

**“But it wasn’t like that”: The impact of visits to community-based museums on young people’s understanding of the commemorated past in a divided society**

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## **Introduction**

Teaching history in conflict-affected societies presents challenges as, almost invariably, how history is represented raises sensitivities by impinging on disputed cultural identities and attitudes to contemporary division (Goldberg & Sevenije, 2015). Whilst conflicts have unique characteristics, scholars seek common principles to take curriculum and pedagogic practices forward. Initially, researchers focused on curricula and the ways that the past is represented in textbooks. Subsequently, they have studied teachers, their practices, and, crucially, the impact of teaching and learning approaches on students. However, children and young people encounter representations of history not only in classrooms but in less formal aspects of their lives, be it via the media, or through families and communities. Research indicates that the influence of school history is important, but that informal learning, including museum visits, also shapes students' understanding of the past and its impact on the present (Barton & Levstik, 2004).

Gradually, our knowledge of how students in divided societies make sense of history is developing through direct study of student experiences. This paper builds on the work by examining the impact that visits to two community museums, each located on either side of Northern Ireland's community divide, had on two groups of 14-15-year-old students from different backgrounds.

In most societies, museums have prominent standing. Traditionally, at a national level they have frequently displayed a consensus position which acts as a site of collective belonging (Marcus et al., 2017). In conflict-affected contexts consensus is problematic, in that common narratives cannot easily be agreed. More recently, museum authorities have become conscious of the need to reflect diversity in society and consequently many have sought to represent a greater range of ethnic, religious, and gender perspectives (Simon, 2011; Trofanenko, 2014a). In societies emerging from conflict this development presents opportunities to promote new thinking and reconciliation but also raises dangers of airing partisan positions. Therefore, national and civic curators should acknowledge multiple contexts when facing "the delicate and

difficult question of just how to deal with the legacy of the past” (Reynolds & Blair, 2018, p.15). Sensitivities are less observed at local level where opposing groups often seek to commemorate those who have contributed as combatants or suffered as victims. Community museums are often sites of reification. These have the potential to raise emotional reactions, be that because they are sacrosanct to the hosts, or provocative to opponents. Thus, while post-conflict, national museums may have educational programs in tune with school curricula aimed at creating greater social cohesion, student visits to local sites are seen as controversial because they are deemed to expose students to ‘biased’ views on the past.

The study employs as its research question, *What impact do visits to community-based museums have on young people’s historical, political, and cultural understanding of the commemorated past in Northern Ireland?* It aims to gain greater understanding of how school students, prepared through a critical, disciplinary approach to history teaching, engage with emotive museum material, reflective of one community perspective; and how findings can inform pedagogical approaches and bring greater criticality and empathy to students’ experiences. Findings from the student visits are reported upon thematically and analyzed to determine how far students took a critical perspective, and to what extent thinking is constrained (or enabled) by emotional reactions emanating from community background. The emotive responses to testimony and artefacts, particularly in one museum, were striking, prompting ‘affective disruption’ (Zembylas, 2019) in one group but not the other. The paper concludes that students employing a critical mindset in community museums can reach new understandings by interacting positively with alternative perspectives, even when these are perceived by those from their own background as being emotively and selectively represented. However, when the perspective accords with their own background they are more likely to have existing views confirmed. In both circumstances the interaction between cognitive and affective learning is at play in shaping outcomes.

### **Teaching Critical History for the Common Good**

Bush and Saltarelli (2000) referred to “the two faces of education” in conflict situations; education can foment and perpetuate conflict when those in power use it to subjugate and discriminate against others, or it can challenge prejudice and discrimination, thus fostering understanding between warring groups. In the past, dominant national groups have used history to promote narratives which exalt their hegemony by emphasizing their people’s unique heritage and glorious achievements, frequently at the expense of others deemed to be inferior (Epstein & Peck, 2018). In recent decades, educators have advocated, from a constructivist perspective, that history teaching should, instead, contribute to peacebuilding by adopting an approach which Korostelena (2016) summarized simply as “critical history”. This term is broadly aligned with Bantolero and Schulze’s (2016, p. 21) assertion that in post-conflict societies history teaching should,

promote active, critical, inclusive, multiperspective, and democratic approaches that encourage young people’s historical understanding and critical thinking, helping them to deconstruct single truths and negative images of the Other and to critically confront and navigate divergent narratives of conflict.

Thus, by placing an emphasis on rudimentary disciplinary procedures, including the examination of historical evidence, students should scrutinize alternative histories from whatever quarter. Through understanding the provisional nature of historical knowledge, and grasping complexity, they can engage with narratives which see the past differently.

However, scholars also recognize that in divided societies which have seen religious, racial and ethnic tension, and violence, a criticality based entirely on cognitive reasoning is unlikely alone to penetrate the emotional web spun by deeply held, conflicting identities and the violent legacies from the past. The additional challenges thus faced have been conceptualized by several researchers in the term “difficult histor(y)ies” (Epstein & Peck, 2017; Goldberg, 2017; Gross & Terra, 2019; Miles, 2019). Gross and Terra (2018, p. 52) defined difficult history as periods of the past “that reverberate in the present and surface some fundamental disagreements over who we are and what values we hold”. The history has resonance with contemporary societal tensions, and challenges what students believe about themselves and their national

community. In the words of Miles (2019, p. 474) difficult history “implicates the learner” not just because its content is troubling but because of its power to disrupt and unsettle self-identity. Thus, if critical history as a teaching approach is to be effective it must accommodate the emotional dimension inherent in studying the difficult past.

Emotional affect is deemed important in how individuals react to the representation of difficult history (Epstein & Peck, 2018; Levy & Sheppard, 2018; Miles, 2019) and pursuing the impact of affect has led researchers to explore psychological explanations of why such history is problematic (Psaltis et al., 2017). Goldberg (2017) employed psychoanalytical and social psychological perspectives to understand how young people respond to accounts of traumatic events, and, importantly in the divided society of Israel, how in-group/out-group dynamics play out when students are presented with uncomfortable knowledge concerning the actions of their group, and other people. When affect and cognition interact, attention is drawn to the complexity, precariousness, and unpredictability of student responses to difficult histories (Goldberg, 2017; Levy & Sheppard, 2018; Sheppard et al., 2015). As Gross and Terra (2018) pointed out, context is all important. Particular events are not necessarily difficult for all students in the same way, nor do they remain difficult in the same way over time.

