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History and Identity in Pluralist Democracies: Reflections on Research in the U.S. and Northern Ireland

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Abstract

This paper addresses the role of history education in developing a shared sense of identity in modern democracies. It does so by presenting findings from research into children's ideas about history in the United States and Northern Ireland, two settings that share important political and social characteristics with Canada and other pluralist countries. In the United States, the history curriculum revolves around developing a unified national identity, and it provides few opportunities for students to examine diversity within or outside the country. In Northern Ireland, schools avoid issues of identity and thus do little to help students move beyond the bonds of their own political/religious communities. A more productive way of incorporating identity into the history curriculum would involve attention to those events in a nation's past that have promoted pluralism and democracy.

As social studies educators, we might benefit from more frequently considering how our subjects are taught in other countries. There's nothing quite so effective at challenging our assumptions as coming face-to-face with another way of doing things. Such encounters can help broaden our ideas about what is possible – and desirable – in our own settings. My research in Northern Ireland over the past seven years has helped me better understand the nature of history and social studies in the United States, and it has alerted me both to the strengths of the U.S. approach and to areas that need rethinking. Canadian educators draw from both British and U.S. traditions, and they work in contexts in which issues of diversity and national identity are critical – just as they are in Northern Ireland and the United States. Comparison of the differing approaches to these issues in the two locations, and of the effects of each, might be a profitable way for Canadians to reflect on their own goals and procedures.

I have interviewed hundreds of elementary and middle level students in the United States and Northern Ireland with regard to their ideas about history. At first, similarities in responses from the two locations seem clearest: In both, even the youngest students are interested in the past and think of themselves as historically knowledgeable and aware. They have learned

about history not only at school but also from relatives, print and electronic media, museums, and public historic sites (Barton 2001). Older students can clearly articulate the importance of specific events and patterns and can explain the significance of broad historical themes (Barton 2005, Barton and Levstik 1998). However, there are crucial differences in the kinds of history students have encountered in these two countries, and the impact of these differences on students' ideas about the past are striking.

In the United States, the creation of a sense of national identity is at the core of the social studies curriculum from the earliest years of schooling through senior high. This takes place not through overt nationalism or patriotic indoctrination, but through repeated and systematic attention to national origins and development. Children's earliest exposure to history at school is likely to consist of semi-mythical stories of Christopher Columbus, the First Thanksgiving, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King, Jr. – events and characters that established the origin or current status of their nation. In later years, students usually study a narrative of national history on at least three occasions – in upper elementary, middle school, and high school – and in many states they also take a course in civic education. Textbooks in these courses convey a clear and consistent national story that emphasizes the founding people, events, and documents of the nation (Avery and Simmons 2000/2001), and teachers repeatedly use first person pronouns like *we*, *us*, and *our* when discussing the nation's past. Public history, in the form of museums, historic sites, and the media, also reflects this emphasis on national origins and development.

Given their consistent exposure to national history, it is not surprising that students identify with the U.S. past, even when they or their families are recent immigrants. When asked why history is important, they focus on the subjects' relationship to their own national identity: They say history helps them understand the origin of their country and the nature of its development, and that it provides lessons in how to relate to their fellow citizens (Barton 2001). Like their teachers, they consistently use first person pronouns when discussing the past, and the events they select as historically significant are those that established the country's political origins, marked it off as unique from other nations, and led to its current demographic makeup and social relations – events such as the American Revolution, the Bill of Rights, immigration, the Civil Rights movement, and so on. The story they tell of the nation's past, meanwhile, is one of progress: Theirs is a nation that has faced up to its dilemmas – foreign domination, slavery and social inequality, lack of suffrage for women, economic downturns-and solved them. Middle school students in the United States are aware that problems such as sexism and racism remain, and they know that some historical events have provoked dissent (such as the Vietnam War), but their belief in progress is so strong that they have few resources for reconciling these discrepancies with the dominant image of the national past (Barton and Levstik 1998). This is not to say that all students have exactly the same view of U.S. history; African American students, for example, select somewhat different people and events as historically significant than do students of European backgrounds, and they point to a much greater level of hardship in achieving social equality (Epstein 1998). Nonetheless, their focus remains very much on the history of the United States and on their place within the nation.

