

## <ARTICLES>

# **How Do Japanese High School Students Learn History? A Qualitative Study on the Layered Construction of Meaning Based on Career Paths and Academic Abilities**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to qualitatively clarify students' perceptions of history classes in Japanese high schools, which are organized according to career paths and academic abilities. We analyzed the narratives of eight high school students from different learning contexts. The results showed that, even though they were based on exam preparation, students in learning contexts A and B found cultural and social significance in history classes. Students in contexts C and D had negative perceptions of history classes due to expectations for learning. In other words, students' perceptions of history classes are layered, not monolithic. These results suggest that Japanese high school students interpret and assign meaning to history classes based on their career aspirations, interests, and learning styles. This reflects their perspectives and experiences. Based on these student narratives, the study derived implications for designing history classes that go beyond career-oriented instruction and enable students to discover the meaning of learning.

**Keywords:** History classes, Japanese high school student perception, Layered meaning-making, Learning contexts

### **Introduction**

Since the 1990s, social studies educational research in the United States has shifted from curriculum and lesson-making research to empirical research (Barton, 1997; Levstik, 1989; Vansledright, 1997; Vansledright & Kelly, 1998; Wineburg, 2001). One reason for this change is that curriculum and lesson-making research, which emphasized the beginning of various social science research lines that developed in the 1960s and 1970s, known as the "new social studies," had little impact on social studies teachings in the field, resulting in a divergence between practice and theory (Fenton, 1991; Watanabe, 2012; Watanabe, 2022). As a result, recent social studies educational research in the US has focused on clarifying the facts, such as examining the exact processes in the field of education, as several studies have been published primarily using qualitative research methods (Ogawa,

2012). Levstik and Barton are two of the leaders in the field (Kuwabara, 2012; Yamada, 2012), focusing primarily on history education and examining the trends and issues in children's understanding and perception of history, including research to understand their thinking patterns (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Levstik & Barton, 2008). This has created opportunities to develop lessons and conduct practical research tailored to the conditions and realities of children in the US (Tanaka, 2015). The methodologies of social studies educational research in Japan are currently undergoing a similar transformational process, as the work of Barton, Levstik, and other experts in the field has been actively incorporated by domestic educational social studies researchers.

Until now, Japan has conducted historical classroom research to develop a classroom theory that helps children discover the meaning of learning (Ikeno, 2006). However, most history class research to date has been normative, with teachers and researchers themselves developing history classes as they consider meaningful (Watanabe, 2017). Therefore, questions have been raised as to whether history classes designed from the perspective of teachers and researchers truly allow children to find meaning in learning<sup>1</sup> (Tanaka, 2023a). Against this background, it has been pointed out that, in designing curricula and lessons, it is necessary to anticipate the occurrence of "independent reading" based on children's selective understanding (Tanaka, 2023b).

In this context, empirical studies targeting elementary, junior high, and high school students have been conducted in Japan (Hoshi, 2019; Nishimura, 2021; Nishimura & Matsumura, 2024; Tatara, 2019). As the present study focuses on high school students' perceptions of history classes, it refers to the preceding studies by Hoshi (2019) and Nishimura (2021). Hoshi (2019) conducted a qualitative study examining students' perception of history classes by observing their participation in two such classes in a high school setting. The results revealed that students did not necessarily understand history classes as intended by their teachers (Hoshi, 2019). In addition, Nishimura (2021) conducted a questionnaire survey of students in a high school with classes for students pursuing various career paths before investigating and analyzing the effects of learning context on students' perception of history classes. The results revealed that most students thought the purpose of studying history was "for knowledge and education," "to learn from historical lessons," and "to understand the present regardless of the learning context" (Nishimura, 2021).

Hoshi and Nishimura revealed several aspects of high school students' perception of history classes, and their findings have been applied to research on the development of those classes (Nakamura, 2023). However, these studies had some limitations. For example, Hoshi's study analyzed the purpose of a history class to foster sovereignty (Hoshi, 2023), but history classes aimed at fostering sovereignty are not necessarily common in high schools (Tanaka, 2016). Rather, it is assumed that the practice is conducted with a perception of students' academic abilities and career paths after graduation (Nishimura, 2021). However, the perception of students who have taken such history classes toward the subject has not yet been examined. In contrast, Nishimura's study was conducted with "general" high school students and schools that practice education according to students' post-graduation career paths and academic abilities (Nishimura, 2021). However, because of the limitations of the quantitative research adopting questionnaire surveys, the results have only shown trends regarding students' perception of history classes. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct a qualitative study complementing previous research to elucidate the actual thoughts of students toward history classes in more detail and derive findings that will be useful in the development and practice of history classes. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct qualitative research to complement previous quantitative studies and to elucidate more detailed realities of students' perceptions of history classes.

