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ABSTRACT

This paper presents preliminary findings from a study of the historical understanding of secondary students age 12-15 years in Northern Ireland. The study investigated the ideas students had about history, the sources of those ideas, how those ideas related to their sense of identity, and how school history compared to other, less formal influences. Participants were 40 children at several different types of schools in different geographic regions. Data collection involved having students arrange historical pictures and complete formal, semi-structured interviews. Initial results from interviews with students who had completed the first year of the secondary curriculum indicated that they considered history strongly related to their sense of heritage and their personal connections to place and community. Many thought that school history should help them understand the contemporary conflict in Northern Ireland. Students learned about history from their families and others in their communities, and they demonstrated attachment to their heritage. Students discussed conflict in terms of religious antagonism, competition among organized groups (political parties or para-militaries) and efforts to obtain rights. (Contains 44 references.) (SM)

National Identity and the History Curriculum in Northern Ireland:

An Empirical Study of Students' Ideas and Beliefs

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Abstract

This paper presents preliminary findings of a study of the historical understanding of secondary students (ages 12-15) in Northern Ireland. The research sought to investigate the ideas children had about history, how these ideas related to their sense of identity, and how school history compared to other, less formal influences. Data was collected through formal, semi-structured interviews with 40 children at a variety of school types and in different geographic regions. Initial results from interviews with students who had completed the first year of the secondary curriculum indicated that they considered history strongly related to their sense of heritage and their personal connections to place and community; that many thought school history should help them understand the contemporary conflict in Northern Ireland; and that they discussed conflict in terms of religious antagonism, competition among organized groups (political parties or paramilitaries), and efforts to obtain rights.

National Identity and the History Curriculum in Northern Ireland:

An Empirical Study of Students' Ideas and Beliefs

Encounters with history are an inescapable part of life in Northern Ireland. A casual drive through the region quickly reveals ancient stone circles, Celtic crosses, Norman forts, and any number of other historic (and prehistoric) structures. Residents are justly proud of this inheritance, and visits to museums and historic sites are an important source of recreation and personal fulfillment. For some, the pursuit of history becomes a lifelong hobby, one expressed in genealogical research or the numerous local history associations. The war memorials found in the center of most towns represent a more reverential attitude toward history, and recent shrines dedicated to victims of political violence also command a deep sense of remembrance. In school, meanwhile, children begin the academic study of history at about age seven; the topic continues to be a required element of the curriculum through the first three years of secondary schooling. And for many people, the most obvious use of history lies in the annual parades (commemorating events such as the Battle of the Boyne or the Easter Rising) that provoke resistance or even violence, and that briefly bring Northern Ireland under international scrutiny.

No great insight is required in order to conclude that history in Northern Ireland serves many masters, just as it does in much of the Western world. But how these diverse historical perspectives develop among young people is less clear. What leads some youth to become interested in climbing castle walls or tramping through old cemeteries, while others grow up to paint murals of Bobby Sands or to walk the walls of Londonderry during an Apprentice Boys parade? And what role does school play in the development of such varied historical perspectives? An important underlying purpose of the school curriculum is to provide students with alternatives to purely sectarian historical identifications. After studying the subject, they are expected have a more balanced understanding of the history of Ireland within British and European contexts, and to be better able to evaluate the evidence upon which historical accounts

are based. But does the curriculum have such effects? We sought to gather evidence on this question through open-ended interviews with students who had completed each of the first three years of their historical studies in secondary school. Although our analysis is only in its initial stages, a number of themes have emerged which are relevant to children's understanding of the relationship of history to contemporary Northern Ireland and to their own sense of identity.

Background

An increasing number of studies by educators, historians, sociologists, and anthropologists over the past decade have provided further confirmation of a long-standing observation: History has a meaning and significance that extends far beyond school walls (Bodnar, 1994; Cohen, 1994; Gillis, 1994; Kammen, 1991; Wallace, 1996; Wineburg, Mosborg, and Porat, 2001). Although scholars and politicians may periodically engage in rhetorical flights about the historical "ignorance" or "illiteracy" of the population, empirical studies make it clear that from a very young age (at least by six years old), children have been begun to learn about history from a variety of sources, including their families, print and electronic media, and historical sites—whether nearby in their communities, or visited as part of school trips or family holidays (Barton, 2001; Levstik & Barton, 1996). Not only have students in the early years of primary school picked up largely accurate sets of historical information from these sources, but many have begun to develop an interest in historical topics and questions and to think of themselves as historically knowledgeable and aware individuals. By early adolescence, students often have drawn from their experiences both in school and out to construct broad understandings of the nature and purpose of history, as well as of patterns of historical change (Barton and Levstik, 1996; Barton, in press).

Students' ongoing, active attempts to make sense of the past and its relevance mirror the importance of the topic in adult society. History can provide an understanding of how the present world came to be, as well as render insights into other ways of life, in other times and places. But history also can be used to legitimate contemporary social structures, to sustain groups in their

struggles against the status quo, or to articulate the experiences of diverse communities not recognized in "official" history. It can be used as a source of moral judgments—a way of condemning villains, extolling the virtues of heroes, or providing lessons for the present. And not least, history can be the source of hobbies and recreation, as indicated by the popularity of historical reenactments, home restorations, antique collecting, and heritage tourism. Given the range and significance of the uses of history in contemporary society, it is hardly surprising that children become socialized into an appreciation of the subject from an early age (Levstik & Barton, 2001).

In Northern Ireland, academic studies are hardly needed to demonstrate that history has contemporary relevance. Perhaps nowhere in the world does the past have as much enduring meaning as in Northern Ireland. Each of the two major political orientations—Nationalist and Unionist—has its own version of the past, and each invokes these historical narratives to justify contemporary attitude, policy positions, or even violence (McBride, 1997; Walker, 1996). For many people in Northern Ireland, history forms an integral part of their sense of identity (Buckley and Kenney, 1995), and representations of history, particularly as depicted in visual symbols, are an inescapable feature of life there—part of gable walls, flags, arches, banners, and even graffiti (Jarman, 1998). Some would argue that the continuing political and social problems in Northern Ireland stem in part from the fact that people there know too much history—particularly too much of the wrong kind of history, namely biased stories of one community's heroism and martyrdom, and the other's treachery and intolerance. Studies examining the nature and use of historical representation in Northern Ireland (Buckley and Kenney, 1995; Jarman, 1998; McBride, 1997; Walker, 1996) have tended to confirm the popular perception that history—particularly history learned outside school—holds enormous significance in the region.

Given the importance of the past in Northern Ireland society, as well as the perception that what is learned outside school is the "wrong" kind of history, educators have devoted careful attention to constructing a curriculum that will provide students with a more balanced understanding of the subject. At the primary level, this has meant avoiding controversial stories of national history and focusing instead on learning about historic societies, in Ireland and

elsewhere—Mesolithic peoples, the Vikings, Ancient Egyptians, and so on—as well as learning about the nature of historical evidence and interpretation. Students begin to study national history in the first three years of secondary school (when they are about ages 11-14, or the equivalent of grades six, seven, and eight in the U.S.) Each year features a core module focusing on a period deemed essential for understanding Irish history, but placed within the wider context of Britain and Europe. In the first year, students study the impact of the Normans on the medieval world, including the Norman invasion of Ireland. In the second year, English conquest and colonization of Ireland is placed in the wider context of change and conflict in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. And third-year students study the growth of Irish nationalism and unionism from the Act of Union to partition in the 1920s, including links with British politics, the influence of European nationalist movements, and the impact of World War One (Department of Education, Northern Ireland, 1996).