A key characteristic of difficult history, then, is its disruptive impact on “self and settled meanings” (Levy & Sheppard, 2018). Zembylas (2019) conceptualized the role of emotions in learning difficult history using the term “affective disruption”. Concentrating on the factors contributing to teacher resistance to promoting difficult conversations in classrooms in contested societies, he argued “that attention to emotion, rather than technicist pedagogy” is a key to enable teachers to confront themselves and help their students understand the emotional legacies of the past (Zembylas & Kambani, 2012, pp. 125-26). As teachers are products of divided societies (Milliken et al., 2020), by implication, their encounter with difficult history is a step toward their students undergoing similar experiences. When teaching difficult histories

in divided societies, there is the likelihood of “a sense of identification between those studying the history and those represented in history,” thus influencing moral responses to traumatic events (Zembylas, 2017, p. 2). When the sacrosanct positions of one’s own community are threatened this can result in “a wilful ignorance,” not a mere absence of knowledge but a “deeply epistemic resistance to know”. Zembylas argued that in schools resistance leads to an “emotional regime” which reinforces “identification with ‘our’ vulnerability and the disidentification with vulnerable others” (Zembylas, 2017, p. 7). He concluded that the challenge is “to turn discomfort into a productive learning experience”, conducive to encouraging learners to move outside their comfort zones and question cherished beliefs and assumptions. Such learning requires “affective disruption” which opens up individuals to acknowledging the vulnerability of others (Zembylas, 2019, pp. 196-199).

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Thus, uncomfortable knowledge can block learning by generating resistance but also, with appropriate pedagogy, presents opportunities for greater insight and new ways of thinking. Empirical studies by Goldberg (2017) and Miles (2019) both illustrated the resistance/opportunity paradigm, alongside the uncertainty of student response. First, Goldberg worked with Jewish Israeli students on a visit to Holocaust sites in Poland, accompanied by camp survivors who recounted stories of the traumas they suffered. Next, students were introduced to unfamiliar narratives investigating responsibility for the Nakba, the dispersal of Arabs from Palestine in 1948. Whereas the students emerged from the former boosted in confidence and moral self-esteem, the latter was a more disruptive encounter. Here, the in-group were associated with the “perpetrator”. For some this association led to hostility or disengagement but others, perhaps unsettled by “collective guilt”, demonstrated empathy for the Palestinian plight. Miles, in his study, used photographs to introduce white Canadian students to the exploitation of native peoples in residential homes in the colonial period. Again, the response varied. Some were obviously moved by what they had learned while others, though empathetic, avoided acknowledging issues of collective responsibility. Both authors called for

further research on the affective/ cognitive relationship in different contexts, and the impact of disruptive pedagogies when learning difficult histories.

### **Approaches to History teaching in Northern Ireland**

Educators in Northern Ireland are expected to address difficult history. Pioneers in the early years of the Troubles (the period of violence, 1968–98)<sup>i</sup> were convinced that

the selective use of the past by politicians and community leaders stoked communal division by drawing attention to emotive events which glorified past victories or fomented collective grievances; and that, in a separate school system, these restricted narratives were unlikely to be challenged (McCully, 2019). The disciplinary approach offered possibilities because it problematized dominant narratives and legitimized consideration of conflicting perspectives. Consequently, from 1991 the statutory Northern Ireland Curriculum: History (NICH) (ages 5–14) has had a critical history dimension, thus facilitating students to challenge the norms of a divided society (McCully, 2019, pp. 427–428). However, while comfortable in dealing with historical controversy in the past, teachers have been resistant to encouraging discussion of its implications in the emotive atmosphere of the present. Pedagogy and confidence are developing, and more students are being asked to explore the links between the historical past and present, and between the past and their individual sense of national identity; and there are curricular possibilities for teachers to address the Troubles, but they are not directly obliged to do so (McCully, 2019, pp. 427-431). The 14-16-year-olds in this study were following an elective GCSE external examination course, focused on the conflict.

Persuasive arguments are made for the efficacy of teaching critical history in conflict affected regions, though verification through empirical studies still lags behind advocacy and implementation. However, studies, from Israel and elsewhere, have indicated positive outcomes (see for example, Goldberg, 2013; Kolikant & Pollack, 2015). Working in NI, Barton and McCully (2010) focused on the competing influences of school and community learning on students' developing ideas about history and identity. They expected their students to follow Wertsch's (2002) appropriation/resistance model whereby they might either adhere to the dominant "official" history learned in school or reject it in favor of an alternative narrative template proffered in the community. Instead, more in line with Bakhtin's (1982) "internally persuasive discourse," students navigated amongst diverse evidence in a conscious attempt to refine and extend their historical understanding. Students neither accepted nor rejected either school or community history but drew from each to reach their own conclusions, even if most remained loyal to their original community allegiances (Barton & McCully, 2010). The researchers surmised that the critical intent of the NICH probably contributed to students' ability to question the prevailing stories of their communities but their ability to do so was also influenced by emotional ties linked to



background and identity (Barton & McCully, 2012). In this paper, the authors identify the two community museums, both emphasizing sensory experiences to generate empathetic support, as particularly useful sites to pursue the interrelationship between cognitive and affective learning.