For these reasons, the purpose of this study is to clarify Japanese high school students' perception of history classes by analyzing their narratives about the classes that they have practiced based on their individual career paths and academic abilities. Moreover, the study aims to derive suggestions that can be used as references in the future practice of history classes.

## **Method**

### ***Participants and Their Context***

This study analyzes high school students' perceptions of history classes based on the learning context (Pace & Bixby, 2008; Turner, 1995).

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (2019) refers to the diversity of students' career orientations and the instructional policies of individual schools. Based on this, the learning contexts in Japanese high schools can be understood along two axes: students' career orientations and schools' instructional policies. By intersecting these two axes—namely, “career orientation (university-bound / non-university-bound)” and “instructional policy (specialized / general)” —learning contexts can be categorized into four types 2 (Nishimura, 2021). Specifically, classes specialized in preparing students for university entrance are defined as “Specialized type for university preparation” and referred to as Learning Context A. Classes that aim for university admission but maintain a broader range of career options are classified as “General type for university preparation” (Learning Context B). Classes that are not oriented toward university entrance and assume diverse career paths are categorized as “General type for non-university preparation” (Learning Context C). Finally, classes focused on employment or non-university pathways are labeled as “Specialized type for non-university preparation” (Learning Context D). It should be noted that this typology was not derived from the analysis results but was instead established as a theoretical framework at the stage of research design (Nishimura, 2021). As it has been pointed out that students' perceptions of history classes are influenced by individual factors such as personality, prior knowledge, and cognitive structures, and also by learning contexts (Watanabe, 2020), this study adopts the aforementioned typology as a basis for analysis.

At School Z, four classes (Classes 1 to 4) are organized according to students' career aspirations, each corresponding to one of the four learning contexts described earlier. Class 1, which primarily aims to prepare students for admission to top universities, corresponds to the “Specialized type for university preparation” and is classified as Learning Context A. Class 2, which targets university admission while also considering options such as junior colleges and vocational schools, corresponds to the “General type for university preparation” and is classified as Learning Context B. Class 3, which focuses on students aiming for junior colleges or vocational schools while also accommodating pathways such as employment or vocational training programs, corresponds to the “General type for non-university preparation” and is classified as Learning Context C. Finally, Class 4, which is designed primarily for students seeking employment in companies or other workplaces, corresponds to the “Specialized type for non-university preparation” and is classified as Learning Context D. Thus, School Z has classes that correspond to all levels of the Japanese high school learning context and is an appropriate case study for examining Japanese high school students' perceptions toward history classes. The characteristics of the students attending the classes and an outline of the classes are summarized in Table 1. It can be confirmed that, depending on the educational role and career guidance policy of each class at School Z, there are inherent differences in the purpose and style of instruction, as well as in the learning environment.

Table 1: Overview of high school Z

Class types	Student characteristics	Class overview
Class 1: Learning Context A “Specialized type for university preparation”	Students enrolling from affiliated junior high schools.	Students with high “academic abilities” are enrolled in the class. The curriculum is designed to prepare them for university entrance exams at top-level universities. The class provides guidance to raise students’ perception as students preparing for entrance exams through participation in university open campuses, guidance for higher education, and extracurricular classes for higher education.
Class 2: Learning Context B “General type for university preparation”	Students enrolling from other middle-level schools.	Students with middle “academic abilities” are enrolled in the class. The school is developing an education that focuses on university entrance. As in Class 1, the school provides participation in university open campuses, guidance for higher education, and extracurricular classes for higher education.
Class 3: Learning Context C “General type for non-university preparation”	Students enrolling from other middle-level schools.	Students with low “academic abilities” are enrolled in the class. Students are mainly aiming to go on to junior colleges or vocational schools. Guidance for vocational and junior colleges is provided within the high school to help students choose a career path that suits their abilities.
Class 4: Learning Context D “Specialized type for non-university preparation”	Students enrolling from other middle-level schools.	Students with low “academic abilities” are enrolled in the class. The majority of students in the class are seeking employment in companies. Through job guidance and visits to business offices held each semester, students are guided to acquire awareness, preparedness, and manners as a member of society.

Table 2 outlines each history class based on the syllabus of Class 2022 at School Z and interviews with history teachers. It should be noted that both Learning Contexts A and B share the common feature of offering classes oriented toward university entrance. Learning Contexts C and D share the characteristic of focusing on the acquisition of basic knowledge. However, differences were observed between Contexts A and B in terms of how they addressed university entrance examinations, and between Contexts C and D in terms of methods for reinforcing knowledge. Therefore, this study maintains the framework of the four typologies while analyzing students’ perceptions of history classes by focusing on both the similarities and differences observed within and across the learning contexts.

Two interviewees were selected from each learning context, resulting in a total of eight participants, two in the same learning context taking the same class. All interviewees were students who were informed of the purpose of the survey by the class teacher and were willing to participate voluntarily. In some classes, more than one student volunteered, and a survey was conducted with both male and female interviewees. Prior to the study interviews, the eight participants and their homeroom teachers were interviewed once again regarding their academic abilities and learning context characteristics, which were later used as references for the analysis. This “overview” referred to the students’ high school goals and their thoughts about their career paths after graduation.