But history at the secondary level in Northern Ireland is not meant to be simply about the coverage of content. Seeking to build on foundations established at primary level, students are encouraged to take an enquiry approach, to understand events from the different perspectives of those at the time, to recognize differing interpretations, and to arrive at conclusions only after considering primary and secondary evidence. As the third year of the secondary school represents the last compulsory exposure to history, there is a tacit recognition by those who designed the curriculum that by the completion of this stage, history—through its knowledge and skills—should contribute to greater understanding of cultural and political backgrounds amongst young people in Northern Ireland

But we know very little about the effectiveness of this curriculum in Northern Ireland, or indeed, about the interaction between school learning and prior understanding of history in any location. Although numerous studies of children's historical understanding have been reported over the last two decades in both North America and Britain, there are relatively few attempts to uncover the link between instruction and changes in children's ideas about the subject—particularly as they relate to issues concerned with group identity. Many studies have provided "snapshots" of students' historical ideas—about chronology, change, perspective, evidence, and

so on—at a variety of ages (Barton, 1996; 1997; Foster, Hoge, and Rosch, 1999; Foster and Yeager, 1999; Seixas, 1993, 1994; VanSledright, 1997; Yeager, Foster, and Maley, 1998). The main thrust of this body of work, however, has been to document the range of ideas children have about the past, as a prelude to the design of more effective curricular and instructional approaches, rather than to establish how this knowledge interacts with instruction. Other studies have indeed investigated the impact of instruction on children's knowledge or their proficiency in historical skills (McKeown & Beck, 1990; VanSledright, 1995; VanSledright & Brophy, 1997; VanSledright & Frankes, 2000; VanSledright & Kelly, 1998), but that research has primarily focused on narrowly defined content (such as understanding of the American Revolution or early explorers) or abilities (such as gathering information from multiple texts or constructing historical accounts)—rather than with the wider patterns of agency, causality, or change that are at the heart of a historically-grounded sense of identity. Classroom studies of the congruence between students' ideas and their teachers' approaches to the subject, though, suggest that school may well have a significant impact on children's understanding of broader issues related to the nature and purpose of history (Grant, 2001 Evans, 1990). The most significant large-scale project to investigate such questions has established that instructional approaches are indeed related to students' ideas about such critical topics as historical evidence, causation, interpretation, and perspective (Shemilt, 1980).

Each of these approaches to investigating children's ideas about history contributes to a better understanding of the effects of instruction. Still largely absent, though, are studies of the interaction between school history and the substantive ideas about the past and its significance that children have developed outside school. That is, we still need to know how learning the subject at school influences students' understanding of important themes, patterns, or movements in history, particularly those that become the basis for a sense of collective identity. One U.S. study indicates that students must juggle two alternative perspectives on national history—the "official" one learned in school and from other public sources, and "vernacular" versions derived largely from relatives, from other people in their communities, or from students' own experiences (Barton & Levstik, 1998). That study suggests that school provides children with

few tools for making sense of these alternative, even contradictory, views of U.S. history. Other studies, meanwhile, have documented the powerful influence of students' racial identities on their perspectives regarding U.S. history, particularly the unwillingness of African Americans to accept fully the "consensus" view of steadily expanding rights and freedoms, told as a narrative in which Whites are privileged as the principal agents of history (Epstein, 1998, 2000). These studies indicate that students are neither passive consumers of the history taught at school nor blindly dismissive or ignorant of it; rather, they actively construct understandings that draw from both school history and the perspectives they have encountered in other venues—particularly those grounded in the identities of racial or national groups. What is needed is a better understanding of how this process takes place, and of the relative extent to which school history influences, or becomes subsumed within, these alternative viewpoints.

In Northern Ireland, investigation of issues related to history and identity is crucial. It is not enough to know whether students develop an abstract understanding of historical evidence, or whether they know more about the movement for Home Rule. What is needed are studies of how instruction influences their overall understanding of the history of Northern Ireland—how learning about evidence or Home Rule affects their constructions of what is important about the past, and how these constructions relate to their sense of who they are. Does the secondary curriculum lead to a more balanced understanding of historical events, or help students become more tolerant of those with opposing viewpoints? An oft-repeated assertion is that children in Northern Ireland learn sectarian versions of history at an early age and that school instruction has little hope of influencing those views. The first part of this assertion has been supported by research indicating that primary children do indeed sometimes exhibit prejudiced viewpoints (Connolly, 1999), but whether these views are specifically related to history—and whether they are impervious to instruction—is still largely unknown. Yet compensating for these prior influences is an explicit goal of the formal curriculum in history.

The present study attempts to provide empirical evidence on the impact of the secondary curriculum on students' ideas about history and its relationship to their sense of identity. We set out to gain an understanding of what concepts students use to understand the past, how these

concepts are related to their sense of identity, and whether (and how) these change after having studied the secondary history curriculum for one, two, and three years. In designing our study, we were initially guided by three questions:

- How do young people in Northern Ireland conceptualize their identity in relation to national history?
- What impact does the Northern Ireland curriculum have on young people's sense of identity?
- How does this impact compare to other, less formal influences?

The complexities not only of investigating historical understanding, but of doing so in a setting like Northern Ireland—with a segregated and stratified educational system, and with multiple perspectives on history and its uses—made this a daunting task, and we cannot claim to have produced a definitive evaluation of the effectiveness of the curriculum or its impact on students' identities. We do believe, however, that the method of our investigation has produced data that can form the basis for important conclusions relevant to such issues.

Methods

In order to investigate students' understanding of history, the sources of that understanding, and the connections student made between history and their own identity, we conducted a cross-sectional study of students who had completed each of the first three years of the secondary history curriculum; students were drawn from a variety of school types and geographic regions in Northern Ireland, and included approximately equal numbers of boys and girls. Data were collected through two related methods. Working with pairs of students, we first asked them to complete a picture-arrangement task loosely based on repertory-grid technique developed by Kelly (1955); in this task, students grouped pictures from history, explained their groupings, and chose the ones they considered most closely related to themselves. Following that task, we engaged students in a formal, open-ended interview, in which we inquired into their

ideas about the purposes of history and the settings in which they had learned about the subject. These methods are explained in more detail in the following sections.

Population and sampling procedures

Participants in our research constituted a cross-sectional population of students in Years 9, 10, and 11 of the Northern Ireland school system; these students were between approximately 12 and 15 years of age and in the equivalent of U.S. grades 7 through 9. Because we wanted to gauge the impact of the required component of the secondary history component—which students study during Years 8, 9, and 10—we chose to interview students who had completed each of those years of schooling rather than those who were in the midst of, or just beginning, a given year's studies. Although data collection has not been completed, we plan ultimately to interview 240 students—8 students in each of the first three years of secondary school, at each of ten different schools.

As with all cross-sectional research, one key disadvantage of our design is that we were unable to collect information on changes in individual participants' ideas; we can only point to differences among students in three different years of schooling and suggest that these may represent generalizable changes that also apply to individuals. Because no major changes in the Northern Ireland history curriculum took place in the three years prior to our interviews, we can reasonably expect that all students were exposed to a similar curriculum. We can be less certain of the extent to which historic factors outside the school setting may have influenced differences in children's responses across the three years. Although the political context had been relatively stable during the period (subsequent to the Good Friday peace agreement and the declaration of cease-fires by each of the major paramilitaries), unsettling events such as the Omagh bombing (three years earlier) or the feud among Protestant paramilitaries (during the time of many of the interviews) may have interacted in differential and unknown ways with the understandings students developed at school. Research has documented the impact of external events on community relations work with youth in Northern Ireland, and such impact cannot be controlled for in a cross-sectional study such as this one (McCully, Smyth, and O"Doherty, 1999).

Students were selected for interviews through a process of stratified, purposeful cluster sampling. For the sake of convenience, we began by identifying a limited number of schools at which we would conduct interviews; these primarily involved those to which we had a reasonable expectation of access through personal contacts. The segregated and stratified Northern Ireland school system, along with regional differences in experiences with the political situation, required that we identify schools that differed along at least three different axes. The first criterion for selection was religious affiliation. Most students in Northern Ireland attend schools which are predominantly either Protestant or Catholic; the former are known as "controlled" schools and are under the management of regional education boards, while the latter are referred to as "maintained" schools and are governed by boards established under the auspices of the Catholic church. "Integrated" schools represent a further category of affiliation; about four percent of students in Northern Ireland attend these schools, which enroll approximately equal numbers of Catholics and Protestants and are governed by individual boards chosen by parents. For this project, we interviewed students at four maintained, four controlled, and two integrated schools.

