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History Education and National Identity in Northern Ireland and the United States: Differing Priorities

Several years ago, in a social studies methods class for preservice teachers, a student asked, “Do children in other countries study U.S. history in fifth grade, too?” Shocked by her question, I responded (hopefully without being too condescending), “No, children in other countries study their own history, not ours.” I now know that my response was only partly correct. Although students in other countries do not routinely study U.S. history in the elementary grades, they also may not study their own history.

At the time, it had never occurred to me to doubt my answer. Based on my experiences as a student, teacher, and teacher educator in the United States, I took it for granted that social education was essentially similar throughout the world—that a basic part of the subject would be the study of each country’s own past. Children in other countries, I thought, would study their history just as we study ours. But after spending 6 months researching the historical understanding of children in Northern Ireland, I now realize just how mistaken I was.

Students in the United States are exposed continually to experiences, in school and out, that reinforce their identification with the history and development of the United States. But experiences in other countries do not always reflect this emphasis on national history and identity. In Northern Ireland, for example, the story of the region’s and the nation’s past are almost completely omitted (for both political and pedagogical reasons) from the primary curriculum and from most other public forums where young children learn about history.

This difference in the amount of attention devoted to national history affects the historical understandings children develop in the two locations. It influences their understanding of historical evidence, the nature and direction of change over time, and the purpose for learning about the past. Looking more closely at the differences in teaching and learning in the two countries provides the opportunity to reflect on the role of national history in the U.S. curriculum and to judge whether changes are needed in the way the subject is taught.

Differing Approaches to History Education

Learning stories of the national past

In the United States, children are exposed to stories of the national past from an early age, and this emphasis continues through the elementary years and beyond. Among children’s first historical experiences are their encounters with images related to important national holidays—Columbus, the “First Thanksgiving,” Independence Day, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr.
Children begin to learn about these people and events through television programs, commercial displays and merchandise, and other popular images around them.

This exposure is reinforced at school, where posters, craft projects, videos, and simple readings about these national heroes and events sometimes constitutes the sole focus of the history curriculum from kindergarten through the end of third grade (Brophy & VanSledright, 1997; Jenness, 1990; Naylor & Diem, 1987). Given the emphasis of the curriculum on national holidays, many children may study the same figures repeatedly during these years.

The theme that holds this set of items together is their focus on the origin and development of the United States as a social and political entity. The history to which young children are most regularly and frequently exposed relates to the discovery by Europeans of the land that now forms their country, the migration there by various groups of Europeans (and occasionally other ethnic groups from Africa or elsewhere), the creation and maintenance of the political structure of the United States, and the extension of social and political opportunities to wider segments of the population.

Although fourth- and fifth-graders usually encounter longer texts and more extensive historical content, the focus of the curriculum remains much the same—the origin and development of their country (or portions of it, such as their state). Attempts to widen the scope of the curriculum, by including more attention to groups that have been marginalized in the grand narrative of U.S. history, usually still do so within the context of a story of national development (e.g., Bigelow & Peterson, 1998; Loewen, 1995; Nash, Crabtree, & Dunn, 1997; Zinn, 1980).

**Studying other times and places**

Learning about history in Northern Ireland is very different. Although students there learn about the past from the same kinds of sources as their counterparts in the United States—school, historic sites, media, relatives—the content they learn shows little resemblance to the national history found in the United States. The school curriculum in the primary grades (through the equivalent of the end of U.S. grade 5) does not present a connected historical narrative related to the development of modern Northern Ireland, the United Kingdom, or the Republic of Ireland, and it includes almost no people or events instrumental in creating the country of which students are a part. Rather, students study the nature of human societies at a variety of times in the past.

Children in the equivalent of second grade study daily life in the 1950s; the next year they study Mesolithic peoples, then the Vikings, and finally the Victorian era. Popular supplementary topics include life in Ancient Egypt, daily life during World War II, and life during the Irish famine (Barton, 2001; Department of Education, 1996). Although many of these topics emphasize the experiences of people in Ireland, particularly in the North, they are not put into the framework of a chronological narrative leading to the present. (Students finally do study national history in the second and third years of secondary schooling.)

This pattern has two significant effects on how primary students in Northern Ireland experience the past. First, they do not learn the details of particular stories. Unlike U.S. students, who are expected to learn the *story* of the Pilgrims, the *story* of Columbus, and the *story* of the American Revolution, children in Northern Ireland are expected to learn about the *way of life* of the Vikings, the *way of life* of Mesolithic people, and the *way of life* in Victorian society. Learning history in Northern Ireland, then, means learning about the connections and relationships among various societal patterns, rather than how to order a series of chronological events and identify their causal relationships.

