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Research article

Shaping historical consciousness: young people, social remembering and identity dynamics outside the classroom

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Abstract

This article explores how young people's engagement with history outside the classroom shapes the development of their historical consciousness. The findings are drawn from a two-year doctoral research project investigating the social remembering of young people from England during the 100-year commemoration of the First World War. Building on recent work by Peck and Zanzanian, and foundational insights from Hall and Epstein, the article explores how young people's historical consciousness is shaped through their self-positioning within national, racialised and cultural frameworks. Complementing this, I draw on Samuel and Wertsch to conceptualise history and memory as socially embedded practices, often located in vernacular, familial and community spaces outside formal education. These perspectives come together in the concept of social remembering, which captures how young people actively construct historical meaning through relational,

affective and culturally situated engagements with the past. As Thelen argues, such remembering is not fixed but dynamic, constantly worked and reworked. This research draws on ethnographic work with a small group of students to address the research question: how are young people's historical understandings constructed outside the classroom? The analysis shows how historical consciousness is shaped beyond the classroom. These processes are not supplementary to formal learning but constitute critical sites where students construct and negotiate meaning – affirming, resisting or reconfiguring dominant historical narratives in relation to their evolving identities.

Keywords historical consciousness; social remembering; identity construction; commemoration practices; autoethnography; learning outside the classroom

Opening vignette

It's a Friday afternoon. Today's lesson was a new enquiry into the First World War. Aware of the war's popular resonance, I wanted to introduce a level of ambiguity and therefore began with a starter picture (see Figure 1) showing the Indian Lancers going into battle. I invited the class to speculate about what this picture showed. After I disclosed the First World War context, one boy disputed its connection to the First World War but was not able to offer an explanation for his conviction. As the lesson proceeded, I talked individually to him. He developed a rationale for this thinking:

'Sir, there weren't no Muslims in the First World War. I go past the War Memorial and it's a Christian War Memorial.'

Figure 1. Troops of the 29th Lancers Regiment (Source: IWM, Q 4997)



The previous vignette describes an encounter in my history classroom that stimulated my interest in young people's learning outside the classroom. This article is based on my doctoral study (Todd, 2016) that explored how young people's engagement with history outside school shapes the development of their historical consciousness. Drawing on public discourses surrounding the First World War, the work reveals the rich meaning-making that takes place beyond the classroom. Recognising the active and dynamic construction of memory and meaning by young people, I develop the concept of social remembering. The aforementioned boy's response was blunt and insightful. The Christian War Memorial was impacting the boy's historical consciousness, his sense of what happened in the past and his place in the flow of time.

I can also remember the boy's family, from parents' evening. They expressed negative views on immigrants; I can imagine that these also informed his meaning-making, which suggests how social remembering is embedded in familial contexts. The boy's account may have been drawn from a 'stock of stories' (MacIntyre, 1984) from home. Meaning was being actively constructed by the boy and not imposed on him by social memory, or by me, the teacher. This was when I became interested in social remembering as a fluid and dynamic process.

The boy was employing logic (namely, supporting evidence of the memorial) that would be acceptable to not only me, the history teacher, but also a teacher of a mixed-race background – albeit not Muslim, but potentially marked as 'other' in the same way as the Lancers (also not necessarily Muslim). The exchange showed both an understanding of context and a negotiation on his part. He was working with materials drawn from different contexts and making choices about these materials and the language that he used. I had a sense of his individual understanding of history, of historical consciousness and of how this related to his identity. I wanted to know more about how this interplay between identity and historical consciousness took place across different settings. Following Epstein (2008, 2009), I was interested in the ways students' racialised and cultural identities shape the interpretive frameworks they bring to history, which powerfully conditions how classroom narratives are taken up, resisted or reworked.

This research was conducted during the First World War centenary commemorations, a period of intense public engagement with history in the UK. Young people encountered the war through a wide range of commemorative activities across schools, media and public culture. I return to this in detail later, but it is important to note here that this commemorative landscape shaped the cultural conditions in which their historical consciousness developed.

This article draws on Phase 2 of a two-year study and focuses on the ways young people navigate national narratives, memory practices and identity formation through lived experiences of remembrance. I am particularly interested in the dynamic interplay between cultural tools and identity work, and how categories such as nation, ethnicity and gender intersect in this process. This reflects a view of identity as fluid and relational, shaped by positionality and social context (McCall, 2005; Zanazanian, 2025).

The central research question guiding this article is: how are young people's historical understandings constructed outside the classroom?

Literature review

Introduction: framing the literature review

A number of theoretical traditions inform this study; this section highlights those most relevant to understanding young people's engagement with history beyond the classroom. Specifically, it focuses on three interrelated concepts: historical consciousness, social memory (evolving into social remembering) and identity formation. These concepts provide the foundation for exploring how young people actively construct their understanding of the past and use it to shape their identities in the present.

Given the article's focus on how young people engage with history beyond formal school settings, this review prioritises broader, more generalisable concepts over specific historical contexts. While the research was conducted during the First World War centenary commemorations, this event serves primarily as a case study rather than the central focus of this article. The goal here is not to delve deeply into the historiography or memory of the First World War, though this is a rich seam (Winter, 1998, 2006), but rather to use it as a lens through which to explore the processes of social remembering and identity formation. This approach ensures that the insights offered can resonate with a wider audience of educators and researchers interested in how young people form historical consciousness across diverse

settings. In doing so, the article contributes to ongoing discussions regarding the role of informal history learning in shaping young people's identities and historical understanding.

Locating my work

The work began in 2014, during the extensive First World War centenary commemorations initiated by the UK government. More than a memorial programme, this was a full cultural moment: *14–18 NOW*, a large-scale arts initiative, spanned theatre, dance, music, literature and visual arts; the Imperial War Museum (IWM) led over 2,700 cultural and educational organisations in coordinated remembrance work; and the BBC aired more than 600 hours of commemorative programming. This included new dramas such as *The Passing Bells*, which aired in a primetime slot aimed at teenagers and attracted 3.7 million viewers. Significantly, popular children's programming such as *Horrible Histories* was also commissioned to mark the centenary, ensuring that commemoration extended into informal learning environments. This commemorative saturation, across schools, media and public culture, helped shape the memory landscape in which students formed historical understandings. It is clear that many of the students in this study would have encountered the First World War in some ways through these contexts. These conditions suggest that their historical consciousness was, at least in part, shaped by the emotional power and cultural framing of the centenary period, in ways that extended beyond the classroom. However, my findings suggest that meaning-making was shaped not only by the affective and cultural framing of the centenary moment, but also by their capacity to draw meaning from a range of sources, formal and informal, public and personal, within an increasingly mediated and participatory commemorative landscape.

This complexity aligns with [Zanazanian's \(2025\)](#) conceptualisation of historical consciousness as a reflexive process that unfolds in the immediacy of lived experience: what he calls the 'now moment'. Rather than passively absorbing dominant commemorative scripts, students engaged in forms of decoding ([Hall, 1980](#)), reinterpreting public narratives through the lens of their own identities, communities and prior knowledge. Thus, students brought a critical lens to these encounters, especially when drawing on cultural resources from their familial, ethnic or peer networks. These interpretive acts involved not only filtering historical meaning but also configuring it into stories that resonated with their sense of self and belonging, thus demonstrating a diverse and situated form of historical consciousness at work.