A second criterion was selectivity. Most post-primary schools in Northern Ireland can be classified as either "grammar schools," which have controlled admissions and enroll only about the top thirty percent of students (based on a selection test taken in the final year of primary school), or "secondary" schools (sometimes known as "high schools"), which are open to all students and which in practice are usually attended by those who were unable to gain admission to the more prestigious grammar schools. But although this distinction applies to most maintained and controlled schools, all integrated schools are "comprehensive"—meaning they enroll students from the entire range of achievement levels (just as comprehensive high schools in England, or public and parochial schools in the U.S. do). In this study, then, we interviewed students at four grammar schools (two maintained and two controlled), four secondary schools (again, two of each), and two comprehensive (integrated) schools.

The final selection criterion was geographic region. Political sentiments, community relations, and experiences with violence or extremism all are unequally distributed within Northern Ireland, with some areas the site of continuous and ongoing conflict and rancor, and others

relatively peaceful locations where obvious sectarian disputes are infrequent (though almost never unknown entirely). Given our focus on informal sources of historical learning and the use of history as a basis for identity, we expected that students might respond differently depending on the extent to which their towns had been sites of overt community conflict. As a result, we chose to include schools from regions that had in our judgment experienced high levels of conflict in recent years, as well as those that had been relatively peaceful. Five schools fell into the former category and five into the latter; within each category we included two maintained, two controlled, and one integrated school, along with two grammar, two secondary, and one comprehensive school.

Ultimately, then, we interviewed students at one school in each of the ten categories arising from our selection criteria. In addition to increasing the likelihood that our aggregate data represented a fuller range of potential perspectives, this kind of sampling also permitted us to disaggregate response by religious affiliation, selectivity, and region in order to search for relationships between each of these variables and patterns in students' ideas. It should be noted, though, that it is impossible to identify the religious affiliation of individual students based on school attendance, because local circumstances sometimes result in students' attendance at schools of the "other" community; at integrated schools, meanwhile, it would violate the ethos of the schools to inquire into students' religion (at least in the context of our interviews). Thus while we can identify differences among students who attended Catholic, Protestant, and Integrated schools, we cannot reliably draw any conclusions about differences based on the religion of the students themselves.

Within each school, participant selection was nonrandom. We asked each school's principal to select eight students (four girls and four boys) to be interviewed at each grade level, and we further requested that the students represent the range of ability levels at the schools and that they be willing to meet with strangers to be interviewed. In most cases, principals appeared to turn this responsibility over to a history teacher in the school, who then identified students, coordinated parental permissions, and scheduled interviews for us. This nonrandom procedure was necessary in order to for us to gain access to students in the schools, but it may have limited

the range of students with whom we spoke. It's quite possible, for example, that teachers were concerned with the image of their school the students would project and thus consciously or unconsciously excluded those with strong sectarian beliefs or with lower levels of academic achievement. Furthermore, student participation was voluntary, and so the first students given the chance to participate sometimes declined (or their parents declined to give permission). Overall, these factors may have interacted to limit the range of students we interviewed; however, based on the limited amount of curricular knowledge some students displayed during interviews, we believe that most teachers took seriously our request to draw from diverse achievement levels, and we know that some also made it a point to include students with strong political sentiments.

Procedures

This research relied on open-ended interviews with pairs of students; at the beginning of each interview we asked students to work together to arrange a set of historical pictures (described in the next section) into groups, to explain the reasons for their groupings, and to choose the pictures they considered to have the most to do with themselves or their identity. This task was followed by a more general set of oral questions about their understanding of, interests in, and perspectives on history in school and out. In most cases each interviewer worked with separate groups of students, although in a few instances both were present during some or all of the interviews. And although the vast majority of students were interviewed in pairs, scheduling irregularities or the absence of some students occasionally resulted in groups of three students being interviewed simultaneously. Interviews were conducted away from students' classrooms, usually in spare rooms, libraries, or offices. Interviews were taped and later transcribed.

The task we set for students consisted of a highly modified version of the repertory grid technique used in Kelly's personal construct psychology (Kelly, 1955). This approach, as used by Kelly and his followers in a variety of disciplines, is concerned with uncovering the conceptual frameworks people use to organize experience and to direct their own actions. In Kelly's formulation, these frameworks consisted of patterns of personally-created constructs, each one of which was "a way in which some things are construed as being alike and yet different from

others" (p. 105). In order to identify each person's constructs, Kelly developed what he called a repertory test; in this diagnostic technique, a subject was given a list of roles (father, supervisor, brother nearest your age, someone you like, etc.) and asked to write down a name for each role; the subject then was presented with groups of three names and asked how two of them were alike yet different than the third, and how the third was different. The resulting descriptions were then analyzed in order to identify patterns in the responses—the subject's personal constructs—which analytically could also be further broken down according to content, tone, overlap, permeability, or other characteristics.

Kelly himself was interested primarily in the constructs used by psychotherapeutic clients to frame their understanding of other people, but he noted that this repertory technique could potentially be used to arrive at a view of conceptualization in general—people's views of poverty, or freedom, or evil, for example—and indeed, his procedures have been employed and interpreted in a variety of contexts that have little to do with Kelly's initial formulations (Ryle, 1975; Scheer, 1996). Kelly also suggested that the procedures of the repertory technique could be varied in a great number of ways; one variation he suggested involved spreading out all the names elicited from a client (rather than presenting them in groups of three), who would then be asked to group them together and explain the resulting categories. This is similar in important ways to the procedure we used in this study.

We adopted a version of Kelly's repertory technique because our fundamental interest was in students' ideas about history; we wanted to know what concepts they used to conceptualize historic trends, people, and events (and whether these changed with increasing exposure to the school curriculum). We did not want to establish a set of concepts beforehand and simply tests students' understanding or acceptance of those, both because we wanted to avoid making the interviews resemble a testing situation (in which participants might be more concerned with reproducing our expectations than in articulating their own understanding), and also because our knowledge of how children think about history is still at such a rudimentary stage that we could not reasonably hope to identify the range of concepts they would consider meaningful. A repertory-type technique thus seemed an appropriate way of eliciting the ideas that

students found salient. Unlike other versions of the technique, though, our approach did not involve students in constructing a list of items for comparison; we wanted, instead, to find out what constructs they used to think about the topics commonly found in historical representations in Northern Ireland, both in school and out—thus we supplied students with the items for comparison, but we asked them to group them and explain how their groups adhered. And based on our previous experience working with children of this age (both as teachers and researchers), we suspected that providing a set of materials would provoke a greater range and depth of response than asking them to construct their own set. The chief disadvantage of providing students with materials was that we may have misjudged which historical topics they had encountered and perhaps omitted elements that could have provided insight into their understanding; we tried to compensate for this somewhat by often asking students whether there were other items that we should have included or that they considered important.

We considered this picture-grouping technique to be particularly appropriate for investigating children's understanding of history. Booth (1980) has argued that the logic of historical thought is "adductive" (following Fischer, 1971)—that is, the historian creates an "imaginative web" (after Collingwood, 1946) by drawing together related events to a common center. The historian that "has much of the creative artist in him" (Booth, 1980, p. 247) but also necessarily makes reference to preexisting frameworks—the concepts, attitudes, and understandings that are consciously or unconsciously brought into play in the analysis of evidence and creation of interpretations. Leaving aside for the moment whether this is what academic historians actually do in their work, or even whether the work of professional historians is an appropriate model for investigating children's thinking, Booth's description of adductive thinking clearly characterizes important aspects of the way people use history outside the academy. Historical events are not simply recalled or explained, they are imbued with meaning, and this meaning-making process involves connecting historical events to each other by reflecting on how they relate to broader patterns or themes. Thus Americans may consider a range of disparate events to be representative of a larger "quest for freedom" narrative (Wertsch, 1998) or a pattern of steadily expanding social and material progress (Barton and Levstik, 1998). And

commentators have long regarded this kind of historical thinking to be uniquely characteristic of historical perspectives in Northern Ireland, where past and present events often are interpreted as "recurrent manifestations of an underlying theme" such as subjection or siege (Brown, 1988, p. 66; see also McBride, 1997). Our interview task sought to provide one means of investigating whether students actually did employ such constructs to group items from history.

