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Trying to “See Things Differently”: Northern Ireland Students’ Struggle to Understand Alternative Historical Perspectives

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Abstract: This study illustrates the processes by which 8 pairs of adolescents in Northern Ireland struggled to come to grips with tensions between school and community history. Findings are based on data collected through open-ended, semi-structured interviews with students from a variety of backgrounds. Although these students appreciated the attempt by schools to present a neutral and balanced approach to the past, many had difficulty fully engaging with alternative historical perspectives. These findings suggest that a balanced history curriculum may fail to challenge students deeply enough to help them integrate competing views of the past in ways that withstand community pressure. Greater engagement with multiple historical perspectives may require that schools address the affective component of contentious history, that they help students reflect on contemporary representations of the past, and that they expose students to the diversity of perspectives that exist within seemingly monolithic political and religious categories.

Keywords: empathy, history education, Northern Ireland, social identity

Emily appreciated learning history at school. She pointed out that in her community, “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.” She and Paige, her partner in the interview, were teenagers at a Catholic school in a predominantly Protestant town in Northern Ireland, and they were well aware that history can be used for partisan political purposes. As one of them pointed out,

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“Say Catholics, they do the pictures of the Famine to let the Protestants know how much suffering they went through because of them, and if they have won a war then they paint that to let Protestants know that they have beaten them.”

They were critical of this kind of history, which they saw as not only biased but ignorant. Emily noted:

Maybe they have heard it from parents as small children, and then they start preaching it to people and it just builds up over generations, like the marching. Sometimes you see three-year-olds dressed in orange, marching, and they don't know what's going on.

But school history is different. As Paige explained, its purpose is to “show you what it was really like, not just to take people's word but to know why and back up your opinion. . . . They show both sides of it, they make it clear.” In the long run, she thought, learning history at school could change people's opinions and maybe even contribute to reconciliation, because it can “make you see things differently about your religion and your country and stuff.”

History certainly should “make you see things differently,” and in a divided society such as Northern Ireland, providing students with alternatives to the politicized histories they find outside school is quite an accomplishment. Like nearly all students in our study, Emily and Paige were critical of the selective and distorted perspectives found in their communities, and they valued the chance to see “both sides” of history at school. Students especially appreciated the opportunity to make up their own minds about the past rather than having to “just take people's word” for it. They knew school history was different, and they liked it.

But it was a struggle, this attempt to see things differently “about your religion and your country and stuff.” Emily and Paige could not easily abandon perspectives they had grown up with, and these continued to influence their understanding of Northern Ireland's contested past and troubled present. The two girls could identify iconic nationalist figures from history, for example, but they did not recognize unionist ones, even those prominent in the curriculum they had just studied. Similarly, they could explain how historic events might figure into nationalist murals, but they gave no examples of similar unionist viewpoints. And their criticism of biased perspectives seems directed mainly at the unionist community, where “you see three-year-olds dressed in orange, marching, and they don't know what's going on.” They were not so explicitly critical of the nationalist community. These responses suggest that rather than helping Emily and Paige see things differently, school history may only have given them a language to talk about balance and neutrality, and may not have fundamentally altered their perception of the past. This article explores such relationships between students' explanations of history's purpose and their substantive understanding of the subject.

Perhaps most significant, Emily and Paige—like most students we talked to—seemed tied to a dichotomous view of history, as though two monolithic

“sides” were engaged in perpetual conflict. They rarely pointed to diversity or complexity within nationalist and unionist communities, and just as important, they almost always referred to these communities by religious labels rather than political ones. This led to notable simplifications, as when one girl observed that famine murals show how much Catholics suffered because of Protestants. A different way of characterizing the famine—one more in keeping with current historical and political interpretations—would be to say that many Irish tenants suffered because of absentee landlords and the inaction of the British government. When students replace political and economic structures with antagonisms between apparently monolithic religious communities, they not only oversimplify historical events but fall into old ways of thinking that contribute to division in Northern Ireland.

BACKGROUND: THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING

Helping students move beyond historical simplifications is a major challenge for educators. It is no small task in Northern Ireland to overcome ingrained ideas: beliefs and prejudices occupying public and private spaces, found around kitchen tables and on the nightly news, displayed in graffiti and murals and banners. Yet for all its complexity, Northern Ireland is not unique. Everywhere, social background influences historical understanding. Studies from Israel, North America, and Eastern and Western Europe all suggest that present-day identities and political allegiances influence students’ views of the past.

Students’ attribution of significance to historical events and patterns, for example, is closely tied to stories they encounter in the wider society and to what they perceive as their own place within those stories. In some cases, students’ historical narratives closely match those found in the textbooks or other sources of “official” history (e.g., An, 2009; Barton & Levstik, 1998; Terzian & Yeager, 2007). Other times, students (and adults) adhere to counter-narratives that challenge or undermine official perspectives; those counter-narratives may even be dominant in the wider society, despite conflicting with school history (Goldberg, Porat, & Schwarz, 2006; Létourneau & Moisan, 2004; Wertsch, 1998). Even their evaluation of sources depends, in part, on students’ ethnic background (Epstein, 2008) and the present-day political relevance of the events the sources address (Goldberg, Schwarz, & Porat, 2008).

History, it seems, is too important for students just to accept what they are told. In the Mideast, Europe, North America, and elsewhere, students recognize the social significance of history, and they interpret historical content in light of narrative templates, community identifications, and epistemological assumptions found in the wider community. As a result, their historical understandings rarely just reproduce either school and academic history, or histories

they encounter elsewhere. Instead, students actively blend elements of diverse historical approaches in order to develop their own perspectives on the past.

Northern Ireland: History in School and Out

As we have argued before (Barton & McCully, 2010), Northern Ireland provides a rich setting for investigating the complexity of students' encounters with the past. 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.

Such public, persistent, and deeply emotional reminders of the past are so important in the life of Northern Ireland that neither the unionist nor nationalist narrative could form the basis for "official" history in the national curriculum; either would be considered far too controversial and politicized. But although Northern Ireland is not distinct in facing a disjuncture between school and community history, the school system confronts this potential conflict in a distinctive way. Rather than ignoring competing community narratives, the curriculum acknowledges both communities' historical experiences. History, at the time of this study, was a required subject during the first three years of secondary school (the equivalent of grades 6–8 in North America), and part of the purpose of the curriculum was to expose students to a different way of thinking about historical accounts. During each of these three years, students studied a period of history deemed essential for understanding Northern Ireland's past, but these were contextualized within a wider British and European framework (Department of Education, Northern Ireland, 1991). Moreover, students did not encounter an official narrative that aimed to justify current political arrangements. Rather, the curriculum systematically presented multiple interpretations of events in a balanced way, with equal attention to experiences and perspectives of both communities. In a typical lesson, for example, students

would consider the motivations and reactions of opposing historical actors (i.e., unionist and nationalist, Irish and English, etc., depending on the topic), with an eye toward understanding how the cultural and political backgrounds of those groups and individuals influenced their thoughts and behaviors. Students would most often base this kind of analysis on examination of written accounts or other evidence from people involved in historical events, rather than simply reading textbook accounts of differing perspectives. One of the goals of the curriculum was to provide an alternative to the presumably partisan and sectarian histories that students encountered outside school.

Although undoubtedly there are deviations in practice from the official curriculum, a great deal of evidence—from academic research, government inspections, and our own experiences in schools—indicates that teachers and textbooks adhere closely to formal requirements and are systematic and conscientious in treating multiple perspectives in a fair and evenhanded way (Education and Training Inspectorate, 2006; Kitson, 2007). It is rare to find evidence of instruction that is either blatantly or subtly biased toward one community or the other (although the public often perceives that such bias exists, particularly in schools of the “other” community). Like most history teachers in the United Kingdom, those in Northern Ireland have been educated in a system that largely eschews narrative and instead focuses on using original sources to answer historical questions—an approach with deep roots in the Schools History Project and similar programs used throughout the country. Teachers think of their job in terms of engaging students in rigorous and objective analysis of past events and perspectives, and this necessarily involves understanding the viewpoints of people in history rather than imposing contemporary partisan interpretations on events. Teachers largely avoid making connections between past events and contemporary politics; in fact, one of the principal critiques of history teaching in Northern Ireland is that it does not deal with those concerns directly enough (Kitson, 2007; McCaffery & Hansson, 2011). History teachers there see their subject as an academic endeavor, guided by the norms and practices of professional historical scholarship, not as a chance to impose particular narratives on students.