Despite some attention to historical consciousness within practitioner-focused articles in English history teachers' professional journals, such as *Teaching History* ([Chapman and Facey, 2004](#); [Instone, 2013](#); [Rogers, 2008](#)), these contributions are rare and typically centre on pedagogical strategies rather than empirical research. [Lee \(2004\)](#) points out that much of the academic focus in England has been on historical thinking and disciplinary knowledge, particularly around key concepts such as causation, evidence and interpretation. While valuable for classroom practice, this focus overlooks how young people develop historical consciousness outside formal education. [Harris \(2021\)](#) has recently reinforced this point, arguing that despite progress in promoting historical thinking within English classrooms, there remains a lack of empirical work on how young people construct historical consciousness beyond school environments. My research seeks to address this gap by examining how young people construct historical consciousness through family and community, thus contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of how historical knowledge shapes identity.

[Chapman \(2018\)](#) offers insights into why historical consciousness may have been relatively neglected in England. He highlights the tension between traditional national narratives and more inclusive approaches to teaching history, which reflects the broader challenges of grappling with contested narratives and national identity. While historical thinking has been accentuated in the English curriculum, broader discussions of historical consciousness, how students understand and relate to history beyond the classroom, have been less prominent. This focus on formal pedagogical methods overlooks the ways in which young people engage with history through family stories, media and other informal contexts, which not only are critical to shaping historical consciousness but also have a bearing on learning inside the classroom.

In comparison, countries such as Canada and Australia have made more significant strides in researching historical consciousness, but their contexts present different challenges. [Seixas \(2006a\)](#) and [Sandwell \(2020\)](#) highlight how historical consciousness in Canada is framed within a colonial context of diversity, reconciliation with Indigenous experiences in colonial history and contested

narratives. However, such framings risk flattening key distinctions. In particular, [Cutrara \(2018, 2021\)](#) critiques the dominant grammar of Canadian history education for treating Indigenous peoples as part of a multicultural mosaic rather than acknowledging their distinct status as First Peoples with sovereignty rights protected under frameworks such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. [Marker \(2011\)](#) similarly contends that Indigenous historical consciousness operates on fundamentally different epistemological grounds, shaped by cyclical notions of time, place-based knowledge systems and relationships to land and non-human actors. Together, these critiques challenge the assumptions of inclusion that underpin mainstream historical thinking models and call for deeper epistemic shifts that make space for Indigenous perspectives as foundational rather than additive.

While some of my research focuses on young people from racially minoritised backgrounds in England rather than Indigenous students, these critiques help illuminate the limitations of inclusionary models of historical consciousness that fail to account for power, epistemic difference and narrative authority. Although the young people in this study do not occupy the same legal or ontological position as Indigenous peoples in Canada, some do often find themselves positioned outside dominant historical narratives, encountering British history as something they must decode, resist or reinterpret. By foregrounding 'social remembering' as a framework, my study explores how these young people draw on community, familial and cultural resources to position themselves in relation to histories that frequently render them invisible. In this way, the Canadian critiques offered by Cutrara and Marker serve not as direct analogues, but as valuable provocations that challenge us to reimagine historical consciousness beyond additive inclusion.

[Clark's \(2016\)](#) work in Australia highlights the struggle with national identity, particularly how young people engage with the contentious history of colonisation and Indigenous rights. Like Canada, Australia grapples with the legacies of colonialism, facing ongoing tensions between reconciliation with Indigenous communities and the construction of a multicultural national identity. While these dynamics play out differently in the English context, where the dominant frame is shaped less by settler colonialism and more by imperial memory, migration and war, the underlying questions of power, inclusion and the role of community and cultural resources in shaping historical consciousness remain strikingly resonant.

The gap in empirical research on historical consciousness in England provides a compelling rationale for drawing on work from other contexts in designing the research. Notably, when I began formulating this research in 2014, the influential collection *Contemplating Historical Consciousness* ([Clark and Peck, 2019](#)) was not yet published. I drew instead on Peter Seixas's early work, which offered a framework for understanding historical consciousness as a dynamic and multifaceted process; this enabled broader investigations into how historical consciousness is formed in informal settings, a critical component of my research.

Over time, however, Seixas's work increasingly shifted towards operationalising historical thinking for curriculum and classroom use, most notably through the 'Benchmarks of Historical Thinking' framework. While this has been invaluable for formal education, it offers fewer tools for capturing the textured, affectively charged and community-mediated experiences that constitute young people's informal historical consciousness. In this respect, the broader sociocultural turn in historical consciousness studies, exemplified by the *Canadians and Their Pasts* project ([Conrad et al., 2019](#)), as well as [Peck \(2022\)](#) and [Chapman \(2018\)](#), has been especially generative for my subsequent analysis. Conrad et al.'s large-scale national study foregrounded how people make sense of the past in everyday life, drawing on personal, familial and cultural resources. Notably, people's primary engagements with history often begin with 'people's history', family stories, local places or artefacts, and only later intersect with public and academic histories. This model aligns closely with my observations of how young people construct meaning through a wide range of informal encounters, including commemorative media, intergenerational conversations and personal memory practices.

[Peck's \(2022\)](#) work further supports this, exploring how young people's identities intersect with their understanding of history, emphasising the role of social context. Peck highlights how cultural backgrounds, personal experiences and social environments mediate young people's engagement with historical narratives; this provides important insights for my study.

While my research focuses on the development of historical consciousness in informal settings, it is important to acknowledge ongoing work aimed at operationalising this concept for classroom use. In the US, [Popa \(2022\)](#) is synthesising existing literature on meaning-making to provide practical tools for educators. Similarly, [Körber's \(2011, 2015\)](#) work in Germany seeks to develop historical consciousness as a more structured concept within history education. Although these efforts are important for advancing

historical consciousness in formal education, they offer less direct guidance for my empirical focus on informal historical understanding. Nevertheless, their work represents a critical step in making historical consciousness a more usable concept for educators; these insights may be useful as I reflect on the broader implications of my research.

Historical consciousness: definitions and relevance

Jörn Rüsen's (2006, 2012, 2015) work plays a key role in theorising historical consciousness, offering a widely cited typology of four types: traditional, exemplary, critical and genetic. Scholars such as Ahonen (2005) describe Rüsen's contribution as 'a kind of cornerstone for the dialogue' (p. 699) on historical consciousness. Peter Lee (2004) similarly affirms its relevance for history education research.

However, Rüsen's model is not without limitations. While he insists the types are not a hierarchy, Lee (2004) notes the typology implies a developmental logic, with 'critical' and 'genetic' forms appearing more advanced. Although these types may co-exist in any encounter with the past, Rüsen's work suggests a dialectical progression: 'There seems to be a dialectic at work, for example, in which critical historical consciousness negates traditional and exemplary types' (Lee, 2004, p. 5). Megill (1994) also critiques Rüsen's assumption of a singular, coherent history, which may not align with plural classroom realities. Additionally, much of Rüsen's work remains untranslated, making deeper engagement difficult.

Despite these challenges, Rüsen's framework offers a valuable theoretical entry point. In this study, I draw on it cautiously, aware of its philosophical strengths but mindful of the need for more empirical grounding and contextual flexibility.

