

“You Can Form Your Own Point of View”: Internally Persuasive Discourse in Northern Ireland Students’ Encounters With History

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Background: *Research on historical understanding has sometimes depicted adolescents and adults as either appropriating or resisting particular narrative accounts, and resistance seems to be especially common when school-based narratives differ from those encountered outside school. In Northern Ireland, however, school history does not present an alternative narrative to community-based histories, but takes a different approach altogether; school history represents an evidence-based, analytic subject that emphasizes multiple perspectives and avoids connections to contemporary identifications or political positions.*

Purpose: *In this study, we sought to understand both how young people in Northern Ireland approached historical information in school and how they made sense of conflicting perspectives on the past.*

Research Design and Participants: *Using qualitative, task-based interviews, we interviewed 253 secondary students, approximately equal numbers of whom had completed each of the 3 required years of historical study; these interviews included students of both genders and from differing school types in a variety of regions within Northern Ireland.*

Findings: *We found that these students had experienced history in more complicated ways than has been evident in most previous research. They had learned about the past in a variety of formal and informal settings, and they navigated among these multiple sources in a*

conscious attempt to refine and extend their historical understanding as they followed up on interests initiated in one setting by seeking out information elsewhere. Although some students simply assimilated this information into dominant community narratives, most were aware that such narratives can be used for contemporary political purposes, and they appreciated that school history encouraged a more complete and balanced historical perspective, particularly by exposing them to the motivations and experiences of the other community. Even as they sought expanded historical viewpoints, however, they were unwilling to abandon the political commitments of their communities, and they sought greater contemporary relevance for history than they were likely to encounter in school.

Conclusions: *These students thus were not simply appropriating or resisting particular historical narratives; they were engaged in a more complex process that involved developing internally persuasive discourse as they drew from multiple historical discourses in an attempt to form their own point of view on the region's troubled past.*

Implications: *This research suggests that students in Northern Ireland and elsewhere might benefit from a curriculum that attends more directly to their active construction of historical meaning and supports them in constructing critical perspectives on the contemporary relevance of the past.*

History forms a key element of the school curriculum in most nations, but students' encounters with the past are by no means limited to formal academic study. From a young age, students are exposed to an array of historical representations—not only in schools but also through print and electronic media, at museums and historic sites, and from peers, relatives, and other community members. These historical accounts may aim to create personal, national, ethnic, or religious identities; establish moral exemplars (or villains) for the present; legitimate current societal arrangements or justify calls for change; and even provide a source of recreation and leisure (Barton & Levstik, 2004). One strand of research on the development of children's and adolescents' historical understanding focuses on how students respond to these competing uses of history, and especially how their appropriation of particular narratives influences their encounters with alternative sources of historical information (Barton, 2008).

This study of young adolescents in Northern Ireland, however, indicates that in some contexts, an image of competing narratives is too simplistic and that many students engage in a more complicated, interactive and open-minded encounter with history, one that may ultimately lead to understandings that transcend accepting or rejecting particular narratives. In Northern Ireland, competing historical representations are part of daily life and have enormous contemporary significance, yet in school, students are not expected to master any officially sanctioned, overarching narrative of the past. Instead, schools present a balance of Nationalist

and Unionist perspectives and emphasize analysis and interpretation of evidence. This leads to a complex mixture of interests, perspectives, and goals as students strive for a more complete understanding of Northern Ireland's conflict that includes varied historical knowledge and multiple perspectives.

These findings shed light on the historical ideas of students in Northern Ireland, but the implications of this research extend beyond particular national and cultural contexts. The complexity of students' responses, for example, pushes us to think in new ways about how young people conceptualize their relationship to the past. We cannot fully appreciate students' developing ideas simply by analyzing the content of the historical representations that they encounter (in schools, film, public culture, and so on) or by examining the extent to which they accept or reject these accounts. Instead, we need to attend more carefully to students' active and creative engagement with the varied uses of history that surround them, and particularly to the range of purposes that they construct from those encounters. In addition, we need to consider the conditions that promote such engagement. We teach history in schools to expand students' understanding, not to confirm the beliefs and perspectives that they have already begun to develop, nor to rid them of their prior ideas altogether. Yet we still know too little about the range of ways in which school curricula and students' prior ideas interact. Examining the unique relationship between school and community history in Northern Ireland thus provides important insights into one way in which students can be challenged to develop more critical considerations of history's purpose.

BACKGROUND

APPROPRIATION, RESISTANCE, AND HISTORICAL DISCOURSES

Wertsch (1998) and other sociocultural theorists have noted that human thought and action are tied to the cultural, historical, and institutional contexts in which they occur. From this perspective, understanding entails more than individual cognition; it consists of interaction between human agents and the cultural tools available in the wider society. Learning, then, does not simply involve retention of information, or even individual construction of knowledge. Instead, from a sociocultural perspective, learning can best be thought of as mastery of socially and historically situated tools for thinking and acting—and the principal cultural tool for understanding the past, Wertsch (2002) argued, is narrative. Whether in school or out, he maintained, learning about the past takes

the form of mastering narrative texts. More than simple literary devices, narratives are used to organize the past into meaningful wholes by configuring events into coherent plots. Even more important than particular narratives, though, are “schematic narrative templates” (2002, p. 60) or generalized plot structures that underlie a range of specific stories. Most Americans, for example, know the story of the September 11 attacks, but many are also likely to use a template involving “terrorists’ threats to the innocent United States” to explain a wide range of events. For Wertsch, a few such narrative templates constitute the basic building blocks of collective memory in any given society.

Wertsch (2002) further noted that historical narratives are rarely neutral or dispassionate. Instead, they are closely connected to fundamental issues of identity, and people often have strong commitments to particular narrative accounts. Because of the importance of history in developing identity and allegiance, governments are especially likely to disseminate officially sanctioned versions of the past that legitimate current social and political structures. Such “official” history, however, often conflicts with “vernacular” histories that develop outside formal educational institutions (Bodnar, 1992). Contrasting historical narratives are especially likely to circulate among minority and marginalized groups, whose historical experiences (or their reconstructions of those experiences) may deviate from accounts found in schools, museums, or media accounts. In such instances, although people may master the content of a given narrative, they may not fully appropriate it as part of their own identity—that is, they may be able to reproduce the official account in public contexts (on a school exam, for example) while privately resisting that narrative in favor of alternatives learned elsewhere. Wertsch (1998, 2002) found that adult Russians and Estonians, for example, could faithfully reproduce official Soviet versions of the national past, but they privately adhered to counter-narratives that rejected the claims of official history.

Wertsch’s perspective on the appropriation of, and resistance to, historical narratives can be used to interpret a number of recent studies on the development of students’ historical understanding. Research in the United States suggests that young adolescents from a variety of backgrounds draw on both school and nonschool sources in appropriating a historical narrative that provides a clear sense of national identity. That narrative revolves around political and demographic origins of the United States, the nation’s social and material progress, and what students perceive as uniquely American freedoms (Barton 2001a, 2001b; Barton & Levstik, 1998; Mosborg, 2002; Terzian & Yeager, 2007). Although students may be aware of historical episodes that do not

easily fit this story (such as the Great Depression, the Vietnam War, or continuing racism and sexism), the dominant narrative of national progress is so strong that they have few resources from which to create alternative interpretations. As a result, discrepant trends and events do little to complicate—much less undermine—the official narrative of U.S. history. African American students are more likely to focus on difficulties experienced in their own ethnic group's history, yet they too appropriate a narrative template that emphasizes freedom and progress (Epstein, 1998, 2000). Almarza (2001), on the other hand, found that Mexican American students altogether rejected the school curriculum as irrelevant to their own ethnic background. There was no indication in her study, however, that students had appropriated an alternative historical narrative in its place.

