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History, identity, and the school curriculum in Northern Ireland: an empirical study of secondary students' ideas and perspectives

KEITH C. BARTON and ALAN W. MCCULLY

This study reports results of an empirical investigation of secondary students' conceptions of history and identity in Northern Ireland. Interviews with 253 students from a variety of backgrounds indicate that they initially identify with a wide range of historical themes, but that these identifications narrow as they study the required national curriculum during the first 3 years of secondary school. Often, they draw selectively from the formal curriculum in order to support their developing identification with the history of their own political/religious communities. This process is most apparent among boys, at predominantly Protestant schools, and in schools located in areas of conflict. These findings suggest that to address history's role in ongoing community conflict, educators may need to challenge more directly the beliefs and assumptions held by students of varied backgrounds, as well as to provide a clearer alternative to the partisan histories encountered elsewhere.

History plays an important role in the formation of individual and community identity, and when groups with differing historical experiences come into conflict, the past can be used to justify and perpetuate discord. Nowhere is this truer than in Northern Ireland, where daily life is punctuated by reminders of longstanding divisions and grievances. Educators and policy-makers, in Northern Ireland and elsewhere, frequently look to the formal study of history as a way of countering such divisiveness. They hope that history education can diminish young people's acceptance of narrow or partisan perspectives on the past, either by providing them with neutral and balanced portrayals of controversial historical issues or by emphasizing non-politicized skills of academic study. Some educators, however, are sceptical of the effectiveness of formal schooling in overcoming deeply entrenched historical viewpoints.

This paper addresses such questions through an empirical investigation of students' ideas; it examines the connections that students in Northern Ireland make between history and identity, and how their ideas change after

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studying the required national curriculum. The findings reported here call into question any simplistic notion of the relationship between historically-grounded identities and formal study at school: students neither reject school history outright nor use it to replace prior, community-based historical narratives. Rather, they draw selectively from the school curriculum (and other sources) to support a range of developing historical identities. Although many students' identifications in Northern Ireland are bound up with the current political conflict, they are by no means dominated by simple Unionist/Nationalist divisions. Moreover, these identifications vary by religious background, gender, geographic region, and type of school. By shedding light on the complex ways in which students' historically-grounded identities develop during early adolescence, this paper provides information critical to curriculum design in history. These findings should stimulate reflection on the history curriculum, not only in Northern Ireland but in any society where history aims at contemporary relevance through its impact on young people.

Historical identification and the school curriculum in Northern Ireland

Encounters with history are an inescapable part of life in Northern Ireland. A casual drive through the region quickly reveals ancient stone circles, Celtic crosses, Norman forts, and any number of other historic (and pre-historic) structures. Residents are justly proud of this inheritance, and visits to museums and historic sites are an important source of recreation and personal fulfilment. For some, the pursuit of history becomes a lifelong hobby, one expressed in genealogical research or local history associations. War memorials found in the centre of most towns represent a more reverential attitude toward the past, and recent shrines dedicated to victims of political violence also command a sense of remembrance. For many people, the most obvious use of history lies in the annual parades, commemorating events such as the Battle of the Boyne in 1690, that provoke resistance or even violence, and that briefly bring Northern Ireland under international scrutiny. Such politicized historical events are widely seen as contributing to group identity in Northern Ireland and, hence, to the continuation of conflict.

Many people in Northern Ireland feel deeply committed to their political or religious communities, and this identification is often credited with perpetuating disputes (Cairns and Mercer 1984, Whyte 1990, Cassidy and Trew 1998, Crisp *et al*. 2001). History, meanwhile, forms an integral part of that sense of identity (Gallagher 1989, Buckley and Kenney 1995, Jarman 1997). Indeed, some contend that continuing social and political problems in Northern Ireland stem in part from the prevalence of history in popular consciousness, particularly in the form of partisan stories of one community's heroism and martyrdom and the other's treachery and intolerance. Each of the two major political orientations—Nationalist and Unionist—has its own version of the past, and each invokes these historical narratives to justify contemporary attitudes, policy positions, or even violence. Unionists, for example, emphasize historical events that have established Northern

Ireland's position as part of Britain, or that represent assaults on either Protestants, or on the status of Northern Ireland. Nationalists, on the other hand, focus on Irish cultural and political autonomy and on injustices suffered by Catholics and other Irish natives. Politicized representations of history are found not only in political discourse and the media, but also in ever-present visual symbols—gable walls, flags, arches, banners, and even graffiti (Buckley and Kenney 1995, Walker 1996, Jarman 1997, McBride 1997).

Given the importance of the past in Northern Ireland, as well as the perception that history learned outside school contributes to social conflict, educators there have devoted careful attention to constructing a curriculum aimed at providing students a more balanced understanding of the subject. At the primary level, controversial stories of national history are avoided, as students learn about historic societies in Ireland and elsewhere—Mesolithic peoples, the Vikings, Ancient Egyptians, and so on—as well as about the nature of evidence and interpretation. They begin to study national history in the first 3 years of secondary school, when they are about ages 11–14. Each year features a core module focusing on a period deemed essential for understanding Irish history, but these modules are contextualized within a wider British and European framework. In the first year, students study the impact of the Normans on the mediaeval world, including the Norman invasion of Ireland. In the second year, English conquest and colonization of Ireland is placed in the context of change and conflict in the 16th and 17th centuries. Third-year students study the growth of Irish nationalism and unionism from the Act of Union to Partition,[1] including links with British politics, the influence of European nationalist movements and the impact of World War I (Department of Education, Northern Ireland 1996). This curriculum is the same for students at all schools, regardless of the religious affiliation of those who attend. At the time of writing, however, the curriculum is undergoing a process of revision, which may result in a curriculum framed more by learning outcomes than prescribed historical content.

However, history at the secondary level in Northern Ireland is not meant simply to cover content. Seeking to build on foundations established at primary level, teachers encourage students to take an inquiry approach, to understand events from the perspectives of those at the time, to recognize differing interpretations, and to arrive at conclusions only after considering primary and secondary evidence. As the third year of the secondary school represents the last compulsory exposure to history, there is a tacit recognition by those who designed the curriculum that, by the completion of this stage, history—through its knowledge and skills—should contribute to greater understanding of a variety of cultural and political backgrounds amongst young people in Northern Ireland. If school history is successful in reaching its goal, it should provide students an alternative source of historical understanding—alternative, that is, to the presumably partisan and sectarian histories they encounter outside school. The social purposes of history education remain largely tacit at present. Two of the key criteria underpinning proposals for a new curriculum, presently at the consultation stage, are those of social relevance and establishing links across subject areas that are explicit to students. For example, the contribution that history might make to a new Local and Global Citizenship programme (Council for

the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment 2003) is more clearly defined and expressed. In debating the implications of these proposals, a dilemma that has yet to be adequately resolved within the Northern Ireland history-teaching community during the decades of the Troubles from 1968 may be addressed: Should teachers chiefly concern themselves with students' understanding of past event? Or should they overtly seek to confront the present through the past (McCully 1998)?

Many educators, however, are sceptical of students' willingness to entertain such alternative historical perspectives. There is a widespread assumption in Northern Ireland that children absorb sectarian stories of the national past at an early age and retain them throughout their lives (Stewart 1977, Byrne 1997). Secondary teachers often lament their inability to overcome early learning, and they warn they cannot compete with lessons learned outside school (Barton *et al.* 2003). Yet, research with students in the primary grades suggests their understanding of the past is not dominated by politicized historical narratives and that they recognize the role of evidence in constructing historical accounts (Barton 2001a, b, c). This lack of congruence among curricular objectives, teachers' perceptions, and research with younger children points to the need for clarification of the nature of students' historical understanding, particularly the ways in which group identity may affect their views of the past and how those views change—if at all—during their encounter with the secondary curriculum. Although previous research has investigated issues of history and identity in Northern Ireland, none has focused directly on the development of such perspectives among children.

