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When Heritage Meets Education: Reflections on Past and Contemporary Policy in Flanders

Joris Van Doorselaere¹

Abstract

This article presents a general overview of how heritage and heritage education are implemented in Flanders, a region in Belgium. It attempts to make a distinction between past and present policy choices, mainly focusing on their impact on contemporary classroom practice. Within this context, the recent intention of establishing a Flemish canon stirred up debates. Here, heritage and its relation with history education are further explored.

Due to the specific political structure of Belgium, heritage on the policy level in Flanders is dichotomized into immovable and cultural heritage. Although heritage education is incorporated into government administration, and opportunities for it have found their way implicitly in the new curriculum framework of the first stage of secondary education, it seems not clearly delineated and lacks an overarching framework. In addition, heritage—and the educational possibilities it contains—does not appear to have built up great familiarity among teachers. Therefore, and with the introduction of a historical canon, the need for an educational framework on heritage education in Flanders, both in formal as in non-formal settings, is raised. Future research should be centered around exploring these opportunities. The challenge at hand is to elaborate methods that fully capture the educational potential of heritage, and to introduce a more bottom-up and participative process regarding the selection of heritage.

Over the course of the past few years, heritage in Flanders has sparked several public debates. For instance, the question of how to treat Belgium's colonial past remains a considerable challenge. Buildings and palaces constructed with Congo blood money, looted African art in museums, and references to King Leopold II in the public domain are all examples of a heritage that is contested, controversial, or at least needs to be approached in a sensitive manner. This list can be extended with recent incidents. The removal of the annual carnival of Aalst from the UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity due to antisemitic representations in 2019 is an example. Or what about the recurring blackface issue culminating in the months of November and December? During this period, children receive gifts from a robed and white-bearded man who comes to visit together with his servant, Black Pete. While part of a tradition, the latter is receiving more and more opposition as it is often perceived as a racist and colonial stereotype that is no longer adapted to the values and norms of the present. Thus, now and then, heritage profoundly affects public opinion in such a way that polarization may be instigated.

Not all heritage needs to be seen as provocative. More importantly, looked at from the perspective of education, all heritage can serve instructional purposes. Nonetheless, in Flanders, even the way heritage is conceived and introduced into the formal education system is controversial. The government has the ambition and intention to establish a canon of the historical and cultural heritage that defines the region's identity (Flemish Government 2019a).

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Do politicians have the right to intervene in concepts like heritage and identity, and moreover, to impose them on students?

This article aims to present an overview of the way heritage education is defined and practiced in Flanders. It tries to focus mainly on policy at the intersection of heritage and formal education, and the instructional opportunities that are inherent to heritage in a broad sense.

Research questions and methods

In order to pursue its main objective, this article examines three research questions:

- 1) What is the political and administrative context of (heritage) education in Flanders?
- 2) How was heritage education (in a broad sense) conceived of and practiced in the past?
- 3) How is heritage education (with a focus on formal education) conceived of and practiced in the present?

First, in order to fully comprehend the context wherein heritage education takes place in Belgium, the political structure is explicated through an analysis of legislative and administrative texts. This analysis will also answer the questions of why Flanders is the subject of this study instead of Belgium as a whole, and why heritage on the policy level in Flanders became dichotomized into ‘immovable’ and ‘cultural’ heritage. In addition, it will address which government institutions and organizations concerned with heritage take on a leading role in putting policy into practice.

Second, a brief history of heritage education is presented. How did the Flemish Government attempt to establish connections between heritage and education? In this article, both are referred to in their entirety as a sector. Although these sectors in Flanders are not always clearly or formally delineated, they more or less can be seen as a way to classify activities or organizations of the same nature. The heritage sector will be addressed throughout this article. In the education sector, the scope is limited to the formal education system. Here, the article draws on a literature review and in-depth interviews with policy advisors and relevant stakeholders. Non-formal and informal learning opportunities are only briefly mentioned in their relation to formal educational contexts. Setting up interviews with non-formal educational stakeholders, such as museums, archives, and heritage libraries, is part of a separate sub-study planned.