METHODS

In this research, we sought to understand how young people had been influenced, if at all, by this approach to history teaching. Toward that end, we conducted open-ended, semi-structured, task-based interviews with 253 students, in groups of 2 or 3, from 11 different schools that represented a variety of demographic, social, and educational contexts—Protestant (“Controlled”), Catholic (“Maintained”), and Integrated schools; Grammar (academically selective), Secondary (nonselective), and Comprehensive schools; and schools in areas that we judged had experienced relatively high levels of conflict in

recent years, and those that had been more peaceful.¹ We interviewed approximately equal numbers of boys and girls, and approximately equal number of students who had completed each of the three required years of history (at about ages 12, 13, and 14).

Interviews (Appendix A) lasted approximately 20–40 minutes each and were conducted away from students' classrooms, usually in spare rooms, libraries, or offices; interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed. To generate richer data, we interviewed students in groups, most of which consisted of same-sex pairs from a single grade level. (Pairings of students were created by teachers, usually based on student availability; in many cases, however, it was evident that students in a pair knew each other well and may have self-selected to be interviewed together.) Interviewing students in pairs or small groups can improve the quality of data (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Levstik & Barton, 2008), because the conversations that arise when students react to each others' ideas are generally more elaborate than those that result simply from answering an interviewer's questions. This is particularly important when working with adolescents, because differences in power and status between researchers and participants may inhibit conversation during individual interviews (Eder & Fingerson, 2002).

In our interviews, we presented each group of students with a variety of images related to the history of Ireland, England, and the rest of the world (Appendix B). We asked them to work together to categorize the images in ways that made sense to them, to choose the categories they most identified with, and to talk about their overall understanding of the purpose of history both in school and out. This task involved a set of 28 images, which we developed in order to elicit a range of possible historical categories and explanations. Images were selected from a variety of sources, including engravings, photographs, paintings, posters, and wall murals; they were drawn from periods ranging from Mesolithic times through the present, and they included not only political and military affairs but social and economic history. Although we included some people and events we believed most adults would associate with either unionist or nationalist viewpoints, many images had little or no direct connection to either of those narratives. Whenever possible we chose images that were ambiguous or that suggested multiple connections—such as a mural associating the mythical Irish figure Cúchulainn with Protestant paramilitaries, or a picture of Irish soldiers wearing German-style helmets during World War II. Our chief aim was to allow categories to emerge from students' understanding as much as possible rather to force them to choose from a narrow set of pre-existing concepts.

We have previously reported two of the principal findings of this research (Barton & McCully, 2005, 2010). First, students consciously and explicitly understood that one purpose of the school curriculum—and one way it differed from history outside school—was to provide a more balanced and less partisan perspective on Northern Ireland's history. Moreover, students embraced

that goal and often felt that it should indeed lead to a lessening of sectarian prejudice. Although students did not suggest that learning about multiple perspectives would make them identify less with their own community's religious and political commitments, they did say that it would make them more appreciative of the experiences of others and would help them understand and accept people of different backgrounds. Students noted that their political commitments should be based on knowledge and tolerance, rather than on ignorance and prejudice, and they largely agreed that the history curriculum at school was an important element of this kind of enlarged understanding.

Yet at the same time, students' identification with community historical perspectives actually became *stronger* over the course of three years of historical study. After one year, students identified with a wide range of historical topics, including "leaders," aspects of local history (such as castles), or the general history of the Troubles (without specifying a particular perspective). By the end of the third year, these identifications had narrowed considerably: A much greater portion of students identified with either a nationalist or a unionist perspective on history, and many fewer students identified with leaders, local heritage, or with nothing at all. Moreover, students seemed to be drawing selectively from the school curriculum in order to bolster developing community identifications. Thus first-year students who identified with a unionist perspective might simply point to a photograph with a Union Jack and indicate that it was a British symbol; a third-year student, having studied the topic of Home Rule, was more likely to note that the photograph represented a speech by unionist leader Edward Carson and that he was the founder of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), an important organization within the Protestant community.

These two sets of findings—that students embraced the curriculum's emphasis on multiple perspectives and its tacit goal of increasing tolerance, while nonetheless drawing selectively from history to support their own community identifications—are not exactly contradictory, but they certainly suggest some underlying tension among the differing ways history is used in Northern Ireland. In order to explore this tension, we examined our data in a new way. In our previous analysis, we relied on aggregate data—both numerical frequency counts and qualitative cross-case analysis. Although these procedures provided a comprehensive view of overall themes and patterns in students' responses, they told us little about how individual students dealt with the tensions they encountered in making sense of history. Understanding the complexity and particularity of students' ideas required a more individual, less cumulative method of analysis.

In order to accomplish this, we used within-case analysis (Huberman & Miles, 1994) of individual interviews to describe the responses of each pair of students.² We first scanned the entire set of interviews to identify those in which students responded in enough detail to enable more in-depth analysis. We then culled this sample of interviews by selecting those in which students

seemed to display a relatively consistent approach to talking about historical events and their significance. We divided this smaller sample between the two of us, and each of us developed an analytic paragraph characterizing the overall approach students took within each interview (including any tensions and uncertainties). We then shared these initial descriptions, re-read the interviews upon which each other's analyses were based (paying particular attention to potential examples of negative or discrepant data within each case) and came to consensus on how best to characterize the approach taken by each pair of students. Like much qualitative research, this process relied on thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), as we developed themes that we felt would best characterize the totality of participants' responses. By examining individual interviews rather than the entire data set, however, our analysis was similar to narrative analysis (Lawlor, 2002). Yet rather than analyzing stories of students' lives, our focus was phenomenological, as we sought to describe how they made sense of their social worlds (Holstein & Gubrium, 1994)—in particular, of tensions between historical content and perspectives they encountered in school and out.

The following section illustrates how seven pairs of students engaged with such tensions. (Emily and Paige, in the introductory section of this article, represent an eight pair.) We selected this set of interviews both to demonstrate a range of ways in which students grappled with school and community history and to represent responses from students at a variety of school types. Our goal here is not to present a comprehensive typology of students' thinking, but to explore some of the means by which students tried to make sense of history in Northern Ireland. We also do not attempt to make claims about the representativeness of these findings; we do not claim that these are the most common ways in which community and school histories interact, or that patterns found in a single interview can be generalized to other students either within our sample or outside it. Indeed, we necessarily relied on interviews with students who were relatively articulate and who gave clear evidence of their perspectives on both school and community history. Our goal, rather, is to demonstrate that school- and community-based ideas about history interact, and that they do so in a variety of ways—a finding that suggests schools cannot simply expect students to take up the content of the curriculum in simple and predictable ways, and that students cannot somehow be inoculated from particular “misunderstandings.” Students are too complex and varied for that, as these interviews illustrate.

FINDINGS

Although all students expressed interest in understanding multiple perspectives on Northern Ireland's past, no single pattern characterized their attempts to make sense of these differing points of view. Moreover, while the

influence of family and community perspectives was strong among all but one pair of students, the ways in which they reconciled—or failed to reconcile—these perspectives with the alternatives they encountered in school varied from pair to pair. Dale and Stan, for example, maintained a strong community identity yet had a balanced understanding of both sides' views. On the other hand, for Caleb and Wyatt, and for Rory and Dermot, community identities provided relatively one-sided frameworks for making sense of the past. Amber and Jessica (like Emily and Page in the introduction) also relied heavily on their community background, but this was evident less in their attempt to impose a single perspective on history than in their simple lack of knowledge of the other community's point of view. Janice and Nuala's responses complicate the picture even further: They were highly sympathetic toward members of the other community, yet their sympathy consisted primarily of assimilating those experiences into their own narrative framework; they did not dismiss or ignore alternative points of view so much as reinterpret them.

Two pairs of students, meanwhile, showed little allegiance to either of Northern Ireland's polarized historical points of view. John and Ted had a deep knowledge of the experiences of both communities, but they identified with the academic study of history rather than any partisan approach to the past. Similarly, Sophia and Ashley showed no identification with either unionism or nationalism; yet their interest centered not on academic study but on a concern with social justice and human rights in history. The following sections explore the thinking of each of these pairs of students. Taken together, they demonstrate some of the variety of ways in which students struggle to make sense of competing perspectives on the past.

Dale and Stan: Combining School History and Community Identity

Dale and Stan were two boys at a non-selective Protestant high school in a town near Belfast.³ During the conflict, the town was perceived as a "safe haven" from violence, and families migrated there from Belfast. This included working-class Protestant families who settled in public housing estates on its outskirts. Subsequently, these estates came under the influence of loyalist paramilitary groups. The school drew its students from these estates and from private housing developments in the town.

Dale and Stan participated in the interview by organizing the images collaboratively, and they responded to our questions readily and articulately. These two boys embodied many of the patterns that emerged in our earlier cross-case analysis of interviews, in which students combined a strong sense of community loyalty and identity with a sincere desire to expand their understanding and to appreciate multiple historical perspectives. Both said they were interested in history, and they cited their exposure to the subject in multiple contexts outside school—including relatives, wall murals, television, and "books and stuff."

