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## ORAL HISTORY AND UNDERSTANDING A TROUBLED PAST

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## Η ΠΡΟΦΟΡΙΚΗ ΙΣΤΟΡΙΑ ΚΑΙ Η ΚΑΤΑΝΟΗΣΗ ΕΝΟΣ ΤΑΡΑΧΩΔΟΥΣ ΠΑΡΕΛΘΟΝΤΟΣ

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in collaboration with

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### ABSTRACT

This chapter argues for the role that oral history might play in helping young people better understand the legacy of the recent past in Northern Ireland. The latter is a society that is emerging from nearly forty years of conflict. First, previous more benign uses of oral history in schools are described. Next, the challenges posed to civil society in general, and schools in particular, when trying to come to terms with the violent recent past are discussed. It is argued that the characteristics of oral history are investigative and that storytelling has the potential to foster empathetic understanding

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for the other. Finally, a model for intervention is presented, a recent practical application evaluated and suggestions made as to how the work might be taken forward.

## ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Στο άρθρο αυτό υποστηρίζεται ότι η προφορική ιστορία μπορεί να βοηθά τους νέους ανθρώπους να κατανοούν καλύτερα την κληρονομιά του πρόσφατου παρελθόντος στη Βόρεια Ιρλανδία. Πρόκειται για μία κοινωνία που βγαίνει από μία περίοδο σκληρών συγκρούσεων που διήρκεσε περίπου 40 έτη. Το κεφάλαιο ξεκινά με την περιγραφή ήπιων μορφών αξιοποίησης της προφορικής ιστορίας στο σχολείο. Στη συνέχεια, συζητούνται οι προκλήσεις που αντιμετωπίζει η κοινωνία των πολιτών γενικά, και τα σχολεία ειδικότερα, όταν επιχειρούν να συμφιλιωθούν με ένα βίαιο πρόσφατο παρελθόν. Υποστηρίζεται ότι η προφορική ιστορία διακρίνεται για τον ερευνητικό χαρακτήρα της και ότι η αφήγηση ιστοριών έχει τη δύναμη να ενισχύει την ενσυναίσθητική κατανόηση του άλλου. Τέλος, παρουσιάζεται ένα μοντέλο παρέμβασης, αξιολογείται μία πρόσφατη πρακτική εφαρμογή του και διατυπώνονται προτάσεις για περαιτέρω μελλοντική αξιοποίηση αυτής της δουλειάς.

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## Introduction

Oral history became popular in British schools in the 1960s. At that time it was gaining credibility academically and innovative teachers were attracted to it for a number of reasons. For some it offered an alternative to the grand narratives of political history and provided opportunities to explore aspects of heritage and the lives of ordinary people (Perks 1992). Community cohesion was perceived to be under threat through social and economic change with the decline of old industries which had shaped the landscape since the Industrial Revolution. Oral history offered benefits in fostering inter-generational communication and its investigative stance was in keeping with the philosophy of the 'New History' movement with its emphasis on a disciplinary approach. It allowed students to engage directly in the collection and analysis of primary evidence by examining accounts to evaluate the reliability and validity of different perspectives and, through synthesis, come to reasoned interpretations of past events.

The era prior to 1990 (when prescribed national curricula in the United Kingdom were introduced) was one of considerable curriculum freedom when teachers could shape their teaching to the particular needs of young people. Oral history was common in primary schools but also in secondary education where the challenge of raising the school leaving age and "democratising" education for all abilities presented both pedagogic challenges and issues of relevance.

In Northern Ireland, too, social and economic change was having an impact. However, the 1970s also saw deep cultural, political and religious divisions between Protestant and Catholics erupt into communal violence (known colloquially as the "Troubles"). This conflict persisted until the Belfast (Good Friday) peace accord in 1998 and continues to manifest itself in confrontations around cultural symbolism, exacerbated by a failure to agree as to how events of the recent troubled past might be mediated in civil society.