Other students, though, clearly do appropriate alternative narratives that lead them to resist those they encounter at school or in other public settings. Quebec students of French heritage, for example, explain the province's history in tragic and melancholy terms, as a one-sided and unvarying story of conquest and victimization; although this narrative is consistent with the historical perspectives of many adults in the province, it has little connection to the content of the school curriculum (Létourneau & Moisan, 2004). Similarly, Porat (2004, 2006) found that Israeli students who attended a religious academy and who aligned themselves with the right wing of Israeli politics adhered to a legendary and heroic narrative of the Tel Hai event of 1920 (an example of Jewish–Arab conflict), even when they read textbook accounts that portrayed the event as accidental and largely insignificant. Students reinterpreted or added details to the textbook accounts so that they comported more closely with their prior narrative frameworks. Secular, left-wing students, on the other hand, were more likely to accept the textbook at face value and to dismiss an account that suggested heroism by one of the participants.

In the United States, students' religious backgrounds can also provide narratives that allow for alternative interpretations of history. Mosborg (2002), for example, found that socially conservative students at a private Christian school had appropriated a historical narrative that ran counter to the mainstream version of increasing freedom and progress, and they used this counter-narrative to explain current events. For these students, U.S. history was characterized by declining public morality, a straying from Christian heritage, and increased victimization and persecution of Christians. Spector (2007; Spector & Jones, 2007), meanwhile, found that students who read literature related to the Holocaust interpreted the event in terms of a Christian narrative of hope and redemption. Many

thought of the Holocaust as a struggle between good and evil, with Hitler playing the role of the sole, and demonic, perpetrator. They also interpreted works such as *Night* (Wiesel, 1982) and *The Diary of Anne Frank* (Goodrich & Hackett, 1993) as redemptive narratives—ones in which Wiesel is sustained by his faith in God, and Frank can finally “frolic outside” in the concentration camp’s fresh air. In addition, many students implicitly or explicitly condemned Jews for their rejection of Christ, and some suggested that the suffering of the Holocaust was a necessary element in God’s salvation of the world.

These studies provide evidence that young people do indeed confront multiple, conflicting historical accounts and that their appropriation of one narrative may lead them to dismiss or reconfigure others. In some cases, students’ appropriation of the dominant or “official” national narrative is so strong that they are unable to provide a coherent framework for discrepant events. In other cases, students have appropriated an alternative narrative—grounded in ethnic, political, or religious allegiances—that leads them to resist school accounts or to reinterpret texts and events so that they more closely conform to their prior frameworks.

Each of these studies, however, portrays multiple sources of historical information as though they involved conflicting narratives, and each presents the outcome of that conflict as one in which students appropriate one narrative at the expense of another. None has suggested that students may experience history in a way that allows for interaction and interpenetration of alternative sources, nor has there been any indication that students might have access to cultural tools that enable them to move beyond appropriating or resisting the historical narratives they encounter. Moreover, none of these studies has suggested that students are consciously aware of the way in which historical narratives mediate their understanding of the past. This, Wertsch (2002) argued, is a general feature of collective remembering: People are unaware that narrative texts mediate their encounters with the past and instead assume that narratives are straightforward reports of historical information that can be evaluated simply on the basis of whether they are true or false.

Bakhtin (1982), however, through his distinction between authoritative discourse and internally persuasive discourse, provides another way of thinking about the relationship between students’ ideas and the historical narratives they encounter. For Bakhtin, authoritative discourse is represented in the language of parents, adults, and teachers; it “demands our unconditional allegiance” and allows for no reinterpretation. Indeed, to disagree with such a discourse is to profane it, because it carries the weight of sacred authority (even if that authority is secular rather than religious). Nor can one divide up authoritative discourse by

choosing to “agree with one part, accept but not completely another part, reject utterly a third part”; rather, “one must either totally affirm it, or totally reject it.” (p. 343). Historical narratives such as the U.S. story of freedom and progress, the conservative Christian narrative of declining public morality, and the right-wing Israeli story of Arab attacks on innocent Jewish settlers all represent such authoritative discourses. Although the power of these historical accounts may not be as comprehensive as Bakhtin argued, research to date has suggested that young adolescents demonstrate a limited ability to reinterpret or negotiate such narratives.

Internally persuasive discourse, on the other hand, is not backed up by authority but represents the “inner monologues of developing human beings” (Bakhtin, 1982, p. 345). These monologues develop as individuals begin to think in “an independent, experimenting and discriminating way” (p. 345) and to distinguish their own thoughts from the authoritative discourses they have previously encountered. Internally persuasive discourse is not isolated or static, but involves ongoing interaction with other discourses and “interanimating relationships with new contexts” as individuals experience a struggle “among various available verbal and ideological points of view, approaches, directions, and values” (p. 346). In developing internally persuasive discourses, individuals neither appropriate nor resist authoritative ones, but interact with them in new ways; as Bakhtin noted, “The struggle and dialogic interrelationship of these categories of ideological discourse [authoritative and internally persuasive] are what usually determine the history of an individual ideological consciousness” (p. 342). Northern Ireland provides a rich context for examining the relevance of Bakhtin’s perspective to young people’s historical thinking, particularly in contrast to Wertsch’s view, for students there are exposed not only to competing historical narratives but also to entirely different historical discourses, each with its own claim to authority.

HISTORY EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Northern Ireland provides a rich setting for investigating the complexity of students’ encounters with the past, and particularly for examining how students construct their understanding of history in the absence of a single official narrative. Northern Ireland is widely recognized as an area in which competing historical perspectives have significant contemporary relevance. Marches, demonstrations, memorials, public artwork, political rhetoric, and even graffiti make frequent use of past events to justify contemporary positions or to bolster a sense of identity, usually defined in sectarian terms, and symbols of these competing histories are prominently displayed by the two communities (Buckley & Kenney, 1995;

Jarman, 1998; McBride, 1997; Walker, 1996). The Unionist version of the past, embraced principally by Protestants, emphasizes events that are seen as establishing British control of Ireland, demonstrating Protestant resolve, and justifying integration into the United Kingdom. The Nationalist version, associated primarily with the Catholic community, focuses on foreign invasion and conquest, Irish nationalism and independence, and Catholic resistance to repression or neglect by local Protestants and the British government. These provide the “schematic narrative templates,” in Wertsch’s (2002) terms, for popular perceptions of history in Northern Ireland, and such historical identifications and grievances often are credited with maintaining community divisions in the region.

Yet school history in Northern Ireland, since the introduction of the national curriculum in 1990, aims to provide an alternative to partisan views of the past and does not present an official narrative justifying current social or political arrangements. In the primary grades (through age 11), political history is avoided altogether; instead, students study the social, cultural, and economic life of societies far removed in time and place (e.g., Mesolithic people, Vikings, Ancient Egyptians) or presented in uncontroversial contexts (e.g., daily life in the Victorian Era or during World War II). As they study these topics, students learn to use evidence to reach conclusions and to consider history from the viewpoint of people in the past. The curriculum places little emphasis on learning specific narratives, much less political narratives of the national past, and children’s experiences at museums and other public historic sites reinforce this apolitical and nonnarrative perspective (Barton 2001a, 2001b).

Students eventually do study the political history of Ireland, Britain, and Northern Ireland during each of the first 3 years of secondary school (the equivalent of Grades 6–8 in North America), when the subject is required for all students. The secondary history curriculum, at the time of this research, was meant to expose students to a more systematic and comprehensive treatment of the region’s history than they were likely to encounter through family stories or local traditions. Each year featured a core module focusing on a period deemed essential for understanding Irish history, but these were contextualized within a wider British and European framework. In the first year, students studied the impact of the Normans on the medieval world, including the Norman invasion of Ireland. In the second year, English conquest and colonization of Ireland was placed in the context of change and conflict in the 16th and 17th centuries. Third-year students studied the growth of Irish Nationalism and Unionism from the Act of Union to partition, including links with British politics, the influence of European nationalist movements, and

the impact of World War I (Department of Education, Northern Ireland, 1996).