History in Northern Ireland is very different. There, accounts of the national past inevitably fall into either Nationalist or Unionist camps, and so any story of the region's history is controversial. As a result, national history is completely avoided in the primary school curriculum (up through about age 11), as well as in most other settings in which primary-aged children learn about the past. Instead of learning a narrative of national development, students study a variety of past societies, such as the Ancient Egyptians, Mesolithic peoples, and the

Vikings. Even when focusing more directly on Northern Ireland, as in units on daily life in the Victorian Era or during World War II, the curriculum emphasizes social and material life rather than national political developments.

National history is also largely absent from children's experiences outside school. Most museums and historic sites avoid political history, and family stories often focus on the details of daily life; in addition, Northern Ireland's history rarely appears in children's literature or popular television programs. Although some students undoubtedly encounter politicized accounts of the national past in their homes and communities, these are not reinforced in schools, public sites, and the media as they are in the United States. Only when they enter secondary school do students encounter a systemic treatment of national history. In three years of required study (between ages 12-15), students are exposed to major topics in the development of Northern Ireland as a political entity. These topics are presented in a balanced, almost apolitical way, and teachers rarely go beyond the official "cut-off" date of 1922, even when they could make pertinent modern parallels – meaning that links to current controversies are often missed (Kitson 2004). Moreover, students are neither explicitly nor implicitly encouraged to identify with any particular version of Northern Ireland's history, and pronouns like *we* and *our*, omnipresent in U.S. classrooms, are almost entirely absent – as they are throughout Britain, where promoting national identity is generally not considered an appropriate goal of history teaching.

Without consistent attention to national origins and development, students in Northern Ireland develop a different view of history's purpose than their counterparts in the U.S. The elementary students I have interviewed there almost never refer to history in ways that would suggest identification with the nation, whether conceived of as Britain, Ireland, or Northern Ireland. Instead, students talk about history as a way of helping them understand people who are *different* than themselves, people who are far removed in time and place – and for some students, the further removed the historical time period, the more interesting it is (Barton 2001). When secondary students are asked which historical events are most important, some point to those that have led to the current social or political makeup of Northern Ireland, but others note themes that are relevant to the region without necessarily implying national identification – themes such as death and suffering, conflict, and injustice (Barton 2005). At both primary and secondary levels, first-person pronouns are virtually absent in students' discussion of history.

Directly asking students in Northern Ireland about their historical identifications yields a more complex and revealing picture. When shown pictures from Irish, British, and world history and asked which have the most to do with themselves, students in the first year of secondary school give a wide range of responses. Some identify with Northern Ireland's troubles, some with Unionist or Nationalist perspectives, and others with a variety of topics that suggest local or regional identifications but not explicitly political ones – old castles, the Titanic, prehistoric sites, and so on. But as students progress through three years of secondary historical study, their identifications become narrower and are increasingly politicized – far more students identify with Unionist or Nationalist perspectives after studying national history at school than before. Not only do students' identifications narrow, but they also become more detailed and specific, which suggests that many students are drawing selectively from the school curriculum to bolster developing sectarian perspectives (Barton and McCully, 2004).

The United States and Northern Ireland, then, represent two extremes in dealing with issues of identity: U.S. students are encouraged to identify with a single story of the national past,

one that emphasizes unity and progress; the Northern Ireland curriculum avoids identity altogether. Neither approach seems adequate to dealing with the demands of a pluralist democracy. U.S students are poorly equipped to deal with the diversity of experiences and viewpoints that have existed throughout the nation's history and that are still a vital part of public debate. Students who recognize those omissions – particularly those from minority backgrounds – may eventually come to reject national identification, because the official story of the past excludes or minimizes their own backgrounds. Many of the debates over multiculturalism in the United States have focused on the apparent contradictions of ethnic and national identities. And indeed, it is hard to see how citizens of the United States could fully identify with the nation when its past is portrayed in such exclusive terms. Nor does this kind of narrow history help students develop an understanding of the perspectives of people from backgrounds other than their own.