Finally, the way heritage education comes into play in the present is examined. This third research question will make up the main body of this article. How is heritage education conceived of in the curriculum set up by the government? In order to answer this question, the new curriculum framework and attainment targets of the first stage of secondary education (12-14 years old) were systematically screened using the official platform “onderwijsdoelen.be” of the Flemish Administration.² On top of the curriculum, the Flemish Government announced its ambition to introduce a canon of historical knowledge for educational purposes. What are the main reasons for this deployment? Here, the article leans on critical discourse analysis of policy texts and their open criticism or vindication in traditional media. Why does the canon create such

² When writing this paper, the attainment targets meant for the second and third stages of secondary education were yet to be approved by the Flemish Parliament. Although eventually approved by the Parliament, they were annulled by the Constitutional Court in June 2022.

lively debates among academics? Which points of view can be observed? Finally, this article also addresses the instructional potential of heritage. Based on a literature review, an interwoven synopsis is presented. How does the proposed canon, which is scheduled to be launched by the first part of 2023, relate to history education? What instructional chances and challenges does the specific context of Flanders entail for classroom practice?

It needs to be stated that this article is descriptive and reflective in nature, and no new research data were collected. The literature review and interviews with experts and relevant stakeholders (n = 13) were conducted in light of a previous research project on the implementation of the 2003 UNESCO Convention concerning the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage in Flanders (Van Doorselaere 2021). The curriculum analysis is part of a current research project at Ghent University on the relationship between heritage and history education in Flanders' formal education system. The merit of this article can be found in the synthesis it has to offer as a starting point for empirical investigations of this study in developing an (evidence-informed) educational framework for classroom practice.

The political structure concerning heritage in Flanders

Belgium became independent in 1830 with its secession from the Netherlands. Shortly afterwards, the national congress adopted a constitution, which turned the new-made state into a parliamentary monarchy. Leopold I, of the dynasty of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, was appointed to fulfill the role of king. The country kept this state structure until 1970, when the field of tension between the two primary language communities, French and Dutch, led to the first state reform. Three cultural communities were established: a Dutch, a French, and a German-speaking community, each with its own cultural autonomy. During the second and third reforms, and in response to the request for more economic autonomy, three regions were added: the Flemish, the Walloon, and the Brussels-Capital Region. The next reforms (1993, 2001, and 2011) gradually turned Belgium into a federal state. Each Community and Region gained its own legislative body and its own government. In Flanders, the community and the region were combined straight away into one entity, creating one Flemish Parliament and one Flemish Government. Moreover, the responsibilities of the Communities and Regions were step-by-step expanded (Witte et al. 2009).

Most noteworthy for the purposes of this article is the fact that the Flemish Community is entrusted with cultural affairs and education, which makes them the legal responsibilities of the Flemish Community within the geographical boundaries of the Dutch-language area and the bilingual Brussels-Capital area. However, decisions on compulsory education, such as the minimum and maximum age of students, are made by the Federal Government (Standaert and Valcke 2020). Whereas communities are based on the three official languages—Dutch, French, and German—and thus are related to the people living within a territory, the regions are based on the geographical principle of territory and have responsibilities that include the environment, agriculture, and spatial planning. This means, for example, that a region can be responsible for the excavation and preservation of archaeological artifacts, while a community has to deal with the presentation of this heritage to the public—such as students—in museums.

Although the separate parliaments and governments of the region and the community were immediately combined in Flanders, the separation of competencies into territorial (region) and personal (community) matters was kept and has persisted under the Flemish Administration, which operates as the general public body of civil servants accountable to their responsible ministers. Its structure consists of ten policy areas.³ When investigating heritage education, the following three separate areas prove to be relevant for this article: (1) ‘Environment’, (2) ‘Culture, Youth, Sports and Media’, and (3) ‘Education and Training’.