But even though students at this level study historical events relevant to the creation of modern Northern Ireland, they do not encounter an official narrative that aims to justify current political arrangements. This is partly due to the minor role that narrative history plays throughout the British educational system, in which the curriculum emphasizes analysis and interpretation of evidence, along with consideration of historical viewpoints, rather than mastery of a national narrative. Students at the secondary level encounter narratives of particular periods, but these are not tied together into an overarching narrative of the national past as they are in many countries. Moreover, in addressing the events of given historical periods, the curriculum systematically presents multiple interpretations—particularly Nationalist and Unionist ones—in a balanced way. An underlying goal of the curriculum is that by the end of the final year of compulsory study, history should contribute to greater understanding of a variety of cultural and political backgrounds among young people in Northern Ireland and that it should therefore provide an alternative to the presumably partisan and sectarian histories they encounter outside school. Although there may be deviations between the official and enacted curriculum, a great deal of evidence—from academic research, government inspections, and our own experiences in schools—indicates that teachers adhere closely to formal requirements and that they are systematic and conscientious in treating multiple perspectives in a fair and evenhanded way (Education and Training Inspectorate, 2006; Kitson, 2007; McCombe, 2006).

It is important to recognize, however, that schools' challenge to popular historical perspectives in Northern Ireland is primarily a tacit one, with no alternative metanarrative presented, and few direct connections to the present. The required curriculum (at the time of this research) ends with partition in 1921; unless students elect to study history at a higher level, they will have no formal exposure to most events since then, and therefore, connections between past and present will necessarily remain indirect. Although teachers might choose to make such connections outside the requirements of the formal curriculum, they rarely do so, particularly with regard to controversial issues. Indeed, many teachers disavow the attempt to make history directly relevant to contemporary concerns, either because of perceived community pressure or because of their own belief that academic subjects should be removed from current societal concerns (Barton, McCully, & Conway, 2003; Education and Training Inspectorate, 2006; Kitson, 2007; McCombe, 2006; Smith & Robinson, 1996). The alternative that school history provides, then, lies

not in presenting a different narrative, or with directly challenging those with which students are already familiar, but in presenting a different way of approaching history—one that involves a distanced, analytical perspective and a balance among conflicting viewpoints. Our aim in this study was to investigate how children make sense of these competing approaches to history and, in particular, how they understand the relationship between the approaches they encounter in school and elsewhere.

METHODS

To investigate students' ideas about history, we conducted open-ended, qualitative interviews with 253 participants, ranging in age from 11 to 14 years, approximately equal numbers of whom had studied each of the first 3 years of the secondary history curriculum. We obtained participants through teacher recommendations for students who represented a range of achievement levels, chosen from schools selected through a process of quota 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 Catholic Church. "Integrated" schools represent a further category; about 5% of students in Northern Ireland attend these schools, which enroll 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.

A second characteristic was selectivity. Most postprimary 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 that they enroll 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 continual and ongoing conflict and rancor, 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, we expected that students might respond differently depending on the extent to which their towns 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 judgment of the extent of public confrontations, political violence, or other sectarian incidents in each locale. Six schools fell into the “conflict” category and five into the “nonconflict” category. The number and portion of students at each school type are found in Table 1.

Table 1. Number and Portion of Students Interviewed

Characteristic	Students	
	<i>n</i>	Portion
Grade level		
First year	81	.32
Second year	89	.35
Third year	83	.33
Gender		
Female	116	.46
Male	137	.54
School Type		
Maintained	89	.36
Controlled	122	.47
Integrated	42	.17
Selectivity		
Grammar	87	.34
Secondary	124	.49
Comprehensive	42	.17
Region		
Conflict	131	.52
Nonconflict	122	.48
Total	253	

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 4 girls and 4 boys at each grade level in mixed-sex schools, or—

corresponding numbers in pairs of single-sex schools. This nonrandom procedure was necessary to gain access, but it may have limited the range of students with whom we spoke.

Our interviews began 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 that individuals use to organize their experiences. Kelly's original procedures have been modified and used in a variety of settings over the years (Ryle 1975; Scheer, 1996), and we considered it especially appropriate for this study because our interest was in the ideas ~~that~~ 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, both 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) and also because 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.

The picture-sorting task involved a set of 28 images, some of which were accompanied by brief captions. 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, Edward Carson, and the Easter Rising, and 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 (such as a poster urging resistance to Home Rule, and paintings of King William III or of the Battle of the Somme), or with Nationalist viewpoints (such as a drawing of Daniel O'Connell and photographs of a civil rights march or a monument to Charles Parnell). Some images, meanwhile, had little direct connection to either community, such as photographs of a reconstructed crannog and of U.S. 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 also social and economic history.

We selected these pictures from a variety of 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 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 & Barton, 2008).

We mounted these images on large sheets of heavy paper, gave them to students as a set, and asked them to physically arrange the images into groups they thought went together. We then allowed several minutes for students to work together on the task. After they had completed their arrangement, we asked them to explain why they had put each group of pictures together. The open-ended interview that followed the picture arrangement task was designed to gather information on several elements of 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 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. (See the appendix for full interview protocol.) 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 to examine how they applied their ideas to concrete instances. Open-ended interviews and conversational probing, particularly combined with an initial task that involves students in making decisions about historical content, has become an established method of research into students’ thinking over the past three decades, and such methods have consistently demonstrated that even young students are capable of reflecting on their own historical understanding (e.g., Epstein, 2000; Grant, 2003; Levstik and

Barton, 2008; VanSledright, 2002; Wineburg, 2001)

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. The interaction involved in paired or small-group interviews has the potential to improve the quality of data (Krueger & Casey, 2000), and the social context of such interviews is particularly important with adolescents because differences in power and status between researchers and participants may inhibit conversation during individual interviews (Eder & Fingerson, 2002). A potential disadvantage of using interviews as a way of gaining insight into students' thinking, however, derives from the "culture of politeness" that operates in most public settings in Northern Ireland. Because it is usually not possible to quickly determine the political position or religious membership of strangers, discussion of controversial issues in potentially mixed company often is 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.

We began our analysis of interview transcripts with a set of broad coding categories determined by our initial research questions; these included areas such as students' historical identifications, the sources of their historical knowledge, their ideas about the purpose of history in school and out, and the nature of their interest in history. We then began axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) of a limited number of transcripts to break these categories down into more detailed and substantive sub-categories of response. These included particular instances of the initial broad codes, such as the places in which students had learned about history (books, siblings, the Internet, and so on), and more substantive generalizations that students made about issues, such as the purpose of history (to provide multiple viewpoints, to learn about the origin of the contemporary world, and so on). Once we had developed this more specific set of categories, we coded each of the remaining interviews using a form of constant comparison (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) in which we looked for examples of categories throughout participants' responses, regardless of the specific questions to which they were responding. We then grouped participants' coded responses using cross-case analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994), in which we combined answers from different interviews (each of which constituted a single case) to develop a set of descriptive generalizations. This process of analysis also included a search for negative or discrepant evidence, in which students' responses

may have contradicted or complicated emerging patterns in the data.

In a separate analysis (Barton & McCully, 2008), we examined selected interviews to gain insights into the thinking of individual students. The kind of cross-case analysis used here, however, leads not to information on particular students but to identification of patterns that cut across interviews. The generalizations that resulted from this analysis are presented in the following section and are illustrated with quotes from students across a range of religions, school types, and grade levels, and of both genders. In some instances, we present either numerical data or rough estimates of the portion of interviews that were characterized by certain types of responses. Within broader groupings, however, we have not usually attempted to identify the precise number of students who fell into discrete categories, both because our primary purpose is to illustrate the range and complexity of students' thinking and because students often gave explanations that exhibited multiple and overlapping ideas about history's purpose and the context of their learning. More quantitative analysis of patterns in students' identifications, including differences among demographic groups and changes in identification over the 3 years of secondary school, can be found in a previous publication (Barton & McCully, 2005).