Regarding the participants: Kei is studying for an entrance exam to earn a doctorate; Anna is preparing for an entrance exam at a demanding private university; Ken aspires to become a local public servant and is studying for entrance exams at a local public university; Elena is accepted in a private university with a major in international studies and is preparing to study abroad; Jin has been accepted to a vocational school; Naomi is enthusiastic about club activities and hopes to find a sports-related job, therefore deciding to attend a sports-related vocational school; Teru has a strong desire to work for a local company and has been offered a job at a private company; Rina also enjoys club activities, has been offered a job at the Self-Defense Force. The eight students’ names are pseudonyms for animosity.

Table 2: Summary of learning contexts

Class types	History subjects	Class outline	Textbooks	Teaching staff
Class 1: Learning Context A “Specialized type for university preparation”	World History B, Japanese History B, World History Seminar, Japanese History Seminar (elective) *Continue World History B and Japanese History B from the 2nd year *Completed World History A and Japanese History A in the 1st year	Classes are conducted mainly in a lecture style using textbooks and supplementary materials (catalogs) that describe historical events in detail. Students practice answering questions to prepare for university entrance exams by using past university entrance exams from around November. In World History and Japanese History Exercises, students practice answering questions to prepare for the university entrance exams. In addition, the contents of textbooks are supplemented by catalogs.	<i>A detailed account of world history B</i> (Yamakawa Publishing), <i>A detailed account of Japanese history B</i> (Yamakawa Publishing)	Teacher A (World History B) Teacher B (Japanese History B)
Class 2: Learning Context B “general type for university preparation”	World History B, Japanese History B *Continue World History B and Japanese History B from the 2nd year *Completed World History A and Japanese History A in the 2nd year	Classes are taught mainly in a lecture format using textbooks and supplementary materials (catalogs) that describe historical events in detail. Students practice answering questions to prepare for university entrance exams from around November, using past university entrance exams.	<i>A detailed account of world history B</i> (Yamakawa Publishing), <i>A detailed account of Japanese history B</i> (Yamakawa Publishing)	Teacher A (World History B) Teacher B (Japanese History B)
Class 3: Learning Context C “general type for non-university preparation”	Japanese History B *Continued from 2nd year *Completed World History A in 1st year	The classes are developed with the goal of understanding the contents of the textbooks. Textbooks with easy-to-understand descriptions are used. In addition, work based on the textbooks is also used to consolidate knowledge. Students also watch video clips and use the Internet for research and study.	<i>High school Japanese history B</i> (Yamakawa Publishing)	Teacher C (Japanese History B)
Class 4: Learning Context D “Specialized type for non-university preparation”	Business Society *Take World History A in the first year and Japanese History B in the second year.	In order to consolidate basic knowledge, students work on printouts based on junior high school-level history, geography, and civics contents, which are carefully explained. The students are required to relearn what they have learned at the school level up to now.	none	Teacher B (Business Society)

Academic abilities were classified as “high,” “middle,” or “low” based on national deviation scores of tests administered by major prep schools, rather than on relative academic abilities within classes. Table 3 presents the results of the study.

Although the students’ family environment is also assumed to have a significant influence on their perception of history classes (Pace & Bixby, 2008), from an ethical standpoint, including the protection of privacy, we did not actively interview the students’ families but limited ourselves to the information the participants provided during the interviews. Therefore, we did not include such data in Table 3.

### Data Collection

This study was conducted with the permission of School Z’s principal. In addition to the purpose and method of the study, the students were informed that the data would be published anonymously, so that individuals would