Research on history and identity in Northern Ireland

Two separate research traditions have investigated identity in Northern Ireland. The first, carried out primarily by psychologists, has been concerned with how people categorize themselves and others. These studies have examined a wide variety of questions derived from social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979), including how people in Northern Ireland identify themselves using various labels, including but not limited to religious or political categories (Trew 1983, Cairns and Mercer 1984, Waddell and Cairns 1991), the relative importance of such identities and their correlation with self-esteem (Cairns and Mercer 1984, Gallagher 1989, Cassidy and Trew 1998, Muldoon and Trew 2000), and the relation between identity and attitudes toward social and political issues and events (Cairns *et al.* 1998, McGinley *et al.* 1998, Whyte 1998, Leach and Williams 1999, Irwing and Stringer 2000, Devine-Wright 2001). This research has relied primarily on quantitative instruments, particularly standardized or researcher-created questionnaires involving choices of binary pairs, semantic differential ratings, personality scales, Likert or Likert-type items, and other attitudinal measures. Some early research examined identity among primary and early secondary students (Cairns 1980, 1989, Trew 1983),[2] but most recent work has focused on older adolescents (Hunter *et al.* 1993, 1996, Whyte 1998) or university students (Cassidy and Trew 1998, Leach and Williams 1999, Irwing and Stringer 2000, Crisp *et al.* 2001).

This work has confirmed the importance of group identity in forming perceptions of the social world among many people in Northern Ireland. Little attention has been devoted, however, to investigating the role history plays in these identities. As Cairns and Darby (1998: 759) note, the 'role of the past in the present' has been largely neglected among psychologists investigating identity in Northern Ireland. One recent exception is the work of Devine-Wright (2001), who examined group and individual attitudes toward historical commemorations through a survey of 600 Belfast residents. That study, however, was subject to the limitations of all survey research, including a low response rate, a self-selected sample, and the inability of participants to clarify or expand on their answers or to give responses not already included on the survey.

Studies that have more directly addressed the relationship between history and identity have been part of a separate tradition, largely historical and/or interpretive in nature. McBride (1997), for example, examined how the Protestant 'siege mentality' has been perpetuated over the past 300 years by historians, artists, politicians, and clergy. Other historical studies of the role of the past in creating a distinctly Protestant/Unionist identity include Hill (1984–1985), Jackson (1992), Kelly (1994), and Walker (1996, 2000). Most of this work is based on analysis of historic documents—books, pamphlets, published speeches and sermons, and newspaper articles— although it often refers to contemporary practices as well. A more ethnographic approach is found in works by Jarman (1997) and Buckley and Kenney (1995), who attend to the use of historical symbols in parades, visual displays, and public rhetoric to develop and maintain collective identities, both Nationalist and Unionist.

The qualitative nature of these historical and ethnographic approaches contribute significantly to an understanding of the complex ways in which people in Northern Ireland use history as a way of creating and maintaining collective identities. However, the open-ended nature of such research makes it difficult to develop generalizations or comparisons across groups. In addition, this work has focused almost entirely on the 'production' of historical identity—the use of historical references and symbols in speeches, books, banners, murals, and so on. Much less attention has been paid to the 'consumption' of such history—that is, how people react to and make sense of the historical representations to which they are exposed (Rosenzweig and Thelen 1998, Wertsch 1998). And almost none of this research focuses on the development of children's ideas about history and identity. Yet, studying children should be an essential component of understanding identity, because—as the early studies of social psychologists in Northern Ireland recognized—identity is a social construction that develops over time. This concern leads to the principal research questions in this study:

- How do students in Northern Ireland connect history to their own identities,
- How does this change during the course of their exposure to the required national curriculum, and
- How does it vary among groups?

Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in a constructivist and sociocultural perspective on historical understanding. For most of the last two decades, theory and research in history education has been part of the larger constructivist tradition in education and psychology. From this perspective, neither children nor adults passively absorb information, whether at school or elsewhere. Rather, they engage in a process of active construction in which they interpret new information—encountered in a variety of formats and settings—in light of their prior ideas and their ongoing attempts to make sense of the world (Levstik and Barton 2001). A student's historical understanding, then, is not simply a mirror of external information but a unique set of mental schemata resulting from interaction between the individual and environment. Sociocultural theory emphasizes that this process is necessarily situated in social contexts, and that the information to which students are exposed has been historically and socially constructed (Cole 1996, Wertsch 1998). Thus, the development of understanding involves the selective appropriation of socially and culturally situated knowledge that groups and individuals use for social purposes.

Among the most important forms of knowledge in history are the overarching concepts people use to bring order to the events of the past and patterns of change over time. People do not simply construct their understanding of history as a series of discrete facts, but rather imbue them with meaning by connecting facts to each other and to broader patterns or themes (Booth 1980). Thus, Americans may consider a range of disparate events to be representative of a larger 'quest-for-freedom' narrative (Wertsch 1998) or a pattern of steadily expanding social and material progress (Barton and Levstik 1998). This kind of thinking is often regarded as especially characteristic of historical perspectives in Northern Ireland, where past and present events repeatedly are interpreted as 'recurrent manifestations of an underlying theme' such as 'subjection' or 'siege' (Brown 1988: 66).[3] In this study, then, we aimed not to evaluate the extent to which students had retained a particular body of discrete skills or knowledge, but to examine their constructions of historical themes or concepts and the connection they made between those and their own identities.

Methods

Design

To investigate the connections students made between history and their identities, and the changes that took place in those connections, we conducted a cross-sectional study of students who had completed (or were nearing completion of) each of the first 3 years of the secondary history curriculum. As with all cross-sectional research, a disadvantage of our design is that we were unable to collect information on changes in individual participants' ideas; we can only point to differences among students over these 3 years of schooling. The research relied on open-ended interviews combined

with a picture-sorting task in which pairs of students created groupings of historical images and chose those with which they most identified. This task was loosely based on Kelly's (1955) repertory-grid technique, which was designed to uncover the personally-created constructs individuals use to organize their experiences. Kelly's original procedures have been modified and used in many settings over the years (Ryle 1975, Scheer 1996), and we considered it especially appropriate for this study because our interest was in the ideas students used to conceptualize historic trends, people, and events. We did not want to establish a set of concepts beforehand and then assess students' understanding or acceptance of those concepts. This was because we wanted to avoid making the interviews resemble a testing situation (in which participants might be more concerned with our expectations than in articulating their own understanding). Furthermore, our knowledge of how children think about history is still at such a rudimentary stage that we could not reasonably hope to identify the range of concepts they would consider meaningful. A repertory-type technique, thus, seemed an appropriate way of eliciting the ideas that students found salient. This approach has not been used previously in studies of historical thinking, however, and we hoped that our study might make an initial contribution toward establishing its advantages and limitations.

Instruments and procedures

The picture-sorting task involved a set of 28 images, some of which were accompanied by brief captions (see Appendix).[4] We chose these pictures so that students could respond to a wide range of people and events in the history of Ireland and Britain. Some related to topics found in the school curriculum, such as pictures of a Mesolithic hut, Unionist leader Edward Carson (1854–1935), and the Easter Rising in 1916, whereas others focused on topics not normally studied at school, including the *Titanic*, hiring fairs, and the United Irishmen. We also included images that we believed most adults would associate either with Unionist perspectives on history (such as a poster urging resistance to home rule and paintings of King William III (ruled 1689–1702) or of the Battle of the Somme in 1916), or with Nationalist viewpoints (such as a drawing of Irish Catholic leader Daniel O'Connell (1775–1847) and photographs of a Civil Rights march or a monument to Charles Stewart Parnell (1846–1891), an Irish Nationalist politician). Some images, meanwhile, had little direct connection to either community, such as photographs of a reconstructed crannog (i.e. an ancient Irish fortified dwelling constructed in a lake or marsh) and of US soldiers in Northern Ireland during World War II. Images were drawn from periods ranging from Mesolithic times through the present, and they included not only political and military affairs but social and economic history. We selected these pictures from many sources, including engravings, photographs, paintings, posters, and wall murals, and whenever possible we chose images that were ambiguous or that suggested multiple connections—such as a mural associating the mythical Irish figure Cuchulainn with Protestant paramilitaries and a picture of Irish soldiers wearing German-style helmets during World War

II. Our goal was to provide students with the greatest possible range of items to work with, so that the categories they developed would not be artificially limited to only a few areas of the past, and so that we would gain information on patterns that might cut across diverse elements. Although supplying students with such materials undoubtedly limited the range of possible responses, previous research with children's historical thinking suggested that a set of visual images would provoke a greater range and depth of response than asking them to verbally identify historical items on their own (Levstik and Barton 1996, Barton and Levstik 1998).