This concern with situating students' ideas within the broader political and social framework also led to another variation from Kelly's original formulation. Kelly's approach was highly individualistic; although he acknowledged the role of learning and culture in the development of constructs, he was mainly interested in understanding the framework each individual had created rather than delving into its sources or its development over time (Ryle, 1975). We, on the other hand, were interested almost entirely in the social context of children's ideas; we were not attempting to describe each system of constructs exhibited by individual children, but rather to find out how, in the aggregate, children drew from a range of socially constructed ideas about the past. We therefore asked participants to reflect on this larger context: We asked where they had learned about history, whether they thought learning history at school had changed their ideas, why they thought history was important, how other people might respond to the task, and why history seemed so important to people in Northern Ireland. We hoped in this way to identify more clearly not only what children thought about history, but where those ideas came from.

Because we anticipated students would be unfamiliar with the task of grouping pictures, we began with a sample set of four pictures of nonhistorical settings (animals, people playing games, and so on) and asked students to arrange them into multiple combinations and to explain this reasoning; we hoped that this would not only help students understand how to carry out the larger task but reassure them that there were multiple possible arrangements and that we were interested in their reasoning rather than any set of "correct" responses. Once this demonstration was completed, we presented students with a set of 19 pictures and asked them to spread them out on the floor or table; this gave them the chance to familiarize themselves with the set before actually beginning their grouping. We then explained again that we wanted them to put them

together into groups that they thought went together, that they might have only a few groups or several, that each group might contain only two pictures or many, and that some pictures might not go into any group at all. We then allowed several minutes for students to work together on the task; most pairs completed this portion of the interview in about five to ten minutes, and only a very few seemed unable to complete the task on their own. (For those students, we selected pictures one at a time and asked what others they might be combined with.)

After students had completed the arrangement (or after we decided that further discussion was unlikely to result in completion), we asked them to explain why they had put each group of pictures together; when groups consisted of a particularly large number of items we asked whether they might break them down further. After working through each set this way, we gave students a second set, this one containing just 8 pictures, which we asked them to combine with groups already created or to use in the construction of new groups. (A small-scale pilot study had indicated that presenting students with the entire set of 27 pictures at one time could be overwhelming.) We then asked them to explain their placement of each of these, and we concluded with the remaining questions of the interview protocol. Most interviews took approximately 30 minutes.

We chose to interview students in pairs (or the occasional group of three) for two principal reasons. First, our previous experience conducting interviews with children suggested that they would be more comfortable with a partner than if they were alone with a strange adult presenting them with an unfamiliar task and a set of abstract questions. The fact that one of the interviewers was from another country made it even more critical that students be given every chance to feel at ease. Second, prior experience also indicated that paired or small group interviews would result in more data, both because students sometimes discuss or justify their answers with each other, and because hearing another students' ideas stimulates responses that might not have occurred otherwise. The chief disadvantage of interviewing more than one student at a time is that it results in only one set of responses: Sometimes one student dominates the other, sometimes students take turns responding and simply agree to what the other has said, and sometimes the joint discourse that develops makes it impossible to disentangle the

perspectives of each. Whenever one student appeared to dominate the interview, we made every effort to involve the other(s), but since disagreements were rare, each interview with two or three students does not necessarily represent an equivalent number of distinct viewpoints but rather provides evidence for a single perspective, shared with greater or less consensus, among more than one participant.

A final disadvantage of using semi-formal interviews as a way of gaining insight into students' thinking derives from the culture of "politeness" that operates in most public settings in Northern Ireland. Because it is usually not possible to quickly determine the political position or religious membership of strangers, discussion of controversial issues in potentially mixed company often is tacitly avoided. Indeed, several of the children we interviewed explained the importance of history partly in terms of the need to better understand how not to give offense to others. It is quite likely, then, that these students discussed sensitive issues more cautiously than they would have in other settings. We doubt, however, that they could have intuited the religious or political affiliation of either of the interviewers, and so this muting of responses at least should have applied equally across the types of schools. Children obviously could determine our gender, however, and we were unable to realize our initial plans to include a female interviewer. As a result, we must also countenance the possibility that the responses from male and female students differed in systematic but unknown ways.

Instrument

Our instruments consisted of the picture arrangement task and an open-ended interview protocol. We developed a set of pictures (from electronic and print sources) that included a wide range of people and events relevant to the history of Ireland and Britain—some related to school topics (including the core modules) and some not, some more closely associated with Catholics and some with Protestants, some famous and some obscure, some tied to political and military affairs and some to social or economic history. We also chose to include brief captions on some pictures, but not others. In some cases, the captions were meant merely to identify pictures that would otherwise have been difficult to recognize, such as a cartoon of Daniel O'Connell or a

photograph of an archeological dig at Ireland's oldest inhabited site. Other times, captions were meant to complicate the content of pictures—such as identifying the figures in a Catholic wall mural as being "Presbyterian leaders." And we gave some pictures no captions, so that we could see how students interpreted them in the absence of any written clues; these included a photograph of British troops on the streets of Londonderry in the early 1970s, and a drawing of a Belfast linen factory from the mid-1800s. All pictures were clear images approximately 8 inches by 10 inches and were mounted and laminated onto A3 cardstock.

Our goal was to provide students with the greatest possible range of items to work with, both so that the categories they developed would not be artificially limited to only a few areas of the past, and so that we would gain information on the patterns they might identify that cut across diverse elements. Whenever possible, we chose pictures that suggested multiple placements—a political caricature of Daniel O'Connell, for example, might be placed either with other items related to Catholics (because he was a supporter of Catholic rights), with those associated with Protestants (because the picture was clearly drawn by someone who opposed him), with other politicians, or with other pictures from the mid-1800s. Similarly, a wall mural of Henry Joy and Mary McCracken might be placed with other Protestant items (because the two were Presbyterian), with pictures related to oppression (because of the quotes contained in the mural), or with other murals. We also chose a few pictures whose connection to the history of the region was ambiguous or confusing (or so we hoped), such those of as Nelson Mandela, U.S. African-American soldiers in Northern Ireland during World War II, King William III on a black horse (historically accurate but contrary to popular myth), and soldiers from the Republic of Ireland (with Nazi-style helmets) during World War II. Again, our overall goal in choosing items was to provide students with the maximum range of possibilities, so that their categories emerged as much as possible from their own ideas about how people, events, and ideas were connected, rather than from a constricted set of choices.

The brief interview protocol that followed the picture arrangement task was designed to gather information on several key elements of participants' understanding of history and its role in Northern Ireland society. First, we asked students which of the categories they created, or which

individual pictures, they themselves identified with. We then asked whether other students in Northern Ireland would have chosen different categories. We also asked students which pictures they considered most important in historical terms (whether or not they were related to their own identity), which they had learned about in school and which out of school, how learning history had changed their ideas about various topics (if at all), why they thought history was important to people in Northern Ireland, why it was a topic they studied at school, and whether and why people had differing ideas about history. Because the questions were open-ended, we invariably probed students' answers, asking for examples or clarifications, and often drawing their attention to specific pictures or other historical topics in order to examine how they applied their ideas to concrete instances. These questions allowed us not only to find out what explicit connections students made between history and their own identity, but also gave us a chance to explore their reflections on the overall significance of history in contemporary Northern Ireland, both for themselves and for others.

Analysis

Our analysis proceeded along two tracks. The first involved categorizing and tabulating the groups students created and then comparing these across grade levels, among types of schools, and between genders of students. For this portion of the analysis, we were less concerned with which pictures were grouped together than with the concepts that underlay the groupings—therefore our analysis only identifies the reasons for grouping, and not the pictures chosen for each group. (Because data collection is not yet complete, the results of this portion of the analysis are not presented in this paper.) The second portion of the analysis was more qualitative; here we were interested in the themes and patterns students considered salient and how they linked these to specific events and to their own identities, as well as with their reflections on the overall role and significance of history in Northern Ireland. Our coding of transcripts for this qualitative component involved both cross-case analysis, in which patterns were identified across respondents, and constant comparison, which involved grouping together

responses from different portions of the picture arrangement task and interview protocol. This portion of the analysis forms the basis for the findings presented in this paper.