Rather than absorbing an exclusively unionist view of the past, though, Dale and Stan had developed knowledge and interests related to a variety of historical topics. They had seen unionist murals in Protestant areas, and learned about Protestant history from relatives, but they also had learned about figures and events associated with nationalist history—Dale, for example, had read about Henry Joy McCracken in books and had seen “Bloody Sunday and things like that” on television. Both identified with images associated with unionist history, but they also valued images related to the World Wars I and II because, as Stan said, “It’s shaped our history, like the two biggest events of the last century, really.” And when asked what they would like to know more about, they identified not only “national differences between Catholics and Protestants” but “ancient things.”

Dale and Stan recognized the differing ways in which school and community sources approach history in Northern Ireland. The latter emphasized the Protestant past, and from them one would only learn, as Dale said, “maybe a bit about the Catholic stuff, cause you’d know about how you’ve went against them, how you’ve been against them and stuff.” The historical aspect of murals, Dale suggested, was both to “show their past and whatever way their religion has taken form” as well as to “annoy people” by demonstrating, as Stan noted, past Protestant victories. Dale pointed out that school history, though, focuses on “the background of it, why unionists and nationalists don’t like each other.” Stan added that after studying history at school, “You understand the reasons, what’s happened more . . . cause like 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 wanted their independence in 1916.”

There was evidence that school history had, indeed, been successful in broadening these students’ understanding of the past, for they were as likely to recognize people and events associated with the nationalist past as those connected with unionism. Moreover, they articulated nationalist purposes and perspectives—noting that the Easter Rising was about achieving independence, and that nationalists “somewhat blame the British” for the Irish Famine. Both agreed that such understanding was important, because without it, as Stan said,

You’d just be dead against Catholics, you’d just be, ‘Oh, I hate them because they started it all,’ and since we’ve been in school and learned about it, you feel more understanding for them, and why this happened and things.

Like most of the students we talked to, though, Dale and Stan did not suggest that learning multiple points of view would diminish their community identities. When asked which groups of images had the most to do with them, both quickly associated with those related to unionism. Dale explained, “That’s our religion, that’s our background, our families’ backgrounds and

their religion.” As illustration he identified with a photograph of Edward Carson (an important unionist leader of the late 19th and early 20th centuries) because “He didn’t want a united Ireland, when it was wanted, so I agree with that, so he would be to do with me.” Learning about the nationalist point of view, however, was important because it would “probably give you a bit more understanding about them” (Stan) and because without it, “whatever tradition you’re from you’d just follow it, even though you’d know nothing about it” (Dale). Learning history at school, then, would not weaken their unionist identity, but would allow them to form a reasoned understanding of the past (including multiple perspectives), rather than leaving them at the mercy of unthinking adherence to tradition.

Caleb and Wyatt: The Dominance of Community Identity

Caleb and Wyatt attended the same school as Dale and Stan. They, too, responded enthusiastically to the picture sorting task and the questions that followed. They demonstrated reasonably accurate knowledge when identifying and sorting the pictures. They were able to link the Easter Rising, Charles Stewart Parnell, and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s as iconic events in the struggle for Irish freedom. Yet it was their focus on images associated with unionist tradition, particularly those of King William III, the Siege of Derry, and the Battle of the Somme, that was most striking, as was the way they drew other pictures into this unionist narrative—for example, by explaining that Carrickfergus Castle (originally built in the 12th century) was the site where Protestant William III “landed” in Ireland in 1690. The boys were even quick to connect economic and social images to the history of unionism, rather than to the history of Ireland more generally. They noted, for example, that the Titanic and linen factory images represented “the industry boom,” another symbol of Ulster’s strength and separateness.

These boys again and again referenced the Siege of Derry, the Battle of the Boyne, and the Battle of the Somme—three of the most important events in the collective memory of unionism. Caleb also made detailed references to the world wars, but even these he saw in the context of sacrifice, an important unionist theme. For him the most interesting event learned in history was the First World War “cause it tells you they all fought and died for us”—an observation that might apply equally to those from both backgrounds, but a sentiment that typically would be voiced only by those from a unionist background.

More pointedly than most students we interviewed, Caleb and Wyatt frequently drew attention to the contemporary significance of historical events, particularly as they related to their own sense of political identity. Wyatt, for example, noted that the image of the mythical hero Cúchulainn showed how the “UDA [Ulster Defence Association] and other paramilitaries are keeping

us British” and that the Battle of the Somme “is commemorated every 12th of July and 1st of July” (and only by unionists). Caleb also pointed out that after the Battle of the Boyne, Protestants had landed in Ulster “and that’s what we believe in.” In summing up why these events meant most to him, Wyatt declared “they’re from Northern Ireland and we celebrate them every year and without them we’d probably be in a United Ireland.”

As indicated earlier, Caleb and Wyatt were not disinterested in those pictures they associated with “nationalist history.” Having contextualized the nationalist struggle for independence, they were one of the few pairs we interviewed, Protestant or Catholic, to locate the Northern Ireland Civil Rights marches of the 1960s in that same narrative: “Well, they want more rights and they’re wanting to become their own free state” (Wyatt). Even so, note that the “we” of the unionist narrative is replaced by the “they” of the nationalist one. When asked whether students at a Catholic school would identify with the same pictures that they did, Wyatt had little hesitation in indicating that Catholics would probably pick the Easter Rising, Parnell, and the Civil Rights march. Tacitly, and without rancor, the boys appear to be acknowledging that each community would identify with its own story and each had the right to do so. However, they also understood that those stories were inter-related: “They need to know their history as well, cause part of your history probably came from their history as well” (Caleb).

For these boys, this was where school history played its part. Outside school they had acquired knowledge of the importance of key events in unionist history. For Wyatt, the chief function of school history was to provide “more information.” For example, when we asked him about school’s contribution to his knowledge of the Siege of Derry, he provided us with a concise and accurate summary of its chronology. Caleb went further by acknowledging the role of school history in allowing him to see both sides of the story: “We were probably biased and didn’t know much about the other and what their arguments were, but now when you learn it, you can understand some arguments from the other side, and from the UVF as well.” Yet both students were clear that learning in school would not change their prevailing views. Indeed, the way both Caleb and Wyatt indicated that “a bit of Irish history” is useful leads us to conclude that they regarded this as distinct from the history of Northern Ireland. Its significance lay only in its function of contextualizing how “we” (unionists) have acted in the past.

For Caleb and Wyatt, history was relevant when it impinged directly on their contemporary world and their sense of identity. It was interesting “because it’s our history which created Northern Ireland, and a lot of things that’s going on now.” It was important because history, according to Wyatt, is especially dynamic, not just because it “changed Ulster and Northern Ireland a lot over the last hundred years” but also because “stuff hasn’t finished, the story is still going on.” To these students “know[ing] your background” was essential to ensure that they could play their part in completing that story.

Rory and Dermot: Using School History to Consolidate Community Identity

Rory and Dermot were students in a non-selective, single-sex Catholic school in a republican area of Belfast. Here, the Catholic population lives in a large, homogeneous community and young people tend not to travel out of the area and, therefore, are unlikely to come into direct contact with Protestants. The area is highly politicized as evidenced through wall murals, posters, and other symbolism, which frequently commemorate the armed struggle of the provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA).

The interview with Rory and Dermot, unsurprisingly, reflected a nationalist perspective. Even when discussing the pictures related to early settlements or monuments, Rory specifically related them “to old Irish history” or giving “a good sense of Ireland,” and when presented with political images this nationalist narrative became obvious. For example, he immediately associated a picture of British soldiers with “Bloody Sunday” (a 1972 incident in which nationalist protestors were fired on by British soldiers) and then grouped this image with those of the 1916 Easter Rising and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s as about “Irish Politics”—but, significantly, each event was then explained in the context of IRA associations, real or perceived. Hence, Civil Rights was “mainly nationalists marching here, the IRA mainly controlled it,” and Bloody Sunday is “where the IRA and the police had a shootout.” In connecting the Rising to the present—“cause this gave the opportunity for this to happen [the outbreak of the most recent conflict]”—Rory attributed continuity to the Irish republican struggle across the 20th century. This idea of armed struggle recurred throughout the interview. For instance, Rory associated the Famine picture with that of Bobby Sands (a nationalist hunger striker in the 1980s) as representing the Irish struggle—and Dermot quickly added “Bloody Sunday” in conversation. Even Nelson Mandela was integrated into the story because “he fought for his freedom the same way as the Irish are here.” When asked to personalize and prioritize events Rory saw “Civil Rights” as most important to him and the Easter Rising as most significant historically because “the Irish eventually go and try to break free from the British.”