Table 3: Characteristics of the interviewees

Class types	Name (Age)	Gender	Academic abilities	Student overview
Class 1: Learning Context A “Specialized type for university preparation”	Kei (18)	male	high	He is enrolled in a class aiming to enter a top-level university. He has a desire to be involved in community medicine and plans to take the general entrance exam to a national university medical school with the aim of becoming a doctor. He is currently studying for the entrance exam.
	Anna (18)	female	high	She is enrolled in a class aiming to enter a top-level university. Although she does not have a clear goal for the future, she has a desire to enter a top private university and plans to take the general entrance exam for the Faculty of Sociology at a top private university in the Kansai region. She is currently studying for the entrance exam.
Class 2: Learning Context B “general type for university preparation”	Ken (17)	male	middle	He is enrolled in a class that prepares for entering a four-year college. In the future, he would like to become a local public servant and be involved in regional administration and plans to take the general entrance exam for the Faculty of Policy Science at a local public university. He is currently studying for the entrance exam.
	Elena (18)	female	middle	She is enrolled in a class that prepares her to enter a four-year university. In the future, she would like to be active internationally. For this reason, she has been actively studying for English exams. She took the entrance exam for the Faculty of International Studies at a private university on recommendation and was accepted. She is currently preparing to study abroad.
Class 3: Learning Context C “general type for non- university preparation”	Jin (17)	male	low	He did not reach the academic level of the high school of his first choice and entered the school as his second choice. While aiming for a junior college or vocational school, he is enrolled in a class that prepares him for vocational training school and employment. He has a desire to acquire specialized skills and find a job, and has decided to enter a vocational school that focuses on job training. He is currently working toward his graduation exam.
	Naomi (18)	female	low	She wanted to join a strong club and enrolled as a special sports student. While aiming for a junior college or vocational school, she is enrolled in a class that prepares her for vocational training school and employment. She is enthusiastic about club activities and hopes to find a job related to sports in the future. The student has decided to go on to a sports-related vocational school. She is currently working on her graduation exam.
Class 4: Learning Context D “Specialized type for non- university preparation”	Teru (17)	male	low	He did not reach the academic level of his first choice high school and enrolled in the school as his second choice. He is enrolled in a class that aims to find a job at a private company. Since entering high school, he has had a strong desire to work for a local company, and has been offered a job at a private company. He is currently working on his graduation exam.
	Rina (18)	female	low	She wanted to join a strong club in school and enrolled as a special sports student. She is enrolled in a class aiming to get a job at a private company. He also entered high school as a special sports student and has been enthusiastic about club activities. She has a strong desire to work for the Self-Defense Forces, making use of the physical strength she has cultivated through club activities. She has been offered a job in the Self-Defense Forces. She is currently working toward her graduation exam.

Note: Situation at the time of the interview, all names are pseudonyms.

not be identified, and they all gave consent.

The interviews were conducted at the end of the high school history curriculum with the objective of analyzing the perception that the students have formed through their high school history classes. Therefore, as

shown in Table 4, interviews were conducted in Japanese from November 2022 to January 2023, with eight third-year high school students. However, considering that this was the period before graduation and university entrance exams, the interviews were limited to 40 min per student. We employed the semi-structured interview method based on the questions in Table 5 to allow the students to freely express their thoughts on history classes regarding their “interest in history classes,” “view of history classes,” and “purpose of studying history.” The interviewees and the interviewer knew each other, which allowed them to discuss their ideas without hesitation. However, they were not students of the interviewing teacher.

Table 4: Interview schedule

Research Day	Name	Class Types
November 22, 2022	Ken	B
November 24, 2022	Elena	B
November 25, 2022	Kei	A
November 25, 2022	Anna	A
January 16, 2023	Teru	D
January 16, 2023	Rina	D
January 17, 2023	Jin	C
January 17, 2023	Naomi	C

Table 5: Interview guide

Interest in history classes
▪ Do you like history class? Do you dislike it? Why do you think so?
View of history classes
▪ What kind of history class made an impression on you?
▪ What kind of history class would you like to take in the future?
Purpose of studying history
▪ What do you think is the purpose of studying history?

### **Data Analysis**

The object of analysis in this study was the students’ perception regarding their history classes. After conducting interview surveys with all participants, their responses were considered as narratives, and we focused particularly on the part concerning the concept of history classes and the students’ perception of them. I employed Sato’s (2008) open-coding analysis. First, each interview was recorded with an IC recorder and transcribed after the completion of the survey. Next, the interview content was intercepted, assigned a code, and classified by comparing and examining the similarities between the codes to generate categories at a higher level of abstraction. The relationships between the codes and categories were then analyzed and interpreted. During this process, I considered both history teachers’ instructional policies and students’ profiles, as revealed by the initial interviews. This is how I detected the students’ perception of history classes.

### **Result**

Given that education in Japanese high schools is generally based on career paths and academic abilities, we examined students’ perceptions in each learning context by focusing on narratives that expressed students’ ideas and opinions about history classes. The codes and categories were denoted as ◇ and <>. The speaker and number of utterances are indicated in parentheses ( ).



***Kei and Anna's View of the History Class in Learning Context A***

Kei and Anna's narratives for the history class were as follows:

Researcher: Do you enjoy history class? (Researcher 1)

Kei: I don't like memorizing things. (Kei 1)

Researcher: Do you like or dislike it? (Researcher 1)

Anna: If you ask me whether I like it, I would say yes. I don't like world history, but Japanese history is interesting. I think I like to memorize things. It is not that I like it because I am good at it, but I just like it, so it is not so difficult for me. (Anna 1)

Kei and Anna were highly interested in history classes. Kei, for example, said that he was ⟨not good at memorization⟩, but ⟨interested in knowing historical facts and people⟩, while Anna reported that she ⟨likes memorization⟩ and is ⟨interested in Japanese history⟩. This suggests that history, and especially Japanese history, was intrinsically interesting to both Kei and Anna, who spoke further about their high school history classes:

Researcher: Are you saying that we need the knowledge that forms the basis for a good discussion?  
(Researcher 9)

Kei: That's what I mean. (Kei 9)

Researcher: I see. For example, knowledge is needed for the examinations. (Researcher 10)

Kei: I think the exam is mainly about memorization, but I also believe that thinking and having your own opinion can also be useful during the exam. I think you should have your own opinion when you enter the world, so I think that classes should be improved. (Kei 10)

Anna: To be honest, I do not really find classes useful. Therefore, I studied for exams and tests. (Anna 8)

Researcher: As you heard earlier, history is a subject that is a part of the curriculum. What do you think history has been studied for? (Researcher 9)

Anna: First, entrance exams are coming soon. I tend to think of this as a study-entrance exam. Other than that, I think there are other things that a Japanese person should know. I do not need to go into such detail. (Anna 9)

Kei and Anna were strongly aware of the relationship between entrance exams and career paths, saying that they were studying primarily for the entrance exams. This indicates that the purpose of history classes is to support the achievement of specific career goals. However, Kei said that he also studied to be able to form opinions as an individual, which was ⟨necessary as a member of society⟩, whereas Anna stated that she learns ⟨what she should know as a Japanese person⟩, indicating that they perceived the purpose of the history class as not only to prepare for jobs and careers, but also to «learn as a culture». Kei and Anna also stated:

Researcher: Now I know that you have been studying history for a long time, but what do you think history is in the first place? (Researcher 7)



Kei: I think the greatest significance is to learn lessons from historical figures; for example, that each war causes many casualties; to learn about such facts and apply them in the future. (Kei 7)

Researcher: For example, you just said that as Japanese people, we should know about certain topics. What kinds of things do you think we should know? (Researcher 10).

Anna: Well, it is not that the Japanese people have done good things only. We have also done many bad things, such as invading other countries. We should be aware of these issues. I think that we should know about these topics so that we can make better decisions for our future. (Anna 10)

Kei and Anna suggested that the purpose of the history class was «practical learning» that was useful for thinking about the present, such as «drawing lessons from history» and «learning about the history of perpetration and applying it to the future».

In Context A, Kei and Anna perceived the purpose of history classes in relation to «entrance examinations and career paths». This perception was formed under the influence of the history teacher's instructional policy, which was oriented toward university entrance exams, as well as their own career aspirations. Simultaneously, they also recognized history classes as a form of «practical learning» that is useful for thinking about the present, such as «drawing lessons from history» and «learning about the history of perpetration and applying it to the future». From these narratives, it can be interpreted that Kei and Anna positioned history classes not merely as a means of knowledge acquisition, but also as learning that can be applied to contemporary and future contexts. In this sense, they perceived the purpose of history classes in a multilayered view.

#### ***Ken and Elena's View of the History Class in Learning Context B***

Ken and Elena's narratives for the history classes were as follows:

Researcher: Yes, it was. For example, what did you find interesting? (Researcher 2)

Ken: I have always enjoyed Japanese history, especially the age of provincial wars; from there, I became increasingly interested in Japanese history. In junior high school, I studied basic Japanese history, and then in high school, I began to acquire technical knowledge that was not available in junior high school, so I was able to understand how things developed by studying these aspects in depth. (Ken 2)

Researcher: Which part of history do you like? (Researcher 2)

Elena: It is very interesting to learn about people and events that happened in the past and why they happened the way they did. (Elena 2)

Ken and Elena showed a high level of «interest in history classes». They also expressed that they «like the Warring States period of Japanese history», that «History is interesting the more you know about it», and that «It is interesting to know the causes of events», referring specifically to the subjects of their interest. This suggests that history is intrinsically interesting for both Ken and Elena, who proceeded to describe their high school history classes:

Ken: It is interesting. I believe mathematics ends when you solve a problem. The more I learn about history, the more I understand it and enjoy it, so it is fun. (Ken 9)

Researcher: I see. We all study history, but in your opinion, what do you think is the purpose of studying history? (Researcher 10).

Ken: I think we study it because it is a school subject, but I also want to use it as a field in which I can excel on my entrance exams. However, I do it because it is fun. I enjoy it and am good at it. It is less stressful than other subjects when studying for exams. (Ken 10)

Researcher: What is the reason for thinking that way? (Researcher 9)

Elena: So, if I were to go abroad to study, I would be able to explain what happened in Japan and where I lived previously. I wish I had learned more about it. (Elena 9)

Ken said, ⟨I am studying for the entrance exams⟩, while Elena added, ⟨I am studying to be able to explain to people when I study abroad⟩, showing a strong perception of ≪entrance examinations and career paths≫. This finding suggests that the purpose of history classes is to support the achievement of specific career goals. Additionally, Ken's interest in the subject led him to recognize history as a field in which he was good at taking entrance exams. The students also stated the following:

Researcher: If you could take a history class again, what kind of class would you want to take? (Researcher 13)