FINDINGS

The young people in this study had learned about the past in a variety of formal and informal settings, and although settings outside school sometimes conveyed politicized stories of Northern Ireland's past, other times they exposed students to more general historical topics and led to a variety of interests that extended well beyond sectarian narratives. Moreover, students navigated among these multiple sources in a conscious attempt to refine and extend their historical understanding. Home, school, popular culture, and the community were not entirely separate avenues for developing such understanding; instead, students followed up on interests initiated in one setting by seeking out information elsewhere. Sometimes students assimilated information into their developing understanding of community narratives, but other times, the information expanded or complicated such narratives. This was clearest when students talked about the purposes of learning history in school and out. Students recognized that popular historical representations are designed to serve contemporary social and political purposes, and most looked to the school curriculum to help them move beyond the limitations of the stories told in their own communities. They retained their community-based political commitments, however, and most expected school history

to have direct relevance to their understanding of present-day issues. They saw the purpose of learning new perspectives, then, as a way of helping them develop more reasonable and information positions, so that "you can form your own point of view."

LEARNING FROM MULTIPLE SOURCES OF HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Like students elsewhere, those in Northern Ireland are exposed to multiple sources of historical information, both in formal academic study at school and through informal learning in other settings. Informal sources include those with a direct community influence, such as local commemorations and wall murals, and the oral impact of family, peers, and other community members. Other sources emanate from popular culture generally, and these include print sources, visual media, heritage sites, and museums. Most students referred to knowledge acquired through television and movies, and a few cited electronic sources such as the Internet and CD-ROMs.

When students attributed their informal learning to family, peers, and other community sources, it was often clear that historical events were associated with one tradition or the other and were seen through the lens of that community. In Controlled (Protestant) schools, the two events students most often discussed were King William's victory at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690 and the Siege of Derry in 1688. Thomas claimed he knew about King William through the "B.B. [Boys' Brigade, a Protestant youth organization] and church," and Max because he had attended a pageant, and "some man dressed up as him came out on a horse and started riding about and everybody thought it was him."¹ Max's interview partner, meanwhile, identified with "a statue of [King William] on top of a church" (actually an Orange Hall in the neighborhood), and Jill said she recognized King William "because we have marches and all for him and a whole lot of people go to them and I go to them." Many students specifically referred to the role of family in passing along such information. James, for example, said that he knew of the "UVF [Ulster Volunteer Force], and the First World War and the Battle of the Boyne and a bit of Irish History . . . from our parents, really." Ben noted that his "grandparents probably would have talked about it, the Protestant religion, and the wars, so they would," and Jessica noted that she had learned about Edward Carson "just sort of from family, my older brother and things like that."

Those from Maintained (Catholic) schools who cited family and community as significant factors in their historical learning were most likely

to refer to Bobby Sands and the hunger strike as a key event. Paul knew of the hunger strikes because “it’s all over the road, ‘Remember the Hunger Strikers’” and “you hear people taking about it, and all.” Cathal noted that “there’s whole songs and all written about it,” and Brendan pointed out, “It’s the 25-year jubilee of Bobby Sands and the Hunger Strike.” Carla, meanwhile, was aware of the Easter Rising because, as she said, “My dad told me about it,” and both Donat and Rory had direct family associations with Bloody Sunday. Donat said his father had told him “what’s happening and stuff. . . . He was marching in a march and, not sure who it was, but some army or something took machine guns to all the people that were marching and some of his friends died.” Rory noted, “My granddad was in that there march and my granny’s cousin was killed in it.”

However, students’ exposure to, and interest in, history was not limited to the sectarian narratives of their own communities. Many students had also been exposed to the historical stories of the other side, although their knowledge of those stories typically was less detailed than those from their own community. Niambh, for example, attended a Maintained school, yet she was also familiar with King William through murals:

Well, yeah, the area I live in is very Protestant—well, not all of it, but some of it—so I woulda knew stuff about King William and these posters because it was a lot, and it wasn’t all graffiti around where I live it was just a couple of neighbors and that you know, cause they put pictures of him and all on the walls.

Moreover, not all family stories were partisan narratives. Students frequently discussed family and community history in apolitical terms, and they often attributed their general curiosity about the past to the enthusiasm of parents or other members of their family. Emily, for example, commented, “Well, my sister likes history, and so does my Daddy so they like talking about it. . . . He’s got a lot of history books at home.” Similarly, Clare said she knew about World War II “through the family thing, you know. My granny would sit me down and tell me stories about it when I was young. Not very interesting really, but now I’m older I’m interested in it.” Dylan said his understanding came before his grandfather passed away, when “he told about his going on missions and stuff, and well, my Da, he loves reading about Adolf Hitler, and he reads a lot, and he loves reading about that, and he tells me a lot of stuff, and that’s really what gives me an idea about it.” Even when historical interests generated by families were explicitly political, they did not necessarily map

neatly onto competing narratives of the national past. For example, two students disclosed themselves to be children of history teachers and articulated a reconciliatory dimension to their learning. Another, Molly, declared her "mum to be into women's rights" and proceeded to display her understanding of both suffragette politics and Mandela's fight for social justice.

Students' discussion of print and electronic media also demonstrated their exposure to a variety of historical information. Brian, for example, displayed his wide interests: "Well, I like to read a lot, and I've learned most about the historical buildings, historical sites, but I've also, I've learned a bit about those [wars]. . . . I've read a lot about Irish [history]." Several expressed interest in reading about the world wars, and others considered television documentaries and drama as important sources of information on this topic. Heather, for example, learned about the world wars because "there's quite a lot of things on TV about it and stuff, and I've seen it, and there's different books and things on it." Luke noted, "World War I and II, seen them on TV all the time." Other students referred to watching programs featuring archaeology, war, or kings and queens. Clodagh watched "programs, like they're digging and they find dead bodies and they find out which, and where we've come from and all by the, how old the bone is. How people lived and what they done and how they died and stuff." Several young people identified the movie *Titanic* as a popular source of information on the disaster, though occasionally this was accorded added significance by the ship's associations with Belfast and by family ties. When Emma declared, "I've seen the video," her partner Dawn added, "And my great, great uncle helped build it."

In referring to school history, students often noted the importance of topics that had no direct connection to political histories of Northern Ireland. Some students pointed to the role of school history in providing personal fulfillment or advancement by noting that studying history was simply "interesting" or suggesting that knowing history could lead to jobs as teachers, archaeologists, museum workers, or lawyers. Others argued that school history was important as a way of increasing general knowledge. Amber, for example, said that the purpose of history was "to teach you about more things—Victorians and castles and Normans and all," and Roisin noted,

Sometimes when you go to places you can see old ruins and stuff and you would probably wonder 'Where is that from?' and then you would know from in school what happened and the story

could be interesting. . . . If you saw a picture of a famous person you would be able to know who it was. If they died of something you would know all about them from history.

Although students clearly encountered sectarian historical accounts in their families and communities, then, their exposure to history was by no means limited to such narratives, and both in school and out, many students developed a wide range of historical knowledge and interests.

MOVING AMONG SOURCES OF HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Not only did students report learning about history from a variety of sources, but they also made it clear that these multiple venues of historical information were not separate spheres of learning. Instead, students moved from one to another, and they used each as a way to expand the interests they had developed elsewhere. This was particularly evident when they talked about topics with political relevance. Daniel, for example, from a school situated in a strongly Loyalist area, had already read about Unionist leader Edward Carson prior to studying him at school: "I already knew about Carson before cause I was interested in that, to read about it." Another student admitted to referencing the following year's textbook because she wanted to know more about the Home Rule movement, and Jack had read up on the Northern Ireland civil rights movement even though it would not be covered in school for another 3 years. Students also were enthusiastic about media representations relating to the Troubles and found them useful in broadening their understanding of the conflict. Aaron said he knew about the Easter Rising and the IRA [Irish Republican Army] through "books, it's quite interesting, and the news, about the IRA, and stuff like that," and Sharon's knowledge of Bobby Sands was enhanced because "he was on Insight [a local investigative news program] and all, and everybody just knows about him."