### **Difficult Histories and Museums**

In most countries, museums are an established extension of the history curriculum. The positive impact that they can have on student learning is well documented (Trofanenko, 2014a; Stoddard, 2018). In response to criticisms that national museums, particularly, have traditionally reified the dominant position of cultural elites and neglected alternative voices, many within the museum movement have adopted what Trofanenko (2014a, p. 270) referred to as the “New Museology” to bring greater inclusivity and criticality to their work by ensuring that a range of perspectives are represented. Museum settings, along with other forms of site visits, are seen as especially valuable educational environments to encounter history, especially so when they inspire debate and controversy (Baron, 2012; Seixas & Clark, 2004). Not only do they promote desirable cognitive outcomes of history education, “the development of empathy, the ability to critically analyze sources and the capacity to ask questions and seek out alternative points of view,” (Marcus et al., 2012, p. 68) they also offer, through ambience and tactile, visual, and oral exhibits, “evocative experiences” which bring history alive (p.78). In short, what Zachrich et al. (2020) described as the “aura of authenticity” (p.244) enable museums to heighten the interplay of cognitive and affective learning beyond its impact in the classroom. Simon (2011) talked of “affect-thought coupling” or, alternatively, in Trofanenko’s words, “the relationship between what we know and what we feel” (Trofanenko, 2014b, p.25). Thus, museums, through challenging content and evocative use of environment, are identified as productive sites for affective disruption. However, strong emotional responses are “neither fixed nor prescribed” (Trofanenko, 2014b, p.24) and have unintended consequences, both positive and negative. The experiential dimension of exhibits associated with violent and traumatic events heightens difficulty where “personal and collective investments, identities, and histories work to both propel and restrict a learner’s inclination to want to know” (Segall, 2014, p.56). Clearly, museums are not neutral spaces. They have underlying messages shaped toward

their perceived audiences. Staff and teacher facilitation influences how these messages are interpreted by students, but individual students' background, their "agency, interests, and prior knowledge," are also crucial (Trofanenko, 2014b, p.35).

In recent years, scholars have pursued the study of educational engagement with difficult history in public settings relating to how students learn, how they understand the emotional dimension of their learning, and the pedagogy most appropriate to elicit critical scrutiny of museum displays. Keenan (2019) concluded that historical visits, when studying indigenous Canadians, were a fruitful way of helping students to understand the counter-stories of minority groups. The studies of Reich (2015; Reich et al., 2020), examining encounters with US Civil War heritage, confirmed affect as central to the use of history as a way for students to orient themselves in time and space and that students were more emotionally engaged with content pertaining to their own identity. In both studies, students drew on "fragments of different narrative positions" (Reich, 2015, p.521) to reach conclusions but, for African Americans, conscious of the salience of race, this "togglng between perspectives emerges as a survival tactic amongst members of a subordinated group" (Reich et al., 2020, p.18).

Seeking a wider frame for investigation, Baron (2012), by observing how professional historians "made meaning" of a previously unseen historical site, constructed a model of structured enquiry to help students interrogate historical sites with teacher facilitation. Subsequently, in collaboration with international colleagues, her work probed the multifaceted nature of learning at such sites (Zachrich et al., 2020). Understanding learning through complex, field-based resources, be they visual or oral, "requires consideration of *the situated embodiment* [italics in the original] of the learner, and the ways in which their experiences inform them about the past" (Zachrich et al., 2020, p.245). The model that emerged involves cognitive, affective, and physical engagement, but acting in concert as a holistic, historical experience. Specific dimensions of each form of engagement are identified. For example, for affective engagement the dimensions are: "being moved" (emotional arousal); "personal attachment" (to those under study); "historical proximity" (a strong feeling of temporal and spatial proximity to the place and time); "awe and reverence" (particularly to the experience of testimony); and "irritation" (when "cognitive incongruity" causes resistance). The model has potential to be a valuable heuristic for examining how students respond in museums.

To date, literature has centered on how affective learning in museums plays out with the values students bring with them from home and community, but there is less clarity as to how this affective learning relates to historical approaches learned in classrooms (Baron, 2012; Marcus et al., 2012; Reich et al., 2015; Trofanenko, 2011). In turning discomfort into a productive learning experience, Zembylas, (2019) called for “critical and strategic engagement” (pp. 197-199) through an open curriculum which encourages “ambiguity, ambivalence, and paradox”. All these are consistent with a disciplinary approach to history teaching. For us, the questions arise, how does the cognitive emphasis prevalent in schools interact with the affective power of museums? And where does affective disruption stand alongside the promotion of critical history? In our study, we investigate how students, well-versed in approaches to historical enquiry in school, respond in the two community museums, one broadly in line with their community background, and the other in opposition.

### **Community Museums and the Historical Context**

We use the term community museums in the specific context of contested societies where they originate from a desire to address aspects of the past that have been left undocumented by mainstream institutions. Both museums featured owe their existence to the Northern Ireland conflict (Crooke, 2010). Many such institutions around the world are the result of grassroots efforts, and their purpose is often to give voice to history of a specific location, group, or event (Crooke, 2007). Thus, they are not beholden, as might a national museum, to seek a consensus position or to make the promotion of social cohesion a priority. Frequently, in contested societies, they go beyond a purely commemorative function by engaging in a social and political process for recognition, change, and justice (Zecharya, 2016). For example, the District Six Museum in Cape Town, South Africa is acclaimed for promoting activism in regenerating its hinterland (Crooke, 2005; Fredericks, 2001; Rassool & Prosalendis, 2001). The narrative presented in community museums is usually an alternative one, be it from left or right, frequently at variance with the ‘official’ story. It is targeted at winning over visitors by employing “models of experience and encounter, performance and participation, empathy and witnessing” through engaging the sensory and emotional registers of visitors (Zecharya, 2016, p. 480). Personal belongings, sound recordings and photographs are utilized to provide authenticity. As well as raising awareness for

a cause, notions of victimhood give rise to what Watson (2018) called an emotional community, thus encouraging unity by giving voice and validation.

Both community museums studied in this paper are situated in Londonderry/Derry (even the name is a source of civic dispute<sup>ii</sup>), a city which featured centrally in events of the Troubles. While both post-date the Good Friday Peace Accord (1998), the context in which they exist has been shaped by the Troubles and their aftermath. The NI conflict has complex roots fashioned by religious, cultural, and political differences which, in the twentieth century, became enshrined around support and rejection of the partition of Ireland in 1921. The internecine violence generated between the pro-British unionist/loyalist (mainly Protestant) and pro-Irish, nationalist/republican (mainly Catholic) peoples was complicated further by the presence of British troops on the streets, seen as peacekeepers and protectors by unionists, or unwanted enforcers by nationalists.