First, the policy area ‘Environment’ belongs to the Flemish Region. Therefore, all types of heritage that can be linked to the principle of territory are covered by it. This means it deals with immovable heritage, such as architectural, archaeological, natural, heraldic, and maritime heritage (Flemish Administration 2021a). As a legal framework, the general immovable heritage decree went into force on January 1st, 2015 (Flemish Government 2013). Here, the Flanders Heritage Agency is the responsible actor. Its main tasks are protecting and inventorying ‘valuable’ heritage. Moreover, it also handles permits, grants, and recognitions of heritage experts, such as metal detectorists or archaeologists, and stimulates the development of the local immovable heritage policy developed by the Flemish Government. One of its most significant structural partners is Herita (2021). This organization has a networking role and is recognized by the entire sector.⁴ Therefore, it can act as a mediator between the heritage policy level and the actors and volunteers in the field. Schools are a (small) part of this as well.

Secondly, the rather broad policy area of ‘Culture, Youth, Sports and, Media’ is a legal responsibility of the Flemish Community. Cultural affairs, such as tangible and intangible cultural heritage, are coordinated by the Department of Culture, Youth, and Media (Flemish Administration 2021b). Within the Flemish Administration, movable and intangible heritage are grouped and denoted as ‘cultural heritage’, while immovable heritage is kept separate, as it falls under the authority of another minister (Demarsin 2021). Thus, both immovable and cultural heritage have their own civil servants and responsible minister. On February 24th, 2017, a new cultural heritage decree was adopted by the Flemish Government (2017).⁵ It acts as a legal framework for cultural heritage and attempts to set up and support a network of relevant organizations. Here, FARO (2021), the Flemish Institution for Cultural Heritage, takes on the role of an interface.⁶ It provides support to archives, heritage libraries, centers of expertise, heritage organizations, and museums. In addition, communities, groups, and individuals in the field of intangible cultural heritage are supported through a participatory and sustainable approach by Workshop intangible heritage (2021). The Flemish Government appointed this organization as a competent body dedicated to the safeguarding of intangible heritage in Flanders in a way that communities, groups, and individuals are involved throughout the process.⁷

³ The list of ten policy areas can be consulted at <https://www.vlaanderen.be/en/organisation-of-the-flemish-authorities>.

⁴ For more information on Herita, see <https://www.herita.be>.

⁵ When writing this paper, the Cultural Heritage Decree of 2017 underwent a process of optimization, which will lead to adjustments to the Decree. This process will be finalised by June 2022. More information is available at <https://www.vlaanderen.be/cjm/nl/cultuur/cultureel-erfgoed/regelgeving/cultureelerfgoeddecreet/optimalisatie-van-het-cultureelerfgoeddecreet>.

⁶ For more information on FARO, see <https://faro.be>.

⁷ For more information on Workshop intangible heritage, see <https://immaterieelerfgoed.be/nl/visie>.

The final relevant policy area ‘Education and Training’ comprises various departments, agencies, and organizations. Just like ‘Culture, Youth, Sports, and Media’, it belongs to the Flemish Community. In this area, the Department of Education and Training sets out the Flemish education policy and supports the minister responsible with a wide range of tasks (Flemish Administration 2021c). On the other hand, developing attainment targets for primary (6-12 years old) and secondary (12-18 years old) schools is the responsibility of the Agency for Higher Education, Adult Education, Qualifications and Study Grants (AHOVOKS). In this process, the Flemish Government appoints separate committees staffed by experts in a particular field, including university professors, pedagogical experts, representatives of educational networks, and experienced teachers. The eight key competencies for lifelong learning adopted by the European Union (2006) act as a framework for these committees. On this level, the key competencies on ‘cultural awareness and expression’, and ‘citizenship’ appear to be the most relevant for the integration of heritage. However, the Flemish Government expanded the eight European key competencies and developed eight additional key competencies that will form the basis for a process of educational modernization in Flanders. ‘Historical consciousness’ is one of them. Moreover, the added key competencies on ‘sustainability’ and ‘spatial awareness’ are useful for heritage education as well.