## History teaching, oral history and dealing with the legacy of the past

Violence caused educators to reflect if education might be a contributor to societal division. Many identified a largely segregated school system (state schools for Protestants and faith schools for Catholics), allied to residential segregation, as significant. Within each set of schools it was suggested that history was taught in partisan ways and thus acted to promote mutually exclusive British and Irish cultural identities. Subsequently, history teachers have responded in a variety of ways to the conflict and its legacies. For some it has become an imperative to directly address the sensitive past, make connections with the contested present and contribute to conflict

transformation. Others are more reticent to tackle contentious issues and instead prefer to keep them at an historical distance.

Thus, oral history, when employed, has often been targeted at non-contentious aspects of local heritage like life and work in the linen factories in the inter-war period. A project might engage schools from different backgrounds co-operatively with the emphasis on demonstrating people's common lived everyday experiences. Arguably, such work helped build community bridges but was less likely to address cultural difference. Also, from a practical perspective the "Troubles" were not conducive to young people participating easily in the community and, with the introduction of a prescriptive curriculum in the 1990s, schools devoted less time to local studies. Consequently, oral history, always a minority activity, lost its foothold in classroom practice.

The debate on history's contribution to peace-building has become more pertinent as Northern Ireland society has wrestled to emerge from conflict. Research indicates that the current generation of young people, the first to have grown up to maturity after 1998, do not have a clear understanding of the nature of the violence and its historical roots and expect schooling to provide answers (Barton & McCully 2005; Bell, Hansson & McCaffery 2010). Yet, at the same time wider society has failed to find a consensual way of dealing with the legacy of the past. Consequently, revelations about past events tend to emerge piecemeal, exacerbating hurt and grievances on both sides.

In other conflicts where 'truth' models have been employed, including South Africa and Guatemala, it is accepted that in the aftermath of violent trauma the need to deal with the past is an important stage in the reconciliatory process. This places the emphasis on "truth recovery", the public acknowledgement of "abused power, complicit actors and the harms to individuals" (Minow 1998: 127). Victims have a need to have their voices heard in a cathartic environment with their testimonies representing, "each person's grasp of the past-perceptions that must be confronted in building new relationships between citizens and the state" (McCully 2012: 11). These stories represent important fragments of the historical record but, at this stage, with the welfare of individuals' concerned paramount, it may not be appropriate to subject their accounts to the critical scrutiny of the historical process.

For Minow (1998: 127) this process is "psychological" truth. However, historical truth demands that such personal stories eventually be put through the lens of evidential criticality, and synthesised with other, possibly, contradictory accounts, leading to a more complex understanding of the conflict. The accounts of living in formerly mixed villages collected in Cyprus, for example, illustrate how a critical dimension can be brought to oral history in conflicted societies (Psaltis et al. 2013). As part of an identity project the work aimed at helping individuals better understand how their views have been socially constructed by external influences. The authors argue that oral history

rests in a privileged position to do this “owing to its particular stance at the interface of the individual and society in the nexus of past, present and future” (Psaltis et al. 2013: 45).

As in Cyprus, peace-builders in Northern Ireland, in the absence of an official mechanism for dealing with the legacy of the recent past, have acknowledged the potential power of oral testimony both to give voice to those who feel victimised and to activate empathetic understanding in others. Recently, several significant initiatives have drawn on the experiences of individuals, particularly those of ‘victims’ and ‘perpetrators’, and have captured these in a variety of forms from print to moving image. Yet, arguably, the work has been aimed more at therapeutic objectives of ‘healing’, ‘reparation’ and ‘reconciliation’ than in pursuit of historical truth. It has also concentrated on adult rather than youth audiences.

Oral approaches to peace-building in schools have been limited. Two exceptions are *Civic Voices* and *From Prison to Peace*.