Unrest in Derry, fueled by discrimination practiced by a minority unionist governing council, held in power by electoral gerrymandering, was the genesis of the civil rights campaign, 1968-9, the opening phase of the Troubles. The shooting dead of thirteen civilians taking part in a Civil Rights march in Derry on 30 January 1972 (an event known as Bloody Sunday) was a critical moment in further alienating nationalists and boosting Irish Republican Army (IRA) recruitment. The Museum of Free Derry (MFD), initiated by the families of those who died, remembers events of Bloody Sunday. Bloody Sunday is still raw in living memory and politically charged by a sense of injustice.

In contrast, the Siege Museum (SM), run by the Associated Clubs of the Apprentice Boys of Derry, depicts history of over 300 years ago by commemorating the Siege of Londonderry 1688–89, when a group of young apprentices closed the city's gates to the advancing Catholic army of James II of England. A 105 day siege ensued, resulting in widespread deprivation and death before the city was relieved by the navy of the Protestant, William III, who had replaced James on the English throne. The siege has iconic significance in Ulster Protestant/unionist/loyalist heritage as a symbol of their struggle for self-determination on the island of Ireland. However, the Apprentice Boys have also had a contentious role in the modern era. Annually, they are responsible for commemorative marches in Derry which during the Troubles years were frequently a source of confrontation with nationalists. Derry continues to be a segregated city demographically, marked by the River Foyle running through its

center. However, its historical inequalities have been largely addressed and national pre-eminence in local politics means that, atypical of many Northern Irish towns, unionists are in a minority position politically.

### **The two community museums**

Crooke (2001; 2005; 2010) has tracked the challenges facing museums in Northern Ireland when responding to the Troubles. For state institutions, initial avoidance or reticence prior to the 1998 peace accord gradually gave way to acknowledging the need to engage with legacy issues. However, this required sensitivity and balance, frequently reflected in artefacts with minimalist commentary. Meanwhile, museums emerging to represent local communities were less concerned with “accepted practice”<sup>iii</sup> (Crooke, 2005).

The SM and the MFD reflect particular political allegiances. Both are strongly validated within their communities and both commemorate events associated with violence, suffering, and victimhood. In interviews with the staff member from each museum responsible for school visits, both expressed similar educational aspirations in that they asserted that they saw their exhibition as an ‘eye opener’ for visitors, especially for those from cultural backgrounds other than the one represented in the museum. Both hoped that they could broaden visitors’ understanding of events by explaining context and intentions from the perspective of those represented in the museum. Thus, individuals could then make informed personal judgements. Notably, both interviewees were community-oriented and neither was conversant with the critical thrust of the school history curriculum.

### *The Siege Museum*

Concerned that it has been misrepresented by outside media, the Apprentice Boys organization opened itself to the public and sought £3.7m public funding for a purpose-built museum/visitor center. Opened in 2015, the SM’s<sup>iv</sup> first floor is dedicated to the historic siege and its deprivations, and the second to the role of the Apprentice Boys. Exhibits place emphasis on heritage and culture rather than the political legacies of the past. The declared focus is not only to educate people about historical events

but also to work with opposed organizations, like the nationalist Bogside Residents' Group, to achieve peaceful coexistence (interview with staff member 10/14/2019).

### *Museum of Free Derry*

The MFD<sup>v</sup> opened in 2006, in the Bogside (a neighborhood outside of the city walls of Derry), to tell the story of its community during the early years of the conflict (1968–1972), especially focusing on Bloody Sunday. A collective of relatives, the Bloody Sunday Trust, refurbished a block of derelict apartments, at a site adjacent to the shootings, as part of a long campaign to prove the innocence of the victims who had been officially labelled as IRA gunmen and nail bombers. In 2017, the museum re-opened after a £2.4m publicly funded redevelopment. Its main aims are to “rectify” official accounts, educate visitors, and provide space for those affected by the conflict to tell their own stories. The museum seeks to put the period displayed into a wider context by connecting it to the contemporary world-wide “struggle for human and civil rights” (interview with Outreach Officer, 14/10/19). There is considerable emphasis on engaging the sensory and emotional registers of visitors, with voice recordings of the civil rights march played on a loop and personal belongings of those wounded and shot dead on display. Relatives of victims are often on hand to talk about their experiences.

Access to public funding has obliged both museums to adopt language which reaches beyond their own constituency but, in practice, both have single perspectives on the past. Whereas the SM plays down a contentious past in favor of what might be deemed a charmed heritage offensive, the MFD is direct and uncompromising in pursuing its goals of social justice. In Crooke's (2010) words, it “stands out for its singular narrative and overtly political purpose” (p.27). When both talk of making informed decisions, they mean visitors mediating between what they think beforehand and what they encounter in the museums. In other words, both museums recognize that people can hold different perspectives but actually, they see their museum narrative as authoritative, and evidence is presented to substantiate this. Thus, this contrasts with what students experience in school where they are offered multiple perspectives and are asked to mediate between these based on (sometimes, conflicting) evidence.

### **The two schools**

The two schools were identified and selected through their voluntary participation in a Northern Ireland Government funded cross-community scheme. They are broadly representative of the two main communities in Northern Ireland (Protestant/unionist/loyalist and Catholic/nationalist/republican). Both schools and teachers have been given pseudonyms.

Mitchell College (School A) is a mixed gender, grammar school (employing academic selection) with approximately 900 students. Less than 20% of students are in receipt of Free School Meals (an indicator of social disadvantage) and the religious breakdown is approximately 60% Protestant, 25% Catholic and 15% other/none. School B, St Margaret's, is a girls', Catholic non-selective school. Approximately 60% of pupils receive Free School Meals and 97% of its pupils are designated as having a Catholic background. Both schools are in urban settings. Mitchell College is positioned in a largely Protestant/unionist area in the vicinity of Londonderry/Derry City. St Margaret's is located in a strongly Catholic/nationalist area of Belfast though it also draws students from a wider hinterland.