We presented students with a set of 27–28 pictures (an additional picture was added during the research project, for reasons to be explained later) and asked them to arrange them into groups they thought went together. We also explained that they might have only a few groups or several, that each group might contain only two pictures or many, and that some pictures might not go into any group at all. We then allowed several minutes for students to work together on the task, and after they had completed their arrangement, we asked them to explain why they had put each group of pictures together. The interview that followed the picture-arrangement task was designed to gather information on several elements of the participants' understanding of history and its role in Northern Ireland society. First, we asked students which of the categories, or which individual pictures, 'have the most to do with you or who you are'. We phrased this question as broadly (and vaguely) as this because we suspected students might not have a clear understanding of the phrase 'identify with', and also so that our wording would not over-determine their responses and would allow them to read their own interpretations into the question. We then asked which pictures they considered most important in historical terms (whether or not they were related to their own identity), which they had learned about in school and which out of school, how learning history had changed their ideas about various topics (if at all), why they thought history was important to people in Northern Ireland, why it was a topic they studied at school, and whether and why people had differing ideas about history. Because the questions were open-ended, we invariably probed students' answers, asking for examples or clarifications and often drawing their attention to specific pictures or other historical topics in order to examine how they applied their ideas to concrete instances.[5]

Interviews were conducted away from students' classrooms, usually in spare rooms, libraries, or offices. To generate richer data, we interviewed students in groups, most of which consisted of same-sex pairs from a single grade level, although scheduling irregularities sometimes led to groups with three students or a combination of genders and/or grades.[6] A potential disadvantage of using interviews as a way of gaining insight into students' thinking derives from the 'culture of politeness' that operates in most public settings in Northern Ireland. Because it is usually not possible to determine quickly the political position or religious membership of strangers, discussion of controversial issues in potentially mixed company is often tacitly avoided. It is possible, then, that these students discussed sensitive issues more cautiously than they would have in other settings. In most cases, however, they would have been unable to determine the religious or political

affiliation of either of the interviewers, and so this muting of responses at least should have applied equally across the types of schools.

Population and sampling procedures

The participants in our research constituted a cross-sectional sample of 253 students, ranging in age from 11 to 14, approximately equal numbers of whom had studied each of the first 3 years of the secondary history curriculum. Data were collected during the 2000–2001 school year. We obtained participants through a process of stratified, convenience, cluster sampling. The segregated and stratified Northern Ireland school system, along with regional differences in experiences with the political situation, required that we identify students whose schools differed in at least three ways. The first was religious affiliation: most students in Northern Ireland attend schools that are predominantly either Protestant or Catholic. The former are known as 'Controlled' schools and are under the management of regional education boards, whereas the latter are referred to as 'Maintained' schools and are governed by boards established under the auspices of the Roman Catholic church. 'Integrated' schools represent a further category; ∼ 5% of students in Northern Ireland attend these schools, which enrol approximately equal numbers of Catholics and Protestants and are governed by individual boards chosen by parents. For this project, we interviewed students at four Maintained, five Controlled, and two Integrated schools. It should be noted, however, that the religious affiliation of individual students cannot be derived directly from school attendance, because local circumstances sometimes result in students' attendance at schools of the 'other' community. Thus, although we can identify differences among students who attended Catholic, Protestant, and Integrated schools, we cannot reliably draw conclusions about differences based on the religion of students themselves.

A second characteristic was selectivity. Most post-primary schools in Northern Ireland are either 'grammar schools', with admission limited to about the top 30% of students (based on a selection test taken in the final year of primary school), or 'secondary schools' (sometimes known as 'high schools'), open to all students but usually attended by those unable to gain admission to the more prestigious grammar schools. All Integrated schools are 'comprehensive', meaning they enrol students from the entire range of achievement levels, although in practice competition from grammar schools may limit this range somewhat. In this study, we interviewed students at four grammar schools (two Maintained and two Controlled), five secondary schools (two Maintained and three Controlled), and two comprehensive (Integrated) schools.

The final characteristic was geographic region. Political sentiments, community relations, and experiences with violence or extremism are unequally distributed within Northern Ireland. Some areas are sites of continuous and ongoing conflict and rancour, and others are relatively peaceful locations where obvious sectarian disputes are infrequent (though usually not entirely unknown). Given our focus on informal sources of historical learning and the use of history as a basis for identity, we expected

Table 1. Number and portion of interviews and students

	Interviews		Students	
Characteristic	n	Portion	n	Portion
Grade level				
First year	37	0.31	81	0.32
Second year	42	0.35	89	0.35
Third year	41	0.34	83	0.33
Mixed	1	0.01	N/A	N/A
Gender				
Female	53	0.44	116	0.46
Male	64	0.53	137	0.54
Mixed group	4	0.03	N/A	N/A
School type				
Catholic schools	41	0.34	89	0.36
Protestant schools	61	0.50	122	0.47
Integrated schools	19	0.16	42	0.17
Selectivity				
Grammar schools	41	0.34	87	0.34
Secondary schools	61	0.50	124	0.49
Comprehensive	19	0.16	42	0.17
Region				
Conflict areas	62	0.51	131	0.52
Non-conflict areas	59	0.49	122	0.48
Total	121		253	

that students might respond differently depending on the extent to which their towns or cities had been sites of overt community conflict. As a result, we included schools from regions that had experienced high levels of conflict in recent years as well as those that had been relatively peaceful, based on our judgement of the extent of public confrontations, political violence, or other sectarian incidents in each locale. Six schools fell into the 'conflict' category (three Controlled, two Maintained and one Integrated; three secondary, two grammar and one comprehensive) and five into the 'non-conflict' category (two Maintained, two Controlled and one Integrated school; two grammar, two secondary and one comprehensive).

   To select sites, we identified schools at which we had a reasonable expectation of access through personal contacts. Within each school, we asked the principal to identify students, representing the range of ability levels, who might be willing to participate, so that we would have a total of four girls and four boys at each grade level in mixed-sex schools, or corresponding numbers in pairs of single-sex schools. This non-random procedure was necessary to gain access, but it may have limited the range of students with whom we spoke. Table 1 shows the number and portion of interviews

conducted with students in each grade level, of each gender, and in each school type, selectivity type, and region, as well as the number and portion of students we interviewed in each category.

Analysis

The analysis that forms the basis for this paper consists of two parts. The first involves a summary of the frequency with which students choose groupings or individual pictures in response to the question, 'Which of these have the most to do with you or who you are?' These responses are further classified into broader analytic categories and time periods, and they are broken down by grade level, gender, school type, selectivity, and region. Responses that included multiple answers (as when a student identified with more than one picture or grouping) are included more than once and, thus, the number of responses does not correspond directly to the number of students interviewed. In addition, students occasionally identified with pictures from different time periods, but for the same reason, or identified with a picture but gave no explanation, and as a result the number of responses in each table differs slightly. Finally, the portion of responses in each category refers to the portion of total responses, rather than the portion of interviews in which it occurred or the portion of students who responded in that way. Because multiple responses were common, this procedure gives a better picture of the relative importance of each type of response than calculations based on the total number of students or interviews.

The second component of the analysis includes a larger qualitative component and is based on a process of analytic induction. Students' explanations of why they chose particular pictures (or groupings) were analysed inductively to identify recurring patterns, and these are presented both through illustrative quotes from students' responses and through tabulations of the number of responses exhibiting each pattern.

Results

The findings from this study indicate that secondary students in Northern Ireland do not identify solely with a limited set of politicized historical themes, and that their identifications cannot easily be predicted by their community backgrounds. When given the chance to identify and categorize their own historical themes, students responded by selecting a wide range of people, events, and trends, and, in many cases, students of varied backgrounds demonstrated similar patterns of identification. There were, however, important differences among groups of students, of which the most noticeable were related to grade level: over the course of 3 years of secondary schooling, their historical identifications narrowed considerably, and community divisions became increasingly important. Students' tendency to identify with community-based historical themes, or with the contemporary troubles, also varied according to gender, selectivity of school, and geographic region. These findings raise important questions about the way

in which history education in Northern Ireland connects with the experiences of young people.