Translating education policy and the attainment targets into curricula in Flanders is the responsibility of the educational networks, both public and private. These act as umbrella organizations of various school boards, and can be seen as a meso-level between the policy level of the Flemish Government (macro) and schools and teachers (micro). It has to be noted that, in this translation process, the networks have the authority to expand the attainment targets set out by the Flemish Government according to their own identity and educational emphasis (Standaert and Valcke 2020). The formal education system encompasses three of these networks: (1) the education and schools provided by the Flemish Community, named *Gemeenschapsonderwijs* (GO!); (2) the official subsidized network that comprises the public schools organized by provinces (POV) and municipalities (OVSG); (3) and, finally, subsidized free schools, of which the largest group is established by Catholic Education Flanders (KOV). A small part of this network, mostly named method schools, has formed a separate organization (OKO). It needs to be stated that, in the end, putting curricula into practice remains a task of the schools and especially teachers. They possess professional freedom⁸ in creating quality learning environments and choosing the most useful teaching and instructional methods to meet the goals set out in the curricula of their educational provider (Nusche, et al. 2015; Standaert and Valcke 2020).

A brief history of heritage education in Flanders’ policy

In Flanders, cultural education is used as a broad and overarching term. Heritage education, together with arts education—and in some cases media education, is part of it (De Braekeleer 2010). In the literature, heritage education is often defined ambiguously, and the meaning can differ according to the source. Nevertheless, what does the concept encompass, and how has it found its way into policy choices in the past?

⁸ Standaert and Valcke (2020: 85-86) question this autonomy of schools. They believe the autonomy may shift to the meso-level due to the complexity of the new attainment targets on the macro-level.

Initiatives to bring stakeholders from the heritage sector and the educational field together did not appear until 2002. The first step towards a policy on cultural education was taken with a protocol agreement between the Ministers of Education and Culture to develop a joint vision (Demeulenaere and Verdoodt 2010). They appointed Anne Bamford, professor at the Wimbledon School of Arts, to chart the scope and quality of arts and cultural education in Flanders. The results of this evaluative study, conducted during the 2006-2007 school year, showed that cultural education was insufficiently integrated into the formal education system (Bamford 2007). The recommendations acted as a starting point for future policy. One of these resulted in the establishment of a Committee on Culture and Education. Subsequently, this committee constructed a participative process in which relevant experts, stakeholders, and institutions could have input. This incentive led to a report in September 2008 wherein the notion of heritage education was delineated. According to the report's definition, it included: "Any form of education that uses heritage as a goal in itself or as a means" (Flemish Administration 2008:24).

However, also in 2007, the Agency of Arts and Heritage, the entity Canon Cultuurcel, which is part of the Department 'Education and Training' and acts as a liaison between the cultural and educational policy areas, and the then Flemish Institute for Immoveable Heritage (VIOE) commissioned a large-scale field study on heritage education. At the base were the findings of a previously formed working group that had the aim of exploring the context of heritage education in Flanders. In general, a lack of structural cooperation between stakeholders was noticed (Van der Auwera et al. 2007). The study was carried out by the Xios Hogeschool Limburg and the University of Antwerp. The report described heritage education as follows:

Heritage education can be any form of education that is based on "traces in the present from the past" and that embed these in a context that is based on knowledge and/or can bring about an experience that refers to the past, in other words, a heritage experience (Van der Auwera et al. 2007:27).

The conclusion stated that heritage education was incorporated in the attainment targets set out by the Flemish Government, especially in primary and secondary education. However, significantly less attention was paid to it in pre-primary and special education. More importantly, the study revealed a lack of knowledge about heritage (education) among school teachers and an inconsistent cross-curricular approach (Van der Auwera, Schramme, and Jeurissen 2007). Based on the results, FARO, the Flemish Institution for Cultural Heritage, constructed a thinking process in which priorities were selected. The aim was to put the recommendations of the research report into practice, involving teachers as well as stakeholders from the heritage field (Schoefs and Van Genechten 2008). The process also brought attention to the fact that teaching about heritage is not the exclusive domain of formal education by referring to the many other learning opportunities outside schools. This train of thought led to pilot projects on local heritage education that attempted to connect primary schools with their contextual environment. These were later upscaled and extended into secondary schools.⁹

In the next step towards a structural policy on cultural education, the Ministers of Education and Culture joined forces during the following years to develop a shared mission and