Second, the classroom activities that support this learning are different from those in the United States. Instead of studying narrative works, students in Northern Ireland read non-narrative expository text and work with evidence (Barton, 1998b). In one classroom I observed, for example, second graders studying life during the 1950s brought in household items from their grandparents and explained what they were used for, looked at pictures "from when Granny was a child" to identify similarities and differences compared to today, examined a class photo from the 1950s to make inferences about the lives of the children in
it, and visited a restored historic school to learn what it was like to be a student in the 1950s.

In another classroom, fourth graders studying Viking life built replicas of Viking ships, analyzed quotes about Viking cultural practices from contemporary authors, and used a CD-ROM to reach conclusions about the nature of the Viking economy. These are not isolated examples: In Northern Ireland, primary history instruction typically involves reading short, non-narrative expository text and making inferences from evidence, either presented in the text or as part of supplementary resources or exercises (Barton, 1998b).

These experiences are reinforced by children’s historical experiences outside school, which may involve exploring the remains of ancient burial mounds and ruined castles, visiting museums and recreations of historic or prehistoric settlements, reading books about Viking life or medieval castles, or watching documentaries on television. These settings emphasize understanding the life of people in the past through examining evidence, not learning a story that explains the social and political makeup of children’s national community.

### Reasons for omitting national history

Public settings for learning history in Northern Ireland tend to discount the national past for both political and pedagogical reasons. Two distinct stories of Northern Ireland’s history—one Unionist and one Nationalist—could be told, and they are opposed at nearly every turn. Because the two communities have such diametrically opposed interpretations of the past 400 years, and because these differing interpretations continue to be the source of political controversy and even violence, neither narrative can become the focus of the primary school curriculum or public forums such as historic sites and museums. Telling any story of Northern Ireland’s past, even one that attempts to include both Nationalist and Unionist histories, would lead to condemnation by one community or the other, and few institutions would be willing to engage in this kind of controversy. Indeed, many people would not consider such controversy a proper aim of history education (Barton, 2001).

Important pedagogical reasons can also be cited for emphasizing topics other than national history. In Northern Ireland and throughout the United Kingdom, history educators consider the goal of instruction to be the development of historical skills—e.g., students’ ability to analyze evidence or to take the perspective of people in the past—not the recounting of historical stories, whether related to national history or otherwise. According to a leading history educator in the United Kingdom, both teachers and historians have to some extent come to regard narratives as “an unacademic, slightly immature and unreliable mode of analysis” involving too much didacticism and too little student involvement (Husbands, 1996, p. 46).

Schools throughout the country, then, have come to emphasize the analysis and interpretation of historical evidence in teaching history, and this perspective is reflected in the objectives of the Northern Ireland national curriculum in history (Department of Education, 1996). This focus may also influence museums’ emphasis on the use of artifacts to illustrate social and material life, because they often aim, implicitly or explicitly, to support teachers in delivering the school curriculum.

### Differing Ideas About History

#### Evidence as a source of knowledge

The distinctive nature of children’s historical experiences in the two countries are consistent with several differences in their understanding of the subject. One of the most obvious ways students differ is in their ideas about how people find out what happened in the past. U.S. students have a notoriously weak understanding of evidence. They do not know what kind of sources are used in developing historical accounts, they have few skills for analyzing such sources, and they do not recognize the interpretive nature of the subject.

Research with elementary students, for example, shows that they believe historical information is transmitted through word of mouth, and that knowledge of the past derives from people long ago telling their grandchildren, who told their grandchildren, and so on (Barton, 1993, 1997b; see also Brophy & VanSledright, 1997; VanSledright & Kelly, 1998). Primary students in Northern Ireland, on the other hand, are quick to identify a greater range of sources than their U.S. counterparts. Few suggest that people know about the past
only through word of mouth. Most point to various forms of evidence as the foundation of historical knowledge. They explain that historians and archaeologists look for clues, find remains such as old clothes, scrolls, house ruins, “bits of jugs and all,” and then draw conclusions about how people lived (Barton, 1998b).

The nature of historical change

Another importance difference lies in students’ understanding of the nature of historical change. Children in the United States tend to think of history as occurring in a linear and progressive sequence: First there were explorers, then small settlements, and finally cities. They may not recognize, for example, that some people in Colonial times lived in mansions while others lived in log cabins, that large cities existed in some parts of the country while people were still settling the West, or that immigrants continued to come here after the country had long been settled.

Moreover, U.S. students tend to equate change with progress. They describe change as a rational and beneficial process in which life steadily gets better, as people discover how to do their work more easily or to improve their way of life. Although students may know a great many facts about people and events in U.S. history, they often arrange these in a temporal sequence that reflects a narrative of historical progress. They equate each time in history with only one kind of image, and they think of these as standing in a determinate chronological order (Barton, 1996; Barton & Levstik, 1996).