The two teachers who had responsibility for organizing the fieldtrips were interviewed separately in their respective schools following the museum visits. At the outset, both were transparent in acknowledging that the external funding available was an incentive to participate, and the chief reason for including the SM was that it was a stipulation of the grant. In the case of Mitchell College, their pupils had previously been to the SM as part of their year 9 study of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. However, it soon became clear that both Aidan, from a Catholic background teaching at the predominantly Protestant Mitchell College, and Brian, nearly twenty years at St Margaret's, fitted with Kitson and McCully's (2005) definition of the teacher as "risk-taker". Professionally, neither compromised in their commitment to achieve the best academic outcomes for their students. Yet, despite logistical constraints (which each acknowledged had prevented detailed preparation and debriefing of visits) both were committed to critical history and relished engaging with students to help them better understand the present through the past. Both pushed boundaries into the realms of difficult history. The one significant difference in their approaches may relate to the context in which they teach. Perhaps reflecting the more academic environment of the grammar school, Aidan tended to place greater emphasis on teacher facilitation to develop critical thinking amongst his students, whereas Brian stressed the impact of the experiences themselves in taking his students beyond their insulated environment and bringing them to

new positions. This difference is an important point when we discuss the role of community museums in either reinforcing or challenging dominant community narratives.

## **Methodology**

The fieldwork aimed to gain insight on how pupils experienced visits to the two museums and the impact these had on their personal understanding of the commemorated past in post-conflict Northern Ireland society. The pragmatic manner by which the schools were selected places limitations on the extent to which they can be used for comparative purposes. As against that, the study investigates a real educational event across the political divide which would have happened whether or not the researchers were present.

A total of 109 year 11 students (aged 14–15, 67 from Mitchell College and 42 from St Margaret's) visited the two museums on separate days over a four-hour period. The data collection process ran between March and April 2019 with the visits taking place on 21 March (Mitchell College) and 29 March (St Margaret's). A mixed-method approach to data collection was employed, utilizing the following:

- online survey of pupils before the museum visits;
- observations of pupils during the visits;
- online survey of pupils after the museum visits; and,
- two follow up focus groups with eight pupils in each school.

In addition, interviews were conducted with each organizing teacher to contextualize the findings, and with two museum staff to ascertain the perceived educational function of each museum. Mixed-methods research enables the corroboration and triangulation of data from multiple quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques, for the broad purposes of achieving breadth and depth of understanding and methodological rigor (Johnson et al., 2007).

### *Data Collection*



A short pre-visit survey was designed to collect background information on which school pupils attended, what they regarded as the main purposes of museums, whether they had visited either of the two museums before, and what they expected to learn or gain from each of the visits. The question regarding the perceived purpose of museums was a close-ended, multiple choice question where respondents were asked to rank the responses in order from most important to least important. The five response options were to: Preserve and display items/ things from the past; celebrate important people who have contributed positively to our history; show how the past is remembered differently by different people; remember the lives of ordinary people who have suffered in the past; and help us understand the world we live in. The two questions regarding what respondents hoped to learn from each of the visits were both open-ended response questions. The survey was created in Survey Monkey and the link and cover email were sent to the two coordinating teachers so that they could share them with their respective pupils. It was completed online by 74 respondents, which was a 68% response rate (54 from Mitchell College and 20 from St Margaret's).

During the museum visits each school group was divided into two smaller groups to practically navigate the museum space. One observer from the research team accompanied each school group and completed observational fieldnotes during and following each visit. Thus, there were eight observational records covering both school visits to both museums. As a method of data collection, observational fieldnotes are used to record the activities, behaviors, interactions, and other relevant features of an observation. The observations added a richness to the data as they provided insights into how pupils engaged with the museum content and staff at each location, and the informal conversations they had during the visits.

Following the museum visits, pupils were provided with a post-visit questionnaire, with the details again being sent to the two teachers for them to share with their pupils (see Appendix A). The questionnaire was again set up using the online survey tool Survey Monkey. Its purpose was to: collect data on school attended; views on each of the museum visited; cognitive and affective responses to each visit; whether students were surprised or angered by anything they saw during each visit; how they thought each museum remembered the past; and whether they would recommend such visits for other pupils in the future. It was completed by 53 participants, which was a 49% response rate (20 pupils

from Mitchell College and 33 from St Margaret's). Both questionnaires were completed anonymously during non-teaching time in school.

Two focus groups, one for each school, were held within eight days of each visit (for interview schedule see Appendix B). Each lasted approximately 50 minutes. These enabled deeper discussion and feedback regarding student reflections, how what they learned related to their previous knowledge of the historical events, and the extent to which their understanding might have changed. Focus groups, along with observations, “pay more attention to the original voices of actors in their everyday life, allowing researchers the possibility of observing and presenting a broader view of social reality within their research practices” (Williams & Katz, 2001, pp. 2-3).

#### *Data analysis*

For the two surveys, basic counts and descriptive statistics were used to provide a summary of the responses. Conceptual content analysis was used to examine the open-ended responses in the surveys. Analysis was undertaken manually as the number of responses was manageable. The units of analysis were the individual question responses from each pupil. Content analysis can have both a qualitative (reducing the units of analysis to themes or categories) and quantitative (frequencies of categories) aspect and both of these approaches were utilized in the study. For the pre-visit survey there were two open-ended questions asking respondents what they expected to learn from each of the two community museum visits. The resulting main categories were: learning about history (cognitive expectations); learning about people's experiences (affective expectations); a mix of both cognitive and affective expectations; and learning about alternative viewpoints. For the post-visit survey, content analysis was employed to analyze the open-ended responses about regarding what pupils had learned from the visits, the three words which best described their thoughts and feelings during the visits, and about how each of the community museums remembers the past.

The focus groups were digitally recorded, transcribed, and independently analyzed by two researchers using Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic coding in qualitative analysis. This approach provides clarity for thematic data analysis, and although usually presented as six linear steps, it is, in fact, an iterative and reflective process (Nowell et al., 2017) as it was applied in this study.