⁹ For more information, see 'Buurten met Erfgoed' at <https://www.buurtenmetergoed.be>.

vision. The year 2016 marked the start of an intensification process in connecting the cultural and education policy areas. Nonetheless, in the Action Plan drawn up by the Flemish Government (2016), heritage education was not explicitly mentioned. The cultural theory “Culture in the Mirror,” based on a research programme led and designed by the Dutch professor on culture and cognition Barend Van Heusden (2010), was enlisted as a joint frame of reference for arts and cultural education, including heritage. This theory is centered around cultural awareness, letting students reflect on their own culture as well as that of others. At the same time, the Flanders Heritage Agency (2016) launched an instruction manual on heritage education in Flanders, approaching the concept from a broad perspective and incorporating various thoughts and suggestions.

The above historiography more or less follows a chronological order. However, because of the partition mentioned above into communities and regions – and associated competencies, two tracks on heritage education policy can be derived from this narrative. On the one hand, decisions came from the policy area ‘Environment,’ mainly focusing on immovable heritage, such as architectural, archaeological, or natural heritage. On the other hand, policy choices were made in the area of ‘Culture, Youth, Sports and Media.’ Illustrative of this division between policy areas is the fact there are two separate days that put heritage into the spotlight for the general public. There is one for immovable heritage (Open Monuments Day), and one for tangible and intangible cultural heritage (Heritage Day).

Moreover, the policy processes often lacked structural – meaning regular and official – cross-domain consultations, which resulted in a compartmentalization of policy choices. Therefore, policy initiatives, projects, and publications in the past were often – but certainly not in every case – launched alongside one another and were not sufficiently cross-referenced or finetuned with other entities. Above all, in the specific case of heritage education, an additional connection to the policy area ‘Education and Training’ has to be established. The Flemish Administration acknowledges¹⁰ this compartmentalization and aims to pursue a more connective and participatory approach in its more than seventy entities. In the present, a specific and overarching framework on heritage education is still missing. This seems to lead to a situation where relevant actors are operating more or less on their own to develop an education section without a common framework for reference.¹¹

Putting heritage education into practice and the case of the Flemish canon

Initiatives concerning heritage education, inside or outside formal learning environments, are created in the Department of ‘Culture, Youth, Sports, and Media.’ They take shape at the sector level, with regard to the various cultural heritage organizations, but are also cross-sectoral, the so-called sectoral networks. Here, establishing connections with the education sector mainly depends on CANON Cultuurcel. Heritage education is included in this collaboration, but never

¹⁰ The acknowledgement and goals of the Flemish Administration are to be read at <https://overheid.vlaanderen.be/op-zoek-naar-ons-dna>.

¹¹ However, recently, the initiative to organize a ‘Day of Cultural Education’ in March 2021, centered around heritage and the diverse spectrum of educational opportunities it has to offer, can be seen as an important step to a more comprehensive and structural approach. For more information, see ‘Dag van de Cultuureducatie’ at <https://www.vlaanderen.be/cjm/nl/agenda/dag-van-de-cultuureducatie-erfgoed>.

explicitly or from a unique focus unless there is a demand for it, such as for ‘Heritage Day.’ To facilitate cooperation between culture and education, investments were made in the development of the digital platform ‘Cultuurkuur,’ managed by CANON Cultuurcel.¹² It provides an inspirational overview for teachers in search of cultural partners in order to bring all kinds of culture and students closer together.

How is heritage integrated into the formal education system in Flanders? When screening the official attainment targets for the first stage of secondary education set out by the Flemish Government, heritage does not seem to have found its way into them explicitly.¹³ Mostly, heritage is incorporated into the generic concept ‘artistic and cultural expressions.’ Instead of conceiving of heritage as a goal, the official attainment targets constitute an open framework in which the different types of heritage can be integrated as a means. For example, heritage can be employed in explaining or demonstrating other subjects as well as on its own. Nevertheless, the framework seems to lack explicit conditions on where or how to integrate heritage. Therefore, the goals remain generic and mostly can be achieved without integrating heritage. In some cases, the goals do mention suggestions concerning heritage. However, this situation seems detrimental to the incorporation of heritage education, and the attainment targets (on the macro-level) and curricula (on the meso-level) lack incentives to do this. Therefore, developing lessons concerning heritage may depend on the goodwill of schools or teachers.