Choices for identification

Table 2 displays the responses students gave when asked, 'Which of these pictures has the most to do with you, or who you are?' One of the most notable characteristics of these answers is their diversity. In 200 total responses, students selected at least 42 different individual pictures or groupings, as well as frequently declining to select any at all. Moreover, several of the categories in table 2 represent more than one distinct answer, because some closely related responses have been collapsed; the groupings labelled *Troubles* and *Murals*, in particular, include a variety of descriptions used by students. Note that only two responses (*Murals* and *War/wars*) exceeded 10% of the total, and only three others (*King William*, *Troubles*, and *None*) rose above 5%. Fourteen of the responses were unique answers offered by single students or groups. Responses also ranged across time periods (from the first mesolithic people in Ireland to current paramilitaries) and geographic spaces (from Nelson Mandela to Carrickfergus Castle), and included people and events related to social, economic, political, and military history.

Table 2. Frequency of choices for identification

Number of times selected ($n = 200$)	Choice of identification (number of times selected in parentheses)
> 20	Murals (24); War/s (21)
10–20	King William (14); None (11); Troubles (11)
5–9	Titanic (9); Bobby Sands Mural/Hunger (8); Rights/Civil Rights (8); Leaders (7); Mountsandel Archaeological Site (7); Carrickfergus Castle (7); Northern Ireland Locations/Historic Sites (5); Protestants/Protestant History (5); Siege of Derry (5); Ulster (5)
2–4	Ancient Pictures/Huts (4); Battle of the Somme (4); Cuchulainn Mural (4); St. Patrick's Church (4); Buildings (3); Easter Rising (3); Irish Famine (3); Miscellaneous (3); Religion (3); Belfast (2); Ireland/Irish History (2); Marching/Fighting (2); Northern Ireland Wars/Ulster Wars (2); Republicanism/Irish Nationalism (2)
1	Post-Industrial Revolution; Battle of the Boyne; British/Irish; Daniel O'Connell; Different Religions; Division; Famous People; Fighting for Beliefs; Nelson Mandela; Paramilitaries; Protestant Freedom; Queen Elizabeth; United Irish; World War II

Table 3.   Portion of thematically grouped responses by school type

Response	Portion of total responses			
	Maintained	Controlled	Integrated	Total
National history, religion, culture	0.37	0.27	0.18	0.29
Troubles in Northern Ireland	0.26	0.30	0.26	0.28
Wars	0.08	0.15	0.24	0.15
Ireland/N. Ireland, local heritage	0.20	0.10	0.21	0.09
None	0.03	0.10	0.06	0.07
Leaders	0.06	0.04	0.06	0.05
Miscellaneous	0.00	0.05	0.00	0.02
n	65	82	34	181

From the diversity of students' responses, it is possible to identify a more limited number of themes that cut across their range of identification. Most of the pictures (or groupings) that students selected fell into five broad categories (see table 3). The most popular of these related to either Catholic/ Nationalist or Protestant/Unionist history, religion, or culture. At Maintained schools, these Catholic/Nationalist responses included the hunger striker Bobby Sands (1954–1981) and the more general category of 'hunger', as well as pictures related to St. Patrick, 'religion', Civil Rights, the Easter Rising, 'Nationalism' or 'Republicanism', Daniel O'Connell, and others. At Controlled schools, the Protestant/Unionist responses included King William, the Siege of Derry, the Somme, and the Cuchulainn mural, as well as responses related to 'Ulster', 'Protestants', 'religion', and others. Such responses were the most common ones among students at Maintained schools, the second most common at Controlled schools, and the fourth most common at Integrated schools. At Integrated schools, some students responded in ways similar to their counterparts at Controlled schools, whereas others more closely resembled students at Maintained schools. There was no separate set of 'national history' responses at Integrated schools that transcended the Nationalist/Unionist divide.

A second group of responses, nearly as common as the first, included categories that focused on conflict and division in Northern Ireland, but did not relate to a single religious or political community. Most of these were associated with groups of murals from both communities or with categories that students explicitly described as being about 'the Troubles'. This was the most common set of responses among students at both Controlled and Integrated schools, and the second most common among those at Maintained Schools.

The third most common category was associated with 'wars', and consisted particularly of pictures related to World Wars I and II. These responses were more common among students at Integrated schools than those at either Controlled or Maintained schools. The fourth major category consisted of responses connected to Ireland, Northern Ireland, or local communities, but not explicitly related to a single tradition or to the

religious/political conflict. These included the *Titanic*, the Famine (when not linked to Catholic history or Bobby Sands), 'ancient' pictures, Carrickfergus Castle, 'Northern Ireland', and the Native Irish. (Notably, such responses occurred twice as often at Integrated and Maintained Schools as at Controlled schools.) Five per cent of students, distributed evenly among the three types of schools, identified with 'leaders' (usually including King William, Queen Elizabeth I, and Nelson Mandela), and a small portion of students chose pictures or groupings (such as 'buildings') that did not fit into any of these categories.

The groupings we have just described represent our attempt to bring order to students' choices by grouping them into broader themes, and such an attempt runs the risk of imposing categories that students themselves might not have considered salient. However, when we asked them to explain their choices, students' responses closely mirrored these categories (see table 4). At both Maintained and Controlled schools, for example, students most often justified their choices by explaining how the pictures related to their national or religious communities, such as one boy at a Maintained school who grouped several pictures into a category he described as 'Republican' and explained, 'I come from a Republican background. ... I'm interested in Irish history'. More often, students explained their identification with specific images rather than larger groupings. The mural of Bobby Sands was a particularly popular choice at Maintained schools, and students explained its significance to them by noting, 'He fought to get Ireland free back in his time', 'Most Catholics believe in what he did and other stuff because he fought for his country and he ended up dying', 'He's a Catholic, just like I am', 'He was a Catholic, and we're Catholic, and he fought for us ... like he was fighting with the Protestants to save us and stuff like that there', 'It is an important part of Irish history because they were trying to move forward, by changing prison conditions, and they had to suffer', and 'It's more sort of Irish, if you know what I mean'. Similarly, students who choose the Easter Rising explained, 'They tried to fight for a united Ireland', and 'I was born in Ireland and this happened in Ireland'.

Table 4. Portion of explanations by type of school

Explanation	Portion of total responses			
	Maintained	Controlled	Integrated	Total
National or religious community	0.29	0.22	0.26	0.25
Related to the Troubles	0.16	0.20	0.23	0.19
Miscellaneous	0.20	0.14	0.06	0.15
Had an effect on the present	0.07	0.09	0.26	0.11
Physical proximity	0.12	0.04	0.09	0.08
Rights, freedom, social justice	0.04	0.13	0.00	0.08
Family connections/ancestors	0.08	0.06	0.06	0.07
No strong identification	0.04	0.10	0.06	0.07
n	75	98	35	208

Explanations by students at Controlled schools resembled those at Maintained schools. One student, for example, chose a set of murals that he referred to as 'the Protestant ones' and explained, 'That's our religion, that's our background, our families' background'. Another referred to a grouping as 'the Ulster ones' and explained that he identified with them 'because if it became a United Ireland, then Ulster … nobody would listen to what they said and what their views were and all'. King William was a popular choice among these students, and several noted his role in establishing Protestant control in Ireland: 'He fought in the Battle of the Boyne and he won and we celebrate it', 'This one here is how we won', and 'He won the Battle of the Boyne for the Protestants. … It means a lot to Protestants, doesn't it?' Some of these students referred specifically to community celebrations of William's victory at the Boyne: one boy, for example, explained that he had selected the picture of William 'because just my religion, and just all the different photos and all, of marching, just go down and watch the people marching, and to do with my religion and all', and one girl pointed out that 'we have marches and all for him, so, and a whole lot of people go to them'. Again, responses at Integrated schools were identical to those at either Maintained or Controlled schools: students who responded in this way did not give explanations that reflected a national identity apart from Nationalist/Catholic or Unionist/Protestant perspectives.

