about the aims of history? In which ways do participants consider history useful?

## Methods

The interpretative nature of history and history education, and the requirement to achieve an in-depth examination of secondary education students' responses to different and sometimes contradictory historical sources made it necessary to adopt a qualitative research design for this study (Creswell, 2014). This design was deemed appropriate to analyse and contrast participants' ideas and conceptions due to the fact that a qualitative approach can be considered interpretive, experiential and situational (Stake, 2010). Students' responses were codified using emerging categories.

### *Context and participants*

A total of 107 fourth-year Spanish secondary education students aged between 15 and 16 (55 female and 52 male participants) were selected for this study. All students were enrolled in three public schools located in three different Spanish regions: 21 in Oviedo, 33 in Burgos and 53 in Laguna de Duero (Valladolid). Because teachers in charge of each group allowed access to the researcher in order to initiate an intervention and obtain data, the sampling approach can be described as non-probabilistic (Neuman, 2007). On the other hand, students were selected from three different Spanish regions allowing for the implementation of a purposive typical sampling strategy to obtain information from comparable groups and contexts (Wellington, 2015), as well as to allow the sample to be more representative of the nation as a whole.

An intervention with a digital learning environment designed for this purpose was implemented by the researcher for a total of three weeks in order to teach students about the Spanish transition to democracy (1975-1982). This implementation adopted an inquiry-based approach to make students reflect about some of the key historical thinking concepts, and about the connection between the past and the present (Miguel-Revilla & Sánchez-Agustí, 2018). During the intervention, the researcher, adopting the role of the teacher during that period of time, made use of the computer room of the schools, and organised the sessions in order to cover different key elements about the time period: from the political sphere to cultural, social and economic aspects of the era. The digital learning environment was used to provide students access to a selection of historical sources (videos, newspaper excepts, song lyrics, etc.) in each session, which were annotated, and which were used to design interactive learning activities that explicitly addressed second-order concepts, something that is not part of the Spanish curriculum, and that is not usually a main focus in traditional instruction.

Some of the tasks that students were asked to perform include identifying and contextualising a series of historical sources from the time period (such as representative music videos and photos), while making use of said sources to gain insight about a specific topic (for instance, the mentality of the period) by learning to ask relevant questions. Specific second-order concepts such as causality or change and continuity were also used as the basis of interactive activities in which participants were provided a task (such as ranking a series of potential causes of the Spanish transition to democracy) in order to later on reflect about the multiplicity of causes or about the relevance of events in the past. In most of these activities, students were made aware of

interpretation in history and about different and contrasting points of view, something that was intended to make them reflect about these issues.

The environment could also have allowed students to familiarise themselves with primary and secondary historical sources about the period while also applying an active teaching methodology, something that was well-received by the students and allowed them to become more engaged in the learning process (Miguel-Revilla, Calle-Carracedo, et al., 2021). After the intervention, once students were more familiar with the period, a questionnaire was used to inquire participants about their ideas regarding interpretation and the aims of history. Data was obtained with the informed consent of all students and with the help of the teachers in charge of every group.

### *Research instrument and data analysis*

Due to the qualitative nature of the study, and in order to be able to allow participants to explain and justify their responses, information was obtained using a structured open-ended questionnaire. Two specific items were incorporated into this instrument with the objective of inquiring about interpretation and objectivity in history, as well about the aims of this discipline. In one of the items, students were provided with two newspaper fragments, both of them addressing the life of Santiago Carrillo, a former leader of the Communist Party in Spain and a controversial historical figure during the Spanish transition to democracy, who had passed away in 2012. The fragments included different interpretations provided by the historian Paul Preston in an in-depth interview published by the Spanish newspaper *La Vanguardia* on April 6, 2013, as well as diverse opinions from other politicians reflecting on his legacy, using an article published on the Spanish newspaper *ABC* on September 18, 2012. Students were asked to discuss the sort of information they were able to obtain from those articles, where a multiplicity of positions was presented in nearly equal terms, as well as to reflect about the existence of contradictory positions. In particular, the historical figure was presented in many different lights, and, occasionally, in diverse shades of grey. Finally, students were also asked to provide their ideas and opinions regarding the usefulness of studying history to determine participants' conceptions about the aims of this discipline.