In some cases, students described their encounters with these sources of historical information in ways that suggested that they were, to great extent, assimilating them into the dominant narrative of their communities. Although nearly all students recognized Nelson Mandela from the news, for example, one boy from a Republican area of Belfast noted a more direct connection because "Nelson Mandela fought for his freedom the same way as the Irish are here." Similarly, when Fergal was questioned on his sources of Irish history, television featured strongly, and the events he mentioned were restricted to those associated with Republicanism:

- Fergal It was for their war for freedom . . . the Irish fought with the British for freedom.
- Interviewer And how did you know about that, you haven't done that at school yet, have you?
- Fergal No, I watched a program about it, and there was four series of it.
- ...
- Interviewer Which other pictures here would you say you know a lot about?
- Fergal I know a lot maybe about famines, Bobby Sands.
- Brendan Aye, Dublin, Easter Rising.
- Interviewer How do you know about that?
- Fergal Cause I said before, the way that I watch programs and all, and I know a lot about it.

In the same interview, Brendan referred to a feature film he had seen, and though he addressed the Protestant perspective, there is little doubt that he sympathized with the Republican sentiment of the movie:

There's a movie called *In the Name of the Father*, they all get put in prison for something they didn't do, and the police knew, the British knew the real bombers came up and admitted it wasn't them, but they put them in prison, and they held guns to their head and they beat them up just to get them to say they done it, and they recorded it, so I think maybe Protestants think maybe, "Ah, our ancestors didn't do that," but Irish people think they did.

Given the strong narrative found in most movies and television programs, it is hardly surprising that students assimilated them into the dominant perspectives of their communities, but information from other sources was sometimes treated in the same way. Katie found a CD-ROM on the Troubles interesting because it allowed her

to see Bobby Sands actually walking round his cell with his blanket, and you can see when people died if you type in anybody's name in, like to see if anyone in your family got shot, you can type their name in, their name would come up and all when they died, how they died.

Similarly, Paula had pursued the Internet to collect information on Bobby Sands and had "loads of projects on him at home . . . like what age

he died at, and, like, what happened to his army, what happened to them all, and stuff.” And although most museums and heritage sites in Northern Ireland are nonpartisan arenas designed to foster a common understanding of the past, some of these reinforced students’ understanding of partisan historical narratives, particularly those associated with Unionism. Harry, in explaining his interest in war and the 36th Ulster Division during World War I (usually associated with Protestant heritage), confided, “Ever since I was 10, you know, I’ve been fascinated by it. I went to the Somme Center at Comber [a museum commemorating the Battle of the Somme] to learn about it.” Similarly, when Edwin and Ian mentioned a small community museum in the heart of Loyalist North Belfast, they became animated in discussing exhibits linked with Loyalism.

As these examples suggest, when young people investigate interests generated within the family or community for themselves, they may do so in a selective or partisan way. Yet genuine curiosity was often the motivating factor for these students, and their curiosity was not limited to events associated with their own communities. For example, Max, attending a school in Protestant North Belfast, associated the Hunger Strike mural with a book he had read on Bobby Sands. And Jordan, again from a Loyalist area, proved to be the only student in the study who had read up on the 1798 Republican Henry Joy McCracken: “Presbyterian is part of the Protestant church, but in history, I think I’ve learned that he was leader against the British, that shows [inaudible] but although he was Protestant, he was a Republican.”

Students’ interest in moving beyond community history to learn more about the Northern Ireland conflict was especially clear when they talked about the purpose of studying history at school. More than two thirds of students noted that one reason for studying history is to understand contemporary societal issues, particularly the conflict in Northern Ireland, and several pointed out that the ubiquity of the conflict made such study particularly important. Jessica, for example, noted, “It’s something we have to sort of live with—the divide—every day, and it’s interesting to see how it started, and why we have to live with the divide and why it’s all happening.” Similarly, Ryan noted that he wanted to “know more about the Protestants and Catholics, about how they’re rivals and stuff like that” because “we’re being brought up here, and it’s probably where we’re going to end up living. . . . It will probably affect our children when they’re older as well.” As Aoife succinctly put it, studying history is important “cause then you can understand why everyone fights in Northern Ireland.”

Often, students pointed out that despite being repeatedly exposed to

historical images and other aspects of the conflict in popular culture and the media, their understanding was fragmentary or incomplete before they studied history at school. Courtney, for example, explained that “at the Twelfth of July you see all these pictures of King William, you know, on his horse,” but that she “didn’t really understand that before.” Similarly, Anna, when asked whether she had known about the Siege of Derry or the Battle of the Boyne before studying them at school, noted, “I heard other people talking about them, but I didn’t really understand what they were.” Some students suggested that their own confusion could be generalized to their peers. Aaron, for example, explained, “A lot of people hear it on the news and they don’t understand what they’re talking about . . . like Sinn Fein and all the Loyalist groups, and Catholics and Protestants fighting, and young people don’t really understand, like us.” Similarly, Victoria noted, “You hear about it on TV and the news, but they don’t really explain it very much to you, and children don’t really understand about it.” Although she said that she and her classmates might not enjoy learning history at school, she pointed out, “I think it’s a thing that we need to learn about, or else we’ll never know what it’s [the conflict] about.”

For many students, then, experience with politicized uses of history in their communities alerted them to topics they needed to learn about in school or pursue on their own. Because they recognized the Troubles as a significant and pervasive aspect of life in Northern Ireland, they felt that they needed to learn about the historical origins of the conflict. When asked about the reasons for studying history at school, for example, students pointed to learning about the background of the region’s conflict in nearly half (47%) of these interviews. In some cases, students may have been assimilating what they learned in school into the narratives they had already begun to learn elsewhere; much more often, however, they saw school history as a way of exposing them to multiple perspectives on Northern Ireland’s past.

SEEKING MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

When asked the purpose of history outside school, many students connected the topic to heritage, remembrance, and a sense of personal and group identity. These students often seemed to be engaged in a fairly straightforward appropriation of traditional historical narratives. When talking about heritage, there was a strong sense that history has an important function for people in locating them in time—tracing their ancestry, “what we are” and “where we came from” as family members and, collectively, as communities. Several students emphasized the process of

transmitting ideas across generations; in Jill's words, "They can teach it to their children, and our children can teach it to their children and it would go on." For Hannah, "The thing you have to know is, you just have to know what you are and where you come from." This sense of personal identity through history often moved seamlessly into a sense of group or national identity. Dylan thought people cared about history because "they were wondering what their ancestors did, and what they should do." He then explained that he was interested in Irish history because "I like to know what my background is and where I come from, like my country and stuff."

Most students, however, displayed a more complicated understanding of the way in which historical representations mediate contemporary understandings of the past. Although heritage, remembrance, and a sense of identity were all perceived as ways in which people incorporated history into their everyday lives, in a divided society, these concepts have a particular resonance; not surprisingly, many students interpreted them in this context, especially when asked to explain why they thought history was depicted on wall murals or commemorated in parades, songs, and ceremonies. Although students' knowledge of the historical events themselves may have been uneven, they displayed a sophisticated understanding of the way in which history can be used to instill pride and strength and to convey messages that portray past events as justification for present actions. These students were aware that the historical representations they encountered were not disinterested accounts of past events, but served current societal purposes. For Luke, the purpose of putting historical images on murals was for people to display "their history, and they want to remember it, or other people to notice it maybe. Maybe to show who they are to other gangs, or whatever." When Lauren was asked to interpret a famine mural, she unhesitatingly declared that its message was "that the English don't help you until it is too late" and that the Cuchulainn painting in a Loyalist estate was about "showing that they rule Ulster." Samuel, a student described by his teacher as a hardcore Loyalist, was in no doubt that images on murals were "not to do with history, it's to do with the paramilitary."

Many students also were aware that murals and their messages were aggressive and designed to "annoy." Robert, from a Controlled school, thought that the images in his area were to show that Protestants "fought against the Catholics and they won and they're proud of it cause they won and they want to, like, annoy the Catholics." Most students had little difficulty in understanding the thinking behind historical images. Rory, for example, recognized that political background influences how history is

regarded: "It's all the way you're brought up, if you're brought up as Irish, then you'll definitely be on the side of the two civil rights marches, if you're brought up as British, you'd definitely be on the side of these [Loyalist murals]." Jessica was strikingly articulate in explaining the selectivity of the two perspectives:

I think that whenever we think about history, the key points that we [Protestants] would sort of think of would be different than what they [Catholics] think. You know, whatever you think if somebody said to you, "Name something significant that happened in history," we would say something like. . . that there topic [Edward Carson]. They [Catholics] might all say the same [time], [but] like a key point for me that happened in history would be, that happening, yeah, the signing of the Solemn League and Covenant. And then a key point for them would be what happened in Dublin, and it would all be around the same time, but people would think of different points in it.