Findings

This section presents preliminary findings from our initial qualitative analysis of Year 9 data, consisting of interviews with 40 students (of an anticipated 80 Year 9 students). Because not all interviews have been completed at the time of this report, and because those which have been conducted are not distributed evenly across the types of schools, a full comparison of students' responses across school type is not yet possible. In addition, because only Year 9 interviews have been transcribed, the cross-sectional analysis that will eventually form the substance of the study can not yet be completed. The following observations represent our initial attempts at identifying emerging patterns in the aggregate data from a portion of the students who have studied one full year of history at secondary school. These patterns will serve, in part, as the basis for analyzing the remaining Year 9 interviews, and this analysis will then become the basis for comparison with students in Years 10 and 11.

History and heritage

When students were asked to evaluate the importance of history, there was virtually universal agreement that it had value, even amongst those who admitted that it was not one of their favorite school subjects. Many recognized that the subject had the potential to provide lessons for future action as well as helping to make sense of the present. The latter was largely applied to the situation in Northern Ireland rather than to international contexts. In articulating why history was important to an understanding of today, a strong sense of "heritage" emerges; this emphasis stresses continuity with the past through connections of place, ancestry and family, and community and culture. These factors are frequently intertwined and, significantly, draw some of their emotional commitment from the oral tradition, particularly that transmitted within families.

Student references to events, sites and artifacts deemed important often display pride in past achievements and make reference to the sacrifices of those in the past.

A sense of place is reflected both in terms of regional identification and at the local district level. The former, of course, can reflect both Northern Irish and all-Irish dimensions and may have a correlation with communal identity. It was common for students to define as important those pictures which could obviously be placed in a general Irish context. Phrases such as "the Irish ones," "those from Ulster," "its about here," "it happens around us" frequently accompanied explanations of why pictures have meaning for individuals. When asked why she selected certain pictures, Rebecca replied simply "the Northern Ireland ones," to which her interview partner Lauren added, "just things in the past over here." In many cases this identification of regional history was framed in the recognition of communal division and violence. David saw "Ulster" history as crucially important "because we live here and it is violent." Others, including Adam, used the existence of wall murals as indicators of societal division, "because you see them everywhere around, all over Northern Ireland." While some students displayed a commitment to particular political positions, the majority of students voiced a detachment toward the troubles, as if they were a legacy they were burdened with but could do little about.

The link between relevance and place was most starkly articulated by Robert and Ben. Initially, they chose to categorize the pictures in three groups under the headings very relevant, relevant and not relevant. Anything not deemed to be about Ireland was cast into the latter pile. Mesolithic and Neolithic huts were deemed to be (North American) Indian, and therefore "it doesn't really affect our country really." Next, pictures were placed in the "very relevant" pile because they were "about us" and "affected Northern Ireland." Those consigned to the "relevant" category were those filtered through a process which identified them as more about "down South" (i.e., in the Republic of Ireland rather than Northern Ireland). For example the Easter Rising and Parnell Monument pictures "are both in Dublin and its not really relevant to Northern Ireland," the Famine, "I don't think was really bad up North" and Queen Elizabeth I "I don't think she ruled Northern Ireland .... I don't think that she really made an impact." Of course, by applying geographical criteria in this way Robert and Ben were also demonstrating a cultural and political

perspective. Significantly, their definition of Northern Ireland was a contemporary one and many of the events chosen as important were those celebrated within their own cultural grouping. Thus Robert identified strongly with "King Billy coming over, that really made an impact on Northern Ireland and you know, the Siege of Derry and all that, it really makes an impact on Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland today wouldn't be the same today if these things hadn't happened." In other interviews, students demonstrated an alternative identification with an all-Ireland dimension, rather than one that was limited to Northern Ireland, thus suggesting that the political dimensions of their identification with place may have been relatively unimportant. However, one student (Conor) explicitly linked place and political association by picking the Easter Rising (the armed revolt against British rule in 1916) because of "the Dublin thing. Because I was born in Ireland and this happened in Ireland."

When students identified with pictures close to their own areas they were less likely to draw on the conflict (unless wall murals and violence were directly present). Several students identified subject material in the pictures which had direct links with where they lived. For example those living near the north coast recognized the Mountsandel archaeological excavation (site of the first known settlers in Ireland dating to around 7,500 BC). Jack, for example, identified as important "the archaeological dig at Mountsandel because that's up around our area." Similarly, Sarah, when asked what she most enjoyed in history, replied, "Last year I studied about the Causeway Tram [a defunct local transportation system], and it was important because it happened near me, it was local." More frequently students drew attention to landmarks they had visited around the province. Thomas also picked out Carrickfergus Castle (some fifty miles from his school) "because it's close to us and it has to do with our history, if it hadn't been made things would be different now." In doing so he acknowledged that others would select differently because if they did not know where these places were, "it might not mean anything to them." The Ulster History Park at Omagh (an outdoor museum containing reconstructions of Irish buildings from earliest times to the seventeenth century) was mentioned in many interviews as a venue both for school visits and family outings. But the reference to place often goes deeper than the contemporary. Matthew first located one of the photographs as having come from the park then

articulated its importance to the present, "I think the historic buildings because they all show Irish history, like that one they built with animal skins, if they had been killed off we wouldn't be standing here right now if the men hadn't survived in Ireland."

Thus, through both relics and representations of the past there emerges a sense of past achievement and a continuity with the present. Reactions to the picture of the Titanic illustrate this. The image was almost always recognized and most students had knowledge of the ship's story as told in literature and films. However, a significant number also made references to the ship's origins in Harland and Wolff shipyard in Belfast, and ironically perhaps, given its fate, identified with it as a symbol of local achievement. Ryan, after outlining the disaster, felt it important to add, "it was built over in Belfast." Matthew thought that the picture "shows one of the things that made Ireland stand out, because its one of the achievements of the Belfast dockyards." Similarly, the Titanic clearly passed Robert's test of relevancy: "The Titanic is a very famous ship and it was made in Harland and Wolff in Belfast so I think, you know, it was very relevant. It was famous for Northern Ireland."

This desire to establish personal links with the past was a strong theme running through the interviews and extended well beyond Twentieth Century events. When asked why people care about history, Chloe replied that "they like to know who their ancestors and things are." Ryan was more strident, "it is interesting, but if like the thing you have to know is, you just have to know what you are and where you came from." According to Andrew "the only reason we learn about history is to learn about our ancestors and all that and about what they did for us." Niamh liked history because "we can learn about past relatives from like monks and stuff."

However, ancestral ties were particularly significant when these were related to family experiences; if events could be seen to have direct connections with family, present or past, and perhaps, involve hardship or sacrifice on the part of those who had gone before, they were deemed especially significant. Michael felt long ago should be remembered "just to show that we're better off than sometimes, like they had to work hard for, didn't have as much then, we've got more things today." His partner, Aaron, added "'Cause maybe their grandda's or greatgran, or grannies, that died during the war, or died during the great hunger or times like that." For Anna,

the Titanic was significant "'cause my grandda had something to do with it, I'm not sure, I think he was on the shipyard or something, when they were building it." A family connection was all important. She went on "some people would care about that cause they might have had ancestors in the boat, and others wouldn't."

Sacrifice and remembrance featured particularly strongly in relation to the world wars. In general terms the allied victories in the wars were widely recognized as having a major bearing on life that has followed. Jamie could relate this directly to his own lifestyle: "If they had won it we mightn't have been here. We might have been like, in a German school or something." Similarly Nathan designated the war pictures as crucial, "It was important to win ... all might be different ... we might not be here today." For victory to be achieved many of the students understood that there was a price and that should not be forgotten. Ellen singled out the war as most important because "a lot of people died in it and it's important for people who, like women, who lost their husbands and stuff and it brings back memories and it would be most important to them and maybe important to other people." For several of those interviewed the identification with the wars was further strengthened if related to family history. The wars were important to Ciara "because like my Granny's father was killed in the wars, things like that there, so it's a significant thing in our family. You know, words like remembrance...family and where I'm interested in history anyway."