The paper questionnaires were completed by the participants in person after the end of the intervention. All responses were transcribed, codified and qualitatively analysed with the ATLAS.ti software. Emerging categories were used following some of the principles of grounded theory methodology (Waring, 2017) in order to establish a connection between the different notions and ideas and systematically examine the concepts that were of interest for this study. The information was transcribed and coded by the author of this study, but no additional researchers took part in the analysis, limiting the ability to take intersubjectivity into account. The data were analysed using concepts regarding historical validity and interpretation, mainly connected to second-order concepts such as the use of evidence (Seixas, 2017a), but these ideas, which addressed notions such as objectivity or subjectivity in history were also used to analyse how these notions could be a reflection of participants' epistemic beliefs. For this reason, some of the categories related to epistemic cognition in history described by Maggioni et al. (2009) have been used in order to discuss and interpret the result. However, due to the fact that students do not categorically adhere to a specific epistemic stance, the *objectivist*, *subjectivist* and *criterialist* stances have been used to provide a discussion and gain insight by establishing some connection between categories. In order to offer a more accurate representation of participants' ideas, specific examples and discrepancies have been selected and provided when presenting the results, enhancing in this way the qualitative validity of the study (Gibbs, 2007).

## Results

### *Students' ideas about historical validity and interpretation*

The examination of the results focused, first of all, on the students' conceptions about historical validity and interpretation. As previously indicated, participants were presented with different documents in order for them to reflect about the legacy of Santiago Carrillo. Students' responses were analysed taking into account, first of all, participants' reflections about the diverse and contradictory information provided by a historian and by politicians in newspaper fragments after the death of Carrillo, and secondly, about their notions about objectivity and subjectivity in history.

When confronted with different testimonies and opinions about the actions and legacy of this controversial figure, students assumed diverse perspectives. One of the main issues detected was that a majority of the participants (a total of 60 mentions were found) explicitly indicated that they considered all testimonies equally valid when confronting different views about the period or about this particular historical figure. In the words of one of the participants, when discussing about two contrasting visions, *'both testimonies are valid because each person can have a different opinion and that is respectable'* (98.Female), while another student pointed out that *'all of us are free to let our opinions be heard and respected'* (53.F). This idea was also reiterated by other participants using similar or more nuanced arguments, like in the following example: *'testimonies are equally valid, because everyone can have a different opinion depending on their mentality and ideology'* (106.F).

In some occasions, participants seemed to have problems adequately grasping the concept of validity. For instance, one student stated that from her own point of view, *'each of us have different opinions, all of them equally valid even if they are not true'* (03.F), conceptualising the idea of validity in history as something not connected with a factual basis. In the very same line, another student stated that *'all opinions are valid as long as they are not insulting towards other people or ideology, and that is why they would be equally valid even if you do not share them'* (49.Male). This idea of equal validity that has been described in the last two paragraphs might be connected with a relativist perspective, in connection with a *subjectivist* or *borrower* epistemic stance, something that will be discussed later on.

Not all students agreed with the idea that all testimonies should necessarily be considered in the same way when examining historical documents. After analysing the responses, a total of 40 instances were detected of participants providing arguments where they tried to present a case about what they would consider as a criteria to establish the validity of the testimonies under examination. It is important to note that in 13 out of these 40 instances, students indicated that their own personal perceptions would be the key factor in determining this validity. In these particular cases, participants usually held themselves in high esteem, firmly believing that they would be able to discriminate between information. For instance, one of the participants pointed out that *'because they are only opinions, I would try to understand them, and that way obtain the information that interest me the most' (54.F), while another one specified that 'one would have to study more about the period and then draw their own conclusions'* (78.M).

Conversely, some students went beyond these type of arguments and tried to indicate an external factor that would help them differentiate between testimonies. In this case, participants highlighted the importance of the author of each text because *'it depends on the point of view and ideology of the one who is talking'* (66.M), as one student indicated, while another one wondered about *'how different a person could be depending on the one that is writing'* (102.M). Surprisingly, very few participants noticed in their responses that a professional historian (Paul Preston) was the one providing his point of view in one of the documents. A student pointed this out, indicating that *'in the second text there is an interview with a historian, and maybe that would make it more valuable than the other one'* (61.F).