Students in Northern Ireland, on the other hand, frequently note the diversity of images that can characterize any given time in the past. They recognize, for example, that small rural cottages could exist at the same time as large urban settings, and they often point out that the way of life of rich and poor people would be different at the same point in history, or that people who lived in the countryside would have different lives than their contemporaries in towns or cities.

In addition, students in Northern Ireland do not consistently equate change with progress. When asked to explain why people long ago lived as they did, they often point to the connections among material resources, economic patterns, and social relations. They do not explain differences primarily in terms of technological or intellectual backwardness, as do U.S. students (Barton 1998a, 1998b).

Why life has changed over time

Students in the United States and Northern Ireland also differ in their understanding of why changes have occurred in history. U.S. students rely heavily on explanations that revolve around factors such as “new inventions” or “coming up with new ideas.” They even attribute changes in style or fashion to improved technology and the invention of “better” clothes. U.S. students also describe changing social relations in terms of rational improvement, such as changes in individual attitudes. They may explain that discrimination or other forms of inequality existed in the past because people were “bossy,” “lazy,” or “greedy,” and that change came about because people “figured out” that everyone should be equal.

In addition, U.S. students focus almost exclusively on the motivations of individuals in historic events rather than on broader social and economic factors. They conceive of material and technological change in terms of the desires and achievements of individuals. They believe that social attitudes have changed because of the efforts of famous people—the most obvious case being Martin Luther King, Jr., whom students often credit for having “made a speech” that changed everyone’s mind. U.S. students explain changing social relations, then, the same way they explain improved technology: They focus on individual intentions and achievements and ignore societal factors such as economics, government, or social and political movements (Barton, 1996, 1997a).

But students in Northern Ireland, asked to identify reasons for change, are less likely to focus on new inventions or the motivations and achievements of individuals. In explaining why clothes have changed over time, for example, students rarely point solely to new technology. Rather, they note that ideas about fashion have changed, and that changing methods of organizing production have led to different styles: Clothes made in the home look different from those produced in a factory. Many students suggest multiple factors in accounting for
changes in material life by pointing to various combinations of social, economic, and technological developments.

Similarly, students are more likely to explain changing social relations in terms of their institutional context. For children in Northern Ireland, one of the most salient differences in the way people treat each other now and in the past lies in the practice of caning—hitting students who misbehave at school. Students explain the disappearance of this practice not only by pointing to changes in individual attitudes but by suggesting that parents and advocacy organizations demanded changes in the laws that govern schools. Thus, when explaining changes in both material culture and social relations, students in Northern Ireland give a wider range of explanations than those in the United States, and they often identify precisely the factors missing in U.S. students’ explanations—collective action and changes in social institutions (Barton, 1998b).

**Reasons for learning about the past**

Finally, students in the two countries differ significantly in their ideas about why history is an important subject. Those in the United States have internalized the emphasis on national history, and thus they consistently point to the need to create a narrative that explains the present, and particularly a narrative that provides individual and collective identity. Beginning in the elementary grades and continuing into middle and secondary schooling, they explain that history is important in order to understand how they are connected to their ancestors, how the country got to be where it is today, and where they fit into the national community. The use of pronouns such as *our* and *we* is an ever-present part of U.S. children’s discussions of significant people and events in history (Barton, 2001; Barton & Levstik, 1998; Combleth, 1998; Hahn & Hughes, 1998; VanSledright, 1997). In addition, U.S. students often note that history provides lessons for the present. By studying history, they suggest, we can avoid the mistakes we made in the past (Barton & Levstik, 1998, VanSledright, 1997).

But elementary students in Northern Ireland give very different reasons for studying history. Few suggest that lessons can be learned from the past, and fewer still suggest that history provides a sense of individual or collective identity. Rather, the most frequent reason they give for learning history is nearly the opposite of U.S. students’ rationale: They think history is important in order to learn about people who are different, or, as one student put it, “to understand the way other people lived and went about their daily life.”

Children in Northern Ireland tend to be the most interested in learning about people who are most different from themselves, and they point to these differences as the underlying reason for their attraction to the subject. Sometimes they suggest that this curiosity is a basic human attribute. As one fifth grader said, “It’s just interesting to know what it was like if we had been there [in the past], and people 50 years from now will be keen to know what it’s like for us.” Because so many of their historical experiences focus on people who are fundamentally different from themselves—Ancient Egyptians, the Vikings, Mesolithic peoples—students conclude that the purpose of the subject is to examine those differences rather than to provide a direct link to their own identity.