When asked how they knew about the wars, school was important, and books and the media were also mentioned—but oral recollections were particularly featured. Frequently interviewees acknowledged that the war was sometimes a subject for conversation at home. Adam was of the opinion that "everybody dates back to the war, so they do, like every time there's a fight going on, they talk about the war and all this here." He also noted that the wars also featured on loyalist wall murals. Andrea described how this worked in her family. "My Dad loves the war. He's got books on it and details of what happened and the two countries or the countries... because his Grandfather I think it was, was in it. He told my Dad and then Dad passed the stories down to us." It is important to note that the sentiments about the war in the interviews were consistent across almost all students, regardless of the type of school they

attended. This is important, because in Northern Ireland remembrance of the world wars often is associated primarily with unionism, and many nationalists would hesitate to accept participation in the wars as part of "their" heritage; conversely, unionists would express disdain at the neutrality of the Republic of Ireland during World War II. But students appeared unaware of these associations. For instance, no examples of antagonism toward British soldiers were expressed, and indeed, the terms "British" and "Irish" were used interchangeably by different pairs of students when discussing the topic. The war effort seemed to be perceived as an allied (including Irish) effort. There was not one reference to Irish neutrality.

What then can be drawn from this survey of heritage? Clearly the students interviewed placed significance on the role of history in enlightening them as to where they have come from and to where they belong; as individuals, as members of families and as members of communities. School history contributed, but the information for this was also to be found in informal popular sources in the family and community. Those sources connected to family and community often had a deep resonance for the students concerned. Many of the places and events deemed important were not controversial and might be shared by young people all over the province, or at least by those living within a local area. Yet there were also instances of events selected, while having a sense of continuity with the past and connections with the family and oral tradition, which might be perceived by others as exclusive and divisive. For example, Jack identified the Battle of the Boyne as important "because it's like happened near us." His partner Matthew added "History's a kind of football match, 'cause you want to see who wins and who doesn't, but whenever we learn about history we learn why we were here, if it wasn't for the battle of the Boyne, we probably still would be under Catholic control and you'd want to know how we won it, and why we won it, and who led us to victory." Robert and Ben made similar triumphalist statements concerning the Boyne. When Ben was asked as to how he knew about these events he commented "Well, my dad's an Orangeman and he sort of told me; so well, sort of learned off him, my grandda and all."

Emerging, then, from these interviews is the possibility that children in Northern Ireland are encouraged in the home and community to place importance on making links with the past

and upholding the actions of past generations. Depending on circumstance this can both foster a common sense of heritage or one that is exclusionist and particular to one tradition. As data collection is completed, a key component of our analysis will be to examine whether these patterns differ by school type, region, or gender, and whether they change over the course of the three years of the secondary history curriculum.

Purposes of history at school

Although a sense of heritage, rooted in family and community, was a crucial component of students' overall perspective on history, most expected *school history* to go further, by providing understandings they did not expect to develop from other sources. In some cases, students' explanations of why they thought history was a subject at school, or their discussions of the historical topics they wanted to study, simply reflected a desire to learn *more* about their ancestors or the place they lived. Andrew noted that Irish history is important "because you should know about the place you live in, like what past times are about and all that so you know what the country is about and all that." Rachel also suggested that history is important "so we know what the past is like, with our country, what happened before we were born, if there was fights and all that we need to know about," and Ellen pointed to the need to find out about people who "have lost their lives for you and stuff."

Sometimes students noted a more general usefulness of school history as a way of providing information about the people, events, and societies of the past, even when these were not directly tied to Northern Ireland. Adam, for example, explained that history "tells us all of what happened before we were born," and that as a result "we can pass it on." Rebecca suggested that because of history, "You know about all the famous people," and Ellen also thought the subject was important "because you find out different stuff about people, famous people, you find out what they were like and stuff." Andrea noted that history "tells you what happened in the past...lifestyles and what they done in their day—the Victorians." Similarly, Sarah justified studying history in terms of interest in "just the way people used to live and things like that," while Michael suggested history was required "maybe to show how it was ruled then, see what it was

like then, how it was controlled." And Anna suggested that learning about "the way people live and the life before us" was important to show us that "we're lucky...because in the olden days they didn't have medicine to cure them, and we do now." These students expressed a general belief that knowing information about the past, specifically of one's own region, was important, but they went little further in specifying why that might be. This perspective was perhaps best summarized by Ellen, who explained, "It's good to know stuff that happened years ago."

Occasionally, students noted that lessons could be learned from studying people in the past. Chloe explained that "Our old history teacher, he said that we learn from people in the past, and not about them"; when asked to explain what that meant, she suggested, "If things were good about them, you could sort of be like them." Other students thought knowing about history might prevent mistakes in the present. Katie explained that history is important "to learn about your past, and what happened, and what could have been prevented...and we can maybe stop it from happening now," while Conor similarly pointed out, "We need to know what happened, because if we don't know what happened then it might happen again and we won't know what to do." And Thomas suggested history was important in case "like you turn into a president or something, then you can change things 'cause you know how people changed it before."

But the most frequent set of explanations for studying history at school centered on the need to understand the historical basis of the modern world, particularly events related to the contemporary conflict in Northern Ireland. If history, for most of the students we interviewed, involved an attachment to the people and places of their communities, then school history was expected to provide a deeper understanding of that heritage—and conflict appeared to be the aspect of their heritage they most wanted to understand better. They emphasized learning how the conflict started and why it has continued, as well as the importance of learning the "whole story," rather than the biased accounts they thought they were likely to encounter outside school.

In some cases, students emphasized simply learning how thing began. Matthew, for example, explained, "If we don't know about history, we don't know what's happening, and how everything started. I mean, if it wasn't for us learning about history, we could just think, 'Boom! We just landed here!'" Similarly, Hannah thought history was important "to let us know what has

changed our lives and how we're here." Jessica noted that she looked forward to finding out more about King William, Queen Elizabeth, and the Siege of Derry "because they changed our country and how we live today and what happens today because of what happened back in those years." Adam wanted to know more about "how the religions started," and Ben looked forward to learning "about what happened years ago in Northern Ireland and how it's come to split." Each of these students, and others, stressed the importance of knowing about the origins of salient characteristics of Northern Ireland society such as partition or religious division.

Other students focused less on knowing how these important features of their society began than on understanding the causal factors behind them—these students were looking not just for description but for explanation. Ciara, for example, explained that it was important to know about history because "we should know about what happened in Ireland before we were born so we know how Ireland evolved into what it is now, and we should know what's going on now because it's important to us...We should know why we have this situation." Several students specifically pointed to their expectation that history would help them understand the events and perspectives that they encountered in their lives outside school. Aaron, for example, thought he needed to know more about "the troubles in Northern Ireland...'cause I don't really understand them whenever they're in the news and all"; he said he didn't understand "why they're fighting and all," and he thought history would help him make sense of "why they were fighting and why they wanted to fight and all." Similarly, Sarah noted that "you hear about it on TV and the news, but they don't really explain it very much to you, and children don't really understand it"; history, she thought, helped explain the situation "because it's been going on for a long time." Ciara thought history was important so that "we'll understand better what's going on now, where our sense of threat came from and things like that...just why it all started...how the division came from Catholics and Protestants"; she was looking forward, she said, to "getting things straightened out." For Sophie, school history had already accomplished this: She said, "I didn't used to understand what was happening, but now I do because of my history." And some students emphasized their hope that school would enable them to discuss the current situation without fear of saying the wrong thing or offending anyone; Nicole thought that "they should be

telling us more about it so that we understand it and we're not scared to say anything, we don't know what to say."