Students' perspectives on the mediating role of historical representation were clearest when they talked about the purpose of learning history at school. Few students thought that school history should serve the same purposes—such as heritage—that history did in their families and communities; this kind of explanation occurred in less than 15% of the interviews. Most talked about school history as providing an alternative to what they had learned elsewhere. Many students made it quite clear that the distinguishing characteristic of school history was its lack of community bias, as in the following quotes:

- It gives you an insight on what happened, a lot of it you will learn outside anyway, but it gives you, it tries to make the facts as even as it can, it's not one-sided, it tries to become both-sided, it tries to look at both sides of the argument. (Rory)
- If you're like studying about the Easter Rising, outside school, you'd only hear one side of the story. . . . In school it gives you like books that have both sides, they have facts from both sides. (Jack)
- At home they just have the one side but in school they tell the both sides. (Ellen)
- Well a lot of what you hear outside of school is all one sided.

Everything is all to do with filling your head with one-sided story. But when you come into school you get to hear the other side of the story as well. (Robert)

- You got it from both sides. . . . If you're outside maybe you heard the story from just one side. . . . Even though you're in a Protestant or Catholic school or a mixed, it would probably have to not be biased. . . . Like one side wouldn't have their stories be right and one side wouldn't be wrong, they'd tell both. (Ryan)

For some students, the alternative to biased perspectives was “the truth,” an objective account of the past that they thought they were learning (or would learn) at school. Amy, for example, said that the purpose of school history is “to show you what it was really like.” She went on to explain that “people tell you their views but sometimes they don't know what they are talking about and then you hear about it for real in school.” Similarly, Niamh explained that when people use history on wall murals, “they have their own opinions on it . . . like some people would maybe change it or something, you know, they would prove their point and make them right.” However, “in school we learn the actual facts, like some of the stuff might not be exact, but it's about right, you know.” Her interview partner agreed and noted, “The teacher can sort of tell you facts, and it's sort of written in the textbook, so you know it must have a bit of truth in it anyway.” Adam suggested that “if you could take bits of each side's stories and piece together you could probably figure out what really happened.” He later added that “true history” “gives you the story without a biased opinion. It's just been written there and nobody has influenced it.” Although these students resisted the narratives they had learned outside school, they were ready and willing to appropriate the “truthful” narrative they expected from school.

More often, students indicated that they expected school history to provide something other than an alternative factual narrative that they could accept in opposition to those they had encountered outside school. As the earlier quotes suggest, many students talked about how school history provided “two sides” or “both sides” of an event. This explanation for the subject's purpose occurred in 38% of interviews, and in 56% of interviews with students who had completed all 3 years of the historical study. These students did not equate lack of bias with an objectively true account of the past, but with an attempt to balance Unionist and Nationalist perspectives—a balance they thought was unlikely to occur in other contexts. Some of these students suggested that learning history would lead to greater sympathy and tolerance, or perhaps a reduction of

sectarianism. Katie, for example, said that studying history might help stop the conflict “because like I think you learn more about, like the other side, and you learn what their past is like, and you see that there’s nothing bad like about them.” Aoife and her interview partner also agreed that history helped them better understand the opinions of others and ultimately to be less likely to “argue and fight.” Daniel explained, “Well, you have to understand that even the Catholics suffered as well as Protestants, and then you can’t just go around, ‘But you started...!’, you can’t say that, it was mainly started by the both of them.” Similarly, Maeve pointed out that learning about the Irish Famine was important “because both Catholics and Protestants died in it and it shows that there is two sides and they both suffered.” And John explained, “When I was a kid I thought that we were treated badly and all, the Protestants were treated badly and all and think [they] shouldn’t be treated like that there, but now that I’ve seen the Catholics’ point of view, they’ve also had the hardships and the bad times as well. I don’t really don’t care about if someone’s a Protestant or a Catholic now, I just give them equal respect, so I would.” For these students, multiple historical narratives could be simultaneously valid, and they considered it beneficial to understand such multiple truths.

But although students generally thought that school history would lead to some lessening of sectarianism, they were divided as to whether it could lead to fundamental changes in anyone’s view of the conflict. Some suggested that it had had no such effect on themselves and that it was unlikely to affect others. Joshua, for example, explained, “People studying this at school, a lot don’t remember studying all this stuff. They would maybe have studied half of it or blanked out points at school that they didn’t agree with.” Conor conceded that school history might lessen prejudice “a bit, but I don’t think it would stop the fighting, it would still be some fighting and violence.”

Even when students admitted to having changed their ideas as a result of learning history in school, they sometimes made it clear that they were unlikely to share their new perspectives in public. A few students reported having corrected their parents on points of history, but these sounded more like instances of adolescent rebellion than principled stands. The real challenge came when we asked whether they would confront their peers’ ideas about history. Rory noted that strong Catholics or Protestants might change their ideas,

but that won’t be admitted outside themselves, they’ll think deep down, but they’ll not admit that. . . . If you’re a deep down Protestant or a deep down Catholic, you’re not going to say in

front of people, “Well, maybe they were wrong, maybe they were right. . .” You’ll keep that to yourself.

Similarly, David explained that if school history challenged what people said in his community, “You just keep your head down and go along with them. . . . You keep the school history to yourself and for the exams.” One of the few students to suggest that he might confront his peers was Joshua, who said,

A lot of people I would speak to would say or taunt people about these kind of things, and you kind of think, “How I can step in here and say that that didn’t really happen?” A lot of it is fiction. Some of it is truth, but you shouldn’t really taunt people about what happened in the past. You should think about the future now. . . . Some people just take the wrong side of it and really genuinely think it did happen, so wrongly accusing at times, so you would step in.

His interview partner, Oliver, though, suggested a different strategy: “You would try to walk away and forget about it.”

Students’ responses often indicated that our questions about whether their ideas had “changed” were off the mark. Most students were unwilling to suggest that they had abandoned the political commitments of their families and communities. Most talked about school history not in terms of changing their views, but in terms of making their views more informed; that is, it had helped them make the transition from biased perspectives to unbiased ones. These students might still use history to support their original political commitments, but they now did so on the basis of a more complete understanding of the past. Samuel, for example, noted that sometimes people change their minds and sometimes they don’t, but that it’s important to get both sides of the story “because then you know what’s going on, cause then you don’t just go out and slobber about because you only know one side of the story, but then you find the other side of the story.” In a very similar way, Emma explained,

There’s people going around the streets saying things that they don’t even know what they’re saying, and then you’re going to school and you’re learning about it and you’re saying, “Oh well, that’s what it means,” and like I know what I’m going to say, or things like that there, instead of coming out with stupid things.

Anna also pointed out, "You can't just, you know, like kids, maybe, in rough areas, running about, shouting stuff, Protestant things. You have to really know what happened in the past, why did it start." As Matthew put it, "It might not have changed our view, but we knew a lot more information about it."

Some of the most articulate explanations of this view came from students who argued that learning history at school allowed them to make their own decisions about what to believe, rather than being compelled to follow the opinions of others. Joseph, for example, said that it's important to get different points of view "so that you can have your own view about it. . . . Rather than people telling you what you have to do, and people telling you what you have to know and all that stuff, you can form your own point of view." He went on to explain that school history "doesn't really tell you what to think, you can choose what you want, it doesn't set something that you have to think or anything like that." Similarly, Jessica explained that studying history at school "wouldn't change your view but expand it":

[It] would help you to have your own views and things and not follow other people or your family . . . I know myself I've heard about a whole lot of things that have happened from my family and I was sort of starting to just take over whatever they said, and now after learning about it more at school, I've got my own views on it and I know how I feel about things.