When the boys discussed the purpose of learning history at school, their answers reflected the importance of community background. For Dermot it was “to know what you are and all that” and for Rory “to give you a purpose of identity [Interviewer: What do you mean?] You’ve got a belief, you’ve got to hang on to it, it’s yours, it’s what makes you, it shapes you, it forms you.” Yet both were adamant that history learned in school was more considered, informed, and balanced than that acquired in the community. In Rory’s opinion school history

gave 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 look at both sides of the argument.

Dermot, too, recognized the limitations of community history by pointing out that through school “some people get to know what the right thing happened, because some people believe what other people say, but it’s not that true.” Further, both boys were forthright in agreeing that school history could change views, but then Rory qualified this by acknowledging that loyalty to one’s own background might override this:

If you are a deep down Protestant or a deep down Catholic, you’re not going to say, well maybe in front of people, maybe they were wrong, maybe they were right, you’ll keep that to yourself, but you’ll still be a strong Protestant or Catholic at the end of it.

In fact, the evidence suggested that neither student had actually dwelt long on alternative perspectives. Rory and Dermot had no difficulty in identifying the picture of Protestant King William III, which they associated as “very deep in Protestant history,” but it did not represent their story, and therefore it generated only cursory attention. And, initially, they failed to recognize unionist leader Edward Carson, whom they had studied that year at school. Indeed, they even managed to incorporate two “unionist” images into their own narrative. When Dermot was asked for an example of how school history had influenced him, he found the Somme picture significant only because knowledge of the First World War had helped him grasp the motives for those who led the Easter Rising—in other words, it helped him simply to achieve a better understanding of the nationalist perspective. Rory declared that the Siege of Derry was “when Catholics were locked inside by Protestants,” whereas the reverse was the case—thus his version colluded with a view of Catholics as victims. When Rory talked, expectantly, of school lessons teaching him more about “1969 and stuff like that, the hunger strikers,” he linked this to the importance of commemorations as “spearheads” to rally his community:

To show people that they’re strong, to show the other side we’re not defeated, look what happened to us, we had one of our best leaders killed, we had millions of people killed in the Famine, but we’ve come back, we’re strong from this, we’ll keep fighting.

Rory and Dermot were bright students who were enthused by the history they had encountered in school. They both appreciated the open and informed approach that was taken by school history and were prepared to learn from it. Yet there was little evidence that it had significantly challenged the dominant narrative they encountered in their local environment. It appeared that they were steeped in prevailing political ethos around them even though they understood what was being attempted in the history classroom. Consequently,

they were drawing on their expanding knowledge to substantiate the view of the past which best supported their emerging political consciousness.

Amber and Jessica: Struggling to Move Beyond Community Perspectives

Amber and Jessica were fourth-year students at a Protestant grammar school in a relatively prosperous town south east of Belfast, an area associated with a robust brand of unionism. The countryside and towns to the west are characterized by residential segregation along religious lines and have been the scene of serious sectarian conflict. Both girls were talkative and enthusiastic, and they contributed in nearly equal measure to the interview (although their voices are virtually indistinguishable on the recording, and so their responses here are not differentiated by name). Both said they liked studying history, and they had chosen to continue the subject as an elective. Like most of the students we interviewed, Amber and Jessica reported learning about history not only in school but from a variety of other sources, including family, print and electronic media, and the built environment. Much of this learning related to unionist events and symbols. One pointed out that they had heard about King William “since we were really young” and that “you would have seen a picture like in a lot of places,” and one noted that she had learned about Edward Carson “just sort of from family, my older brother and things like that.” Not all of their encounters with history outside school, however, were of a partisan nature. They pointed to the importance of family members who talked about the Second World War (“what happened to relatives in the war, like why did their grandfather die in the war and what for”), and one noted that she was interested in the Titanic because of the film and books.

Yet despite their interest in history, Amber and Jessica provided little evidence of deep or extensive historical knowledge during their interview. They could not remember, for example, when World War I took place, and they thought the Irish Famine and a photograph of a hiring fair were from about the same time, although they were separated by nearly a century (and the hiring fair photograph included a picture of an automobile). They expressed an interest in learning more about the history of Northern Ireland’s conflict, but when asked what aspects they needed to know more about, they could not think of anything specific. Moreover, most of their groupings of images were made on fairly superficial grounds. They put a modern church together with a round tower (with gravestones visible in the foreground) because churches and graveyards are “linked,” and they grouped the Battle of the Somme, U.S. troops in Northern Ireland during the Second World War, and British troops in Londonderry in the 1970s “because they’re all pictures of violence or fighting.” And more than most students, they left several pictures ungrouped because they could not see any clear connections to the others—including a mural of the Siege of Derry, one of the most iconic events in the history of the region. Only

one group of pictures—all related to the conflict over Home Rule (a nationalist cause), a topic they had recently studied—had a strong thematic or chronological basis, and these were practically the only pictures that led the girls to make specific historical references.

Amber and Jessica expected school history to provide a fuller understanding of Northern Ireland's past, including the symbolism that they encountered around them, as well as to make them more appreciative of the perspective of Catholics. As one of them put it, "I know I've heard a whole lot of different people from where I live, talking about things, whenever I was younger, and I was like, 'Why? Why is that there so important?' And now you're getting to find out a lot about a whole lot of the things." As an example, one girl noted that after studying King William and the Battle of the Boyne at school "You just had more facts" and "You sort of had more to know about it." Thus, Amber and Jessica felt that by providing a more complete picture of the history of Northern Ireland's conflict, school history led to a better understanding of topics they had encountered only superficially elsewhere.

They also believed that school history should expand their understanding beyond narrowly sectarian perspectives. One girl pointed out that it's important to study history because, by knowing the background information, "you've seen both sides of it, so you wouldn't be as sectarian." Her partner agreed and added,

Well, 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.

For both girls, a critical element of this enhanced understanding was the chance to learn about both Protestant and Catholic viewpoints, and they thought that understanding multiple perspectives would lead to reduced prejudice.

However, upon closer inspection, Amber's and Jessica's interview was notable precisely for its lack of insight into nationalist perspectives. They knew that nationalists were in favor of a united, self-governing Ireland, and they knew that Charles Stuart Parnell and the Easter Rising were part of that attempt—and that these took place at about the same time as (and in opposition to) speeches by Edward Carson and the call to "Defend Ulster" (although Parnell was active a generation before the other events in this group). Beyond this, however, their grouping and discussion of images showed little awareness of the substance of nationalist history. For instance, they had no sense of the role of the Irish Famine in nationalist views of the past. They had studied the topic in primary school, and they recognized that a mural of the Famine was more likely to be seen in a Catholic neighborhood—but there was an absence of any recognition that the Famine figures in nationalist history as

an example of British indifference to Irish suffering. Similarly, they described a picture of British troops in Londonderry in the 1970s without connecting it to the turbulent relationship between British troops and the Catholic community more generally; for these girls, there had been trouble and the troops were simply going in “to try and sort it out.” Their commendable hope that school history would overcome the narrowness of their own backgrounds, then, was largely defeated by their failure to retain much information about the other community’s perspective.

Janice and Nuala: Merging Other Perspectives Into One’s Own Narrative

Janice and Nuala were completing their third year at a non-selective, Catholic girls’ school in a deeply divided and segregated mid-Ulster town. The school is set in a working class area near a community “interface” which has seen frequent street violence over the years. Although this interview was shorter than most we conducted, both girls were cooperative and willing to answer all our questions, usually without hesitation. Nuala was dominant, and when questions were addressed directly to Janice her answers sometimes demonstrated a different perspective.

Both girls displayed specific knowledge not only about topics that they had studied in school but also about topics that were not part of the curriculum. Nuala gave two extended explanations of the purpose, process, and outcome of the hunger strikes in the early 1980s—at a combined 136 words, this was one of the longer historical descriptions found in any of our interviews. When asked where she had learned about the topic, she pointed to both her family and her own reading: “The whole family is into history. They sit and discuss it. I have read a few books on the hunger strikes as well.” As with many participants, historical interests developed in one context—family discussions—led Nuala to seek further information from other sources.

Janice and Nuala understood that the two communities had differing historical perspectives. In discussing the events of 1916, for example, they noted that nationalists would remember the Easter Rising, while Protestants would commemorate the Battle of the Somme, and they knew that the subject of a mural would differ depending on which community it was located in. Nuala thought that students at a Protestant school would know about the Titanic, but not as much about the Famine or its associated workhouses. She explained, “They wouldn’t learn much about that because it was the majority of the Protestants hired the servants and the majority of Protestants built the Titanic so they would have a different view on it.” When asked why there are different views of the past, Nuala responded simply, “Because of religion. Catholic and Protestant teach different religions. One believes one reason and one the other.”