Students addressed the notion of evidence in only 19 of these 40 instances that try to establish a criteria for the assessment of validity. On the one hand, participants used generic arguments in most of the cases, but interestingly, one of the students explicitly indicated that her opinion was shaped by the fact that in one of the documents *'I have the impression that it is not completely true, simply because they do not contrast ideas'* (82.F). Conversely, when discussing the interview with the historian she indicated that *'it is more faithful to me because he contraposes ideas, highlighting and verifying them, in a more objective manner'* (82.F). A similar idea was presented by another student, who argued that while some testimonies *'only present one side of the coin; in the second [document] they show the good things, but also his failures and mistakes'* (71.M).

On the other hand, the examination of the responses made it possible to observe additional ideas. For instance, one of the participants focused on the number of statements defending a particular position as a criteria, because from his point of view, one of the texts *'is more realistic, because it gathers the testimonies of other people, while there is only one on text B'* (95.M). Interestingly, some students implied that validity in history stems from taking a few key elements from each testimony: *'you can mix and create a description using those testimonies about [Santiago] Carrillo'* (58.M).

Finally, some of the spontaneous and implicit references to the notions of objectivity and subjectivity in history were also analysed due to their relevance in relation to epistemic beliefs in this discipline. While only the responses of a few students discussed or mentioned ideas related to these notions, the conception of objectivity was addressed comparatively much more frequently. The 12 participants that reflected about this issue in their responses when confronted with the different documents and testimonies usually included references to the necessity to be objective when examining evidence and that *'historians need to have an objective vision when examining the situation'* (28.F), in the words of one of the students.

Participants usually reflected about these notions when trying to make sense of divergent testimonies or contrasting information. For instance, one student stated that *'it is not possible that two contraposing opinions are equally valid. I believe that there is one that is true and other that is false'* (40.F). While this point of view was accepted by these participants, it was also possible to detect a deeper conception of history. In many of these cases, students also argued about the necessity to examine the past so *'you can see what truly happened'* (107.F) or *'what truly was'* (16.M), adopting an objectivist or copier epistemic stance characterised by a belief that history is static, and that knowledge about the past can be directly accessed. At the same time, some of the students adhering to this stance also seemed to have problems differentiating between the notion of history and the past as itself, with arguments such as that *'you have to accept history just as it is'* (48.M).

Conversely, only four students openly discussed the notion of subjectivity in history, and most of them simply mentioned that when contrasting testimonies *'all points of view should be considered, because they are subjective'* (105.M), or that *'depending on who is saying it, information and opinions are very subjective'* (59.M). When specifically discussing the documents that were provided, only one of the students explicitly adopted a relativistic point of view, in line with a subjectivist or borrower epistemic stance, indicating that all testimonies are *'equally subjective'* (72.M) when talking about the historical figure, and not considering a criteria that would be helpful when discriminating between testimonies, or between facts and opinions. While only a few students addressed this issue, it is important to remember that a large number of them implicitly supported this stance when they defended the identical validity of all testimonies in history. In any case, and while this will be discussed in the last section, it might be difficult to identify a coherent or firm epistemic stance in this regard due to the age of the participants.

### *Students' conceptions about the aims of history*

In second place, those participants' responses that addressed the way they thought about the relevance of history were also analysed. The main objective, in this occasion, was to understand their conceptions about the aims and usefulness of history and history education in today's world, something connected with the different conceptions about the nature of history (Miguel-Revilla, 2022; Sakki, 2019), a key element that can also help understand and characterise students' beliefs about this discipline.

After the analysis, results indicate that students offered many different points of view when confronted with the question of whether learning about the past could be useful or important. Only three out of the 107 students that took part in this research explicitly stated in their responses that they did not consider history as something connected with their daily lives, with sceptical arguments such as the following, provided by one of the participants: *'I don't believe that by talking about something that already happened we will be able to understand something better in the present'* (46.F). Despite these outliers, the rest of the participants that referred to this specific issue were conscious of the link between the past and their current context, although different aspects were highlighted by each of them.

First of all, a total of 22 instances were found of students mentioning the idea that history should allow us to avoid some of the mistakes of the past. One of the students suggested that everybody *'should have the past as a lesson, and learn from the mistakes'* (04.F), while another one indicated in her response that *'we should learn to use the past, and become aware that what is happening now was already happening before, to anticipate and change things'* (62.F). In a step further, five students mentioned in their responses that history should ideally not only be a source of potential lessons, and claimed that it should be imitated whenever possible. In some of these answers it is possible to detect some hints of presentism, due to the fact that some of the students established a contrast between the current political climate and that of the Spanish transition to democracy, when reaching a consensus was the main aim of the period in order to avoid perpetuating the dictatorial regime. In the words of one of the students, *'I believe we should imitate the past, because if we do just that, today we would not have these problems with politics'* (63.M), echoing some of the perspectives also found in the mass media. In fact, in line with this idea, only one participant focused on a cyclic notion of history, and stated that *'the past repeats itself in the present, but it seems politicians do not know anything about history'* (05.M).