Primary-level history in Northern Ireland shows greater promise because of its emphasis on the experiences of diverse people from around the world, and students recognize that the subject can help them move beyond their own perspective. At the secondary level, however, history there fails to capitalize on its early success: Students move away from the study of other societies and toward their own national past, yet the subject is presented in such a way that it does not encourage any common identification. As a result, students are left to draw from it selectively in support of historical identities that arise in their families and communities. Often these identities are conceived of in sectarian terms, and the lack of shared identity is a key aspect of Northern Ireland's problems: Because the two communities do not perceive a set of common interests, they have little motivation to work together for the benefit of the entire region. When teachers there learn about the U.S. emphasis on creating identity through history, they often suggest that Northern Ireland would benefit from such an approach – and yet they also know how difficult it would be, because practically all people and events in history are perceived as part of either Unionist or Nationalist traditions. Moreover, which "national" identity should be promoted-that of Britain, Ireland, or Northern Ireland itself?

If citizens are to work together as members of a democratic society, they must share a sense of identity, and that identity must be parallel to the political system within which citizen action takes place – and in today's world, nations enjoy a privileged position in that regard. Nations can bestow rights and demand actions that ethnic groups, religious communities, and subnational regions such as states and provinces cannot. (Since devolution in the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland would qualify as such a nation – if its contending parties could agree to work together.) Yet there is no doubt that many people feel a strong sense of identification with ethnic, religious, or other groups, and they are likely to continue to do so. Pluralist democracies must recognize this fact by promoting national identities that encourage inclusiveness and diversity and that do not dismiss other identities that are important to its citizens (Barton and Levstik 2004). In the United States, that would mean a shift away from stories of European settlement and early political leaders, and toward accounts of the diverse populations that have made up the country throughout its history. It would also mean a greater emphasis on events that have led to broader participation in the nation's public life, and on groups and individuals who have championed pluralism. If we hope to promote identification with a pluralist democracy, then surely diversity and participation must be at the center of the historical accounts we emphasize in school.

As a U.S. citizen, I must continually suppress my temptation to tell people in other countries what they should do, and in particular how they should teach history. Therefore I will not presume to end with conclusions about the implications of this research for the Canadian

context. Instead, I will simply suggest some of the questions it raises. The first set of questions revolves around students' prior understanding: What ideas do Canadian students bring with them when they take part in formal study of history at school? Where do these ideas come from, and how do they affect students' learning of required content? Moreover, how do students' ideas (whether specific content knowledge or perceptions of broader trends and processes) vary by region or ethnicity? Researchers across Canada are currently working on precisely these questions, and they are poised to surpass scholars in other countries in their contributions to our understanding of the development of historical understanding.

But even with the empirical evidence that is being developed, Canadian educators still must face difficult, philosophical questions that cannot be answered by research alone. These include questions such as: What is the purpose of teaching history? How can history promote national identity (if it should) and still respect diversity of perspectives? What implications are there for changes in the course of study and for the selection of specific content? (After all, saying that there should be "more Canadian history" says nothing about which people, periods, topics, and themes should be addressed.) How much regional diversity should be encouraged, and how much should the curriculum be differentiated to deal with the prior perspectives of students? At a conference in Montreal not long ago, I heard the suggestion that because recent immigrants are unlikely to have developed the same myths of the Canadian national past as other students, they should be taught those myths first-and then taught that they are all wrong! Although the comment was made in jest, it illustrates how Canadian educators must address the tension between unity and diversity at the same time that they juggle the complex relationship between educational purposes and students' ideas. These are difficult issues, but they cannot be avoided.

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