In many cases, students expected schools to counteract the history they had already learned—history that they suspected was biased. Hannah noted that "if someone told you, like they're biased, they would cut things out" and so "you might not know the whole story, you might only know one half of it." Her interview partner Thomas also explained that "sometimes when you're told stories, they might be biased, they might be just from one part, you know." But schools, several students thought, could provide the "whole story," as Rachel put it. Hannah also noted that at school "it's the full story, and the facts about it, and not people's opinion," so "you'd be more likely to know the whole story if you studied in school"; Ciara also thought school history could overcome bias because "it can tell you what it is or how it happened or whatever." Robert, meanwhile, explained, "The teachers aren't biased. Most of them aren't biased...Some would take sides but some won't, and it's good to know the Catholic culture as well, because we're not really exposed to the Catholic. We try to be kept apart." Nathan agreed that "teachers give you different views," and Victoria pointed out that schools are "coming from all over, both sides, which is the best way." Some of these students went even further, suggesting that having a more complete view of history, or understanding multiple perspectives, could help prevent conflict between individuals or groups. As Daniel put it, "When you learn history, you can learn to understand more and be more appreciative of what people think and what they believe in, because it doesn't help you if you just believe one thing and think everyone else is wrong."

These findings regarding students' understanding of the purposes of school history are particularly interesting, for most students appear to make a distinction between the academic study of the subject and the representations they encounter outside school. Moreover, students expect that school history will significantly extend their historical perspectives, both by providing information on the origins of contemporary conflict and by exposing them to viewpoints missing in their previous experiences. As the above quotes indicate, though, there are at least two ways students have begun to formulate each of these issues. First, some students simply want more information—they want to know who Daniel O'Connell was or what happened at the Battle of the

Boyne—while others are more interested in explanations; these latter students want to find out how the troubles developed and why they continue. It will be important to examine whether students who have studied history during the second and third years (during which they address the roots of conflict much more directly) consider these expectations to have been fulfilled, as well as whether their relative interest in factual information and explanatory frameworks shifts. We certainly hope that students will *know* more about history after having studied it two additional years, but will they consider themselves as having developed a more complete *understanding* of that history? Indeed, will they even continue to consider explanation a purpose of history?

A second divergence evident in students' responses revolves around their differing expectations of how school history can overcome the biases in their prior exposure to history. Most of the Year 9 students describe bias either in terms of missing knowledge or slanted explanations—they thus consider the history they have learned to be potentially incomplete or incorrect, and they anticipate that school will provide them either the complete story or an explanation of what "really" happened. A few students, however, already appear to regard bias as an inevitable component of historical explanation and want to make sure they learn "both sides"; these students seem to be less interested in overcoming bias than in learning about multiple perspectives. This latter view is much more in keeping with the aims of the Northern Ireland curriculum, and it will be important to find out whether Year 10 and Year 11 students have more completely adopted this perspective as envisaged by the formal study of history.

Explanations of conflict

As is clear from the preceding sections, the Northern Ireland conflict, both historic and contemporary, constituted an important theme in many students' responses. Some discussed the topic at great length, while others gave it only passing mention, but nearly all touched upon it at some point in their descriptions of the pictures or their significance; only two groups of students never mentioned the conflict at all. Within students' discussions, though, at least three different ways of talking about the conflict (or its elements) were apparent. Sometimes students focused on the antagonism between adherents of two religions, others times they emphasized competition

between organized groups (such as political parties or paramilitaries), and still other times they talked about efforts to obtain rights. In some instances, students focused primarily (or exclusively) on only one of these, but more often they alternated ideas or juxtaposed them in a variety of combinations. These three discourses, then, did not appear so much to constitute alternative explanations for the conflict, in students' eyes, as to represent a loosely connected set of frameworks from which they drew in trying to make sense out of what was going on around them.

The most common way of talking about conflict revolved around conflict between the two religious groups. When students described conflict in these terms, they focused on enduring antagonisms between Protestants and Catholics, either as individuals or as larger communities. This is not surprising, for in popular parlance "Protestant" and Catholic" are used as glosses for complicated religious and political positions, and these terms are used much more frequently than alternatives such as "unionist/nationalist" or "loyalist/republican." But while adults might recognize the complexity that underlies simple labels, what was striking in many students' explanations was the apparent perception that conflict could be explained solely on the basis of religious affiliation, without the need to consider the political, demographic, or economic contexts of that opposition; in many cases, conflict appeared simply to be equated with religious difference. Matthew, for example, referred to a set of pictures as "the conflict ones" and explained that "those pictures all have something to do with Protestants and Catholics." Similarly, Sarah suggested that pictures related to religion were particularly important because "it's going on all the time, like always fighting," and Hannah also noted that such pictures were significant "because we live in places like that, where Protestants and Catholics are divided." Students' tendency to assimilate all aspects of the conflict into a framework of religious antagonism was also apparent in their discussion of symbols such as rifles, paramilitary uniforms, or the Union Jack; they invariably described these as "Protestant" rather than Unionist, Loyalist, or British.

A number of students indicated that they thought the relationship between religion and conflict was no accident but that religious affiliation played a determining role in shaping beliefs and behavior related to both politics and history. Gerald and Mark, for example, noted that people have different ideas about history depending on "what church they were brought up in," and

Chloe explained that murals sometimes include historical scenes "because that's why all the fighting started, between Protestants and Catholics." Similarly, Ryan—although he claimed that murals were not specifically meant to be about history—suggested that the people who paint them "are drawing stuff about what they think is right in their religious point of view." James also suggested "There's been a lot of these different bombs and shooting and paintings and all on walls, I think they take it just a tad bit too far with different religions." Students' understanding of the role of religion in conflict was also apparent when they compared Northern Ireland to other locations. James, for example, wanted to know, "Is it very religious over in America, and bombings and like that?" while Andrew, who came from Guernsey, noted that "there's no religious war over there or anything."

Students' discussion of leaders who played important roles in the history of the region also reflected their emphasis on religion as the cornerstone of conflict. For example, Queen Elizabeth and King William were not usually identified with specific policies or actions relevant to Northern Ireland (much less to Britain or Europe generally), but in terms of their religious affiliation. James noted that Queen Elizabeth was "big in with the Protestants," while Rachel thought she was important because of "religion, she changed the religion." And Adam explained that the main thing he had learned about history outside of school was that "King Billy went around killing Catholics." A further indication of students' tendency to see conflict in terms of religious groups came when they encountered a caricature of Daniel O'Connell, whom none of them recognized. Some asked the interviewers who he was, and upon learning that he was an Irish leader who tried to get rights for Catholics, they quickly concluded that the picture (an unflattering parody) must have been drawn by a Protestant—not by a political opponent, or by an English critic, but by a member of the other religious community.

Some students located the source of this antagonism in personal prejudice between individual Catholics and Protestants. Conor, for example, suggested that people paint murals "because they are racist" and "they want to say they are powerful, as if they're better than other people." Similarly, Matthew noted that many of the students in his school didn't like Catholics, and they might even have chosen to attend an integrated school in hopes that "there's going to loads

and loads of fights between Catholics and Protestants"; he further noted that the fathers of some students were racist, "so they might have been driven to it." His interview partner Jack agreed, explaining that people call each other bad names "because they just like believe in their religion, and they want to stick to their religion."

Other students explained religious conflict more in terms of group membership than personal prejudice. Ryan, for example, explained that the news often features "all these terrorist groups, the UVF, UFF and all...going around shooting innocent people, making bombs, blowing people up, to smithereens," and he suggested that "people think that if you're not in that sort of group, of religion, you're not exactly one of them." Similarly, Gerald suggested that some pictures represented "like riots and gangs, like the UVF and IRA and stuff...rivalries, really, from Ulster," which he further described as "rival churches." They thought that the purpose of murals was "maybe like to show who they are, to the other gangs." Chloe also described murals as an effort by such groups to "mark their territories."

This kind of explanation shades over into students' second way of describing the conflict in Northern Ireland—as a competition between organized groups such as political parties or paramilitaries (or "gangs," as some students called them). Adam, for example, noted that wall murals "represent all the parties," and his interview partner Jordan also suggested that people paint murals "to present different parties and unionists." Similarly, Rachel described one group of pictures as consisting of attempts to tell people "to support their group"; these groups, she explained, were "political, politics." Even when students referred to politics or political parties, though, they rarely articulated specific positions. One exception came when Daniel, Hannah, and Rachel agreed that two pictures stood for "Ulster," by which they specifically meant "Northern Ireland as part of England." Similarly, Aaron explained that one set of pictures were "all like about the troubles in Belfast, and all about Ulster, trying to fight for freedom and all"; these were important "because if it became a united Ireland, then Ulster would be very much in the, nobody would really listen to what they said and what their views and all were." Aaron's response was significant not only because he explained a specific political position more clearly than any other student, but also because he later suggested that pictures of churches were also important—not

because of their connection to the conflict but rather because "if there were no churches, nobody would really know about God or religion or anything like that." More distinctly than any other student, Aaron separated the political dimension of the conflict from religious antagonisms.