Many participants adopted a different perspective and did not show a perception of the past as something that should necessarily be imitated, focusing instead on other elements. A total of 39 students specifically mentioned the idea that history could be especially useful to understand the present. For one of the participants, *'thanks to the things that happened in the past we can understand some of the things that are happening now'* (59.M), an idea that was also reiterated by another student, who suggested that *'if we did not know their origin, we would not know the reason of why things happen'* (81.M). From this perspective, some of the students assumed a pragmatic vision about the utility of history, like in the following example, were a participant stated that *'I think we should not imitate the past, but study it to apply a solution based on the past with a vision for the future'* (107.F).

While showing an understanding that history is connected with the present, only 17 participants explicitly mentioned the necessity of contextualizing the past when learning about it. In the responses, the students argued against simply drawing lessons from the past before first examining the particular historical context. In some occasions, the arguments used showed a certain degree of scepticism or even disdain about the past, like the case of one student, who stated that *'in my opinion we should never go back to the past because if we changed it must have been for a reason; we should put it in context and leave it behind'* (74.M). While the majority of the responses were succinct and simple in nature, another participant very eloquently expanded on this idea: *'imitating the past leads to conservatism and a romanticisation of history, which doesn't bring anything good'* (47.F). This very same student indicated below that *'maintaining the past in its context could be more beneficial to understand it and learn from it, while also avoiding problems*

*when taking it out of context*' (47.M), adopting some ideas connected with a nuanced stance about the discipline of history.

## Discussion and conclusions

After analysing the responses provided by the participants attending to the different categories, it is now time to discuss the results that were obtained in this study in order to provide an answer to the initial research questions. First of all, taking into account the students' ideas regarding interpretation in history, it is now possible to address some of the recurring notions regarding validity and evidence, as well as some conceptions about objectivity and subjectivity in this discipline, as a reflection of participants' epistemic beliefs about history.

Results indicate that only a minority of those students that took part in this research were able to adopt a completely coherent perspective in order to make sense of diverse and sometimes contradictory testimonies about a particular historical period and the legacy of a key historical political figure. Most of the responses did not try to delineate any sort of criteria that would help them establish a differentiation between the information available, or that would allow them to determine which testimony could be more believable, corroborating previous studies with secondary education students (Barca, 2005; Liceras Ruiz, 2000). In these cases, participants seemingly adopted a stance where they perceived all testimonies as equally valid, in line with a *subjectivist* or *borrower* epistemic stance. This vision was not necessarily completely coherent in nature, as some of the same participants also aimed to find *what really happened,* a conception linked to an *objectivist* or *copier* epistemic stance (Maggioni et al., 2009), described by the authors as a less sophisticated stance.

The results obtained in this study indicate that only few students were able to take evidential inquiry into account and to go beyond some of the most simplistic visions, something already found by Chapman (2011) in his study about historical interpretation with British students. In relation to the *subjectivist* stance, as seen in the responses, some students at this age were able to understand that the past cannot be accessed directly and that history is gradually constructed over time, a reason why they sometimes adopted a defeatist attitude and stated that history is simply a matter of interpretation. On the other hand, nuanced arguments were also sporadically found about the issue of selection in history, which contributes to the debate whether a *subjectivist* stance is necessarily less preferable than a *criterialist* one (Stoel et al., 2017), and which points to the relevance of always considering the criteria that was considered in order to arrive to a specific epistemic stance. In any case, the arguments provided by participants seem to imply that they lacked a completely coherent vision in the vast majority of the cases that were examined, something that has been previously indicated by those studies that have focused on some of the gaps and difficulties in students' reasoning about history and about the past (Barton, 2008).

Regarding the second category that was analysed, in this case in relation to students' ideas about the aims of history, it should be noted that only a minority of the participants' responses suggest that they did not find history relevant or connected with their lives, in partial contrast with previous research (Angvik & von Borries, 1997; Haydn & Harris, 2010). On the other hand, it is important to point out that selecting the Spanish transition to democracy as a topic to address for this study might have influenced students' responses due to the fact that it is a very recent historical period, something which might have helped them establish a clear connection between the past and the present.