Like several of the students we interviewed, these girls thought that history in the schools of the other community might be taught from a biased

perspective, at least in part, but that in their own school there was no partiality. Their views, however, were heavily influenced by a nationalist perspective, and while they frequently demonstrated knowledge of people, events, and symbols important to nationalists, they rarely displayed a similar familiarity with those of unionism. This was evidenced by Nuala's identification with a mural of Bobby Sands:

The hunger strike one because they died for their rights. They had no other way of showing their strength. They went on the blanket for a few years previously but it didn't seem to work, and it was the only way they could show their strength, by going on hunger strike, and if they died then it would make the British Government give them their rights, and then all the dying would end—but unfortunately it didn't. So that is very important because it shows their bravery.

This not only elicited a nationalist narrative on a subject she would not have studied in school but also reflected a familiarity with specific ways of talking about the event. For example, the phrase “went on the blanket,” which denotes the refusal by republican prisoners in the late 1970s to wear prison uniforms, would only be used within the nationalist community. This orientation was much less evident in Janice's responses. She identified with a mural of the Famine, for example, not because of its nationalist associations but because “it remembers the problems of people with no food,” and when asked the purpose of school history, she simply noted, “I just like to know about history.”

The resilience of Nuala's nationalism was especially apparent when she talked about the purpose of school history. She thought that the subject should expand community perspectives, and she consistently equated the experiences of Protestants and Catholics. She showed little insight into unionist viewpoints, however, and she was only minimally critical of the nationalist perspective. Indeed, it seemed at times as though school history had served primarily to deepen her community identification rather than to complicate it. For Nuala school history was

to show that—you know the way the communities are divided? And the Protestant community call us “Fenians?” Well, actually the first Fenians were Presbyterians, and it's to show us that no side was, they don't go back into their history and we don't, so I think that's one of the purposes.

At first glance, she seems to be equating the limitations of contemporary unionist and nationalist perspectives and suggesting that both sides need to better understand their pasts. Yet her example points only to unionist blind spots—their failure to recognize that some Protestants in the past were also nationalists—and so we probed her response further by asking, “Can you think

of any examples that might go the other way, where it might help enlighten nationalists where they might have gone wrong?" Nuala replied, "The Famine, because both Catholics and Protestants died in it and it shows that there is two sides and they both suffered." Again, Nuala equates Catholics and Protestants and notes their mutual experiences, and she may be mildly critical of nationalists for failing to recognize Protestant suffering, but here too she assimilates the Protestant past to her already established view of the deprivations of the Famine. In a sense, she does not so much identify differing perspectives on the Famine but rather argues that Protestants had the same experiences as Catholics—just as she had noted that Protestants were the first nationalists. Similarly, in discussing the Battle of the Somme, Nuala was critical of Protestants for failing to recognize the Catholic contribution, and she was critical of nationalists only to the extent that they also failed to recognize the sacrifice of their own people. In each of these instances, Nuala suggested the need to move beyond simplifications in traditional nationalist and unionist perspectives, but only by equating the experiences of the two communities—not by recognizing legitimate differences between the two.

John and Ted: Accepting the Primacy of School History

John and Ted were students at the same nonselective, Protestant high school as Dale, Stan, Caleb, and Wyatt. Prior to the interview, their teacher described Ted as the best history student in the school. The boys interacted enthusiastically during the picture sorting task, explaining everything they knew about each one and how it related to the others. When questioned, they offered similar views on the purpose of history, and the impact of learning in school, yet each developed their answers sufficiently to suggest that one was not unduly influenced by the other.

Very deliberately, both boys drew on their historical understanding to categorize the pictures, impressively applying historical concepts to the task. Their groupings were dominated by political considerations, with only a passing interest in those pictures relating to ancient or social history. Social history was considered mainly in the context of indicating "progress" through time, a theme the boys returned to later in the interview. When treating the political images, two major categories emerged. One involved a large collection of pictures which they grouped as "people working together and pulling together and fighting for their beliefs." The pictures included both unionist and nationalist leaders and events: William of Orange, Carson, the Siege of Derry, Parnell, the Easter Rising and the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Three pictures had been moved from this group to the second category, "hardship": the wall mural of the Irish Famine, the painting of the Battle of the Somme, and the photograph of British troops on the streets of Derry. The latter they interpreted as Bloody Sunday and together, according to Ted, the three meant "the bad

times in Irish history, they symbolize a great loss of life and bloodshed.” Thus John and Ted seemed to associate political action in Ireland through time with individual and collective struggle and sacrifice—from whichever community it emanated.

Indeed, the boys made no attempt to separate the pictures into unionist or nationalist, even though it was clear that they would have had no difficulty in doing so. Rather, in justifying their classifications they demonstrated an understanding of the dominant narratives of each of the two traditions. Mention of one tradition was balanced, almost routinely, by a corresponding example from the other. So, when referring to those “fighting for their beliefs,” Ted maintained, “you’ve got Carson over there fighting and rallying people against Home Rule, and you’ve got Charles Stewart Parnell fighting for his belief that Home Rule should be kept in place.” John, when asked what pictures had most to do with him, also picked Parnell and Carson because “it [Home Rule] sort of determined whether we would be Protestant or Catholic, and stuff like that.” This cross-referencing was consistent throughout the interview. What emerged then was a view of Irish history as a battle of political wills leading to strife, as each side seeks dominance. Ted articulated this position by pointing to the Parnell and Easter Rising pictures, and stating:

It shows that there was Irish resistance to the British Government’s desire to keep hold of Northern Ireland, people’s rebelling with a different side of politics, and that shows me that if it wasn’t for both sides disagreeing with each other, then we wouldn’t have had such bloodshed and uproar.

In working with the pictures, John and Ted gave away little of their own cultural and political allegiances. It was as if, by alluding to the two perspectives at each stage, the boys were able to keep any personal views in check. Yet later, when asked about the sources of their historical knowledge, they made it clear that they came from the Protestant tradition. At first, John attributed his knowledge of Irish history to school alone, until Ted talked of visiting Belfast when he was younger and getting an insight, albeit a “very one-sided one,” into the “events . . . happening around you.” John then enthusiastically related similar experiences: “Your grandparents and all, just say they’re Protestants, they’d tell you their story more effectively than the Catholic side,” and, “When I was a kid I thought that we [Protestants] were treated badly and all.”

Both boys were adamant that school had challenged their views. Ted declared that school history was “different because it’s [what you learn from the family] very one-sided,” and John argued that school tackled issues “equally from the two points of view.” They also credited learning history in school with bringing about changes in their attitudes toward Catholics. John, following his statement that he had been brought up to believe Protestants had been treated badly, was of the view that,

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 Catholic now, I just give them equal respect.

Ted followed this by concurring,

I think history has pretty much given me respect for other people, when you look at their past and what they have gone through, how they've fought through it, I mean, I realize that when you look from your parents' [position] about how they've had it, all these killings and everything from their side, when you come into school, well the Irish [had a] hard time, the Dublin GPO [General Post Office], I mean they got executed, all the bombers, and it's just terrible from both sides.

Yet, when asked about the specific value of history, they chose not to stress its multi-perspective aspect, but instead placed importance on the lessons it could teach as to future actions. As Ted put it "we can't go forward if we don't know about the past." Such sentiments were common in other interviews, but again, what made these two distinctive was that they displayed consistency. When asked what they would want to know more about Ted replied:

Less of the origins, but more of what might happen in the future, what future and what prospects the future holds for what we're talking about, basically, I want to know where the peace process might be going in a few years time.

John agreed, but added that it was also important "to know what's going on around you, not just your own civilization, but others."

John's and Ted's liking of history was allied to their keen interest in the evolving political situation around them. For them history was important because it helped them make sense of the present by broadening their understanding beyond the restricted outlook provided by those in their own community. Through their study of history they recognized that seeking political change was often a painful and divisive process, yet they had a sense that people could learn from the past and that a less contentious society might be the result. In effect, both had largely rejected the "very one-sided" history of the community in favor of that learned in schools.

Sophia and Ashley: Learning History Through an Alternative Narrative

Sophia and Ashley attended an integrated, comprehensive high school, adjacent to the troubled town where Janice and Nuala went to school. The school had "transformed" from Controlled (Protestant) to integrated status.

Experience has shown that because these institutions already have an established culture, it is more difficult for them to achieve a shared ethos and the “mixed” ratios for students and teachers expected of planned integrated schools. Nonetheless, the two girls felt that students’ answers might be influenced by the integrated environment “cause they know each others’ religions, and been brought up to know it.” In the course of the interview Sophia identified her family as Presbyterian, but Ashley’s responses gave little clue as to her religious and cultural background. In completing the task, the girls were in constant dialogue, bouncing ideas off each other and reaching consensus on their decisions. They drew on knowledge acquired from their study of Irish history at school, albeit not always accurately, and they used abstract thematic concepts of “equality and civil rights,” “remembering,” and “celebration” to create groups.