Ken: The kind that continues today. Historical stories. I think it would be good to know about discrimination, politics, when I grow up. (Ken 13)

Researcher: I see. Why do you think that it is important to study discrimination? (Researcher 14)

Ken: First, I think it is necessary to know why it happened and how it was related, and to connect the two. How did discrimination occur and how does it happen? We need to look at the current issues from a historical point of view. (Ken 14)

Elena: I was impressed by Ms. Fusae Ichikawa. (Elena 6)

Researcher: Why do you have lasting impressions of Ms. Fusae Ichikawa? (Researcher 7)

Elena: For the equality of women. I am very grateful that she worked for the equality of men and women. I am very grateful that I can live the life I am living now. So, it has to do with the present time and my present position. I am glad that I was able to learn this. (Elena 7)

Ken emphasized the importance of examining ⟨current issues⟩, such as ⟨discrimination⟩ and ⟨politics⟩, from a historical perspective, while Elena suggested the importance of having a sense of ⟨gratitude⟩ toward those who have worked for ⟨the equality of men and women⟩. In other words, Ken and Elena perceived the purpose of history classes as practical learning, which helps them understand and think about the present.

In Context B, Ken and Elena perceived the purpose of history classes in relation to ≪entrance examinations and career paths≫. This view of history classes was shaped by the instructional policy of the history teacher, who focused on university entrance exams, as well as by their own career aspirations. Simultaneously, Ken referred to the

importance of understanding 〈contemporary issues〉 such as 〈discrimination〉 and 〈politics〉 from a historical perspective, while Elena expressed her 〈gratitude〉 toward historical figures who contributed to the realization of 〈gender equality〉. In other words, they also held a perspective that connects history classes with contemporary society. From these narratives, it can be interpreted that Ken and Elena did not perceive history classes merely as a means of acquiring knowledge, but also as opportunities for fostering awareness of contemporary social issues. Thus, they perceived the purpose of history classes in a multilayered view.

***Jin and Naomi's View of the History Class in Learning Context C***

Jin and Naomi's narratives for the history classes were as follows:

Researcher: Do you have a reason for liking it? (Researcher 2)

Jin: The reason I like this - I like history and social studies. Classes are boring, but I like them. (Jin 2)

Researcher: Do you like history classes? Or dislike them? (Researcher 1)

Naomi: If I had to say it, I dislike them. (Naomi 1)

Jin and Naomi felt a ≪mental distance from history classes≫ in high school. This is why they stated the following:

Researcher: Among these history classes, what is the most impressive one you have taken so far?  
(Researcher 4)

Jin: The teacher taught what I already knew, so there were no impressive ones. I always knew much about social studies content. (Jin 4)

Researcher: Do you have a reason for that? (Researcher 2)

Naomi: Rotes to learning. I often memorized the tests. I am not good at memorizing it. I must learn things from the past in class. I am not good at memorizing things like that, so I am not very good at them.  
(Naomi 2)

Researcher: Was there minimal discussion in the history class? (Researcher 7)

Naomi: This may vary from teacher to teacher, but the teachers speak only. Because of the many teachers' one-sided discussions, we never had a chance to discuss things among students. I did not know how to think about this issue. (Naomi 7)

These students regarded the history class as 〈teaching what they know〉, 〈a lot of memorizations〉, and 〈one-sided talk〉. This was the main reason for the ≪mental distance from the history class≫ for Jin and Naomi. However, they stated the following:

Researcher: Do you think the history classes you took in elementary, junior high, and high school have helped you? (Researcher 6)

Jin: I can obtain good test scores and good grades. This will help me in this respect. (Jin 6)

Researcher: What point is that? (Researcher 10)

Naomi: There were times when I answered questions. Well, there were times when I was unable to answer.  
(Naomi 10)

Jin and Naomi thought that «performance in history class», such as ⟨getting good scores and grades⟩ and ⟨being able to answer questions from the history teacher⟩, was a useful side of the history class.

Researcher: I see. I think you know all this stuff, but I still think history is taught in class. What do you think is the purpose of studying history? (Researcher 5)

Jin: To learn about the past. (Jin 5)

Researcher: I see what you mean. Still, history is a school subject, is it not? What do you think was the purpose of studying it? (Researcher 8)

Naomi: I think it is necessary to learn the basics of what happened in those [past] times. (Naomi 8)

It was clear that both Jin and Naomi thought that the purpose of history class was to «acquire common historical knowledge», such as ⟨learning about the past⟩ and ⟨acquiring basic historical knowledge⟩.

In Context C, Jin and Naomi perceived history classes as opportunities to «acquire common historical knowledge», such as ⟨learning about the past⟩ and ⟨acquiring basic historical knowledge⟩. Simultaneously, they held a negative view of classes that focused on teaching already-known content or relied on ⟨one-sided explanations⟩ by the history teacher to reinforce knowledge. However, when they were able to experience a sense of academic achievement, they showed a willingness to evaluate such classes positively—even when the instructional style aligned with their initially negative perceptions. From these narratives, it can be interpreted that Jin and Naomi, while demonstrating a negative attitude toward history classes, also accepted them positively when they experienced a sense of success or competence. Thus, they perceived the purpose of history classes in a multilayered view.