Seixas's definition of historical consciousness responds to this need, encompassing 'the individual and collective understandings of the past, the cognitive and cultural factors which shape those understandings, as well as the relations of historical understandings to those of the present and the future' (CSHC, n.d.). This definition provides a broad and inclusive framework for exploring how young people encounter and understand history both inside and outside formal educational settings.

Seixas's formulation is particularly useful for this study because it recognises the dynamic and multifaceted nature of historical consciousness. It allows the inclusion of both formal historical education and the informal, and often more personal, ways in which young people engage with the past outside the classroom. This aligns with the central aim of this research: to investigate how young people form historical consciousness through lived experiences, family stories, community events and cultural interactions beyond formal schooling.

Furthermore, Seixas's (2006b) emphasis on the interplay between interpretive practices and cultural factors is crucial in understanding how young people interpret and rework historical narratives. By situating historical consciousness at the intersection of personal and collective memory, Seixas provides a way in which to explore how individual identity interacts with the larger cultural and historical frameworks that young people encounter. This is directly relevant to the ways in which young people decode historical narratives and integrate them into their evolving sense of self.

I have sought to move beyond narrow interpretations of historical literacy, which often focus on disciplinary knowledge and second-order concepts, to a more holistic understanding of how history becomes meaningful in young people's lives. This approach allows a deeper exploration of how informal engagements with history outside the classroom contribute to the development of historical consciousness and identity formation – something I argue is less evident in English history education theorising and practice.

In Seixas's later work we can see a turn away from historical consciousness. In *Heritage versus History* Seixas (2016) critiques the ways in which emotional identification with the past, what he calls the 'heritage imperative', can override analytical engagement. In contexts such as state-led commemoration, historical narratives often serve identity or political functions that may resist critical scrutiny. This tension is particularly relevant to the current study, which took place during the First World War centenary commemorations – a moment when public history, media and political discourse converged in powerful ways. However, my work suggests students are able to draw on a range of resources to resist, or at least complicate, the heritage imperative.

In this context, Paul Zanzanian's (2025) more recent work is analytically valuable. Zanzanian reframes historical consciousness not as a set of cognitive outcomes or chronological orientations, but as a lived and reflexive process embedded in practical life. He conceptualises historical consciousness as something enacted in the 'now moment', a space in which individuals draw on cultural tools, social

positions and available narratives to make sense of the past in relation to the present. His dual framework, distinguishing between *interpretive filters* (how people make sense of the past) and *content configurations* (the narrative templates they use), offers a productive lens through which to analyse the rich and varied forms of social remembering evidenced in my study.

Like Zanazanian, I am interested not only in what young people know about the past, but also in how they position themselves through and with history. Their historical consciousness emerges through participation in familial memory practices, engagement with commemorative media and interpretive encounters shaped by identity, affect and belonging. By bringing Zanazanian's framework into dialogue with Seixas's definition and extending this through my own consideration of social remembering, I aim to capture the layered and situated ways in which young people make history meaningful in their lives.

Social memory and the evolution to social remembering

The concept of social remembering, central to this research, builds on earlier sociological understandings of collective memory, particularly the work of Halbwachs (1992). Halbwachs asserted that memory is socially framed, that is, constructed within groups such as the family or nation, and shaped by shared language, norms and frameworks of meaning. He distinguished between personal memory, collective memory and historical memory, arguing that what we remember is always mediated by our position within society. While his work focused more on the social scaffolding of memory than on the process of remembering itself, it laid the foundation for later theorists, such as Wertsch (2002) and Connerton (1989), who extended the analysis to consider how memory is mediated through cultural tools, bodily practices and acts of transfer. This study draws on that trajectory, moving from memory conceived as a static storehouse to remembering as an active, dynamic process and finally to social remembering enacted across informal sites of meaning-making in young people's lives.

Seixas's broad conception of historical consciousness dovetails with the concept of social remembering, which plays a central role in this research. His early framework accommodates the dynamic, situated nature of remembering, making it useful for examining how young people continuously engage with and reinterpret history as they navigate their present-day identities and social contexts.

Where Halbwachs focused on the structures that shape memory within social groups, I extend this tradition by emphasising remembering as a present-tense activity, something that is continually worked and reworked in context. This distinction, first signalled by Thelen (1989) and echoed in Zanazanian's 'now moment', allows for a more dynamic understanding of how young people engage with the past in lived settings. Social remembering provides a way to explore how young people actively use cultural tools, such as texts, films, family stories and community events, to construct and reshape their understanding of the past. This process is not passive but rather is influenced by their identities, experiences and social contexts. In this sense, social remembering is both personal and collective, aligning well with Seixas's emphasis on the relationship between individual and collective understandings of history.

The shift from memory to remembering is crucial. It foregrounds the agency young people exercise in shaping historical narratives. Rather than treating memory as static or imposed, this perspective recognises remembering as a dynamic, ongoing process through which young people negotiate their identities in relation to broader historical narratives and events. This has implications for how we conceptualise where and how historical learning takes place.

In my work, this conceptual shift enables an exploration of how young people interact with history in informal settings, such as community events and family contexts, which serve as important sites for the construction of historical consciousness. The findings suggest that these interactions are key to how young people develop a sense of belonging and position themselves in relation to historical narratives.

Zanazanian's (2025) work helps to sharpen this distinction. He reframes historical consciousness as a reflexive life practice rather than a cognitive toolkit, one enacted in specific 'now moments' through which individuals make sense of their positionality. This perspective reinforces the importance of the situated, relational and affective dimensions of historical understanding – dimensions that are foregrounded in the informal and community-based engagements this study explores.

Identity, historical consciousness and social contexts

Identity is an essential component of historical consciousness and social remembering. In this research, I explore how young people's identities, or at least their self-declared or observed patterns of identification, interact with their understanding of history. Drawing on Hall's (1980) work on encoding and decoding, I argue that young people do not simply receive historical narratives; rather, they actively decode them, interpreting historical events through the lens of their own identities.

I use the phrase 'self-declared or observed patterns of identification' to acknowledge that identity categories such as gender, ethnicity and nationality are not fixed or essential but are fluid, contextual and relational. My analysis does not treat these identities as stable descriptors, but rather as positionings that reveal something about how young people made sense of themselves and the past in a given moment. As Zanazanian (2025, p. 22) argues, historical consciousness must be understood in terms of the positions individuals take up in the 'now moment' of enactment, rather than through the lens of fixed or pre-determined identity categories.

Hall's (1980) concept of *decoding* supports the idea of social remembering by emphasising the active role that individuals play in interpreting and reshaping cultural messages. Much like the concept of *social remembering*, it describes an active, dynamic and ongoing process of working and reworking memory, mediated by different contexts.

In Hall's model, media and cultural products are encoded with specific meanings by their creators, but these meanings are not passively received by the audience. Instead, individuals *decode* these messages in ways that are influenced by their own social and cultural contexts. This decoding process can result in various interpretations: dominant, negotiated or oppositional, depending on the viewer's identity, experiences and positionality. This is similar to how *social remembering* highlights the active and dynamic way in which individuals engage with memory, continually reshaping it through interaction with cultural tools.