Similarly, Jordan and Ben, from an ardently Loyalist area, were adamant that they were committed Unionists and that learning history would not change that, yet they were also emphatic that understanding the other side was critical. As Jordan pointed out, "Before we learned about this [the Easter Rising] we would have thought they were just causing trouble, but they have their own reasons why, cause they want their independence, in 1916." When challenged as to why learning this was important for Unionists, Jordan's interview partner, Ben, explained that without it, "You wouldn't have much of understanding, you'd just really, whatever tradition you're from you'd just follow it, even though you'd know nothing about it." Like most of the students in our study, Ben and Jordan clearly were going to continue following their own tradition, but they prided themselves on the fact that they were able to base their views on a thorough knowledge of Northern Ireland's past and a consideration of multiple perspectives.

DISCUSSION

Although some students in this study saw the purpose of history in fairly narrow terms—as a way of bolstering developing sectarian viewpoints—most were engaged in a more open-minded, critical, and self-aware process consistent with Bakhtin’s (1982) concept of internally persuasive discourse. Students moved among multiple and even conflicting sources of historical information, and the interests they developed in one setting often led them to seek information in other contexts. Moreover, they were aware that narratives they learned from family and community might serve contemporary political purposes and could be highly partisan—a recognition that Wertsch (2002) suggested is atypical—and this led them to seek alternative sources of information. Most notably, students looked to school to provide more reliable information about the history of Northern Ireland’s conflict; in nearly half of our interviews, students identified this as a reason for studying the subject in school, and the need specifically to understand multiple perspectives was mentioned in over half of interviews with third-year students.

Yet even though many students looked to school for an alternative to the histories they learned elsewhere, they were not simply appropriating the discourse of academic history, for few of them rejected the political commitments of their communities or suggested that they would completely resist the accompanying narratives. For many students, their self-identified goal was to reach informed and independent judgments about history, as opposed to peers who “slobber about” because they “only know one side of the story” (i.e., who had appropriated the authoritative discourse of their community). Some students explicitly noted the demands that this placed on them but seemed comfortable with the ambiguity involved. Nicole, for example, explained that school history could change people’s ideas by leading to doubt, in her words, “cause you’re seeing it from a Catholic’s point of view, and then you’re sort of seeing it from a Protestant’s point of view, and you’re sort of thinking, ‘Ah, I don’t know.’” Similarly, Maeve, when asked whether the confusion accompanying multiple perspectives was good or bad, explained, “Good and bad. You don’t understand but you can go and find out. It enlightens you more if you are confused about it.” And Jessica explained, “I don’t know how to put this. Like you have your view, but you also know that there’s something else, other people have their views and that you can change your view from just being one thing to saying, ‘Well, yeah, I think that there, but I also think this as well.’” Thinking “that there” but “this as well” is surely an example of internally persuasive discourse rather than acceptance or rejection of particular narratives.

Why were so many students in Northern Ireland engaged in such complex reasoning, when previous research can be more easily interpreted in terms of simple appropriation of, or resistance to, authoritative historical discourses? One potential explanation is methodological: Studies such as those by Mosborg (2002), Porat (2004, 2006), and Spector (2007) focused on students' reading of specific texts and may not have produced data that would illustrate a more complicated set of interactions among sources and perspectives. Yet other studies (e.g., Barton, 2001a, 2001b; Barton & Levstik, 1998; Epstein, 1998, 2000) did engage students in more extensive and open-ended discussions, just as ours did, and should have revealed such interactions. Although research with U.S. students has portrayed them as consciously engaged in making sense of the past, there has been less evidence that they recognize either the multiple purposes of history or the mediating influence of historical representations. In the United States, much of the history that students are exposed to both in and out of school has a common goal—that of creating a sense of identity. It is not clear that U.S. students see a clear distinction between the purposes of school and community history, even when they recognize that interpretations arising in the two locations may differ. That is, they seem to think that history both in and out of school is after the same thing—stories of who “we” are—even though students of differing ethnic background may recognize variation in the content of those stories and the definition of “we.” The differences between students in the United States and Northern Ireland, then, seem to be more fundamental than mere differences in researchers' methodologies.

Students in Northern Ireland may be engaged in such a complex process of historical conceptualization because the representations of the past they encounter there are so obviously influenced by contemporary societal concerns. The use of history to justify current political positions is so pervasive in Northern Ireland that few young people could ignore the presence of conflicting stories, each with its own set of narratives. Perhaps more important, in Northern Ireland, the use of history to provoke the other community is so obvious that it would be difficult to ignore that these narratives can be used for something other than telling the “truth” about where “we” came from. Unlike in many other countries, members of the two communities in Northern Ireland do not simply dismiss or ignore competing historical narratives in favor of their own; rather, both constantly engage in attempts to force their narratives into the consciousness of the other (to “annoy” them, as some students noted). Students are further exposed to uses of history that do not attempt to justify current political arrangements; the school curriculum, in particular, addresses some of the same topics that students encounter

outside school, but in a way that rarely includes explicit connections to current politics. The extremity of these differences in historical representation may lead students to recognize how contemporary concerns mediate their understanding of the past.

The specific nature of the school curriculum, however, may also contribute to students' development of internally persuasive discourses rather than complete acceptance or rejection of authoritative ones. After all, young people in Northern Ireland have been exposed to conflicting narratives for decades, and yet many have grown up to accept uncritically one set of partisan stories or another. But since 1990, the history curriculum has encouraged students to consider multiple perspectives on all historical topics, to compare conflicting viewpoints, to differentiate their own ideas from those of people in the past, and to base their conclusions on evidence—and they have not been asked to appropriate a master narrative that justifies current political arrangements. The content of school history since the introduction of a national curriculum in 1990, then, may have directly influenced students' ability to question the authoritative stories of their communities. Had the national curriculum presented an alternative narrative, rather than an alternative to narrative, students might have had fewer tools for questioning those stories, and they might have had no choice but to appropriate one narrative or the other. And yet many students were also unwilling to fully appropriate the discourse of school history, with its disavowal of direct contemporary relevance. Students wanted to use history in ways that helped them understand present political issues, and they insisted on retaining their political allegiances, albeit on a firmer and more inclusive footing. School history, then, by providing tools that go beyond narrative mastery, may have been instrumental in helping students see the potential for historical understanding that transcends the authoritative discourses not only of their communities but also of school itself.

This is not to say, however, that students' attempts to move beyond these discourses were always successful. As we have reported elsewhere (Barton & McCully, 2005), over the course of their 3 years of historical study in secondary schools, students' identification with their own community's history became stronger, and their knowledge of that history became increasingly specific. This suggests that some students were drawing selectively from the school curriculum to bolster their developing sectarian perspectives. Moreover, as we have analyzed selected interviews in greater depth (Barton & McCully, 2008), it has become clear that even those students who were most articulate in their explanations of the need to transcend partisan perspectives nonetheless had difficulty understanding the other community's viewpoints. Recognizing the need for new

ways of thinking about history is certainly an important first step, but students will need a great deal of support if they are to move beyond good intentions in pursuit of a fuller and more inclusive approach to the past.

IMPLICATIONS

Societal goals, whether implicit or explicit, influence the curriculum of any school subject. Subjects do not simply mirror academic disciplines, but represent content deemed suitable for educational purposes (Thornton, 2005), and the selection of content is inevitably influenced by political struggles, historical traditions, and the personal and social values of teachers, parents, and even students themselves. Nowhere is this clearer than in the history curriculum, which has been the source of contentious debates in the United Kingdom and other nations in recent years (e.g., Nash, Crabtree, & Dunn, 1997; Phillips, 1998; Seixas, 2002; Taylor, 2004). In identifying implications of the research reported here, then, it is crucial to specify the goals that we have in mind for the subject rather than assuming that those goals are either self-evident or unproblematic.