The theme of social justice featured throughout the interview, and Ashley’s consistent references to rights issues were striking. That was what she declared was important when studying history—“equality, civil rights and stuff like that.” She reacted enthusiastically to the Civil Rights picture, although it was not clear whether she recognized the specific context or simply identified with the concept as portrayed on the banner. Leadership was an idea she wanted to learn more about in school. Significantly, King William and Queen Elizabeth were placed quickly in the category of “rulers” and then passed over, but when the picture of Nelson Mandela appeared it was added to a group of Irish leaders deemed to have brought about social change. For Ashley, history was important because it let you see “how people have been through so much, there’s like the, Charles Stewart Parnell [who] tried so hard, and Nelson Mandela, and people like that.” She judged the contribution of events and individuals to history by the outcomes in relation to the achievement of democratic and social rights

so you don’t take it for granted, to think we couldn’t have a voting or anything, or we couldn’t, women wouldn’t have the same rights as men, we couldn’t get the same jobs, we wouldn’t be as important in education, things like that.

In contrast, studying the First World War in school was of little interest to her because “it was just a waste of time that people got killed for no reason.”

None of our pictures directly connected with women’s rights, yet Ashley mentioned women’s suffrage on two further occasions, including reference to a project she had completed on Emmeline Pankhurst. She attributed her understanding of social justice issues to the influence of her mother rather than to learning history in school. She knew about Mandela because “my mum loves him” and Pankhurst because “my mum would be into women’s rights and like that.” Hence, Ashley wished that school would feature such issues more centrally. For her it was important to study history at school because it “gives

you a wide range of beliefs.” While Ashley led the social justice discussion, Sophia, too, subscribed to it in a way that appeared authentic. For example, when assessing the importance of those figures associated with the equality and civil rights grouping (Parnell, Carson, and the leaders of the Easter Rising and the Civil Rights movement), she declared that “those people change history and we mightn’t be where we are today if it wasn’t for them.”

Both girls were aware of Northern Ireland’s divisions. They had no difficulty in allocating murals to particular communities and in suggesting why people held sectarian views. Ashley attributed this to limited exposure to a range of experiences: “If they’re brought up in the Garvaghy Road [the scene of a major Orange march dispute], and they’ve learned the one way of life, and they don’t know anything else about the Protestant history or anything, they’ve just got [a] one-sided mind.” Yet both girls, while acknowledging the presence of the divisions, appeared distanced from them. In Sophia’s case, she seemed obliged to identify with certain events as a consequence of her background but actually displayed little emotional commitment. In discussing why it was important to know “your roots, where you come from,” she appeared to reveal her own dilemma as a Protestant who did not subscribe to the perceived norms—“so they don’t live in confusion, always thinking about what happened.” When discussing the value of studying events such as the Famine, she was more at ease talking in the formal language of school history about its “long-term and short-term causes” and its “consequences.” For her, history at school meant that “you’d be less likely to be one-sided” and it would help you when you “don’t know properly.”

The interview with Sophia and Ashley in many ways presents a contrast to others. Sophia had no deep allegiance to the dominant history within her community, and, therefore looked to school history for clarification and enlightenment; yet she also appeared open to the views of her friend, Ashley. Ashley’s position is even more intriguing. She displayed no identification with either of Northern Ireland’s two main traditions, yet the influence of her alternative social justice narrative, originating at home, appeared just as strong on the way she viewed history in school as that of any of the other students who were steeped in the nationalist or unionist traditions. That Sophia and Ashley are at an integrated school is of interest, but it is impossible to discern from the interview how far this shaped their thinking.

DISCUSSION

These interviews illustrate some of the difficulties students had in trying to reconcile school and community history. Although most students were committed to retaining their original political allegiances while at the same time engaging with a curriculum that “tries to look at both sides of the argument,” as one student put it, the conflict between school and community history

was, for many, too pervasive to completely achieve such goals. Some students recognized the value of seeing multiple perspectives and even admitted that school history might challenge their ideas, but they consistently demonstrated nationalist or unionist interpretations of the past that showed little complexity or ambiguity. Others were more likely to equate the experiences of Catholics and Protestants and to see the value of learning about both, but rather than coming to grips with alternative perspectives, they either assimilated the other community's narrative to the one with which they were already familiar, or they displayed little specific understanding of the other community's historical symbols and perspectives. Finally, some students largely dismissed community history and either spoke in the academic register of schooling or emphasized themes such as social justice; these students were not limited by one community's history in the same way as others, but rather than engaging with the partisan uses of the past in Northern Ireland, they tended to be dismissive of them. Despite their variety of understandings and approaches, then, most of these students shared an incomplete understanding of the meaning of history for one or both communities. How can it be that students who encountered a meticulously balanced curriculum, and who often explicitly said they wanted to understand multiple perspectives, nonetheless had trouble doing so?

Social Identity, Empathy, and Curiosity

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1981) has provided one of the principal explanatory frameworks for investigating intergroup relations in Northern Ireland, including among researchers who examine young people's identity development (Cairns, 1982; McGlynn, Niens, Cairns, & Hewstone, 2004; Muldoon, 2004; Trew & Benson, 1996). A central tenet of Social Identity Theory is that people categorize themselves and others at least partly in terms of social groups: They do not perceive people merely as individuals but as members of socially-defined categories that are relatively distinct, stable, and impermeable. These frequently dichotomous groupings constitute a way of making sense of the world in terms of in-groups and out-groups, or simply "us" and "them"—and in Northern Ireland, the ubiquitous categories of social identification are Catholic and Protestant. The students in this study clearly applied this dichotomy to their understanding of both history and contemporary society: They spoke in terms of two monolithic political and religious communities that have remained in conflict over the centuries and continue to confront each other today. Although students sometimes grouped unionists and nationalists into an overarching category—by recognizing that everyone had been affected by conflict, and that each side represented history in its own interests—they talked little about differences *within* either community, nor did they dwell on groups and individuals who had crossed the community divide. In this, they reflected the approach of much popular culture in Northern Ireland,

including media representations and political rhetoric, which typically devote more attention to cross-community differences than to the range of societal diversity found there. (Even within this article, we have consistently talked about “the other community,” despite our recognition that perspectives can hardly be captured in such dichotomous terms.)

Another tenet of Social Identity Theory, however, has less explanatory force when applied to the responses of students in this study. Social Identity Theory posits that people not only categorize themselves and others as members of groups, but that they strive to establish and maintain a *positive* social identity—generally in contrast to other groups, which are perceived more negatively. Developing a social identity, in this view, involves highlighting the positive aspects of one’s own community and derogating those of the other. This process, however, was not clearly evident among our participants. Their interest in their own community may represent an attempt to achieve a positive social identity, but even so, many focused simply on understanding and explaining their community’s history rather than portraying it in overtly positive terms. Moreover, noticeably lacking were negative evaluations of the other community. Students almost never expressed criticism or disparaging attitudes toward others; when they made comparisons, these were affirmations of the equivalence of Protestants and Catholics, either historically or in the present. Although many students sought to establish their own social identities (conceived of in terms of the prevalent community divide), they did so almost entirely by focusing on their own community rather than by defining themselves in opposition to the other. Rather than negatively evaluating perspectives and experiences of the other community, students simply misunderstood them or failed to comprehend them meaningfully. Wrapped up in their own quest for social self-understanding, they paid little attention to others.

Understanding students’ pervasive yet nonjudgmental focus on one community requires moving beyond Social Identity Theory and considering limitations in students’ sense of empathy. Scholars in history education are likely to think of empathy in purely historical terms; most theory and research in the field has focused on how students come to either appreciate or understand the ideas and experiences of people in the past (reviewed in Barton & Levstik, 2004). Yet within the wider scholarly community, this is a distinctly specialized perspective on empathy. Most of the extensive work on empathy in primatology, philosophy, cognitive science, and other fields has explored issues such as the extent to which people consider other individuals their moral and ethical equivalents (to whom they have duties and responsibilities), and the ways in which humans and other animals can share, reflect, or participate in the thoughts and emotions of others who are contemporaneous with them (Batson, 2009; Preston & de Waal, 2002; E. Thompson, 2001). In this study, although students certainly considered members of the other community to be morally equivalent, most showed limited familiarity with the specific

thoughts and experiences of that community—even though they considered such understanding important.

Halpern's model of empathetic engagement (1993, 2001), although aimed at providing guidance for how physicians can relate to patients' emotional states, provides important insights into what may be missing in these students' experiences. Halpern rejects the notion of "detached insight," whereby clinicians are expected to rationally and dispassionately assess patients' emotions. For Halpern, empathy depends on "engaged curiosity about other people's distinct experiences" (2001, p. 129). This involves suspending judgment in order to cultivate an attitude of uncertainty and ongoing discovery. Without genuine curiosity, it becomes easy to mistakenly equate one's own experiences with those of others—just as some students in this study did. Unless clinicians (and perhaps students) are genuinely curious about how others see the world, they are unlikely to develop deep and meaningful understandings of different perspectives.