### ***Civic Voices***

*Civic Voices* is an international programme in support of democratic action. It involves teachers and students from around the world interviewing change-makers on how their democracy and society was built and preserving these stories in a ‘democratic memory bank’ as an inspiration for young people. (Civic Voices 2014). In Northern Ireland these interviews have frequently been conducted by mixed groups of Protestant and Catholic young people. *Civic Voices* maintains that it helps young people to realise that they are part of that historical narrative of democratic advancement and to celebrate those stories.

### ***From Prison to Peace***

*From Prison to Peace* has engaged young people in less comfortable dialogue with ex paramilitary combatants to explore the reasons why people became involved in conflict, the impact of prison and the contribution former prisoners are now making in the community (Emerson 2012). Evidence to date indicates that the two projects have facilitated constructive debate around contentious issues. While both draw on historical material they do not rely on the discipline of history to provide their critical edge. Rather, they particularly target contemporary political debate and civic engagement.

Thus experience has established that the power of testimony is important in developing empathetic understanding in post-conflict situations.

The remainder of this chapter explores the potential of applying historical thinking to oral accounts to help young people better understand the complexity of the legacy left from Northern Ireland’s violent past.

## Addressing conflict through oral history in practice

First, this section outlines a possible model for using oral history in the transitional justice process (McCully 2010: 171-172). This is then positioned alongside the outworking of aspects of the model in practice.