For instance, national identity can play a role in how young people engage with commemorative events, such as the First World War centenary. However, my research suggests that the interpretation of these events is far from uniform. Young people from different ethnic backgrounds, for example, may interpret the significance of national commemorations differently, depending on how they see their own community's place within that history. This decoding process allows young people to either embrace or critically engage with dominant historical narratives, thus shaping their own identities in the process.

The role of gender remains important, not as a fixed category but as a socially constructed and culturally mediated pattern of identification. Young people may engage with history in ways shaped by how gender is represented, expected or performed within their communities and broader society.

My desire was to approach identities in a way that implicated cultures and communities while being alert to a range of contexts and complexity. Baumann (1996) offers one way of highlighting complexity by being alert to the interplay between dominant discourses, which confer identities in fixed, inert ways, and demotic discourses that exist at a local level. Baumann's study recognised the continued presence of dominant discourses within the contestations of the Southall community but highlighted the way it was mediated by demotic discourse that is language 'of the people' (p. 10), reflecting local usages.

Another important consideration is highlighting the intersectionality at play in processes of identity formation. McCall (2005) has outlined the categorical complexity at stake with intersectionality. McCall defines intersectionality as 'the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations' (p. 1771); fundamentally, it creates a demand for complexity.

Finally, Epstein (2009) and Wertsch (2002) provide useful frameworks for understanding how identity shapes historical understanding, and my research contributes by emphasising how these dynamics play out specifically outside formal educational settings.

Rethinking historical knowledge beyond the classroom

A central contribution of this research is its focus on how historical consciousness develops outside the classroom, aligning with the journal's special theme. I foreground the role of public and informal encounters, particularly during the First World War centenary, in shaping young people's historical understanding. Earlier sections have explored how these engagements intersect with identity, memory and positionality through the work of Zanazanian, Peck and Hall. I now turn to a different but related concern: how historical knowledge is conceptualised and valued, particularly in the tension

between disciplinary, classroom-based approaches and more vernacular or community-based forms of history-making. This discussion raises important questions about the role and value of popular history in shaping young people's historical consciousness.

Curriculum debates in English history education have often accentuated a disciplinary approach to history, not merely as a body of knowledge but as a form of critical inquiry, and as a pragmatic response to the government's promotion of narrow, traditional national narratives (Smith, 2017). However, in the process we may have reified and narrowed the scope of historical knowledge and closed off productive avenues of both research and pedagogy. The tension between disciplinary knowledge and more popular forms of historical understanding raises important questions regarding the hierarchies of knowledge, particularly in the classroom context.

Educators such as Counsell (2011) view disciplinary history as a corrective to what they see as 'rawer forms of collective memory' (p. 201), while Samuel (1994) advocates a more inclusive approach that embraces community-based history for its ability to engage and empower students. However, not all forms of collective memory hold equal value (Wertsch, 1994), just as not all disciplinary histories are equally rigorous. This dual caution invites a more nuanced approach: by exploring the intersection of vernacular and disciplinary histories, I seek to understand how collective memory can offer critical insights into disciplinary history, and vice versa. Samuel's assertion that history should account not only for the record of the past, but also for the hidden forces shaping contemporary understandings (1998), informs this study's aim to explore how young people interact with history outside formal educational settings. In questioning Rüsen's dialectical model of historical consciousness, which may privilege certain forms of knowledge, my research instead adopts a more fluid perspective, reflecting Winter's (2006) view that memory and history often overlap in complex ways. By developing rich accounts of young people's lived experiences with history beyond the classroom, this study contributes to ongoing debates surrounding the purposes of history, its relationship to identity and the diverse ways in which historical knowledge is constructed and valued. The research thus aims to articulate the voices of young people, whose perspectives are often overlooked in discussions of curriculum and pedagogy, and to examine how these voices mediate between academic, school and vernacular histories.

Research design

This study draws on insights from history, anthropology and sociology to explore social remembering. Rather than treating memory as fixed or static, this approach emphasises how time, place and relational settings shape historical understanding.

The project adopts a sociocultural framework, assuming that identity is constructed through complex and context-specific interactions. A key aim is to move beyond static categories such as class, gender, race/ethnicity and nation, which can constrain agency. Instead, I approach identity as fluid and intersectional, shaped by dominant and local discourses over time (Baumann, 1996; McCall, 2005).

The study began with a large-scale Phase 1 quiz, completed by over 600 students, exploring how young people understood the First World War, and a survey of what sources informed their knowledge and the extent of their social remembering. One open-ended question invited students to describe what the First World War meant to them personally, even if they believed it to be unimportant. Responses to this item were particularly revealing of identity-related meaning-making.

Phase 1 helped to inform the selection of cases for Phase 2, highlighting the importance of students' sense of identity and membership of 'we-groups' in shaping their engagement with social memory. It also guided the focus towards students with either strong identification with or resistance to history, and it revealed that family and community settings were critical to early historical engagement outside school. Students were invited to self-describe key identity categories such as ethnicity and gender in the survey, and these self-reported identities were used to ensure a representative and diverse sample for Phase 2. Table 1 summarises the overall design and chronology of the study across both phases.

Phase 2 then focused on autoethnographic case studies with 12 students across four schools. Participants were invited to document their lived experiences through writing, drawing and discussion, capturing the cultural tools they used to construct historical meaning. Initially adopting an intra-categorical approach, which centres individual experiences while situating them within broader social contexts (McCall, 2005), the research later moved towards inter-categorical complexity, highlighting how identities are made and remade across multiple settings. Together with the students I

sought to construct a range of ethnographic portraits that emphasised the temporal and spatial dynamics of identity formation, particularly in relation to national memory and belonging.

Throughout, young people acted as co-researchers, contributing rich personal narratives that captured the complexity of their engagements with history outside the classroom. The multigroup data from Phase 1 provided a comparative frame, foregrounding how historical consciousness is shaped by social location and cultural context.

The Phase 2 design was intentionally iterative and responsive to participant contributions. While rooted in strong theoretical commitments, it remained flexible, evolving through engagement with the young people themselves. At the same time, the core research question – *how are young people's historical understandings constructed outside the classroom?* – served as an anchor throughout.

Ethical approval was granted by the university's Central Ethics Committee, and all research followed the British Educational Research Association's ethical guidelines. All student names are pseudonyms, and identity descriptors reflect students' self-identifications from the Phase 1 survey.

Table 1. Study chronology, methods and outcomes

	Methods	Outcomes
Piloting May 2014 Phase 1	Testing the quiz/survey in class with the teacher's collaboration.	Redesigned language and format; established time demands.
Piloting June 2014 Phase 2	School visits to explain the research and test its viability.	Positive engagement and useful collaborative guidelines.
Phase 1 June 2014–Sept 2014	Classroom-administered quiz: mainly focused on the First World War.	Provided a comparative framework and helped identify potential participants (137 opted into Phase 2; 12 selected).
RQ1: What is the extent and nature of children's remembering?	RQ2: Classroom PowerPoint quiz on the First World War (completed by 622 students).	
RQ2: What (understandings) do children draw from the First World War?	RQ1 & RQ3: Online survey (342 respondents) focusing on children's remembering.	
RQ3: Where are these understandings drawn from?		
Phase 2 Sept 2014–March 2015	Case study: Autoethnography in four in-school sessions, combining discussion of personal writing/portraits with Phase 1 data.	Sessions evolved with group needs, enabling thematic exploration and effective support.
RQ4: How are these understandings constructed outside the classroom?		
Phase 2 March 2015–17 August 2015	Home visits for in-depth exploration of all research questions.	Composite graphic portraits were refined through family interviews; five home visits completed.
Home visits.		