But for Halpern, this kind of curiosity is not simply a cognitive undertaking; rather, she places emotional imagination at the core of empathetic engagement. For Halpern, developing empathy is an affective process, one that involves communicating with others and experiencing their emotions as present and real. This is not a matter of naively imagining that one can simply take on another's emotions (or even fully comprehend them), but rather a process of reasoning grounded in the resonance one person can feel for the emotions of another. And crucially for Halpern, this is a deeply interpersonal undertaking. She argues that "curiosity is grounded in an affective experience of connecting—wanting to relate to another person as another self, as a center of meaning and initiative" (2001, p. 130). This accords well with the argument by Barton and Levstik (2004) that the emotional aspect of historical empathy is an indispensable pre-condition for its more cognitive component: If students are to grapple with making sense of how people in the past viewed the world, they must first care enough to undertake such a difficult task. And certainly in Northern Ireland, any attempt to understand the conflict must confront the deep emotional attachments people have toward events in both recent and distant pasts. If students are not genuinely curious about why members of the other community are so attached to their own interpretations, they are unlikely to take part in the difficult process of trying to understand their perspectives.

The emotional engagement that leads to genuine curiosity may be what is lacking in the Northern Ireland history curriculum, and perhaps in the curricula of many nations. Emotion is not a common feature of history teaching, particularly in the United Kingdom; in our experience, teachers there (and elsewhere) often hope to avoid provoking emotional reactions among students. When educators in Northern Ireland are exhorted to engage with sensitive cultural and political material, they usually point to a lack of expertise and training as constraining factors. They often are unwilling to bring controversial issues into the classroom, and there is a tendency to "play safe" by letting

materials speak for themselves rather than delving too deeply into sensitive material (Conway, 2004; Kitson, 2007). Many teachers prefer to remain within the comfort zone of an analytic, academic approach to history and thus avoid making clear connections between past and present (Kitson, 2007; McCombe, 2007; C. Thompson, 2007)—precisely the links that are likely to inspire emotion and perhaps provoke curiosity. As one government report concluded, “Contested events are (usually) noted within written planning, but classroom practice varies considerably and issues relating to their current significance are often not explored in a sufficiently detailed manner” (Education and Training Inspectorate, 2006, p. 16). Students who face strong pressures of identification outside the classroom may not be well-served by such a dispassionate approach to history. This is particularly so because, as King (2009) points out, students also tend to “censure themselves for fear of causing discomfort” (p. 236) to others during discussion of controversial public issues.

Implications

There are many reasons to be optimistic about the historical learning of students in Northern Ireland. The students we interviewed recognized the limitations of history learned outside school and of their own prior ideas, and they clearly and consistently articulated the importance of moving beyond sectarian perspectives so that they better understood both the origins of the conflict and the perspective of the other community. These achievements are impressive, particularly in light of the fact that conceptual change is difficult—requiring, as it does, acquisition of new factual knowledge while reorganizing conceptual schemas (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). Furthermore, given the emotional resonance of history in Northern Ireland, and the inherent difficulty of making sense of perspectives other than one’s own, students’ sincere efforts to engage in this task are admirable. The fact that students undertook such efforts willingly, and appreciated the challenges that school history posed to them (and their communities), is testimony to the professionalism and expertise of the region’s history teachers, who sometimes are unfairly maligned for perpetuating division rather than helping to overcome it.

But the failure of many students to fully engage with alternative perspectives certainly represents a weakness in their understanding both of history and of the contemporary uses of the past. We can hardly be surprised by students’ difficulties: Moving beyond simple explanations of Northern Ireland’s troubled history bedevils everyone. There are no easy answers, no simple solutions to the conflict, and making sense of the subtleties of other perspectives—much less a wide range of such perspectives—can take many years of determined effort. Moreover, there is no “correct” endpoint for this process, no final understanding of Northern Ireland’s history that all students can be expected to master. The purposes of learning history can never be captured adequately

by such simplistic objectives, in Northern Ireland or elsewhere. Yet schooling should nonetheless move students beyond their previous understandings by opening them up to possibilities they would not have considered otherwise. School history in Northern Ireland is certainly achieving that goal to an extent, but we fear that it has not yet done enough. In particular, we wonder whether students who have not reached a deeper understanding of other perspectives will be able to withstand the pressures of sectarian versions of the past once their formal history education has concluded. We also fear that students' reliance on monolithic, dichotomous groupings of people—even when viewed as morally and ethically equivalent—may have the effect of solidifying division rather than overcoming it.

Instead of simply presenting a balanced history curriculum, educators might better develop students' empathy and understanding by trying to motivate them to engage deeply with others' pasts as well as their own. This might be accomplished by greater attention to the power of stories. Telling stories—or more to the point, *listening* to the stories of others—plays a pivotal role in Halpern's model of empathic engagement. She argues that empathetic curiosity is part of a “natural” drive toward sociality and friendship, and that “when one person actually listens to another person's story, emotional resonance and empathy often occur effortlessly” (2001, p. 130). McCully (2010) has outlined an oral history project, examining life during the 1969–1998 Northern Ireland conflict, that might contribute toward such empathetic curiosity. In this approach, students interview individuals from each community to explore their views on both the recent and distant past. By encountering the power of individual testimony genuinely told, students are encouraged to develop a deeper sense of caring about people's historical experiences and perspectives. Students' concern with the lives of others, and particularly with the ordeals and injustices they may have faced, can be a powerful motivation to take their perspectives seriously, and to strive to understand them more deeply. Yet there are drawbacks to narratives as well: Stories inevitably simplify the past, and they do not automatically invite a critical perspective (Barton & Levstik, 2004). Students must therefore put such accounts through the lens of critical historical thinking and synthesis. Discrepancies—both among accounts and with students' own prior understanding—can then lead them to seek additional evidence that would confirm or contradict particular accounts. In this way, the emotional component of empathy—caring about people and their viewpoints—might motivate students to engage in the critical thinking that teachers value, and might ultimately help students achieve their own goal of understanding “both sides” of the conflict.

Students may also need more opportunity to engage with their own perspectives. Halpern (1993) argues that empathetic curiosity can de-center individuals from their own reactions and presuppositions, so that they are no longer interpreting others solely in light of their own backgrounds. History education, however, requires an additional insight: Not only must students

move beyond their prior ideas in order to understand others, they must also come to understand that their own ideas—the perspectives that form a part of their community's self-understanding—are historically and socially situated. It does little good, that is, to recognize that the other community differs in its self-understanding if students continue to believe that their own backgrounds somehow provide the natural or correct means of interpreting reality. Barton and Levstik (2004), however, argue that being able to contextualize one's own contemporary beliefs is the most difficult step in developing comprehensive historical empathy.

In Northern Ireland, students might begin to engage in this process by analyzing popular representations of the past, such as political wall murals or posters, songs or movies portraying contentious events, and so on. Not only can students interrogate their claims in light of available evidence (i.e., whether events are portrayed accurately), they can also examine the motivation of those who created these representations and the ways in which their motivations shaped the outcomes. For example, students in one classroom examined contrasting film versions of the 1916 Easter Rising by judging the evidential foundations of each drama, identifying discrepancies, and probing the creators' reasons for portraying the Rising as they did (McCully, Pilgrim, Sutherland, & McMinn, 2002). Eventually this led students to consider the significance of the rebellion in Irish society today and to examine its connotations for their own sense of identity. In another classroom (McCully & Pilgrim, 2004), students speculated as to how two popular fictional characters in a local television comedy program (known to students as a "bigoted" unionist and nationalist, respectively) might view emotive historical events such as the 1641 Rebellion. Having considered why such characters might see the past from a partisan perspective, they were then asked to reflect on how their own backgrounds might influence the way they engage with the history they encounter in school and the community. Beginning with popular uses of history in this way not only is motivational, it also calls attention to the fact that all historical representations—including students' own—are social constructions that serve particular purposes.

Part of this process of contextualizing contemporary representations of history (and of society today) must involve analyzing the simplified yet pervasive notion that Northern Ireland's history can be characterized from the perspectives of two (and only two) irreconcilable communities. When examining any contested issue in Irish history, teachers should explicitly seek to introduce students to a spectrum of opinions within unionism and nationalism, and beyond. For example, when studying the Home Rule issue in the pre-1914 period—while acknowledging that most Catholics supported Home Rule and most Protestants opposed it—students need opportunities to consider the voices of significant exceptions in both directions. Even when considering the most polarizing events of the recent conflict—the 1981 Hunger Strikes—students should consider the views of those in the Catholic Church who were

morally opposed to prisoners starving to death, and those in Protestant paramilitary groups who identified with republican prisoners' campaign for political status. Similarly, rather than relying so heavily on topics relating to the region's constitutional struggle, the curriculum might draw from local, social, and labor histories to illustrate common experiences of Protestants and Catholics. For example, students might investigate the Poor Law riots of 1932, when the urban working class from adjacent, religiously distinct neighborhoods in Belfast marched together in protest of poverty. Students could also examine how dichotomous representations have developed over time, what perpetuates them, and whose purposes they serve. This kind of complexity can help to break down the impression of two monolithic blocks, perpetually in conflict, and make students aware that the boundaries of prevailing political orthodoxies in Northern Ireland are not necessarily impenetrable.