The research team reviewed the focus group transcripts and agreed the coding categories (see Appendix C for the coding categories that were used in the analysis of the focus group transcripts). Then, the qualitative focus group data were independently coded by two members of the research team. The full team met to review the coding and analysis and ensure there was consistency and consensus with regards to process (see Appendix D for examples of coding). Such intercoder agreement is crucial to ensure that there is rigor and to establish the trustworthiness of the resultant findings. The analysis of the fieldnotes followed an identical process to the focus group analysis and used the same coding framework.

The range of data collection methods employed in the study enabled data triangulation which helped validation of the findings (Olsen, 2004). Such mixed-methods research or methodological pluralism offers a pragmatic approach which draws on the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques while minimizing the weaknesses which could occur if one only approach is taken (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

Ethical approval for the study was given by Ulster University. All participants have been afforded anonymity and all the normal ethical stipulations have been followed. Every participating student had the opportunity for their voice to be heard through the two students' surveys. Whereas "There is no homogenous pupil voice even in a single working group but rather a cacophony of competing voices" (Reay & Arnot, 2002), the research focus on student voice adds to the authenticity and value of the findings and enables better understanding of the impact of community-based museums on young people's engagement with the commemorated past.

## **Findings**

The outcome of applying a thematic analysis to the student responses elicited through the observations, the pre- and post-visit questionnaires and the student focus groups was the identification of four themes:

- the influence of community background;
- historical understanding and critical thinking;
- emotional and empathetic engagement; and,

- reinforcement of/challenges to community narratives.

### *The influence of community background*

Northern Irish students commonly interpret past events through the lens of their own community (Barton & McCully, 2012; Bell et al., 2010). In this study, also, Catholic and Protestant students reacted differently, depending in which community each museum was rooted. There was some common experience, but background influenced expectations prior to the visits, the perspective students took into the museums and how they responded to the stimuli encountered.

Northern Irish teenagers' activity space is frequently segregated and strongly influenced by the parameters of their own community boundaries (Roulson & Young, 2013). Therefore, geographical (and cultural) proximity, and a previous visit explains why, in the pre-visit survey, 87% of Mitchell students declared they were familiar with the SM, whereas no pupil from St Margaret's had visited either museum, and very few had been to Derry at all. Given that Derry is a segregated city it was more surprising that 43% from Mitchell College claimed to have been to the MFD before. Findings substantiated the influence of territoriality. In the MFD the observers did not encounter any Mitchell students who declared that they had been there before, nor was there any reference to previous visits in the post-visit questionnaire or focus group responses, thus contradicting the initial questionnaire responses. An explanation may lie in several students confiding to the observer that they had thought they were going to the Tower Museum, a civic building in the center of the city. Others had either never heard of the MFD or knew only that it was in the nationalist Bogside area of the city. This lack of familiarity with the museum and its locality is illustrated by anxieties expressed in focus groups. One participant admitted that she thought [the museum] "was going to be a wee house with two pictures and that's it." Another talked of her, and her friends', initial discomfort when "we were walking to the [MFD] and everyone was, like 'Oh, it's in the Bogside, my mum would kill me'. And then we were getting our photo taken from the Free Derry Wall, everyone was, like, 'I hope no-one sees me on Facebook'."

Pre-visit survey data made it clear students hoped that visiting both museums would gain them greater insight into the Troubles. A few mentioned specifically that they expected to receive "help with

GCSE history” but, generally, there was a wider interest in finding out about past violence and its impact. At the SM, St Margaret’s students hoped to find out more about the perspective of the Protestant/unionist/loyalist community and “how the lives of everyone were affected by the Troubles.” Interestingly, despite being there before, Mitchell students hoped that this time they would learn more about the “history of our community,” “why the Apprentice Boys march,” and the “backstory of the Troubles.” At the MFD a St Margaret’s girl followed her community narrative by wanting to know about “how Unionists discriminated against the nationalists” whereas a Mitchell student wished “to achieve a better understanding of how Catholics felt in the 20th Century.” Students clearly expected to learn about the impact on, and sentiments of, people who had lived through the Troubles, though their openness to new knowledge varied.

In the SM the Mitchell students were comfortable and, while frustrated that there were not more opportunities to link the exhibits to the modern period, nevertheless 85% of respondents in the post-visit questionnaire regarded the visit as enjoyable (as opposed to 66% of St Margaret’s respondents). The three words which most recur in the written responses of pupils from both schools are “interesting”, “bored,” and “informative.” However, though both groups engaged positively with aspects of the siege, particularly those relating to the deprivation experienced by the besieged, they reacted differently to contemporary associations linked with the Apprentice Boys. Most Mitchell students regarded the presentation as “factual,” remarking dispassionately on modern day symbolism associated with banners and marches, and the importance of the siege commemoration to Protestants today. Some St Margaret’s students responded similarly but, in contrast, 39% indicated experiencing anger at some point during the SM visit. A video on why the Apprentice Boys marched “started up some unwanted opinions” and several felt that their guide’s language was divisive, giving only “one side of the story;” this, despite the observers, and Brian, the St Margaret’s teacher, commenting afterwards on his largely reconciliatory tone. Nationalists often regard unionist marching culture as threatening, suggesting that visual and oral triggers were overriding the intentions of the guide.

If Mitchell students were more apprehensive entering the MFD than those from St Margaret’s they were quickly immersed in the graphic evidence on view. Ninety-eight percent of respondents across both schools deemed the visit enjoyable, though reactions, also, differed. The most mentioned thoughts

and feelings listed by Mitchell students were “interesting,” “important,” “interactive,” and “engaging.” St Margaret’s respondents found the experience mostly “interesting” and “informative” but it also made them feel “angry,” “sad,” and “shocked.” Whereas 70% of Mitchell College expressed surprise at what they encountered (to 56% of St Margaret’s), a majority of St Margaret’s girls also felt anger (65% to 30% Mitchell students). This reaction they attributed to finding out about the death of innocent people and the way Catholics had been treated.