What should history teachers be trying to develop in young people? We believe that history education, in part, should contribute to students' participation as reflective citizens of pluralist, democratic societies (Barton & Levstik, 2004). This goal is particularly crucial in Northern Ireland, where the political process has long been characterized by an inability (or unwillingness) to overcome long-standing sectarian grievances and where many people feel alienated from the highly constrained nature of most political discourse. At present, history teachers appear to be comfortable with an approach that engages students in the historical process, introduces them to the concepts of evidence and perspective, and develops their critical skills (McCombe, 2006). Certainly, our study shows that students benefit from such scholarly and evenhanded presentations. Many students in our study had learned that there is no single, objectively true narrative of the past, and they recognized that historical narratives are human constructions, influenced by the purposes of those who create and reproduce them. This is a critical element of citizenship, for if students (or adults) believe that narratives are part of the past itself—rather than human attempts to shape the meaning of the past—they will be ill-prepared to understand, or interact productively with, those who come from communities that emphasize differing narratives. But if students are continually and systematically exposed to multiple perspectives on historical events and to the process by which historical accounts are created, they may become more willing and able to entertain the

legitimacy of perspectives other than their own.

However, this emphasis on the cognitive dimension tends to distance historical study from its contemporary connections, and this allows teachers to steer clear of the possibility of emotional reactions generated from background and community. For history teaching to fully meet students' needs, the acquisition of appropriate knowledge and skills is not enough. Teachers should be conscious of fostering particular dispositions in students through which to frame their engagement with history, however complex and challenging it appears. This would involve making more direct connections between past and present. Many history educators assume that if students learn to evaluate evidence and consider multiple perspectives when studying distant historical periods, they will make use of those abilities when analyzing other topics that they encounter on their own, but experience with young people in Northern Ireland suggests that this is more difficult than it appears. Although students may bring a critical eye to distant events, consideration of more recent topics brings forth an emotional response that acts as a barrier to critical analysis (McCully, 2006; McCully & Pilgrim, 2004; McCully, Pilgrim, Sutherland, & McMinn, 2002). If the history curriculum is to play a role in helping students better understand the present, teachers will have to guide them, carefully and systematically, to steadfastly seek clarity and adopt positions based on personal judgment, but also to be comfortable when faced with complexity and confusion and to recognize that all positions must be open to reinterpretation in the light of new knowledge. With such an outlook, students may have the understanding and confidence to better mediate between the history of the classroom and the streets.

The implementation of a revised secondary curriculum in Northern Ireland, which has been rolled out from September 2007, goes much further in adopting this kind of social utilitarian perspective (Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, 2003). In doing so, it goes some way to addressing issues raised by the research presented here. In addition to promoting historical skills and concepts such as causation, chronology, and perspective-taking, students are to be encouraged—through the process of inquiry—to directly explore the relevance of historical study in their contemporary lives. For example, in the context of studying Irish history, young people should have opportunities to “explore how history has affected their personal identity, culture and lifestyle” or “investigate how history has been selectively interpreted to create stereotypical perceptions and to justify views and actions.” With regard to more directly political matters, in addition to examining the short- and long-term causes of the partition of Ireland, students should

apply their learning to how partition “has influenced Northern Ireland today” (Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment). By providing such experiences in the future, the reformed curriculum has the potential to provide educators in Northern Ireland with further opportunities to develop students’ capacity to think critically about history and its role in contemporary society and to explore more explicit links between past and present. Although teachers may find this effort challenging, it should enhance students’ ability to develop their own perspectives on the relevance of history.

Although situated in the unique circumstances of Northern Ireland, this study has at least two important implications for any setting in which history is expected to contribute to the development of reflective citizens. First, students’ exposure to history must extend beyond mastery of particular narratives. Although its appeal is well known, reliance on historical narratives also presents several obstacles to sophisticated and critical understanding—including dismissal of alternative stories, lack of attention to the evidence on which stories are based, and the belief that plots are found in the past rather than imposed on it (Barton & Levstik, 2004). If school history aims at no more than mastery of particular narratives, students are likely to either accept or reject those narratives uncritically and thus to ignore information that might complicate and extend their understanding. But if students experience alternative ways of making sense of the past—such as considering multiple perspectives and the use of evidence—they may be able to better understand the diversity and complexity of historical events. At the same time that students are learning stories of the past, then, they must be learning to analyze how those stories are constructed, how they might be told differently, and how they serve social or political purposes in the present.

Consideration of purpose points to the second broad implication of this research: The study of history should enable students to make explicit links between past and present. Students in this study expected history to have contemporary relevance, and they were unwilling to fully accept the distanced, academic discourse they encountered in school; they retained their political identities, but they wanted those allegiances to be informed by serious historical study. Yet students had difficulty achieving that balance: They did not fully understand alternative viewpoints, and the longer they studied history, the more they became entrenched in their own community’s perspective—despite the explicit desire by many of them to do otherwise. If educators want the study of history to help young people develop informed views on contemporary and controversial issues, those issues will have to be addressed directly, and students will need a great deal of guidance in thinking about them.

We cannot expect students to understand the present by focusing solely on the distant past, nor can we influence their identities by asking them to ignore who they are. The study of history must include attention to topics and perspectives that students and society care about, no matter how unsettling those may be.

CONCLUSIONS

This study challenges us to think in new ways about young people's developing historical ideas. Although previous research has demonstrated that students may be actively involved in appropriating or resisting particular historical narratives, many of those we interviewed in Northern Ireland were engaged in a more complex process. The knowledge and interests they developed in one setting led them to seek additional information in other contexts, and they struggled to integrate the ideas they encountered in each. Although some students simply assimilated this information into dominant community narratives, most were aware that such narratives can be used for contemporary political purposes, and they appreciated the fact that school history encouraged a more complete and balanced historical perspective, particularly by exposing them to the motivations and experiences of the other community. Even as they sought expanded historical viewpoints, however, they were unwilling to abandon the political commitments of their communities, and they sought greater contemporary relevance for history than they were likely to encounter in school. Both the highly contentious nature of popular historical representations in Northern Ireland and the evidence-based, nonnarrative emphasis of the school curriculum may have been responsible for the tendency of many students to move beyond simply accepting or rejecting given historical narratives. This points to the value of historical study that focuses on approaches other than mastery of historical narrative, but students' difficulty in fully considering alternative perspectives also suggests the need for more direct guidance in considering controversial issues and their links to contemporary identities.

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Note

1. All students' names have been replaced by pseudonyms.

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APPENDIX

Interview Protocol

Explain to students that their participation in this interview is completely voluntary and that they can choose not to participate without any effect on their studies. Explain that if they decide to participate, they can change their mind and withdraw at any time.

Explain to students that the purpose of the research is to find out their ideas about history and how it relates to them. Explain that the purpose is not to find out how much they know, but what they think—what their ideas are about what’s important in history. Explain that they will work with a partner to look through a group of pictures related to history and to put them into groups that they think belong together. Explain that

they will then be asked why they chose those groupings and that they will be asked some questions about where they have learned about history and what they think is important. Explain that the interview should take about 30–45 minutes and that they will be tape recorded, but their names will not be used, and no one other than the researchers and their assistants will know what they say in the interview.

Ask students if they would like to participate in the interview. If they agree, explain the first part of the task: “I have a set of pictures from different times in history. Some are about the history of Northern Ireland, and some are about other parts of European or world history. What I would like for you to do is work with your partner to put these into groups; decide which ones you think belong together, and put those into sets. You might have two sets, or three, or four, or more; it’s up to you. As you’re working on it, be sure to talk to your partner about what you’re thinking and why you think the pictures belong together. After you’re finished, I’ll ask why you chose the groups that you did.”

Give students time to arrange the pictures into groups. When they are finished, point to each group and ask why they thought those pictures belonged together. Then ask:

1. Which of these groups of pictures have the most to do with you, or who you are? Do you think other people would pick different groups, or arrange the pictures differently? Why?
2. Which of these pictures do you think are the most important? Where have you learned about them?
3. Which of these pictures have you learned about at school? How did what you learned at school change your ideas about them?
4. Why do you think people in Northern Ireland care about history? What do you think is the purpose of studying history at school? What have been the most interesting things you’ve learned about history at school?
5. Do you think different people have different ideas about history? Why?

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