Ethnographic approach and phase 2

Participants and settings

Phase 2 involved working closely with 12 young people aged between 12 and 17 from diverse backgrounds, across four schools based in four locations in the South of England. Students were asked to create autoethnographies and participate in home visits to explore how their social remembering and historical consciousness were formed. Two of the schools were based in urban areas, while two

were located in more rural settings. In this study, I use the term autoethnography to refer to a method through which participants reflect on their own lived experiences in relation to wider cultural, historical and social narratives (Ellis et al., 2010). This approach encourages reflexivity and acknowledges that both participants and researchers are situated within the histories and identities they explore.

Details of the sample for Phase 2 are given in Table 2. I wanted a sample, informed by Phase 1, that was representative not only in terms of 'gender' but also in terms of ethnic background. I focused on the extreme ends of historical engagement, those with a strong attachment to the subject and those perceived as disengaged. Some participants described themselves as 'history geeks', while 'history refuseniks' was a term used by teachers. Although no student used this label, the contrast helped to illustrate the different ways the young people related to history. In addition, given the ethnographic element, which depended specifically on writing, I wanted young people to be prepared to develop their answers. The students from school B did not engage with any writing; while still part of my analysis, they do not form part of the ethnographic portraits. Given that this was the only group with participants from minoritised backgrounds, I was keen not to lose this perspective, so I contacted a fifth school in Oxford city and worked with Younis, a 16-year-old of Bangladeshi heritage.

Table 2. Sampling information

School A	School B	School C	School D
A co-educational academy in a market town near Oxford.	An inner-city co-ed school in London with a higher-than-average free school meals and population from minority backgrounds.*	A state-run co-ed 6th form college in a large market town in South East England.	A co-ed comprehensive secondary school in a small rural village in South East England.
The group consisted of Robert: 17-year-old, who described himself initially as black. Scarlett: 17-year-old, white. Amelia: 17-year-old, white.	The group consisted of Thierry: 12-year-old, black, fostered. Abdullah: 12-year-old, Asian (Bangladeshi origin). Sophie: 12-year-old, Black British Caribbean. Yvonne: 12-year-old, Black British Caribbean.	The group consisted of Mark: 16-year-old, white. Ivy: 17-year-old, white.	The group consisted of: Tom: 14-year-old, white. Bess: 14-year-old, white. Roisin: 14-year-old, white.**

Notes: * I have used the ways participants described their own identity in the Phase 1 survey or as part of Phase 2; ** Roisin withdrew from the project after second visit as her family moved.

Research design and autoethnography

I planned four in-school sessions and in some cases a 'home' visit; this was largely dependent on consent. Initially the sessions were led and structured by me, but as the work and relationships developed, I was able to tailor the sessions to the students' ideas and interests.

In-school sessions

Session 1 introduced students to ethnographic methods using Galman's (2007) graphic novel and guided them in writing personal portraits related to the themes of the research. The goal was to help them see their interactions with history in the context of their broader lives. As a former secondary school history teacher in England, and someone of mixed-race heritage shaped by personal and familial entanglements with national memory culture, I brought my own historical consciousness into the research encounter. I shared my own written autoethnographic reflections, a personal learning journey exploring memory, place, race and identity, as a way of modelling the kind of reflective engagement the research invited. I drew on my own experiences as a mixed-heritage individual, raised across multiple cultural contexts, and

later as a history teacher and researcher. By making aspects of my own identity and positionality visible, I aimed to build trust and demonstrate that personal and emotional responses to history are legitimate forms of inquiry.

Session 2 focused on reviewing data from Phase 1 and encouraging students to reflect on their relationship with history. The students discussed their personal connections to historical events such as the First World War and explored cultural tools (e.g., films and family stories) that shaped their understanding.

Sessions 3 and 4 involved analysing cultural representations of history, such as commemorative events or media, and encouraged students to articulate their thoughts on how these events influenced their historical consciousness.

Home visits

Home visits were important for deepening the understanding of how history was discussed and remembered within the family setting.

Using graphical representations, where I had created a composite portrait (see Figure 2) of the cultural tools and meaning-making identified through their writing, school sessions and dialogue, I engaged students and their families in discussions of their historical memories and practices. This phase provided rich insights into how identity, place and familial narratives shape young people's engagement with history.

Figure 2. Portrait of Ivy



The family context added another dimension to the data, particularly in understanding how personal and collective memories intersect. Of the sample provided in Table 2, Scarlett, Amelia, Mark, Ivy, Bess and Younis were visited at home, and they provide the substantive base of my findings. The home visit also provided ecological validity (Neuman, 2003) from the young person and their family, through their review of the composite portrait that I had created. On the left-hand side of the composite portraits are the tools on which the young person was drawing on in relation to their meaning-making, and on the right-hand side are the meanings that they constructed. In Figure 2, Ivy draws on a range of cultural tools, including family and films, as part of her meaning-making. In her original piece of ethnographic writing, she embraced the idea of a fluid identity, writing: 'I think that identity is always ambiguous and

subjective.’ She also recognised the influence of relational and contextual factors, noting: ‘My identity has been shaped definitely by the people around me.’ I have tried to reflect this in the composite portrait that I shared with Ivy and her family, using the butterfly.

Throughout this process, I tried to maintain a collaborative and flexible approach, though the scope of collaboration was moderated by key factors. Ethically, it was important to be transparent about the research aims, which were set by me rather than the young people. As a former teacher, I was also conscious of providing enough scaffolding to support participants in shaping their portraits. To do this, I shared examples of my own personal historical reflections and memory work, not to prescribe a format but to offer a starting point they could adapt or challenge. This act of modelling functioned both pedagogically, by legitimising reflective and emotional engagement with the past, and relationally, by building trust in the co-construction of knowledge. The resulting autoethnographic process enabled young people to actively shape the research and reflect on their evolving historical consciousness, as evidenced by the variety of responses they produced.

My understanding of ethnographic portraits, particularly drawing on the work of [Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis \(1997\)](#), significantly shaped both the design and the execution of this study. This approach to portraits highlights the importance of humanising research and representing the complexity of individuals’ lived experiences. While Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis’s work has conceptual resonance, I draw on it here for methodological purposes – specifically, to guide how I engaged participants and shaped the form of their accounts. I was motivated by the dual goals of giving a voice to young people and ensuring that their stories emerged authentically, while also creating representations that could resonate beyond academic circles. I chose portraits because they allowed participants the space to express themselves in ways that reflected the fluidity of their experiences, while avoiding overly empirical or rigid methods.

Within the scope of this article, rather than sharing full portraits, I will discuss the findings using vignettes. [Van Maanen \(1988\)](#) describes vignettes as ‘personalised accounts of fleeting moments of fieldwork in dramatic form’ (p. 136). The opening vignette above alerted the reader to my background and interests, illustrating where the impetus for this work came from and how this led to the formulation of my research questions. Furthermore, the use of the vignette deliberately draws attention to my desire to use a style of writing that helps to not only draw attention to context but also allow an exploration of young people’s perceptions, beliefs and meanings in those specific contexts.