The second most popular set of responses was related to the Troubles and appeared more as a commentary on life in Northern Ireland than as a statement of particular loyalties. One girl at an Integrated school, for example, identified with a group of pictures she had categorized as 'the Troubles' and explained, 'That's the biggest thing in our lives, and you can't go anywhere without being reminded of that'. At Maintained schools, students' explanations sometimes referred to sets of murals, at other times to political rallies or marches, and at still others to military troops, but the explanations themselves were very similar: one girl identified with a set of pictures because of 'the fighting in Northern Ireland, because we live in Northern Ireland', another noted that 'it's the way our life is now you know, everybody's like painting things on walls', and still another explained, 'They're still fighting in Ireland, and we live here'. Similarly, one boy chose a set of pictures because 'we're living through an age where there's still fighting', and another explained, 'We live in Ireland, and it's still going on, the Troubles'. At Controlled schools, explanations in this category most often related specifically to murals. Students described these as elements of the environment that could not be ignored, and they often saw them as emblematic of the Troubles more generally. One boy, for example, commented, 'I think the three murals have most to do with us, because, since we live in Northern Ireland and there's a lot of things going on, all the UVF (i.e. Ulster Volunteer Force) and the IRA (i.e. Irish Republican Army) and all'. Others noted, 'It's to do with our country, and how it is today, and it affects how we live today', 'It's all like happening, it's not like over or anything', and 'Sometimes it's just to annoy other people … and it sort of destroys the scenery and everything'. As this quote suggests, students sometimes identified with images related to the Troubles, even when they condemned them. One boy, for example, noted that he identified with a paramilitary mural 'because it is

depriving us of peace and things like that', and his interview partner agreed, adding, 'Well, 'cause it's affecting us, it's making our country not as free as it should be, and more dangerous'.

In the third most popular type of explanation, particularly common at Integrated Schools, students justified their choices on the extent to which an event in the past had affected life in the present. One boy, for example, noted that 'the war changed everything', and another suggested that if Britain had lost World War II, 'we might have been like in a German school or something'; similarly, one girl explained that if Germany had won, 'we wouldn't be talking English'. Sometimes these explanations overlapped with identifications related to the Troubles or to national history, particularly at the other types of schools. At Maintained schools, for example, one girl noted that she identified with pictures related to Home Rule and the Easter Rising because 'it like changed the religions around here', and a boy identified with the same group because 'we's were affected by the religion like and the different like wars and stuff between them'. More specifically, one boy identified with a group of pictures related to Home Rule by noting 'Ireland was all one once, and then we, or Northern Ireland, gets split up from Republic of Ireland, and we live in Northern Ireland'. His interview partner chose the same set of pictures and explained, 'If it wasn't for Carson, then Ireland would still be all one, and if it wasn't for like people like Daniel O'Connell, they wouldn't have Home Rule in Dublin'. Similarly, one student at a Controlled school identified with King William because 'if he hadn't come over Protestants wouldn't have come over and there wouldn't be no trouble', and another noted that the Home Rule crisis 'sort of determined whether we would be Protestant of Catholic and stuff like that, because if that there didn't happen … the history would have changed'. Although such explanations overlap with those in the first two categories (and were coded as representative of more than one category), they differ in that they emphasize not just national history or the Troubles, but the origins of current perspectives in the events of the past.

Three other explanations were given by at least 10 students each. First, some explained their choices on the basis of physical proximity. Several students who identified with the Mountsandel archaeological site, for example, noted that it was close to where they lived. Similarly, students who chose murals sometimes talked not about their political or historical significance but simply about having seen those particular murals near where they lived. Secondly, several students explained that they identified with the pictures they chose because of the involvement of family members or ancestors in the events depicted. At both Maintained and Controlled schools, for example, several students noted the involvement of grandparents or great-grandparents in the World Wars, and a small number explained that relatives had either sailed or worked on the *Titanic* (built in Belfast). Finally, several students at Controlled schools explained their identification in terms of the importance of rights or social justice, even when not specifically linked to their own religious/political community. These responses focused on Nelson Mandela, soldiers in the World Wars, or other pictures that students perceived as being relevant to co-operation for desirable social ends.

This leaves two other categories: those in which students expressed no strong identification, and a large set of 'miscellaneous' responses. Some students declined to choose any pictures they identified with, and others selected pictures but then fell silent when asked to explain their choices. In neither case did students articulate a clear rejection of such identification (nor did they suggest other pictures they might have identified with); they simply said they did not think any of the pictures were especially related to themselves or who they were. Other students gave explanations that were uncommon or unique. This included those who gave unclear explanations and those who identified with pictures because they had studied about them at school, because they had a personal interest in them, because the pictures involved famous people or leaders, or because they represented death or suffering. Although the total number of miscellaneous responses is large, no single explanation in this category was given more than five times, except 'we studied it at school', given by nine students.

Differences across grade level, gender, region, and selectivity of schools

Grade level A clear pattern emerged when students' responses were broken down by grade level: the portion of responses related to Protestant/Unionist or Catholic/Nationalist history, religion and culture differed dramatically from first to third year. Fewer than 25% of responses fell into this category among either first- or second-year students, but nearly 50% did so in the third year (see table 5). The increasing popularity of these choices for identification came at the expense of several other categories, including those

Table 5. Portion of thematically grouped responses by year, gender, selectivity, and region

	Portion of total responses									
	Year			Gender		Selectivity[a]			Region[b]	
Response	1st	2nd	3rd	F	M	G	S	C	C	NC
National history, religion, culture	0.23	0.20	0.47	0.23	0.34	0.25	0.37	0.19	0.38	0.20
Troubles in Northern Ireland	0.11	0.39	0.22	0.30	0.28	0.30	0.27	0.47	0.21	0.33
Wars	0.14	0.18	0.10	0.06	0.19	0.13	0.11	0.25	0.14	0.13
Ireland/N. Ireland, local heritage	0.23	0.14	0.10	0.20	0.09	0.17	0.12	0.22	0.12	0.19
None	0.12	0.02	0.07	0.09	0.05	0.06	0.07	0.06	0.04	0.09
Leaders	0.07	0.06	0.02	0.08	0.03	0.05	0.05	0.06	0.05	0.04
Miscellaneous	0.02	0.03	0.02	0.03	0.02	0.05	0.01	0.00	0.02	0.02
n	57	66	58	79	98	64	84	32	91	91

[a] Grammar, Secondary, Comprehensive (all Comprehensive schools in this study were also Integrated).
[b] Conflict, non-conflict.

Table 6.   Portion of explanations by year, gender, selectivity, and region

Response	Portion of total responses									
	Year			Gender		Selectivity[a]			Region[b]	
	1st	2nd	3rd	F	M	G	S	C	C	NC
National or religious community	0.21	0.21	0.35	0.21	0.30	0.21	0.29	0.26	0.32	0.19
Related to the Troubles	0.08	0.27	0.17	0.21	0.19	0.23	0.15	0.23	0.14	0.25
Miscellaneous	0.24	0.13	0.12	0.29	0.06	0.21	0.14	0.06	0.15	0.14
Had an effect on the present	0.10	0.11	0.12	0.08	0.13	0.08	0.08	0.26	0.11	0.12
Physical proximity	0.09	0.10	0.04	0.07	0.08	0.07	0.08	0.09	0.06	0.10
Rights, freedom, social justice	0.04	0.10	0.03	0.04	0.10	0.08	0.09	0.00	0.10	0.05
Family connections/ ancestors	0.09	0.07	0.04	0.04	0.08	0.05	0.08	0.06	0.08	0.06
No strong identification	0.12	0.01	0.09	0.11	0.05	0.07	0.08	0.06	0.06	0.09
n	68	71	69	90	108	73	99	35	103	104

[a] Grammar, Secondary, Comprehensive (all Comprehensive schools in this study were also Integrated).
[b] Conflict, non-conflict.

related to Ireland, Northern Ireland, and local heritage, wars, leaders, and 'no identification'.

Students' explanations for their choices revealed a similar pattern: among first- and second-year students, 20% of explanations were phrased in terms of the importance of national or religious communities, but in the final year 35% of their explanations related to such issues (see table 6). This was accompanied by a clear decrease in the frequency with which students explained their choices in terms of physical proximity, family connections, and miscellaneous factors. Among the most common choices and explanations, only those related to the Troubles did not decline from first to third year. These increased dramatically in the second year and then fell back to levels slightly above those of the first year.

The decline in the portion of 'miscellaneous' responses is particularly noticeable. Several first-year students, and some in the second year, said they identified with pictures because they knew about them, were interested in them, or had studied them in school. One girl identified with the Mountsandel archaeological site because 'we done that in history at the start of the year and learned about it', and she noted that other students might identify with different pictures because 'they might not have learned about it when they done history; they might have done other stuff'. Another first-year student identified with archaeological remains 'because you see an awful lot of them around when you go and visit the National Trust places', and still another explained, 'I like old stuff about archaeologists and stuff'. Other first- and second-year students identified with the *Titanic* because they had

learned about it on television, because it was built in Belfast, or in one case because it sank on the same date as the student's birthday. By the third year, however, almost no students justified their choices in terms of simple familiarity or personal interest.