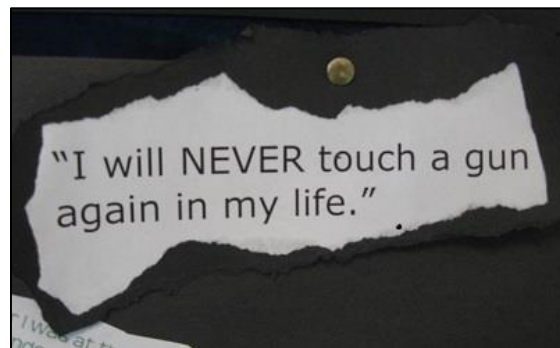
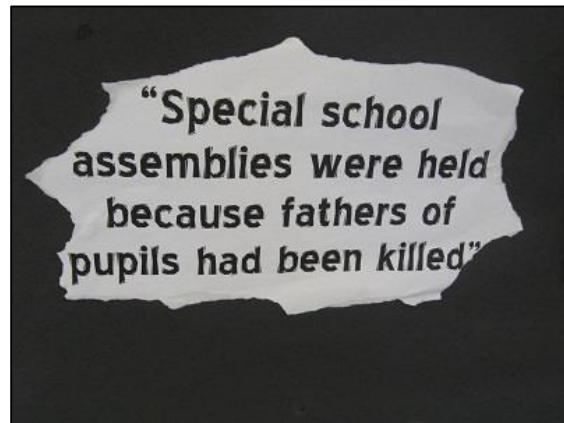
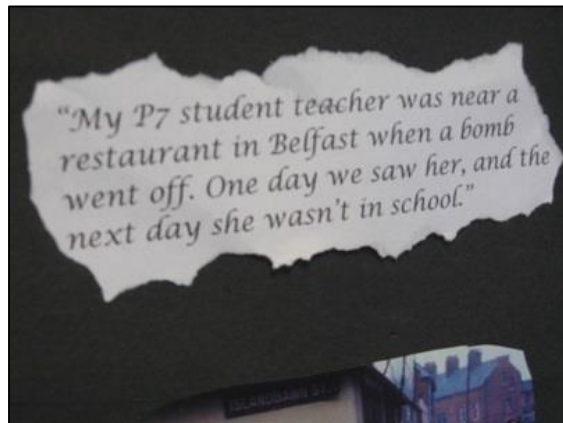
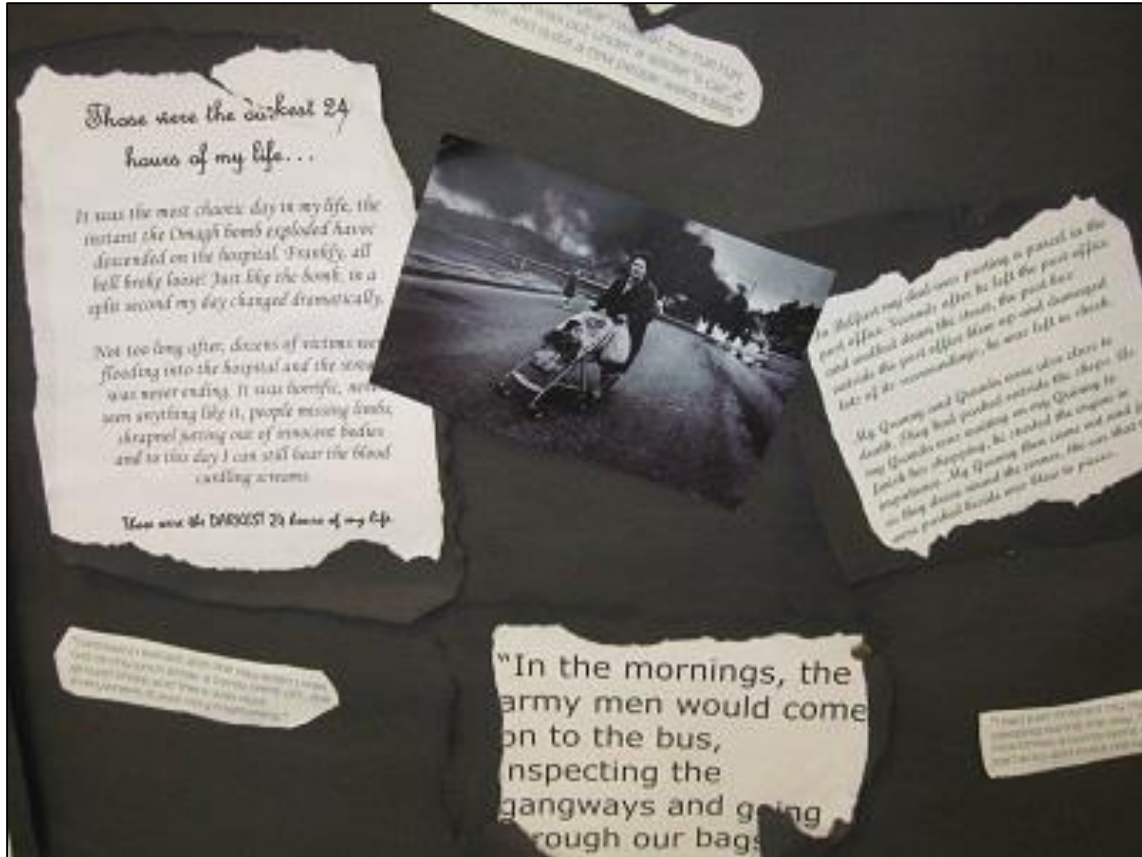
Initially, it was proposed that two schools in the same town, from different cultural backgrounds, might co-operate together on a project to investigate *Life During the Troubles*. Pupils would first develop data collecting skills and then engage in interviewing those who had lived during the violence, thus gaining insight into ordinary people's experiences. No special effort would be made to locate combatants or victims, but the latter might be interviewed as, and when, they were encountered. Schools would share their material and, as trust developed, there might be opportunities for students to interview those from the other community.

Focus would be placed on critical enquiry and on helping to bring together and evaluate complex and, sometimes, divergent accounts. The expectation would be that the authenticity and the commonality of experiences, might promote sensitivity and mutual empathy, thus drawing on Barton and Levstik's (2004: 207-208) "caring" dimension, inviting us "to care with, and about, people in the past, to be concerned with what happened to them and how they experienced their lives", which they argue is essential to make historical learning relevant to young lives. The culmination would be some form of public presentation and reflection in a "shared space", accessible to both communities. The schools might then continue to work together to accumulate accounts which would become a resource for wider community understanding.

