

EDITORIAL

Negotiating the nation: Young people, national narratives and history education

Jocelyn Létourneau
Université Laval, Quebec City

Arthur Chapman*
UCL Institute of Education

As we noted in 2015, in a blog post launching the call for papers for this special feature in the *London Review of Education*, ‘anxieties about national identity and its strengthening and preservation are common in countries around the world, and it is, of course, entirely natural that this should be so in times of great change, challenge and uncertainty’ (Létourneau and Chapman, 2015). These anxieties set the context for many discussions about history education, identity and young people’s knowledge in nations around the world (Taylor and Guyver, 2011). They are often expressed in a persistent perception, common around the world, that young people are ignorant of their country’s past, a perception that is often based on very weak or impressionistic evidence (e.g. Ball, 2013) and that is often repeated, generation after generation (Wineburg, 2004).

Over the last decade and more, scholars in a number of places around the world – including one of the editors of this special feature (Létourneau, 2014) and a research team at the UCL Institute of Education (Foster *et al.*, 2008) – have set about posing *positive* questions concerning young people’s knowledge and understanding of the past. The work of James Wertsch has been both groundbreaking and influential in providing conceptual tools for many researchers in this field – in particular, through the concept of ‘schematic narrative templates’ (Wertsch, 2002; 2008: 141–4). Research on these issues has aimed to understand the ways in which young people *do* think about and know and understand history, and the ways in which they *do* structure and organize this knowledge and understanding, and not simply to identify deficits in young people’s knowledge of isolated facts. These were the issues that we set out to explore through this special feature by focusing on the multiple sources of young people’s historical knowledge, on young people as active builders of historical sense rather than passive assimilators of materials presented to them, and on the relationships between young people, schools, identity and national, intranational, international and supranational contexts around the world.

As we anticipated in our call for abstracts, the papers that we publish in this special feature – which draw on evidence about young people’s thinking collected in Belgium, Canada, Israel, New Zealand, South Africa, Sweden, Uganda and the United States – suggest that young people often know and understand a good deal about the past and that much of this knowledge is structured in a national frame of reference. The common ground in these research projects

* Corresponding author - email: arthur.chapman@ucl.ac.uk

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is that, in contrast to the tightly structured and pre-coded way in which researchers often approach the question of what young people do/do not know about the past, these projects aim to give them the opportunity to shape how they structure and report their historical knowing. Overall, this feature confirms the need for scholars to address the question of history education in the context of what could be called a ‘learning eco-system’, a concept that recognizes the fact that young people’s historical consciousness develops in a wider social environment in which the history classroom is only one source from which they develop their wider sense/s of history alongside other cultural sources that shape the stock of ‘narrative templates’, representations and ‘mythhistories’ (Létourneau, 2004) that help shape students’ thinking about the past. It is necessary to understand such eco-systems in order to understand the ways in which students will make sense of what they are taught, which is, of course, a precondition for teaching that aims to develop and extend what young people know (Donovan and Bransford, 2005).

We are grateful to the contributors for their papers which, we feel, succeed in taking our knowledge forward in this important field of international research in history education and memory studies. In addition to papers submitted in response to our call, this special feature also includes a review article that explores contemporary trends in history textbook research of relevance to our themes. We are grateful to Maria Grever and Tina van der Vlies for accepting our invitation to undertake this review. Finally, we would like to express our deepest thanks to James Wertsch for reading the research papers in this special feature for us and for sharing his insights on their significance and their implications for the field.

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Articles published in the 'Negotiating the nation' feature

This is the editorial for a special feature called 'Negotiating the nation: Young people, national narratives and history education'.

The articles in the feature are as follows:

- Angier, K. (2017) 'In search of historical consciousness: An investigation into young South Africans' knowledge and understanding of "their" national histories'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (2).
- Dawes Duraisingh, E. (2017) 'Making narrative connections? Exploring how late teens relate their own narratives to the historically significant past'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (2).
- Goldberg, T. (2017) 'The useful past in negotiation: Adolescents' use of history in negotiation of inter-group conflict'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (2).
- Grever, M. and Van der Vlies, T. (2017) 'Why national narratives are perpetuated: A literature review on new insights from history textbook research'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (2).
- Holmberg, U. (2017) "'I was born in the reign ...": Historical orientation in Ugandan students' national narratives'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (2).
- Létourneau, J. and Chapman, A. (2017) 'Editorial – Negotiating the nation: Young people, national narratives and history education'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (2).
- Lévesque, S. (2017) 'History as a "GPS": On the uses of historical narrative for French Canadian students' life orientation and identity'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (2).
- Olofsson, H., Samuelsson, J., Stolare, M. and Wendell, J. (2017) 'The Swedes and their history'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (2).
- Sheehan, M. and Davison, M. (2017) "'We need to remember they died for us": How young people in New Zealand make meaning of war remembrance and commemoration of the First World War'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (2).
- Van Havere, T., Wils, K., Depaepe, F., Verschaffel, L. and Van Nieuwenhuyse, K. (2017) 'Flemish students' historical reference knowledge and narratives of the Belgian national past at the end of secondary education'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (2).
- Wertsch, J.V. (2017) 'Foreword – Negotiating the nation: Young people, national narratives and history education'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (2).