Not only the relative proportion, but the very nature of students' explanations changed between the first and third years, particularly among those who identified with aspects of national history and culture. Younger students phrased their identifications in general terms, whereas those in the third year—who had studied the Home Rule crisis and the events leading to Partition—gave more detailed and specific explanations. At Maintained schools, for example, one first-year girl chose a set of Nationalist murals and explained,

> Where I used to live there was loads of them and I just like looking at them because of all the Catholic ones; there was one where I used to live that had Irish dancing on them and I like looking at them and what they say about everything.

Similarly, a second-year student noted that such murals were 'all like cultures of Ireland, and I live in Ireland', and another said of Bobby Sands, 'He's a Catholic, just like I am'. Third-year students, however, included much more historical detail. One girl, for example, identified with the Easter Rising 'because they tried to fight for a united Ireland', and another noted that it was 'a big part of Irish history and that led up to a lot of stuff about Partition and Michael Collins' (Irish Revolutionary leader, 1890–1922). A third-year boy, meanwhile, identified with Daniel O'Connell 'because of the way he fought for Home Rule and because I would like Home Rule for Ireland'. Similarly, at Controlled Schools, many students in the first and second years commented on the presence of the Union flag in the picture of Edward Carson, but few mentioned him by name or showed an awareness of his role in history. However, in the third year, seven students identified him by name, and several more articulated his role as a figure of Ulster resistance. One boy, for example, identified with Carson because 'he didn't want a united Ireland when it was wanted, so I agree with that, so he would be to do with me'. As noted in our discussion of the study's design, its cross-sectional nature prevents us reaching firm conclusions about changes in individual students' ideas, but the consistency of these changes across a variety of schools suggests that they may be generalized to individuals. If so, this trend has important implications for the design of the history curriculum at school, and we will take up this issue further below.

Gender Some clear patterns also emerged when students' responses were broken down by gender (see tables 5 and 6). Boys and girls were nearly equally likely to identify with pictures or groupings that related to the Troubles, and their explanations for these choices also demonstrated a close equivalence. However, a higher proportion of boys' choices and explanations related to Protestant/Unionist or Catholic/Nationalist history, religion, and culture. In addition, the choice of 'wars' as a subject of identification was nearly three times as common among boys as among girls, and the percentages of explanations related to family connections, gaining rights or

self-determination, and the effect of the past on the present were higher among boys than girls. Higher portions of girls' responses, on the other hand, related to Ireland, Northern Ireland, and local heritage, as well as to leaders, and their explanations more often revealed no strong identification or fell into the miscellaneous category. At first glance, these findings are hardly surprising: surely most educators—or people on the street—could have predicted that boys would be more likely than girls to identify with national history and culture or with wars. Less obvious, however, is the fact that girls suggested no consistent set of alternative historical identifications, but instead gave a wide range of responses that indicated few clear tendencies. Again, this pattern has curricular implications that will be taken up in our discussion section.

Selection Patterns could also be discerned when students' responses were broken down by school selectivity, and these again were connected particularly to the frequency of identification with pictures or groupings related to national history and culture (see tables 5 and 6). Fewer responses at grammar schools related to Protestant/Unionist or Catholic/Nationalist groupings, and a smaller portion of responses were explained with reference to such issues. A higher proportion of responses at grammar schools, meanwhile, related to Ireland, Northern Ireland, and local heritage, and a slightly higher percentage related to the Troubles. Explanations at grammar schools, meanwhile, more often fell into the 'miscellaneous' category or related to the Troubles.

　　However, caution must be applied to the interpretation of these findings for two reasons. Firstly, the only comprehensive schools represented in our study were integrated schools, and so results in this category could not have varied independently of school type. Secondly, the degree of selectivity among grammar schools differs widely depending on local circumstances; some grammar schools, for example, may accept a greater range of students than similar schools to bolster attendance. Thus, students who qualify for admission to a grammar school in one part of Northern Ireland might have to attend a secondary school if they lived elsewhere. Comparisons, then, are limited to those between secondary and grammar schools rather than among all three levels of selectivity, and these should be read as indicative of differences among students at different types of schools rather than of differences among students at particular levels of achievement.

Region Finally, some differences appeared when the responses of students who lived in relatively peaceful areas of Northern Ireland were compared to those whose local areas have been more notably marked by conflict (see tables 5 and 6). A much higher proportion of students' responses in conflict areas related to national history and culture than in non-conflict areas; responses related to the Troubles and to Ireland, Northern Ireland, and local heritage (as well as no identification) were more common in non-conflict than in conflict areas. Similar patterns can be seen in students' explanations for their choices, with responses related to national history and culture more common in conflict areas, and those concerned with the Troubles more common in non-conflict areas. The portion of explanations in conflict areas

related to gaining rights or self-determination was also twice as high as in non-conflict areas.

Again, some caution must be applied to interpreting these findings, because general labels such as 'conflict' and 'non-conflict' may mask a wide range of experiences. Although schools designated as being in 'non-conflict areas' were within a relatively limited geographic region, the 'conflict area' schools represented a much wider range of circumstances, including two schools drawing their students from the Shankill and Falls Roads,[7] three in mid-Ulster (an area of significant sectarian conflict in recent years), and one in a town experiencing a paramilitary feud during the time of the interviews. In addition, experience with the conflict can vary widely depending on economic circumstances, and so many students even within a conflict area may have little direct experience with the Troubles.

Patterns of identification by time period

Students' responses can also be categorized chronologically. Most of their choices for identification—whether individual pictures or groupings—fell into one of three time periods: before Plantation (the period studied in the first year of secondary school, and also the focus of two required primary units); Plantation through World War II (roughly the time studied in the second and third years of secondary school, as well as the topic of one required primary unit); and Modern (a period not covered until the elective fourth and fifth years of secondary school, but the subject of one unit in the early primary grades). Some pictures or grouping did not neatly fit these categories, primarily because they extended beyond a single time period ('buildings' or 'Republicanism', for example).

As seen in table 7, few students identified with pictures from the pre-Plantation period, although this was more common among first-year students, who had recently studied the time, than those in the second and third years. The importance of the modern period increased dramatically after the first year, and this is consistent with the greater proportion of students who identified with pictures related to the Troubles; there was a corresponding decrease of not only responses related to the pre-Plantation period but also those that were unclassified (see table 8). Girls were also noticeably more likely to identify with the oldest time period, as were

Table 7.   Portion of chronologically grouped responses by school type

Time period	Portion of total responses			
	Maintained	Controlled	Integrated	Total
Before Plantation	0.09	0.05	0.19	0.09
Plantation through World War II	0.24	0.44	0.28	0.33
After World War II	0.29	0.31	0.17	0.28
Unclassified	0.40	0.20	0.36	0.30
n	68	85	36	189

Table 8.   Portion of chronologically grouped responses by year, gender, selectivity, and region

Time period	Portion of total responses									
	Year			Gender		Selectivity[a]			Region[b]	
	1st	2nd	3rd	F	M	G	S	C	C	NC
Before Plantation	0.16	0.06	0.07	0.12	0.04	0.05	0.08	0.19	0.01	0.17
Plantation through World War II	0.35	0.32	0.34	0.30	0.35	0.36	0.33	0.28	0.38	0.28
After World War II	0.12	0.32	0.34	0.28	0.29	0.29	0.31	0.17	0.33	0.22
Unclassified	0.37	0.30	0.25	0.29	0.31	0.30	0.28	0.36	0.28	0.33
n	57	69	61	82	99	66	87	36	94	95

[a]Grammar, Secondary, Comprehensive (all Comprehensive schools in this study were also Integrated).
[b]Conflict, non-conflict.

students from non-conflict areas. Both these groups were less likely to identify with the period from Plantation through World War II, and students in non-conflict areas also identified less with the modern period.