**Rethinking Priorities**

Students in the two countries have very different ideas about history. Although children in Northern Ireland give explanations that overlap with those of children in the United States, in many instances they have a better understanding of the nature of the discipline, the content of history, and the implications of learning the subject. In addition to recognizing a wider variety of means by which the past is uncovered, for example, they are more likely to recognize the range of images that can characterize a given time in the past, less likely to equate change with progress, less likely to see change as a purely “rational” process, and less likely to focus on the motivations and achievements of individuals. Compared to U.S. students, those in Northern Ireland are more likely to recognize the institutional contexts that influence people’s way of life and to identify a range of forces in explaining historic changes. They are quick to point out the value of studying the lives of people who are different from themselves.

Each of these features of children’s understanding can be linked to differences in their historical experiences. Although children in both nations learn about history from relatives, historic sites, the media, and school, the content of what they learn from these
sources is very different. Children in the United States are exposed primarily to stories of the nation’s development, and they are expected to identify with the characters who populate these stories—whether “traditional” heroes such as Columbus or more modern ones such as Rosa Parks. History is invariably about us and our history—about how we got to be where we are today.

In Northern Ireland, students do not learn stories about the development of their nation; in fact, they do not learn history as a “story” at all. With the possible exception of children’s homes and neighborhoods, all the most important sources of historical information in Northern Ireland emphasize using evidence to learn about the way of life of societies at different times in the past—and many of these societies have no direct connection with modern Northern Ireland.

Examining these differences gives us the chance to consider whether new priorities for history education in the United States might better serve our students. Of course, elementary educators in the United States are unlikely to abandon the story of national development any time soon. Many Americans would be unwilling to give up the connection between history and identity in schools, and U.S. students’ emphasis on using the past to learn lessons for the future seems like a perspective worth maintaining. But it may be that even within the story of national development, students’ encounter with history could be extended in ways leading to the more advanced understandings apparent among even young children in Northern Ireland.

Focus on patterns of daily life

The most obvious modification would be to spend more time studying social and material life rather than learning the details of specific narratives. If students learned more about the patterns of daily life among Native Americans, settlers in the North American colonies, residents of antebellum cities, or enslaved people, they might be better able to explain the connections among a range of societal forces rather than thinking that people simply did not know any better (or did not have the inventions) to live like we do today. In addition, students could be provided more regular and systematic opportunities to compare societies at different times in history and to examine the reasons for change.

If, for example, they compared the lives of rich and poor in a given city at three different times in history, or of Native Americans at the time of encounter, during the late 1800s, and today, they might be less likely to conclude that famous people or individual events have been single-handedly responsible for bringing about broad social changes. While studying these topics, if students were challenged to draw conclusions from various forms of evidence (pictures, photographs, artifacts, diaries, letters, newspapers), rather than relying solely on narrative texts, they might also better understand that historical knowledge does not result primarily from handing stories down over the centuries by word of mouth.

Focus on diverse lifestyles

Another obvious way of expanding the curriculum is by diversifying the story of national development. Studying a given time in the nation’s past, for example, might include learning about different ways of life at a single time—rich and poor, rural and urban, men and women, and different regions of the country. If students had a chance to learn about the variety of lifestyles that can characterize any moment in history, they might be less likely to oversimplify the past into a linear march of progress.

Moreover, such diversification might include placing U.S. history within a global context. Although primary classrooms are unlikely to replace Columbus with a study of the Mesolithic Era, they might expand their treatment of Columbus to include the way of life of people in Europe, North America, and Africa at the time of the encounter, and the changes that occurred as a result. Similarly, the study of North American settlement would benefit from attention to the forces within other societies that led to emigration. The study of the American Revolution could be augmented by comparison with the French Revolution, and the study of the civil rights movement would be enhanced by comparison with other human rights struggles around the world.

Indeed, nearly every topic in U.S. history would benefit by being placed within a more complete global context. Not only would students’ understanding of historical content be more complete, but they might come to see the value of studying people who are not directly related to their own national community.
Conclusion

History education—in school or out—serves a variety of social purposes, and these will differ from one society to another. As the experience of children in Northern Ireland shows, the connection between history and national identity is not an in-escapable one, and alternative approaches may lead to more sophisticated understandings of important historical concepts. Yet this recognition alone will not drastically alter the way history is taught in the United States.

The curriculum is unlikely to undergo wholesale change as long as the public expects it to address the goal of building national identity. However, it may be possible to incorporate significant elements of the kind of history education found elsewhere. In particular, less attention to repeatedly learning specific narratives and more attention to the evidence-based study of social and material life among diverse groups in the United States and elsewhere might help students develop a more comprehensive understanding of the past.

References

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