The student focus groups and interviews probed further into how background influenced reactions. In a divided society there is always the danger of assuming that the dominant outlooks of communities are reflected uniformly in the views of individuals. Importantly, both teachers were keen to point out that, despite their respective schools recruiting on mainly ethno-sectarian lines, their students had a range of experiences and views regarding Northern Ireland politics and culture. Aidan acknowledged “we are a largely Protestant school, we have a Catholic intake, but a lot of our children have never been in the Bogside.” Nevertheless, “you can take them anywhere ... they like to see things.” Mitchell focus group participants declared themselves to be from families holding a variety of perspectives, which reflected in a range of views they brought to the MFD visit. One, whose parents are “pretty Protestant,” had acquired a loyalist narrative of Bloody Sunday from them: “young soldiers ... had come in and the Catholics had started resisting and started firing at the army and then they shot them.” Others admitted to being shielded from the violence: “I personally come from neither a Protestant or a Catholic background... [Bloody Sunday] was a ‘thing’. I didn’t know what it was exactly.” A willingness to engage was supported by focus group data. Indeed, a girl who disclosed she was from a Catholic background, and usually kept her opinions to herself, was interested not only in what her classmates had to say about the MFD but also learned more about Protestant culture from visiting the SM. There was one issue raised by Mitchell students that did not feature at all in the St Margaret’s dialogue. Their visit corresponded to the week in which Soldier F, a British Army paratrooper, was charged with murder for four killings on Bloody Sunday. Several students determinedly raised this issue with victims’ relatives, suggesting that what was to become a major public controversy in the following months was already a live and emotive issue in the unionist community.

Though Brian confirmed that his students were mainly from Catholic, nationalist areas, and their families have been impacted variously by the Troubles, he made the distinction between those who were politicized through family and community and, in his view, the majority of the current generation who, “it’s quite surprising the limited knowledge they do have.” Whatever the knowledge gaps, focus group responses indicated that many of them arrived at the museums with a specific narrative template, one familiar within their own community. For example, referencing Bloody Sunday one girl “knew” that the people killed “were innocent, they didn’t do nothing wrong. They were just going about their daily life.” Another commented on the familiarity of exhibits she saw in the MFD which she associated with republican prisoners from the Troubles era: “There is stuff like in your house that you see that’s from a wee box ... Stuff that’s come from the prisons and it’s all in the museums now.” As for visiting the SM, one student admitted, “After being in the other museum, like I straight away dismissed it ... cause I had already made my mind up, that they were the bad ones.” A subsequent comment suggests that she had reconsidered but her initial stance illustrates how community background influenced strong reactions to aspects of the SM presentation.

#### *Historical understanding and critical thinking*

Aidan and Brian were adamant that their students should approach the museum visits with the same critical, historical mind-set which both sought to foster in their classrooms. The findings indicate that, generally, they were successful in that students had acquired a critical dimension through their engagement with school history and were aware of the importance of applying criticality to the museums; but that, sometimes, influences from their respective backgrounds got in the way. Questionnaire, focus group, and observational data provide indicators that disciplinary thinking was occurring. Clearly, a number of students valued connections they made with their GCSE course, especially in the MFD, one St Margaret’s student commenting “that it helped put a picture to what we are learning.” Also, frequently, students used language associated with disciplinary history in their written and verbal responses. For example, “perspectives,” “evidence,” and “interpretations” were all used appropriately, in addition to students seeking the views of “both sides” or a “rounded picture.” Students, generally, demonstrated an understanding of the provisional nature of historical knowledge

and were comfortable that it can be presented from different standpoints. A Mitchell student welcomed the MFD as a “new place, new side. Just to listen to this kind of unbiased view.” A co-participant in her focus group moved to a higher level when asserting, “although some may argue that it's unfair because it's only coming from one side of the community, it doesn't mean that it's not useful. It's really useful to see one side and the other side.” Mitchell students explored interpretation further by addressing omissions. In the post-visit questionnaire, a respondent agreed on the “unfair treatment of people in this city,” and felt angered that only one soldier was to be prosecuted, but also pinpointed that in the MFD there was “nothing based on the Army’s views or reasoning for [the] killings.” Similarly, in the Mitchell focus group two students praised both museums but pointed out that neither dealt adequately with paramilitary violence that had emanated from within their respective communities during the Troubles.

Certainly, students were interested in the evidential worth of the historical material presented but its affective impact was also strong. Holding rubber bullets used by security forces during the conflict was a highlight, especially for those from St Margaret’s. Both post-visit questionnaire and focus group comments mentioned other graphic material that had caught their imagination. In the SM it was often the “dead dogs, rats, and horses” eaten by the besieged and, in the MFD, the descriptions of killings during the Troubles. When asked what they had learnt at the SM several respondents from both schools referred directly to military events as well as to organizational characteristics of today’s Apprentice Boys. Learning from the MFD, for many, centered around the role of the army on, and after Bloody Sunday, and on the part played by victims’ families in the aftermath. However, here, the knowledge acquired was more likely to be accompanied by some deeper questioning or empathetic engagement – and by assessing its relevance to the present.

Unquestionably, many students approached the museums aware that their critical faculties should be switched on, which reflected in comments they made about exhibits, but also regarding their own potential biases. Scrutiny of evidence is a core concept of the NIHC. Students were intrigued by artefacts and oral contributions, but they were also aware that their validity needed testing. Both groups had listened to a young man recounting the death of his grandfather on Bloody Sunday. In the Mitchell focus group, a student articulated how he had decided that the information had veracity by considering its origins and the supporting evidence:



... he was probably slightly biased, but I don't think what happened to his granddad had a huge impact on how... like, he wasn't trying to force that on everyone and trying to make everybody feel bad. He really, like, stayed with the facts and he explained it really well. Like he showed photos of his granddad when he was dead, that kind of stuff. And even in the displays downstairs, the jacket with the bullet through the pocket and that's how they proved that the things were planted because the bomb would have went off if it were true and stuff like that.