#### ***Teru and Lina's View of the History Class in Learning Context D***

Teru and Lina's narratives for the history classes were as follows:

Researcher: What do you dislike about it? (Researcher 2)

Teru: I still have to memorize it. There are too many things to memorize. For example, the name of an era and the names of people. There are several historical figures in this area. I am not good at that, so I do not like it. (Teru 2)

Researcher: What do you dislike about it? (Researcher 2)

Rina: There are too many people's names, it becomes confusing. (Rina 2)

Researcher: I see. (Researcher 3)

Rina: In short, there is much memorization that is complicated. (Rina 3)

Teru and Rina felt a «mental distance from history class» because «a lot of memorization» and «memorizing is not my favorite thing». They also expressed the following feelings regarding the classes:

Teru: This left a lasting impression. What is it? (Teru 5)

Researcher: Is this interesting? However, this was not interesting at all. (Researcher 6)

Teru: The teacher wrote a lot on the blackboard, so it was very easy for me to watch the videos. I found it very easy to watch the videos. I can concentrate on watching videos. (Teru 6)

Researcher: What kinds of classes have you attended most often? (Researcher 7)

Rina: What kind, what kind... like teachers writing on a blackboard? (Rina 7)

Researcher: I see. (Researcher 8)

Rina: Making a group and watching videos would be fun for me. (Rina 8)

Researcher: Have you ever attended classes where you watched videos? History classes in elementary, junior high, and high schools. (Researcher 9)

Rina: In elementary school, I think there are a few. I would like to attend a history class in which we can work in groups. (Rina 9)

Researcher: Why do you think so? (Researcher 10)

Rina: By having fun, I would be able to learn more, even though there are still things that I must learn there. (Rina 10)

Teru and Rina had a «learning motivation» to enjoy studying history through «videos» and «groups» in the classes. However, they reacted negatively to the high school history class because it did not match their «learning motivation». They added the following:

Researcher: Why do you think you studied history? Even if you do not like it, it's always there, right? I think there is a reason for this. What purpose do you think studying history has? (Researcher 9)

Teru: From my point of view, I did not think I needed to study it. I do not know what the correct reason is. (Teru 9)

Researcher: I see. (Researcher 10)

Teru: This is not interesting. I do not see this point at all because I have never found it useful. I think it should be done by people who like to do it because all they do is memorize things. I think that this should be an elective. People who wish to do so should do so. (Teru 10)

Researcher: I see. Do you feel that anything you learned in class is useful? (Researcher 4)

Rina: No, not particularly. Nothing in particular. (Rina 4)

Researcher: So, you mean that it is not useful. However, even if you say that history is not useful, I think history classes are included in the school curriculum, but why do you think history is being studied? (Researcher 5)

Rina: It is useful. Uh, I wonder what it is like. (Silence) (Rina 5).

Teru and Rina did not understand the purpose of learning history.

In Context D, Teru and Rina, perceived history classes as being centered on memorizing the names of many historical figures and blackboard-based and rote learning, and they held negative impressions toward content that resembled relearning at the junior high school level. This perception appears to have been shaped by a sense of discomfort with knowledge-intensive classes aimed at “relearning,” as well as a mismatch between the instructional style and their own learning preferences. Their references to ⟨videos⟩ and ⟨group⟩ activities suggest a certain level of interest and positive expectations toward history classes. In other words, Teru and Rina did not reject history classes outright, but rather expressed a willingness to accept them if they were conducted in a style suited to their preferences. From these narratives, it can be interpreted that although Teru and Rina demonstrated a negative perception of history classes, they also identified positive aspects within them. Thus, they perceived the purpose of history classes in a multilayered view.

## Discussion

In this study, four types of learning contexts—A, B, C, and D—were established during the research design phase, and students’ narratives were analyzed according to each context. As mentioned earlier, the analysis focused on both similarities and differences within and across learning contexts. As a result, commonalities were found between Learning Contexts A and B, as well as between C and D; therefore, they are discussed in an integrated manner.

The history teacher’s teaching style differed depending on learning contexts A and B. However, students aspiring to attend college in both contexts had a shared understanding of the purpose of learning in relation to achieving their career goals. Simultaneously, they found meaning in history classes in terms of acquiring liberal arts education, gaining insights into contemporary issues, and obtaining practical knowledge. These narratives indicate that students perceived history classes not in a singular way, but in a multilayered manner, integrating both exam-related and practical or liberal learning. In other words, students actively interpreted what they should learn from history classes according to their own career aspirations and interests and sought to position that learning as personally and socially meaningful.