Schools in Flanders are autonomous in operationalizing the framework set out by the Flemish Government and the educational networks. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, teachers possess professional freedom in choosing the most useful teaching methods to meet the goals above. However, in 2016, CuDOS, a research group of Ghent University, conducted a field study on cultural education in secondary schools in Flanders. The results indicate that heritage, employed as a means, is not much used (Beunen et al. 2016: 84). Of the teachers surveyed (n = 796), 71.6 per cent indicated that they never used heritage during lessons. Besides, nearly three-quarters of these teachers attest that they were not aware of the possibilities local heritage institutions had to offer. On this level, the notion of teacher agency, which can be seen as the ability to act within a certain educational context, is frequently overlooked in the case of heritage education. The teachers’ own interest and vision on cultural education counts as relevant factors (Beunen et al. 2016: 94). Teachers can find support in textbooks from educational publishers, but these mostly rely on generic educational examples instead of responding to cultural diversity and the heritage manifestations that surround them. Contextual factors such as curricular choices or the local network in which the schools are embedded affect heritage education and, ideally, should be considered (Van Doorsselaere 2022). Therefore, it seems necessary to enhance the role of teachers by developing an overarching educational framework in employing heritage in or outside the classroom.

The relevance of an educational heritage framework for teachers is further increased by the political decision to introduce a Flemish canon into the formal education system. The subject of history will presumably occupy a prominent place in which the selected key points can be addressed, and it will therefore be up to the history teacher to contextualize them sufficiently and

¹² The digital platform ‘Cultuurkuur’ is online available at <https://www.cultuurkuur.be>.

¹³ The attainment targets of the first stage of secondary education were screened from the official platform <https://onderwijsdoelen.be> managed by the Flemish Administration.

to construct a dialogue with the students and their perspectives. However, it is important to investigate the context wherein this decision took place and what the purpose of such a canon will be.

In September 2019, a new Flemish Government took shape based on the elections almost six months earlier. In this formation, Flemish nationalists drew some crucial cultural policy areas towards themselves and managed to deliver the Ministers of Culture and Education to the newly composed government. Creating a canon of the historical and cultural heritage that defines the region's identity was an important proposal during the negotiations. Two policy memoranda (2019-2024) refer to introducing a Flemish canon following the example created in the Netherlands in 2006. In other words, this new canon will contain a list of significant historical and cultural reference points that characterize Flanders as a nation in Europe. Although canonizing history has been criticized by various renowned voices in the field of history education (Grever and Stuurman 2007; Seixas 2016; Symcox and Wilschut 2009), the Flemish canon is conceived and intended to support formal and non-formal education. According to the coalition agreement (Flemish Government 2019a: 25-26), it will be prepared by an independent and pluralistically composed scientific committee. Nevertheless, the Minister of Culture indicated in the policy memorandum that he would also participate in the development process (Flemish Government 2019b:15). More than a decade after the introduction of a canon by its neighbors to the north, Flanders is on the verge of making the same choice. However, this decision – just like in the Netherlands – sparked up debates among politicians, academics, and historians (Aerts et al. 2020; Awouters et al. 2019; Boone 2021; De Paepe et al. 2020; Dumolyn 2019; Meremans 2019; Pelckmans 2019; Reynebau 2019). In what follows, some of the main concerns are discussed, as they relate to heritage education.

In the first place, the criticism was centered around political interference. Should young people's sense of identity be pushed in a particular direction by the government? Additionally, the canon will not only serve an educational purpose, the government aims to adopt it as a guideline for immigrants as well. The Flemish identity will be linked to cultural heritage in a broad sense. Therefore, belonging or functioning in society will depend on and be measured by knowledge of the canon. The danger lies in the political misuse of this concept as an instrument to exclude certain individuals, groups, or communities. Why do cultural aspects, seen from one dominant perspective, need to be imposed from a sense of cultural superiority? In his research into identity construction in European heritage discourse, Roel Duing (2011) points to the fact that politicians often place cultural heritage at the service of pursuing social cohesion, and for that reason, pursue cultural uniformity. In this light, Richard Kurin warned in 2004 that the past, through a deliberate selection of historical events or figures, plays a significant role in the formation of identity from a sense of superiority (Kurin 2004). The concept of 'heritage' can be misused by politicians, among others, to achieve cultural exclusion.