Students' final way of describing the conflict—a frequent but vague approach—was to refer to protests, marches, or other efforts to obtain rights. They recognized that these efforts went on both in the past and today, and that they had great social significance, but they were less certain what rights were being fought for, or who the contestants were. Chloe, for example, thought the picture of the Civil Rights march was important "because everybody's entitled to their rights," but she noted, "I don't know what they're actually marching for, Civil Rights, they're marching for Civil Rights, so they mustn't have them in the first place." Similarly, Jessica thought the Civil Rights march was important because "the people were fighting for their rights, so they got equal things as everyone else even though they weren't rich or anything." And Niamh and Sophie thought several of the pictures reflected a struggle for rights, but they never suggested what rights those might be; they thought Queen Elizabeth fought "for people's rights," the Civil Rights march "might have been to get people to have their proper rights," a picture opposing Home Rule involved "that lady because she's got a gun, she's fighting for her right," and even a mural of the Irish famine "could be fighting for rights."

Particularly telling were students' frequent comparisons of an anti-Home Rule rally and a Civil Rights march in the 1960s. These images represent distant ends of the political spectrum in Northern Ireland, yet students almost always perceived them as similar, if not identical. Lucy, for example, explained that she grouped them together because "those people [at the rally] seem to be like protesting about something, them ones [in the march] are doing a walk." Several students thought the Civil Rights march was similar to a march of the Orange Order—again, at the opposite end of the political spectrum—but they still were unclear what the purpose might be. Ryan, whose father was in the Orange Order, simply noted that "the Orange Order always goes marching and protesting," and his interview partner James reported that he himself sometimes would "go down and watch the people marching," but all he knew was that they had "to do with my religion and all." Even one of the images most closely associated with Unionism—the anti-

Home Rule poster—prompted only vague responses. Ryan suggested that "it's about this here woman that really defends what she thinks," while Emily thought "they had a fight over it because they didn't think it was fair that they didn't have a say in the matter."

When students described conflict in terms of religious antagonism, the combatants were obvious—Catholics and Protestants. When they approached conflict as competition, they were also able to identify the antagonists—rival political parties or organizations such as the IRA, UVF, or UFF. But when discussing protests, students were less clear about whom the protesters expected to confront, either literally or figuratively. Only two students recognized that the state was implicated in such affairs, and even these students explained its role in direct and physical terms. Robert, for example, though a picture of British troops in Derry looked like the 1970s because "in the last thirty years the army was quite involved, shootings and all...it looks like there's a crime going on and sometimes the army intervened in crimes like Bloody Sunday." Similarly, Conor noted that his father "was marching in a march, and I'm not sure who it was, but some army or something took machine guns to all the people that were marching, and some of his friends died." Other students, lacking even this sense of the role of governmental institutions, simply referred back to the religious nature of the conflict. Jamie, for example, put a picture of a church and the Civil Rights march together "because it was to do with religion...because of the civil rights march for religion." And for Matthew, conflict was about the attempt by Protestants to rid themselves of Catholic control—without the United Irishmen, without the Famine, and without the Battle of the Boyne, "we would still be under Catholic control." Although students recognized marches, protests, and rights as salient features of the Northern Ireland conflict, then, they rarely were able to explain them with the concreteness that they could apply to religious and political contests.

The simplicity of these analytic categories, however, should not be allowed to obscure the complexity of students' thinking. Sometimes, students appeared unsatisfied with their own explanations, particularly when they emphasized religion as the basis for conflict. In discussing murals with violent images, for example, Ryan noted that he didn't think "rifles have anything to do with God"; he also criticized the UVF for what he thought was a shift in the organization from

religion to violence, and he suggested that one of the things he wanted to learn more about from history was why people have been "bombing things for religion." Niamh noted, "I don't know what is the point between Protestants and Catholics. We're all just the same...I was at a Protestant school before and some of my classmates used to talk about the Catholics, but some of my friends are Catholics up in my street." Jack also noted that "I don't care if anyone is like Protestant or Catholics, they're humans, they have the same feelings as we do," and his interview partner Matthew noted how "disgusting" he thought it was when people used ethnic slurs to refer to Catholics. These observations were usually phrased in the form of moral pronouncements—students thought it was wrong to use religion to justify prejudice or violence—but they were also tinged with a hint of perplexity: Students did not fully understand how religion *could* be the basis for conflict. This perplexity perhaps indicates that the students themselves were aware of the inadequacy of simple explanations of the Northern Ireland situation.

In addition, as noted above, few students relied solely on one set of explanations. Rarely did they explain conflict only in terms of a single dimension. They often drew from different frameworks at various times during the same interview, and they sometimes give alternate or overlapping descriptions of the same historic or contemporary events. Nowhere was this clearer than in Jessica's interview. This student employed, at one time or another, nearly every one of the perspectives described above. Sometimes she described the conflict in religious terms: King William was important because "he was a very strong Protestant," and murals were used to "show what like religion the estate is and they think the other religion isn't allowed around where they live." But other times she was unsure of the role of religion (she didn't know which religion was likely to celebrate the Siege of Derry), or she separated it from conflict altogether, as when she suggested churches were important because "I go to church every Sunday and I go to GB [Girls' Brigade, a Christian youth group] and all." Other times her explanations focused more on the competition between contending groups: Not only was King William Protestant, but he was "a leader of the Orange," and in addition to marking territory, murals were used "to show people that they are not allowed around their premises because they didn't help them in the past when they needed help." And still other times, she interpreted events in terms of fighting for rights or

freedom: Pictures of a Civil Rights march and the Siege of Derry belonged together "because you had to fight for your rights...and then you were fighting for Derry." She even appeared to suggest a role for the state when she noted that during the famine, people "had sort of fell out with England because they didn't supply food or anything."

But in Jessica's explanations, as in most students', the connections among religion, politics, and rights were neither consistently nor coherently integrated; instead, they formed separate strands in the attempt to make sense of conflict. Students drew a variety of elements from the different discourses to which they had been introduced, but this effort was halting and incomplete. Granted, they may have had a more systematic understanding of these forces than they were able to articulate; they might, for example, have conceived of rights as the motivation for conflict, of competition between groups as the activities that made up that conflict, and of religious groups as its main actors. Analysis of data from students in years 10 and 11, who will have studied the history of Northern Ireland in much greater detail than these students had, should shed light on whether such connections become more clearly or consistently explained. Analysis of the complete set of data should also, of course, help us draw some conclusions about whether students' explanatory concepts differ depending on gender, school type, or region.

Conclusions

Although our data collection is incomplete, and our analysis is still in its preliminary stages, the initial data have already begun to demonstrate some significant patterns that will serve as the basis for further analysis and comparison. In particular, students' responses relating to popular and academic history, and the connections between the two, complicate and add nuance to our understanding of the development of children's historical understanding in Northern Ireland. Although students have learned about history from their families and others in their communities, and although they demonstrate an attachment to their "heritage," these perspectives are not necessarily sectarian or exclusive. Moreover, many students expect school history to help them better understand the contemporary conflict, and to overcome the bias they

perceive in the accounts they have learned outside school. In trying to make sense of the conflict, meanwhile, students struggle to understand and integrate elements from a variety of explanatory frameworks. Ideally, school history should help them do precisely this: After studying the required secondary curriculum, students should have a more complete understanding of history—one that is not exclusively rooted in community identification, one that considers multiple perspectives, and one that integrates the influence of religion, politics, and rights (including the role of the state). We anticipate that our final analysis will provide some insight into whether this development does in fact take place.

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