The most striking pattern in these chronologically grouped responses is the much greater frequency with which students at Controlled schools identified with the period from Plantation through World War II: 44% of these response related to that time period, compared with only 24% at Maintained and 28% at Integrated schools. The difference between students at Controlled and Maintained schools became clear during our earliest interviews and ultimately led us to modify the set of pictures we used. As already noted, in choosing pictures we tried to select a balance of those with which Catholic and Protestant students might identify. We included many of the people and events most important from an Irish Nationalist perspective—a Round Tower (a symbol of the Celtic past), a church named after St. Patrick, a picture of the 'Native Irish', Daniel O'Connell, Charles Stewart Parnell, the Easter Rising, a 1960s Civil Rights march, a mural commemorating the Irish Famine, and another representing the United Irish movement. And yet we noticed that Catholic students did not seem particularly engaged by any of these choices. Protestant students, presented with similarly iconic images from the Unionist past, were much readier to choose those they felt were related to their own identity, and many of these came from the period of Home Rule and Partition. As a result, we chose to add one further picture, the mural of Bobby Sands (partly because several students misinterpreted a famine mural as commemorating the 1982 hunger strike), and this immediately became the favoured and enthusiastic choice of students at Maintained schools. Not only did students specifically identify with this picture, but it became a focal point around which they organized larger groupings relating to hunger, civil rights, or the Troubles. None of the traditional icons of Irish Nationalism had provided them with this level of interest or conceptual focus. Had this picture been available in all interviews, the proportion of students choosing it obviously would have been higher. It

may also have resulted in a higher percentage of students choosing modern history as the basis for identification, as well as the proportion of those who explained their choices in terms of their national or religious community. Because interviews were conducted school-by-school, however, adding this picture should not have had an effect on the choices made by grade level.

Discussion

These findings lead to two important conclusions. The first is that community conflict in Northern Ireland is a strong influence—although not the only one—on students' perceptions of who they are and what is important to them. Readers familiar with Northern Ireland will hardly be surprised that students were most likely to identify with pictures that related to their national, religious, and cultural backgrounds, or that they consciously explained their choices in these terms. After all, such issues are a constant feature of public discourse and play an important role in the division between the two communities. However, students' responses contradict any simplistic generalizations about their historical identifications. Although items related to their national, religious, and cultural backgrounds were the most common sources of historical identification, fewer than 30% of students' responses involved such choices, and only 25% of their explanations were phrased in these terms. In other words, 70% or more of the responses involved identification with events other than those related to Protestant/Unionist or Catholic/Nationalist history.

Most notably, nearly as many responses indicated a general identification with Northern Ireland's Troubles: at all three types of schools, a large portion of students chose pictures that suggested identification with the community conflict that surrounded them rather than (or in addition to) any of the specific parties to that conflict. And nearly 50% of students' choices had nothing whatever to do with the conflict but related instead to the World Wars, local heritage, leaders, or other historical items. Their explanations, meanwhile, indicated the importance of physical proximity, family connections and ancestors, a concern with rights and justice (beyond their own community), the effect of the past on the present, and a range of other factors. As our theoretical framework suggests, students were not passively absorbing established historical narratives but actively constructing their historical identifications from a range of sources. Among the students in this study, at least, we must conclude that, although national, political, and religious issues were important, they did not dominate their conceptualization of their connection to history.

However, such issues increasingly moved toward such dominance over the 3 years during which students studied national history. After just 1 year of study, students had a wide range of historical identifications (including archaeological sites, the *Titanic*, the World Wars, and castles and other old buildings) and they explained those identifications in a variety of ways— noting personal knowledge and interest, physical proximity, and school study. After the third year of study, however, their choices and explanations had narrowed considerably, and they were much more likely to focus on

pictures related to their own national, religious, and cultural backgrounds. Moreover, their responses became much more specific as they used the content they had learned at school to add detail and context to their identifications: first-year students at a Controlled school might identify with Edward Carson because they saw a Union flag in the picture, but those in the third year identified with him because he fought against home rule and formed the UVF.

The role of community conflict in students' historical identifications has important implications for instructional practice and the design of curriculum. It supports the view of those who argue for a history curriculum that directly addresses potentially contentious subject-matter and draws links with the contemporary situation. Students' high levels of identification with such issues—and the frequency with which they identified with the period since World War II—suggests that this would be a highly motivating topic of study. Although the present rhetoric of official documents related to the history curriculum in Northern Ireland advocates such practice, in reality students are often left to make the link between past and present on their own. In many classrooms, history is presented in a chronological format that addresses events relevant to the current political situation, but students have little opportunity to engage directly the relationship between past and present. Our interviews suggest that students do make such connections on their own; and without teacher mediation those connections are likely to be highly selective and uncritical. As students study elements of the national past, many of them incorporate those elements into an increasingly politicized historical perspective. Their experiences with the required curriculum, then, may actually supply raw material for the partisan narratives that their study of history is meant to counteract. More directly addressing connections between past and present might help students develop the alternative, contextualized, and evidence-based views that form the rationale for history education (McCully *et al.* 2002).

Many teachers are hesitant to support such efforts, however, both because they fear the emotional responses that might occur in their classrooms, and because, as we have noted previously, they believe students' historical perspectives are so entrenched that little can be done about them (Smith and Robinson 1996). Their apprehension of emotional reactions may well be justified, but their perception of unshakeable ideas among students is not. Previous research with younger students indicates that their ideas about history are not dominated by contemporary political issues, and the findings reported here suggest the first 3 years of secondary school is the time during which such perspectives become important. Moreover, many students in our interviews had adopted, to varying degrees, a critical stance toward the significance of past events, whatever the perception of those events within their own communities; thus, identification with issues related to community conflict did not equate with support for particular political positions. This presents a tremendous opportunity: students enter secondary school with varied and diffuse ideas about their relationship to the past, and teachers could play a critical role in helping them expand on previous identifications or providing opportunities to develop new ones grounded in tolerance and mutual respect. As the curriculum review in Northern Ireland

enters its final consultation phase, the Local and Global Citizenship programme (Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment 2003), which emphasizes critical thinking and active engagement, is being advanced as a core component. Further, it is envisaged that more established subject areas will be oriented toward informing that contemporary debate, thereby demonstrating their relevance to students' everyday lives (Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment 2003). The contribution that history might make to this is being debated, but our findings suggest that new approaches may be required to ensure that connections between the study of the past and the exploration of the present are systematically bridged.

The second important conclusion derived from this study is that students' identification with history varies by school type, gender, geographic region, and selectivity of school. Identification with national history and culture, for example, was more common among boys, at secondary schools, and in areas of conflict. Identification with the overall region was more common among girls, at grammar and Integrated/comprehensive schools, and in non-conflict areas, and identification with the Troubles was also higher in non-conflict areas and at grammar and Integrated/comprehensive schools. Girls were also much less likely to identify with the topic of war. Even the time period of identification varied, as girls and students from non-conflict areas were more likely to identify with the oldest time periods and less likely to identify with the period from Plantation through World War II. The most dramatic difference between students at Controlled and Maintained schools lay in this area: those at Maintained schools were substantially more likely to identify with elements from this period.

These are not trivial differences because they indicate that some groups of students are more likely to identify with required topics and, as a result, may be better served by the national curriculum. Girls, for example, were less likely than boys to identify with topics emphasized in the curriculum (those related to Unionist/Nationalist history, to war, and to the time period covered in the second and third years of study). The attention given to the events of the 18th and early-19th century, and particularly to World War I, is more likely to inspire identification—and perhaps motivation and achievement—among boys. Although girls identified more closely with the overall region of Northern Ireland and with topics further removed in time, their responses displayed no clear or consistent alternative to the content they were required to study at school. History education in Northern Ireland seems to be geared, presumably unwittingly, to boys.

The greater frequency with which students at Controlled schools identified with items from the second and third years of study is also worth noting. It may be that the curriculum as it stands is perceived as more relevant by those from a Protestant background. If this is so, it flies in the face of the goal of opening students to inquiry and a range of interpretations, not to mention of developing their understanding of the inter-relatedness of events. We can only speculate as to why this discrepancy may exist. Perhaps contemporary Protestant insecurity dictates that past triumphs be used to shore up crumbling certainties, whereas Catholic confidence allows previous failures to be conveniently forgotten. However, whatever the underlying explanations, the

differing identifications of the two groups may have major educational and social consequences. Protestant students (whether at Controlled or Integrated schools) may consider the curriculum to be a tacit legitimation of their own cultural and political backgrounds, and Catholic students who do not proceed to elective courses may perceive an official rejection of historical topics (such as Bobby Sands) close to their own identities. Alternatively, if teachers attempt to challenge students' community-based historical perspectives, they may find their efforts more meaningful among Protestant students than among Catholics, because the latter have such low levels of identification with the topics found in the curriculum. In other words, a challenge to conventional wisdom about Protestant leader Edward Carson would be a challenge indeed, whereas a similar effort focused on Charles Parnell would have little resonance among Catholics. Ironically, then, the curriculum as it stands may both fail to legitimize the interests of Catholic students *and* fail to challenge their positions on contemporary historical events.