Although the teaching styles of history teachers differed between Learning Contexts C and D, students in both contexts consistently perceived teacher-centered lessons, which focused on memorization and blackboard explanations, in a negative light. However, when they engaged in learning through videos or group activities that matched their preferred learning styles, or when they received positive feedback, they were able to find meaning in history classes. These narratives also demonstrate that students’ perceptions of history classes were multilayered. Although many of their expressions appeared negative on the surface, underlying them were latent expectations and hopes for history classes, such as wanting to enjoy learning or finding it interesting if understood. Unlike students in Contexts A and B, however, students in Contexts C and D did not articulate the purpose of learning history from perspectives beyond instructional methods.

Based on these findings, it can be understood that Japanese high school students interpret and assign multiple meanings to history classes in accordance with their own career orientations, interests, and learning preferences, reflecting their individual perspectives and experiences. At the same time, these interpretations are not formed in isolation. They may also be significantly shaped by the teaching styles of their history teachers. In

particular, the observed differences between Contexts A/B and C/D suggest that instructional approaches may exert a certain level of influence on how students interpret and find meaning in the subject. This implies that learning context should be understood not only in terms of student characteristics, but also as a pedagogical environment shaped by the teacher's instructional policy and classroom practices.

It should be noted, however, that the framework of learning contexts and the trends in students' narratives presented in this study are based on specific schools and regions. Different structures and perceptions may exist in other schools and regions.

## **Conclusion and Implications**

In empirical research on history education in Japan, there have been few sufficient attempts to qualitatively clarify students' perceptions of history classes that are organized according to their career paths and academic abilities. Against this backdrop, the present study aims to examine students' perceptions of such history classes by focusing on their narratives from a qualitative perspective. Drawing on both the findings of Nishimura (2021) and the qualitative analysis conducted in this study, several theoretical implications concerning the design of history classes can be derived.

First, the narratives of students in Learning Contexts A and B, who were oriented toward university entrance, revealed a perception of history classes as meaningful in terms of practical learning—for example, learning lessons from history or connecting the past to the present. Despite the context of university entrance exams, these students demonstrated a willingness to engage with history based on their interests, suggesting that they sought to relate history to their own lives. These findings supplement Nishimura's (2021) assertion that lessons should be designed to help students learn from historical lessons and better understand the present. However, such views of history classes also carry the risk of oversimplifying the past or reducing it to moralistic lessons. Therefore, it is necessary to incorporate questions into the lessons, such as "Is it possible to draw lessons from history?" or "Is it valid to connect the past and the present?" so that students can critically reflect on their own thinking as citizens living in a democratic society.

Second, the narratives of students in Learning Contexts C and D who were not oriented toward university entrance showed that they could find meaning in history classes if the instructional methods matched their learning styles or if they received positive feedback. These findings suggest that aligning instructional methods with students' learning styles is a key factor in fostering engagement and should be considered in lesson design. However, these students based their understanding of the purpose of history learning solely on learning styles and instructional methods, so they may not have reached a deeper understanding of its intrinsic significance. Therefore, it is first essential to help students realize that history can be meaningful in their present lives and then support them in developing a purpose for learning history that goes beyond learning styles.

Based on these findings, while Nishimura (2021) pointed out the importance of aligning students' perceived purpose of studying history with the content and structure of history classes, this study further suggests a direction for deepening that alignment. That is, for students who are already able to articulate the purpose of studying history, lessons should encourage them to reexamine and critically reflect on those purposes. Conversely, for students who are unable to articulate such purposes, it is necessary to foster their awareness of the value of history learning by connecting it to contemporary issues. In this way, to adjust the goals, content, and methods



of history classes in response to students' perspectives, history teachers must engage in what Thornton (2004) refers to as "aim talk"—a reflective practice that connects students' perceptions and the design of lessons in a reciprocal manner.

Simultaneously, this study derived implications for lesson design based on students' narratives. Therefore, future research should focus on the actual design, implementation, and evaluation of history lessons developed in collaboration with teachers based on these findings. Through such efforts, we hope to contribute to the improvement of history classes in school settings by applying and refining the insights gained from this study.

## Note

1. Regarding this point, Tanaka (2023b) points out the possibility that what teachers intend to convey in class may not actually be understood by students, because students engage with classes in their own way and interpret them based on their individual experiences and thinking.
2. In this study, the term "university-bound" refers to classes in which students primarily aim to enter four-year universities, while "non-university-bound" includes classes preparing students for junior colleges, vocational schools, training institutions, or employment. The term "specialized type" refers to classes that adopt a curriculum focused on a single, specific career path. In contrast, the "general type" includes a more diverse group of students and assumes multiple possible future paths. Although junior colleges are technically a form of higher education, Nishimura (2021) classifies them as "non-university-bound" in the context of Japanese education, as they are more strongly associated with vocational training, similar to vocational schools and employment.

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