Next to these politics of identity, the concept of the canon seems to collide with multiperspectivity – a notion that has gained importance over the past 25 years – in history education (Stradling 2003). It refers to the idea that “history is interpretational and subjective, with multiple coexisting narratives about particular historical events, rather than history being objectively represented by one ‘closed’ narrative” (Wansink et al. 2018: 496). In this case, it is not the selection of key points that will determine the value of the canon, but its interpretation

and the opportunity to interact with other perspectives. The less 'beautiful' past should not be shunned here. Controversial aspects of the past, such as the exploitation of the Congo, can offer opportunities for critical reflection as well. However, even here a Flemish-nationalist perspective or framework can disrupt the reflective process, according to a public letter in the Flemish news article 'De Standaard' (Aerts et al. 2020). More than a dozen historians from various universities in Flanders joined forces to criticize the one-sided approach of the canon. Additional dangers lie in the concepts of teleology and anachronism (De Paepe et al. 2019). The former addresses the risk of seeing the past as a series of events that inevitably lead to the situation in the present. A canon is a simplified narrative, which coats the unpredictable character of the historical process. The latter concept refers to connecting figures from the past to the contemporary Flemish identity. Famous painters such as Jan Van Eyck (15th century) or Peter Paul Rubens (17th century), who lived long before the conception of Belgium – or in some cases were not even born within the current geographical borders, are conceived of as both Flemish and heroic, and as contributing greatly to the present situation. The authors of the letter (De Paepe et al. 2019), all academic historians and active in the training of future history teachers, argue that a canon will lead to misuse of history. It can not be paired up with the historical thinking concept that has been used to create the fundamentals of the attainment targets in history education in Flanders (Flemish Parliament, 2018).

Finally, heritage should be understood as something dynamic. In contrast, the mechanism of a canon is based rather on a static and romantic image of the past, which can lead to chauvinism. But what exactly is meant by the dynamic aspect of heritage? The Dutch historian Willem Frijhoff (2007) argued that something only becomes heritage when people want to turn it into heritage. It can be interpreted as a social construct (Loulanski 2006). People select certain aspects of their life as valuable and then pass it on. This status is the result of a whole process with various influences, which means that heritage is continuously subject to change. With the creation of a canon, the government threatens to freeze the dynamic process, (Frijhoff 2007). Although the intention is to regularly update, it remains unclear at what intervals this will take place. People – in this case, students – must discover for themselves in relation to their environment what is valuable for them to preserve, to pass on, and, above all, to reflect on. Here, the question needs to be raised how the canon will affect integrating heritage into educational settings, such as museums or schools. Entering into a dialogue on the diverse personal meanings of heritage can be seen as an important educational opportunity (Grever and Van Boxtel 2014).

Despite these concerns, in September 2020 the Government of Flanders pushed through and announced the appointment of a historian of the Catholic University of Leuven to lead the development committee (Grommen 2020). This historian gathered eight other experts to start the work on a concept of the Flemish canon.¹⁴ The intention of the Minister of Culture to partake in this process seems to have been abandoned. Moreover, the chairman of the development committee, fully aware of the raised issues, stressed in an interview (Pauli 2020) the independent nature of the committee, free from identity politics, and the importance of pursuing an interdisciplinary, pluralistic, and dynamic approach to the concept of a canon. This statement seemed to bring clarity to the initial misleading—and somewhat unsuitable—communication from political angles. Nonetheless, the sense or nonsense of a canon remains a fluctuating (public) debate for the time being in Flanders. How the concept will be implemented in the

¹⁴ For more information on the Flemish Canon, see, <https://www.canon.vlaanderen>.

heritage sector, or more specifically, how it will relate to history education, is still unclear. The committee has the ambition to complete its work by the first part of 2023.