These differences among groups of students suggest that the curriculum might be more equitable if it spoke to a wider variety of themes and time periods, rather than being limited to a chronological progression that chiefly addresses major political events up through the 1920s. The study of Northern Ireland's post-1960 period—currently an elective course for students past age 14—seems particularly crucial to providing Catholic students with topics of study they consider relevant to the experiences of themselves and their communities, as well as helping all students better understand the Troubles and the connections between past and present. Meanwhile, more emphasis on social history (including its relevance to the present) might provide a source of identification for students unmotivated by wars and other political events, and attention to the experiences that cut across the two communities might provide alternatives to identifications based on national, cultural, and religious background. Finally, differences among groups call into question the 'symmetrical' approach to teaching history, whereby all schools follow the same curriculum. The prevailing assumption is that history should be taught in a common, multi-perspective way in all schools, and evidence from Department of Education Inspectorate reports indicates that this is overwhelmingly the case (Department of Education, Northern Ireland 2004). However, students' differing identification with that curriculum suggests history departments should perhaps be allowed greater freedom to design programmes that take account of individuals and their needs in the communities in which they live. Different strategies may be needed for students in different settings (McCully *et al.* 2002).

Conclusions

This paper has demonstrated that secondary students in Northern Ireland identify with the past in more various and complex ways than they are generally given credit for. Students do not necessarily begin their study of national history with rigid and stereotypical views, and this indicates that schools may be able to play an important role in helping them develop perspectives on the past that are grounded in inquiry, evidence, and multiple viewpoints—the

explicit goals of the history curriculum. And yet, this study also suggests that schools may not always succeed in this task, because as students move through the required curriculum, their identification with Unionist or Nationalist history actually intensifies, and they appear to draw selectively from the school curriculum in order to bolster their developing understanding of partisan historical narratives. This process seems more salient for some students than others, as Protestants, boys, and students from areas of conflict identify more closely with the political history they study at school than do others. These findings imply that if educators hope to reduce the extent to which history is used to justify ongoing community conflicts, they may need to challenge students' developing ideas more directly, as well as to provide a clearer alternative to the histories they encounter elsewhere (Barton and McCully 2003). Such efforts would also require greater sensitivity to the specific beliefs and assumptions that students of varied backgrounds bring with them to the classroom. Despite the best of intentions, a balanced and neutral course of study, standardized for the entire region, may not be up to the task of dealing with the emotionally charged uses of history in Northern Ireland.

These findings also have implications that reach beyond the specific circumstances of Northern Ireland. They demonstrate, first of all, the importance of directly and systematically inquiring into students' perspectives on history, rather than relying on anecdotal or untested assumptions about the nature of their beliefs and ideas. When students are asked what they think, they often demonstrate a range of complicated understandings, and this is as likely to be true in other countries as in Northern Ireland. Secondly, this study suggests that history educators need to examine more closely the unintended consequences of their choice of content, particularly the ways in which students from diverse backgrounds may interact differently with the same curriculum. Does studying particular topics or time periods appeal to some students more than others, even when the curriculum aims at neutrality and inclusiveness? In the USA, for example, one might ask whether the repeated attention given to the Colonial Era and the New Republic—a time when most North Americans of African descent were slaves—alienates African-American students today, even if examples of their experiences during that time are regularly included in the curriculum. At the broadest level, this study suggests the need to examine how the enacted curriculum supports—or fails to support—the intended goals of historical study. If part of history's purpose in schools is to develop critical and informed citizens—a controversial goal in itself—educators will need to develop clearer and more explicit links between programmes of history and citizenship. Without closer attention to such issues, school history is unlikely to have a significant impact on the developing political perspectives of young people.

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Notes

1. For a brief description of the principal events, persons, and locations in Northern Ireland history mentioned in this paper, see British Broadcasting Corporation (2003).
2. See also Muldoon and Trew (2000).
3. See also McBride (1997).
4. Some students worked with only 27 images; as discussed below, a further image was added during data collection.
5. This paper focuses only on issues related to identity. Data on the settings in which students had learned about history, and their ideas about the purposes of history in and out of school, are part of a separate analysis and are not reported here.
6. Interviews with groups that included both genders or more than one grade accounted for only four of the 121 interviews conducted, and data from those exceptions has been excluded from the corresponding analysis. For example, data from interviews in which both boys and girls participated has not been included in the analysis of gender differences.
7. The Shankill Road runs through the Protestant area of west Belfast, and many of its residents support Loyalist groups; the Falls Road runs through the Catholic area of the same part of the city, and many of its residents are Republican supporters. These two roads and their surrounding areas often are regarded as emblematic of hard-line political positions and community conflict in Northern Ireland.

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Appendix: Images used in interview task with students

1. Anti-home rule poster depicting woman with rifle and internal captions *Ulster 1914* and *Deserted! Well—I can stand alone*.

2. Photograph of the Titanic.
3. Photograph of market displays in public square, ca. 1930, with added caption, *Hiring Fair*.
4. Contemporary photograph of a reconstructed crannog, with added caption, *Crannog*.
5. Engraving of a 16th-century feast, with added caption, *Native Irish Feast*.
6. Contemporary photograph of a reconstructed hut, with added caption, *Mesolithic Hut*.
7. Contemporary photograph of a Church of Ireland parish church named after St. Patrick.
8. Photograph of Irish soldiers wearing German-style helmets, with added caption, *Irish soldiers during World War II*.
9. Portrait of Queen Elizabeth I, with added caption, *Queen Elizabeth I*.
10. Photograph of troops on the streets of Derry, ca. early 1970s.
11. Photograph of a wall mural commemorating Mary Ann and Henry Joy McCracken, with added caption, *Presbyterian leader of the 1798 rising, and his sister*.
12. Photograph of an archaeological site with internal captions, 'Hearth' and 'Post holes' and added caption, *Archaeological dig at Mountsandel*.
13. Photograph of mural of Cuchulainn and paramilitary solider with rifle, with internal captions *Cuchulainn Ancient defender of Ulster from Irish attacks over 2000 yrs. Ago* and *Ulster's Present-day defenders East Belfast Brigade*.
14. Contemporary photograph of monument of Charles Parnell, with caption, *Parnell Monument*.
15. Photograph of Civil Rights March, ca. 1960s, with added caption, *Civil Rights March*.
16. Photograph of African American soldiers, with added caption, *U.S. soldiers in Northern Ireland during WW II*.
17. Photograph of mural depicting the relief of Derry, with added caption, *Siege of Derry*.
18. Photograph of Edward Carson delivering a speech at a political rally.
19. Painting of the Battle of the Somme, with internal caption, *Charge of the 36th (Ulster) Division, Somme, 1st July 1916*.
20. Contemporary photograph of Nelson Mandela, with added caption, *South African leader Nelson Mandela*.
21. Engraving of a factory, ca. mid-1800s.
22. Painting of rebels in the Dublin Post Office during the Easter Rising, with added caption, *Dublin GPO, Easter 1916*.
23. Painting of King William on a black horse, with added caption, *Painting of King William III crossing the Boyne*.
24. English caricature of Daniel O'Connell, with added caption, *Cartoon of Daniel O'Connell*.
25. Contemporary photograph of a round tower surrounded by a church cemetery.
26. Photograph of mural commemorating Bobby Sands, with internal

captions, *Everyone, Republican or otherwise, has their own particular role to play*, *Our revenge will be the laughter of our children*, and *Bobby Sands Irish Republican*.

27. Contemporary photograph of Carrickfergus Castle with added caption, *Carrickfergus Castle*.

28. Photograph of Mural commemorating the Irish Famine, with internal caption *The Great Hunger* (in English and Gaelic), and added caption, *Mural of the Great Hunger*.