CONCLUSIONS

This research has shown that although students in Northern Ireland hope to move beyond sectarian views of the past, as well as to integrate community attachments with more open-minded, evidence-based historical representations, they find it difficult to do so. The very strength of those attachments, combined with the dichotomous and monolithic way in which political conflict in Northern Ireland is represented, makes such integration difficult. Moreover, the neutral and balanced approach to history education found in Northern Ireland classrooms—although an admirable alternative to sectarian histories—may not be enough to develop deep, complex, and resilient understandings of history. Although teachers are comfortable with an analytic approach to history that encourages detachment from thoughts and feelings that might engender passionate responses, students may relegate this kind of history solely to the context of school-based academic study. It may do little, that is, to challenge their affective attachment to particular interpretations of the past—particularly when links to contemporary community identifications go unexamined. As a result, students may be either trapped into polarized ways of thinking or forced to abandon community attachments in pursuit of other ways of making sense of the past. Young people are hardly alone in this struggle; the relationship between past and present is an ongoing feature of social, cultural, and political discourse throughout the region, and schools are only one player in this drama. Yet because schools are explicitly charged with expanding students' historical understanding, they cannot be content with a curriculum that is balanced and neutral but that may not challenge students at a deeper level.

We have suggested that a more productive engagement with history in Northern Ireland's schools may require greater emotional engagement, more awareness of the basis for contemporary historical representations, and greater complexity in representing the shared and diverse experiences of the region's

populace. The need for such changes is particularly acute given recent revisions to the history curriculum that place stronger emphasis on the utility of the subject in addressing societal division. For example, in addition to giving teachers greater freedom to choose subject knowledge appropriate to the needs of their students, the revised curriculum asks them to engage their classes in an exploration of the linkage between history and students' sense of national identity, and to trace the consequences of Irish partition through to the recent conflict (Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment, 2007). This approach, and the flexibility it implies, provides a real opportunity for innovation in history teaching, yet it also places significant demands on teachers. We hope, however, that teachers' sense of professionalism and responsibility—combined with provision of appropriate resources and professional development—will lead them to meet the challenges of the new curriculum, in order to enable students to more fully come to grips with the history they learn in both schools and their communities.

NOTES

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¹Most students in Northern Ireland attend schools that are predominantly either Protestant or Catholic. The former are known as “Controlled” schools and are under the management of regional education boards, whereas the latter are referred to as “Maintained” schools and are governed by boards established under the auspices of the Roman Catholic Church. “Integrated” schools represent a further category; approximately 5% of students in Northern Ireland (at the time of this study) attend these schools, which enroll approximately equal numbers of Catholics and Protestants and are governed by individual boards, representative of members of both communities. Most post-primary schools in Northern Ireland are either “grammar schools,” with admission limited to about the top 30% of students (based on a selection test taken in the final year of primary school), or “secondary schools” (sometimes known as “high schools”), open to all students but usually attended by those unable to gain admission to the more prestigious grammar schools. All Integrated schools are “comprehensive,” meaning they enroll students from the entire range of achievement levels, although in practice competition from grammar schools may limit this range somewhat.

²One of the disadvantages of paired interviews is that often it is difficult to differentiate the thinking of individual students. As a result, each interview is

generally treated here as a single unit of analysis, even though students within that interview may not have shared exactly the same understanding of the past.

³All students' names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

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APPENDIX A

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?

APPENDIX B

Images Used in Interview Task (only italicized text accompanied images)

Anti-Home Rule poster depicting woman with rifle and internal captions, *Ulster 1914* and *Deserted! Well—I can stand alone*: Representative of strong unionist political and cultural opposition to the transfer of political power from London to Dublin, 1910–1914

Photograph of the Titanic, uncaptioned: In addition to the tragedy, represents Belfast's industrial heritage, particularly that of unionist East Belfast

Photograph of market displays in public square, ca. 1930, with caption, *Hiring Fair*: Representative of an aspect of past social life common to most rural communities in Northern Ireland

Contemporary photograph of a reconstructed crannog, with added caption, *Crannog*: Representative of early Irish settlement, associated with the Bronze and Iron Ages

Engraving of a 16th-century feast, with added caption, *Native Irish Feast*: Representative of Gaelic Irish life and culture prior to military defeat

Contemporary photograph of a reconstructed hut, with added caption, *Mesolithic Hut*: Representative of earliest known Irish settlement in North Ulster

Photograph of a Church of Ireland parish church named after St. Patrick: Representative of Celtic Christian tradition, identified with both the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches

Photograph of Irish soldiers in German-style helmets, with added caption, *Irish soldiers during World War II*: Representative of Ireland's controversial neutrality during World War II

Portrait of Queen Elizabeth I, with added caption, *Queen Elizabeth I*: Representative, in the context of Ireland, of the final military conquest and the imposition of the authority of English monarchy at the end of 17th Century

Photograph of troops on the streets of Derry, ca. early 1970s: Representative of civil unrest and the role of the British army during the Troubles

Photograph of a wall mural commemorating Mary Ann and Henry Joy McCracken, with added caption, *Presbyterian leader of the 1798 rising, and his sister*: Representative of radical Presbyterian rebellion against British authority, here commemorated by nationalists

Photograph of an archaeological site with added caption, *Archaeological dig at Mountsandel*: Representative of the earliest known archaeological evidence of settlement in Ireland

Photograph of mural of Cúchulainn and paramilitary soldier with rifle, with internal captions *Cuchulainn Ancient defender of Ulster from Irish attacks over 2000 yrs. Ago* and *Ulster's Present-day defenders East Belfast*: Cúchulainn, a mythical Celtic hero, normally associated with Irish nationalism but appropriated by a loyalist paramilitary group to indicate Ulster's historical separation from the rest of Ireland

Contemporary photograph of monument of Charles Stewart Parnell, with caption, *Parnell Monument*: Parnell, Protestant landowner and radical leader of Irish nationalism, brought down by sexual scandal in 1890

Photograph of Civil Rights March, ca. late 1960s, with added caption, *Civil Rights March*: Representative of the Civil Rights campaign directed at the unionist Northern Ireland Government, and which prompted the outbreak of the Troubles

Photograph of African American soldiers, with added caption, *U.S. soldiers in Northern Ireland during WWII*: Included to represent diversity in allied war effort in Northern Ireland context

Photograph of mural depicting the relief of Derry, with added caption, *Siege of Derry*: Representative of unionist identification today with those who successfully resisted Catholic James II's forces at Londonderry in 1688–1689

Photograph of Edward Carson delivering a speech at a political rally: Carson, Dublin-born unionist leader, 1910–1921, prepared to resist Home Rule from Dublin by force, if necessary

Painting of the Battle of the Somme, with internal caption, *Charge of the 36th (Ulster) Division, Somme, 1st July 1916*: Representative of an iconic

- moment in unionist memory, the high casualties sustained are a symbol of sacrifice to the British Empire
- Contemporary photograph of Nelson Mandela, with added caption, *South African leader Nelson Mandela*: Included as a renowned international political figure
- Engraving of a factory, ca. mid-1800s: Representative of working in a Belfast linen factory, an experience common to 19th/20th century urban working class unionists and nationalists.
- Painting of rebels in the Dublin Post Office during the Easter Rising: Representative of iconic event in republicanism, considered the genesis of an Irish independent state
- Painting of King William on a black horse, with added caption, *Painting of King William III crossing the Boyne*: William's victory in 1690 over James II led to over 200 years of Protestant domination in Ireland; commemorated annually by the Protestant Orange Order
- English caricature of Daniel O'Connell, with added caption, *Cartoon of Daniel O'Connell*: Representative of early 19th century Catholic leadership of mass populist movement
- Contemporary photograph of a round tower surrounded by a church cemetery: Round towers are associated with Irish monks seeking protection against Viking invaders
- Photograph of Bobby Sands mural: Representative of republican activists who died in prison in early 1980s on hunger strike
- Contemporary photograph of Castle with added caption, *Carrickfergus Castle*: Representative of Norman invasion and partial conquest of Ireland in 12th/13th centuries
- Photograph of Irish Famine mural: Representative of emotive and contested event with implications for British responsibility for Irish suffering