Some reflections and conclusions

This article presents a general overview of how heritage and heritage education is implemented in Flanders, as a region in Belgium. It attempts to make a distinction between past and present policy choices, mainly focusing on their impact on contemporary classroom practice and current debates. Due to the specific political structure of Belgium and a process of cultural emancipation during the twentieth century, heritage on the policy level in Flanders is dichotomized into immovable and cultural heritage (Demarsin 2021). This is reflected in its administration by separate organizations and initiatives. Although heritage education has found its way into the Department of ‘Culture, Youth and Media’, it is not clearly delineated. It lacks an overarching framework, which leads to a situation where museums, organizations, archives, and heritage libraries are operating more or less on their own to develop an education section without a common reference framework.

In formal education, heritage has not found its way into the overarching educational targets (macro-level) and curricula (meso-level) explicitly. Although the possibilities are certainly present in the curriculum framework, no specific conditions on integrating heritage education have been set. Without proper incentives, developing lessons using heritage as a means or a goal seems to depend on the goodwill of schools or teachers (on the micro-level). However, heritage – and the instructional possibilities it contains – does not appear to have built up great familiarity among teachers in Flemish formal education. From this point of view, the question can be asked, to what extent Flemish teachers are sufficiently educated in (critically) approaching heritage, within or outside the context of the upcoming Flemish canon?

The intention of establishing a canon stirred up debate. When filtering out the points of criticism, they can be situated at the intersection of history and citizenship education on one side and critical heritage studies on the other. Regarding the latter, gaining insight into the notion of heritage, as some scholars (Seixas and Clark 2004; Grever, De Bruijn, Van Boxtel 2012; Savenije, Van Boxtel and Grever 2014) have proposed can be valuable, especially when combined with the employment of useful concepts such as ‘historical significance’, which was elaborated by Seixas and Morton (2013) as one of their six historical thinking concepts. Here, historical significance refers to the challenge historians face when deciding what is important to learn about the past. In this way, students may learn to assess what is significant, what is not, and on what grounds these choices were made. This train of thought could be followed for the historical canon as well, as it presents a—deliberately simplified—narrative through the lens of the nation-state. Considering the government or the development committee attributed significance to certain persons, events, or objects in the past, gaining insight into the notion of heritage could prove to be beneficial when discussing and contextualising the items that made it on the list.

This situation seems to boil down to a need for a deeper—but not exclusive—relationship between heritage education and history education. Teaching history needs to stay free from a (national) master narrative and not promote it. Heritage education can therefore be engaged to confront the dangers of a Flemish canon, but (perhaps) also the opportunities. Much will

therefore depend on the way in which the canon can or may be used in learning critical historical thinking. The subject of history will presumably occupy a prominent place where selected key points can be addressed. Therefore, it will be up to the history teacher to contextualize them sufficiently, to enter into dialogue with them, and introduce multiple perspectives.

To conclude, as the synthesis of the arguments above argues, there seems to be a need for an educational framework on heritage education in Flanders, both in formal as in non-formal settings. Future research should be centered around exploring these opportunities. The challenge at hand is to elaborate methods that fully capture the educational potential of heritage, with regard to the diverse implementers, from school teachers to archival educators. This research should happen not only on a theoretical level, but also at the level of practice, where different kinds of methods can be tested, evaluated, and adjusted. In addition to being practice-based, the research should be future-based as well. Scholars need to examine heritage and its upcoming (educational) challenges, such as program sustainability issues. Finally, including regional or local content and introducing a more bottom-up and participative process regarding the selection of heritage in educational settings can improve socio-cultural relevance of the curricula for students, and stimulate ownership by schools and teachers who are the final implementers of curricular ideas.

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Second, the reflections are part of a current doctoral dissertation *Inherited from the past, shaped by the present? Investigating the didactic potential of heritage in history education in Flanders*. It is being carried out at Ghent University and supervised by prof. dr. Bruno De Wever (advisor).

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy reasons of the interviewees. The interviews were carried out in Dutch.

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