Subsequently, aspects of this proposal have been applied in practice. A small scale pilot, *Troubled Tales*, operated within a larger project, *Facing our History, Shaping the Future* (FOHSTF 2014).

### *Troubled Tales*

Two teachers, Darren Scott and Donal O'Hagan, supported by the project director, Sean Pettis, worked with able students aged 13 to 14, in two schools, one largely Protestant in composition and the other Catholic. Students were asked to interview a family member or friend willing to talk about their experiences during the conflict, to convert findings to a written record and then present it anonymously to class peers. The accounts were first posted in their respective classrooms and then mounted on display at an event in the Northern Ireland Parliament Buildings to which parents from both schools were invited. The material attracted considerable attention, including from politicians. The displays remained in classrooms for some time and generated curiosity from other students who encountered them.





The brief evaluation which follows is based on interviews with the three key facilitators. Undoubtedly, the experiment had been valuable, with each talking positively of pupil and parent reactions. Through participation the pupils had “*gained access*” to the



recent conflicted past by breaking the prevailing “culture of silence” and, thereby, had gained a more nuanced and complete sense of people’s lives during the period.

The potential of everyday stories to interest and challenge appeared central in helping students “*to see differences in experiences*” and take account of other perspectives. By placing the outcomes on public display, albeit, in a restricted (but safe) environment, the work had stimulated a degree of peer, inter-generational and community debate, indicating the potential for further inter-community dialogue.

The commitment of the two teachers to *Troubled Tales* cannot be under-estimated. The project director referred to them as “*risk-takers*” who were convinced that the work must have societal value beyond purely fostering historical cognition. Throughout, both were aware of the sensitivities involved and the importance of laying out clear guidelines for pupils and interviewees. Crucially, both stressed the importance of engaging pupils in enquiry underpinned by historical method which fitted with the curriculum and developed students’ historical thinking. By adhering to the principles of the discipline, in the words of one of the teachers, Darren Scott, oral history could “*demystify*” and “*de-mythify*” partial understandings of the recent, sensitive past.

*Troubled Tales* was a limited implementation of the original idea but it did provide valuable insight into possible future directions. Inevitably, constraints on time featured. There was the usual dilemma of finding space in a packed timetable but, more importantly, it was finding the time to build the trust necessary to ensure that authentic accounts emerged from the data collection.

Anonymity raised issues. It was afforded to all the oral contributions yet the teachers expressed reservations as to how far a few contributors had filtered their stories either by holding back on detail or, in some cases, exaggerating for effect. Yet anonymity was also a limiting factor for it hindered pupils directly sharing dialogue around ‘personal’ stories. Removing it may increase sensitivities, but may enable greater empathetic identification at a personal level.

There were also tensions between pupils’ critical scrutiny of evidence and their desire not to offend, with some tempering the language of their write-up in the knowledge that their accounts would be seen by the other community. This indicates the wider pitfalls of seeking to use historical study too directly in the reconciliation process and, perhaps, can only be overcome by all involved having a deeper grasp of the nature of historical investigation.

Above all, there was inadequate time for reflection on what had been gathered and an appropriate pedagogy to facilitate this was identified as a priority for the future. There was also a vision emerging that the collection of stories should be cumulative, year on year, and that the archive be on the web and shared by other schools.

## Conclusion

This critique of *Troubled Tales* is only partial and, unfortunately, the work stopped short of students from both schools sharing their accounts in open dialogue. However, it does suggest that oral history can be a strong motivator in introducing young people to the legacy of a violent past and that stories, genuinely told, may have the power to activate empathic understanding of the other's position. For this to be fully effective the teacher has a vital role first in building trust with students and their parents and then with colleagues from partnership schools. Above all, there is a need for an associated pedagogy to ensure that the stories are digested and critically examined. Thus, they should challenge those who encounter them, or, as Darren Scott concluded,

I would like to hope that *Troubled Tales* troubles people. They would go and maybe reflect and go and research. That's the trouble with our Troubles. People aren't troubled enough in a reflective way.

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