Ethically, working with young participants required careful attention to consent, safeguarding and ensuring that they had the ability to withdraw at any time. I sought informed consent from both the students and their parents, and I used pseudonyms and maintained transparency regarding the research aims to protect their privacy. This approach not only ensured ethical rigour but also encouraged genuine collaboration, helping participants feel safe and involved in the research process. Sharing my own writing with participants and inviting their feedback further supported this ethos. This act not only modelled the kind of reflective engagement I was asking of them but also positioned them, however partially, as co-researchers in the process.

Findings

I cannot, within the scope of this article, outline the detailed ‘thick descriptions’ that formed the central findings chapters of my thesis. Here I offer a synthetic analysis that draws on multiple participants in Phase 2 to answer research question 4 (RQ4): *how are these understandings constructed outside the classroom?* Before turning to RQ4, it is important to briefly explain what Phase 2 suggested about where these understandings are drawn from. These include family conversations, religious frameworks, media and commemorative practices. Students described drawing on online content, intergenerational stories and community perspectives – resources that were often emotionally resonant and culturally situated. This context is essential for understanding *how* these understandings are constructed: through active processes of interpretation shaped by identity, belonging and access to different historical narratives.

RQ4: how are these understandings constructed outside the classroom?

Young people construct historical understandings through evolving engagements shaped by identity, social context and personal experience. These engagements can lead to rejection, when history feels

disconnected, or to a critical embrace, where the past becomes a tool for navigating self and society. In this sense, history plays a critical role in identity formation, as a tool with which individuals navigate their sense of self in relation to broader societal structures.

Identity and historical consciousness

Historical consciousness is not a static concept; rather, it is shaped and reshaped by the various social and cultural interactions that young people experience throughout their lives. Drawing on Hall's (1988, 2018, 2019, 2021) broader work, which views ethnicity and identity as historically and culturally constructed, we see that young people do not passively receive historical narratives but rather actively negotiate their identities through their engagement with history. In this sense, history becomes a dynamic space in which personal and collective identities are continually reimagined and reaffirmed.

Vignette of Mark

Mark, a 17-year-old student from a rural village in England, has always been deeply interested in history. His passion for the subject was fostered early on by family involvement in national commemorations such as Remembrance Sunday and by the rich local traditions of his community. Growing up in a house where Union Flags were a constant visual presence, Mark's sense of national identity was strong and rooted in the pride of his family's British and Scottish heritage. His connection to historical events, particularly those related to British military history, became a source of personal pride and a way for him to understand the world.

Mark's participation in Remembrance Sunday ceremonies, both as a member of the Air Cadets and alongside his family, further reinforced his bond with national history. He spoke with reverence about the moment of silence observed at 11 am, noting that it brought a sense of unity and national pride: 'I contemplated that about 60 million people at that minute stopped whatever they were doing and for a whole two minutes a nation of people remembered what their relatives went through.' For Mark, not only were these moments acts of commemoration; they were also a way of feeling connected to something larger than himself: a collective historical consciousness tied to British identity and pride.

However, despite his pride in national remembrance, Mark maintained a critical perspective on war. He recognised the moral ambiguity of the conflict and the futility of the soldiers' sacrifices, saying, 'I don't feel necessarily proud of the First World War or any war unless the causes are just.'

Mark's reflections on the war, as seen in Figure 3, highlight the complexity of his engagement with history: while he embraced the sense of unity and pride in national commemoration, he also questioned the broader consequences of war and the narratives that glorify it.

Mark's interactions with history were influenced by his strong attachment to his national and local identity, situated within a predominantly white, rural English village. His sense of place, coupled with his family's engagement in national commemorations such as Remembrance Day, gave him confidence in exploring history, reinforcing his attachment to Britishness and a global perspective on wars. Mark's engagement with history was deeply intertwined with his identity as a British citizen, reflecting how personal and national narratives often align to create a cohesive historical consciousness.

Figure 3. Mark portrait



Vignette of Younis

During one of our conversations, Younis shared his thoughts on the concept of the Ummah, comparing it to a body: 'If there is a pain in one part of the body, the brain registers it – you feel the pain. And that is what we are trying to imply ... the Muslim Ummah is united.' His perspective on history was influenced by this global connection, as he explained how historical events such as the First World War impacted the Middle East and shaped the modern political landscape. Younis believed that the division of the Ottoman Empire by Western powers, which followed the war, was a significant moment in Muslim history, one that continues to reverberate today.

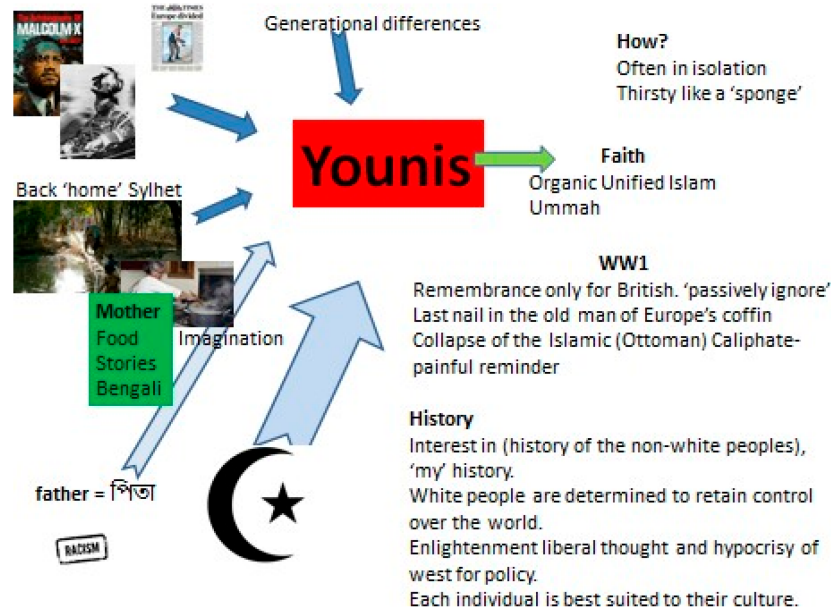
He passionately discussed how the past, particularly the history of the Middle East, influenced the current migrant crisis, remarking that 'the Middle East map is drawn in Europe', and that the effects of colonialism and war are still being felt in the region.

We see in Figure 4 that Younis’s historical consciousness was shaped by his Muslim identity and his connection to the global Ummah, which offered him a transnational lens through which to interpret the past. His understanding of history extended beyond national narratives, drawing instead on both local religious practices and a critical awareness of global injustices, particularly in relation to colonialism and the Middle East. His engagement exemplifies how religious and cultural identities, informed by global belonging, can profoundly shape how young people make sense of historical events.

Both Mark and Younis, though situated in distinct cultural and social contexts, demonstrate the dynamic ways in which identity mediates historical consciousness. Mark’s national pride was tempered by moral questioning, while Younis used history as a way to critique ongoing geopolitical injustices. Each, in their own way, navigated between inherited narratives and critical reflection, revealing how history can serve as a resource for self-positioning in both national and global frames.

These two cases illustrate how young people draw on distinct identity frameworks and ‘we communities’ to engage critically with history, a pattern echoed in other participants’ accounts, albeit in different forms.