Furthermore, the ideas that were examined indicate that some participants might have had the current Spanish political and social circumstances in mind when discussing the way in which learning about the past could help to avoid previous mistakes. The Spanish transition to democracy was characterised by the search for a political consensus and reconciliation, which some students understood as something that could be imitated in the present. Precisely, this link was deemed useful in the construction of the task, because the expectation was that it would allow students to understand how history can be dynamic, connected to, and reinterpreted from the

present, which in turn, from the point of view of epistemic cognition, might help them avoid a naïve objectivistic approach in which history is merely conceived as a picture of the past, using the terminology of Lee and Shemilt (2003), and Martens (2015). Despite this particular outcome, only a systematic approach over time would be able to deeply and meaningfully shape epistemic beliefs. Only a relatively reduced number of participants explicitly argued that each particular historical context should always be taken into account before drawing any lesson from the past, underscoring the need to contextualise all information and historical evidence in order to avoid simplistic connections, something that was expected, due to the fact that a *criterialist* stance is usually of a more reflective nature.

## *Implications, limitations and future directions*

This study was conceived as a way of examining Spanish secondary education students' visions about historical interpretation and the aims of history, ideas that are closely underpinned by epistemic beliefs about history. The analysis has helped understand participants' reasoning regarding aspects such as validity and objectivity in history, usually linked to the idea of evidence, while also providing information about how students establish a relationship between what they study about the past and the present they live in, a key element of historical consciousness (Thorp, 2014).

Using historical documents and testimonies about a very specific topic has allowed students to reflect and provide valuable information about the way they think and how they perceive history as a discipline. By interpreting students' conceptions about the notions of objectivity, it has been possible to understand how they think about interpretation in history, because, as indicated by Ashby (2011), evidence is something that should be understood and not something that is practiced. By analysing how students interpret contradicting testimonies and interpretations, information was also obtained about their epistemic beliefs in relation to some key epistemic stances (Maggioni et al., 2009). Students were not strictly categorised using these stances, but their use allowed to understand how these notions are related to ideas clearly connected with historical thinking concepts. For instance, when participants reflected about how all different points of view could be equally valid when interpreting historical sources, it was possible to detect ideas connected with a *subjectivist* epistemic stance. Likewise, responses that showed problems establishing a differentiation between history and the past could be a reflection of an *objectivist* or *copier epistemic* stance. In most occasions, these associations were helpful in order to detect how some of these notions and ideas can be perceived as connected to each other, although further research is needed in order to gain further insight about these relations.

Among the limitations, it is always important to consider the effects of the questions or questionnaires used, as Chapman (2011) points out when discussing about epistemic beliefs and historical interpretation. In addition, and while participants from different Spanish regions took part in this study, it would be useful to establish additional comparisons in the future with other national contexts in order to further examine contrasts and similarities. It should be noted that, as previously discussed, the selection of the Spanish transition to democracy might have been a motivating topic for students (Miguel-Revilla, Calle-Carracedo, et al., 2021), but similar historical periods can be found regardless of the national context. From this point of view, addressing controversial issues or periods (as well as other potential topics and themes) could help students establish a connection between their interests and the aims of history education. Finally, the fact that this was a very specific intervention, and that only a limited number of historical sources could be used should also be taken into account, as there is always a risk that students were only able to rely on specific information.

An additional key aspect that could be highlighted is that the design of this particular study has helped bring to light some of the ideas and reflections of secondary education students, which were examined by attending to the participants' own words and responses. This made it possible to detect some of their preconceptions, which were of a very diverse nature. From this point of view, focusing on historical interpretation and the use of evidence was a strategy that allowed to

obtain information about epistemic beliefs in this field, which should be taken into account if we aspire to understand how students think about history and how to transform teaching practices in history education. Finally, it is important to remember that some of the conceptual shortfalls that were detected in secondary education students can be addressed by fostering historical thinking and understanding. By transforming traditional approaches by explicitly focusing on historical concepts, such as use of evidence, and by making use of a disciplinary approach with historical sources, it might be possible to connect students with the way history is produced and interpreted. Allowing students to work with sources and testimonies can help promote a more nuanced understanding about historical knowledge and its nature, which in turn can play a fundamental role in making them perceive history as a more interesting and relevant subject.

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