Figure 4. Younis portrait



Positioning the self: nation, gender and ethnicity in historical consciousness

Vignette of Scarlett

Scarlett's engagement with history was deeply intertwined with both her personal identity and her family's sense of duty towards remembrance. Raised in a rural English village, Scarlett's connection to the past was reinforced by family traditions, particularly regarding Remembrance Sunday. 'Both my parents take a similar line with it. Obviously, we've lost family, and my view that everybody has lost family definitely came from them', she explained, referencing her family's participation in national remembrance events. For Scarlett, history was not just about facts – it was a way of maintaining continuity between the past and the present.

One moment that particularly shaped her understanding of history, captured in Figure 5, was a visit to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Westminster with her mother. 'It was an exemplar moment ... I became aware that the war had a direct impact on my family history.' This personal connection made her more determined to honour the past, but her understanding of history extended beyond remembrance.

Scarlett's engagement with history was not merely about honouring the past; she also brought a critical lens shaped by her awareness of how gender roles operate within family and cultural settings. Conversations with her grandparents exposed her to conventional expectations, such as the idea that household responsibilities were primarily 'a woman's job', which she began to question. Rather than simply rejecting these views, Scarlett's reflection prompted a deeper exploration of how gender has been constructed and contested historically. Her interest in the suffrage movement, particularly the changing roles of women during and after the First World War, reflected not a binary understanding of gender, but a broader concern with social justice, equity and the ways in which historical narratives can both reflect and challenge societal norms.

Figure 5. Scarlett portrait



Vignette of Ivy

Ivy's connection to history was shaped by the personal stories shared within her family, particularly her grandfather's experience during the Second World War. Although she didn't feel a direct connection to the First World War, Ivy was fascinated by the personal stories of individuals affected by historical events. 'My granddad was evacuated during the war', she said, recounting the stories that he shared with her. These family discussions offered Ivy a personal window into history, helping her to understand the emotional and human aspects of conflict.

While Ivy didn't have a strong familial link to the First World War, her understanding of history was heavily influenced by the films and books that she consumed. One film in particular, *Goodnight Mister Tom*, had a profound impact on her. 'That film gave me a child's view of what evacuation must have been like', she explained. The emotional connection that she felt through these stories, both from her family and from popular media, helped her to see history not as distant and abstract, but as something deeply personal and relatable.

Ivy's engagement with history focused on the human side of events, the stories of individuals rather than national narratives or grand historical moments (see Figure 2). Her empathy and her interest in the personal dimensions of history illustrate how young people construct their understanding of the past through emotional connections and family narratives; this emphasises the importance of personal experience in shaping historical consciousness.

The way young people position and are positioned with regard to identity is particularly significant in shaping their historical understanding outside the classroom. Students' identities, while fluid and context-dependent, mediated emotional connection, critical distance and patterns of historical interpretation. National identity, in particular, can provide a powerful framework for historical engagement. Mark's case illustrates how ideas of national identity can powerfully shape historical understanding outside the classroom. His involvement in cadet groups and remembrance events aligned his personal identity with dominant national narratives, allowing him to interpret the First World War through a lens of pride and resilience.

Patterns of gendered identification also influenced how students made sense of history, but not in uniform or deterministic ways. Rather than treating gender as a fixed trait, I considered how

some students, particularly those positioned within normative expectations, navigated history through affective and relational modes of engagement. Scarlett, for example, combined a strong familial memory culture with critical engagement around gender roles, particularly through her interest in the suffrage movement. Ivy, meanwhile, like Younis, drew on intergenerational stories and emotional connections to historical fiction to construct a more intimate, human-centred understanding of the past. These examples suggest that gender, understood as a social position shaped by relationships and expectations, can inform how young people relate to history, but always in complex and context-specific ways. This resonates with Peck's (2022) finding that students' historical understandings are filtered through their own self-perceptions of ethnic, national and cultural identity – understandings that shift depending on context and cannot be reduced to fixed categories. Like Peck, I have sought to capture how participants named and negotiated their own positionalities rather than assigning identity labels externally.

This affective tendency contrasts with students such as Mark, whose engagement leaned towards structured, nationalistic forms of historical positioning. However, these patterns should not be read as strictly binary. Instead, they illustrate how gendered experiences and identifications may mediate different orientations towards historical meaning-making, depending on the social, familial and cultural contexts in which students are situated. As Zanazanian (2025) reminds us, these are not fixed dispositions, but enactments of historical consciousness in particular moments.

Ethnicity, too, plays a critical role in shaping young people's relationship with history, particularly for those from minority backgrounds. For Abdullah, who was one of the School B students for whom I did not complete a home visit, history was experienced through a lens of exclusion. National commemorations felt disconnected from his Bangladeshi heritage, reinforcing a perception of history as 'white' and exclusive. This sense of exclusion was compounded by the absence of narratives that resonated with his personal and cultural identity. As a result, Abdullah became disengaged from history altogether, a site of resistance rather than connection. His experience underscores how ethnic identity can complicate the relationship with national history, especially when dominant historical narratives fail to acknowledge or include the diverse experiences of minority groups. This was also a factor in why Younis rejected the formal history offered to him at school but was very much engaged through his own reading of Marcus Garvey and Malcom X.

Family, community and the practice of social remembering

While the previous section explored how young people's historical consciousness is shaped through national, gendered and ethnic identifications, often shaped by dominant public narratives, this section turns to the more intimate and relational spaces of family and community. It is within these spaces that what I term social remembering takes shape: the active, ongoing and situated process through which young people engage with the past through shared stories, inherited emotions and cultural practices. These 'we communities' offer not only content but also interpretive frameworks, enabling young people to affirm, complicate or resist dominant historical narratives. Peck (2022) similarly highlights the dialogical nature of historical understanding, where young people construct meaning in conversation with family histories, cultural practices and collective memory. My findings echo this, showing that meaning-making is embedded in relationships and is often oriented towards questions of belonging, rather than disciplinary coherence. Here, historical consciousness is not a solitary cognitive act, but a socially mediated practice grounded in belonging, affect and everyday life. Family stories, traditions and community involvement in historical events are often the first points of contact that young people have with history, offering them a personal and emotional connection to the past. These settings allow history to be experienced in a relational way, where historical events are tied to family experiences and cultural practices – whether that is Younis's access to stories of Sylhet, embedded in his mother's stories and food, or Scarlett's experience of illness, which unexpectedly opened space for historical reflection and reconnection. In her account, history became both a companion and a bridge, supporting self-understanding and mending a strained relationship with her father. Though rarely foregrounded, illness can thus form part of the intimate terrain in which young people practise social remembering.

Mark's participation in family activities such as Remembrance Sunday ceremonies reinforced his sense of belonging to the national narrative of British history. His family's engagement with these events, like Scarlett's, provided a direct link to the historical narratives celebrated in public spaces, further solidifying their understanding of British national history. My findings echo the *Canadians and Their Pasts* conclusion that 'interest in family history often seemed to be an avenue into the community, a

point of entry and a means of access rather than a mirror or a dead end' (Conrad et al., 2019, p. 157). These personal experiences were critical in shaping their historical consciousness, fostering a sense of belonging by aligning family memory with national narratives, an alignment not equally available to all students.

This sense of alignment between family memory and national narratives was not shared by all students. For those from minority ethnic backgrounds, family and community settings often served as spaces in which alternative historical narratives were constructed. Younis, for example, drew heavily on his family's teachings and his religious community's narratives to construct his understanding of history. His engagement with historical events was not shaped solely by the national narratives taught in school, but also by his family's broader religious and cultural connections. This highlights the role of non-Western perspectives in shaping historical understanding outside formal education.

For Abdullah, his community played a vital role in maintaining his sense of identity in the face of exclusion from mainstream historical narratives. His experiences at home and within his local community allowed him to connect with cultural practices and historical stories that were more reflective of his ethnic background. However, the lack of representation in public commemorations, such as national remembrance events, or indeed school history left him feeling marginalised. This disconnect between his community's history and the national narrative highlights the challenges faced by minority students in engaging with this history in a meaningful way.

Media also play an increasingly important role in shaping historical understanding outside the classroom. Young people encounter historical narratives through television, films, online platforms, games and social media, where they are exposed to a range of perspectives that may challenge or reinforce the historical narratives taught in school. During my home visit, Mark's father noted the absence of *Call of Duty* in Mark's portrait, and Mark agreed this was a tool he used. In some cases, media can serve as a critical tool for young people to engage with history in more diverse and more inclusive ways, offering them alternative narratives that better reflect their experiences and identities.

The critical importance of historical engagement outside the classroom

The findings from this research highlight that young people's engagement with history outside the classroom is not merely supplementary to formal learning but plays a crucial role in shaping their historical consciousness and identity formation. Family, community and media serve as critical arenas in which historical narratives are encountered, reinterpreted and integrated into young people's evolving sense of self.

In the home, family stories often serve as an initial point of contact with history. These stories may revolve around ancestors' involvement in historical events, local traditions or even the ways in which family members interpret national or global histories. These personal settings allow young people to access history in deeply relational ways, where historical events are intertwined with family experiences, thus enhancing the emotional resonance of historical understanding. As Anna Clark (2016) notes, family memory serves as a powerful vehicle for transmitting historical narratives across generations. These intergenerational stories not only reinforce personal and collective connections to historical events but also offer a means of challenging or supplementing dominant historical narratives. This was directly significant for Mark, whose family's participation in Remembrance Day ceremonies deepened his connection to national history, and indirectly for Younis, whose family narratives helped to shape his understanding of global Muslim identity.

For students from minority ethnic backgrounds, family and community narratives often serve as a counterbalance to the exclusion that they experience in public historical commemorations. Younis, for example, derived much of his historical understanding from his religious community and the broader concept of the Ummah. His family's teachings provided him with a non-Western perspective on historical events, which shows how global and religious identities can shape historical consciousness outside formal schooling.

Community settings also provide powerful spaces for constructing historical narratives. In communities in which collective memory is actively preserved – through rituals, commemorations or local symbols, history becomes part of everyday life. For Abdullah, whose community's stories were vital in maintaining his sense of identity, the absence of representation in national commemorations left him

feeling marginalised. This illustrates how both the presence and the absence of historical representation in public spaces can influence young people's engagement with history.

Media play an equally fundamental role in shaping historical understanding outside the classroom. Through films, documentaries and online content, young people encounter historical narratives that either complement or contradict the versions taught in school. In some cases, media provide alternative perspectives, allowing young people to critically engage with history and explore narratives that reflect their own ethnic or cultural backgrounds. But in most cases, students decoded these representations dialogically in their 'we' communities.

The intersection of these external influences, family, community and media creates a rich tapestry of historical engagement upon which young people draw to construct their identities. However, these engagements are not neutral; rather, they are mediated by power dynamics within each setting. Family narratives may reinforce dominant national histories, while community practices can either support or challenge them. Media can also reflect hegemonic accounts but provide a space for marginalised voices to present alternative stories. It is crucial that educators and policymakers recognise the diverse ways in which young people engage with history outside the classroom.

To foster a more inclusive and more dynamic form of historical consciousness, history education must be flexible enough to incorporate the multiple and often conflicting narratives that students encounter. McCall's (2005) concept of intersectionality is particularly useful here, as it highlights how categories such as race, gender and nationality interact to create unique challenges and opportunities for engaging with history. By recognising these complexities, educators can better understand how young people construct their historical consciousness, and how to support them in the process.

This echoes Peck's (2022) emphasis on the dialogical construction of historical understanding, where students' perceptions of history are shaped not only by the narratives they encounter, but also by how they position themselves in relation to race, ethnicity and national identity. Similarly, Zanazanian (2025) argues that historical consciousness should be understood not as a static cognitive state, but as an enacted, reflexive life practice, emerging in the 'now moment' through which individuals navigate identity, memory and moral reasoning. My findings reflect both of these perspectives: students drew on a range of community, familial and cultural resources to construct historical meaning – often doing so reflexively, questioning dominant narratives and situating themselves within or against them. These acts of social remembering were not simply about retrieving facts but about engaging with history as a way of orienting themselves politically, emotionally and culturally in the world.

This study also returns to broader epistemological questions regarding the study of history in relation to identity and agency in young people. I have shown that young people make sense of the world around them in complex ways, both inside and outside the classroom, with social remembering a key aspect of this process. It is critically important for teachers to recognise the knowledge that students derive from these varied contexts and to appreciate its value. Understanding how this knowledge is constructed will better equip teachers to engage with it effectively. Teachers must recognise that a key starting point for planning students' learning is not only their prior understanding, but also their identities and desires. This involves a critical exploration of the knowledge that they value, and the sources from which it emerges. In this context, social remembering, such as through public commemorations, provides opportunities for these explorations and has the potential to give young people access to broader debates on history, society and the values that underpin them.

Samuel (1998) would certainly advocate embracing more popular forms of history, for their potential to both engage young people and give them access to meaningful and powerful cultural tools. 'A history that was alert to its constituency would need to address not only the record of the past but also the hidden forces shaping contemporary understandings of it, the imaginative complexes in and through which it is perceived' (p. 222). In conclusion, young people's historical consciousness is actively constructed through family, community and media – spaces where memory and identity intersect. These engagements are not neutral; they reflect ongoing negotiations with power, representation and belonging.

Education must recognise these informal histories not as peripheral, but as central to how students make sense of the past and of themselves. Building on this, history education should engage more deliberately with the lived, situated ways in which students encounter the past. As Peck (2022) argues, historical understanding is inherently dialogical, shaped through interaction with others and informed by students' sense of identity, place and belonging. Zanazanian (2025) reinforces this with his notion of historical consciousness as a reflexive life practice enacted in real time. For educators, the implication

is clear: teaching history cannot begin and end with disciplinary content. It must engage with the personal, cultural and affective dimensions of how students already encounter the past. Teachers can create space for students to surface these engagements by exploring family narratives, analysing media representations or reflecting on community memory practices as valid sources of historical knowledge. In doing so, they not only expand what counts as historical learning but also help students develop the reflexivity and interpretive awareness necessary to navigate a plural, contested historical landscape.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The author declares that research ethics approval for this article was provided by the Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) in accordance with the University's ethical procedures for research involving human participants. The author conducted the research reported in this article in accordance with the ethical standards of BERA.

Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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