The comment indicates he was appraising the evidence for himself but also suggests that, less consciously, he was also being swayed by the power the exhibits presented. A St Margaret's focus group participant was similarly convinced by what she heard and saw, "because they said they shot him because of that [carrying a nail bomb]. But if they did shoot him because of that the bombs would have gone off." Her classmate then offered a more complex explanation. Rather than the army simply telling lies, "I think their stories got all tangled up and they had to keep covering it up because they couldn't do nothing. ...they did contradict themselves, but they got away with it."<sup>vi</sup>

Interestingly, the St Margaret's girls were more explicitly conscious that they were wrestling with their own feelings and biases. One explained, of the SM, "you try to be as open-minded as you can but obviously your background influences what you see." A classmate articulated this constraint further, "there is not many of us that would get the opportunity to listen to the other side .... So, we are going into that with our background and not knowing theirs. So, it influences you." Countering that, a third girl, in seeking "the truth," recognized that public knowledge has power, in that "when you go into a museum, but you are already thinking ... that it's all true, so you don't really question that, I don't think. Well, I didn't." Mitchell students were also aware of the influence of background (one student talked of being "brainwashed ... taught a very Protestant way") but, afterwards, perhaps naively, seemed confident that it had not swayed their judgements, particularly in the MFD. One lad acknowledged his "very biased approach" and felt apprehensive, "but when you got down there it was all fine. You got to the museum and you got to hear a new perception." The St Margaret's girls, despite being aware of the importance of being critical, were having prior views confirmed, whereas the Mitchell students were, less consciously, being challenged by what they saw.

The NICH stresses the importance of connecting past with present. The pre-visit responses show that students were keen to do so and post-visit data suggest that, in practice, they strived to do so. Indeed, it was because of its contemporary relevance that they valued the MFD more highly. Crucially, students regarded it as living history. For three St Margaret's girls, in turn, the MFD "has more emotion," "they [victims' families] are still battling," "they are still suffering from it now." When asked in the post-visit questionnaire to critique the motives of those who established each museum, there was considerable consensus regarding the MFD, despite its emotive theme. Amongst both groups, students were impressed by the passion of its supporters in raising awareness of the events of Bloody Sunday and in their pursuit of justice for victims. Whereas Mitchell students perceived a reconciliatory purpose behind the exhibits, that by not forgetting the hurt and upset, "they want us to move on in peace," the St Margaret's responses saw a greater necessity for "truth telling," and "about what really happened to those innocent people." Thus, in both groups examples of critical thinking were common, yet when analyzing the data, it was impossible to totally separate cognitive thinking from affective processes, influenced by prevailing narratives absorbed from home and elsewhere. In practice, however, the Mitchell students were more able to step beyond the latter and seek fresh insight.

### *Emotional and empathetic engagement*

If cognitive processes were evident in how students responded to the museums it was the impact of their empathetic and emotional engagement that was striking, especially in regard to the personal stories presented in the MFD. These moving accounts impacted on all. However, while this affection, voiced primarily as empathy towards the victims and their families, contributed to deeply challenging assumptions held within the Mitchell College group, again it acted to confirm existing narratives among St Margaret's students. Within the disciplinary approach to history teaching, the concept of historical empathy has been a contested construct, with debate often raging on whether it is purely cognitive or has an affective dimension (Endacott & Brooks, 2018). Barton and Levstik (2004) offered illumination by identifying two strands to historical empathy: "perspective recognition" and "caring." The former is largely cognitive, focused on understanding why historical actors responded as they did in the circumstances of their time; the latter is affective, having "concern of the lives and experiences for those

in the past” (p. 228) which, they argued, is central to motivation because without emotional involvement studying history is “a soulless enterprise” (p.228).

Curators in both museums have demonstrated through exhibits that they understand that the sensory nature of museums makes them “particularly powerful for developing historical empathy” (Marcus et al., 2012, p. 68). One Mitchell student commented that in contrast to history classes, “I feel that when it comes to museums like that, both of them, it’s nice to get like more of a personal feel for how people interpret it.” Barton and Levstik’s two dimensions were present (for instance, focus groups wrestled with perspective recognition by trying to explain the army’s actions on Bloody Sunday) but caring was central to students’ reactions. In the SM, students engaged with what people had endured during the Siege; a St Margaret’s girl declared “it humanized them ... it put a face on the stereotype” but it was the authentic artefacts and direct testimony in the MFD that especially resonated with students.

In the MFD, students were particularly absorbed by artefact displays linked to the violence of Bloody Sunday, by the stories recounted by relatives of victims and by computer data which listed Troubles’ casualties in the city. Many seemed taken aback that some of the victims listed were of a similar age to themselves. In considering Bloody Sunday, several noted that people were killed for little or no reason. Probing in the focus groups confirmed that students were significantly influenced by what they saw and heard. For example, the bloodied belongings of victims, “the clothes and all, the bloody clothes,” warranted attention (St Margaret’s focus group) but it was the personal testimonies that especially moved students. A St Margaret’s student explained, “you see how much of an impact it had on them and still now and it happened ages ago.”

One input, the young man’s account of his grandfather’s killing, featured strongly in the focus groups. In accord with most of what is presented in the museum his story is largely verified by the Saville Enquiry (though it was him who also told of the bomb in the pocket incident). The details were harrowing but it was also the manner of his presentation that had affect. The observer, during the St Margaret’s visit, noted that his language was distinctly associated with a nationalist narrative, referring to the soldiers as “Brits” and to the vindication of the victims by Saville as a significant moment in “the 850-year occupation of Ireland.” He connected his grandfather’s killing to accounts of others who died and linked these evocatively to sites close by, and to other museum exhibits. In conclusion, he described

how “the people fought back” and how Bloody Sunday was a massive factor in IRA recruitment, “the best thing that happened to the IRA.” The power of his account clearly moved students and in the case of those from Mitchell College it appears to have overridden any negative nuances associated with his language. A Mitchell College respondent when asked what had shocked her, replied,

Just about how a soldier shot an 11-year-old in the head and all and they killed him, point blank...things like that make you feel even more sad because my wee brother is 11. Thinking like if he was just carrying on with his friends and maybe throwing stones but the soldier was like a grown man and he was just going and shooting an 11-year-old in the head.

St Margaret’s pupils reacted similarly, though here anger was directed against the army itself, as well as individual soldiers,

And someone gave them the order, the person who gave them the order isn't getting as much hate or punishment but people who were doing the killing, they were just doing what they were told to do.... But it was loads of them so they could have turned around and said, like this isn't right. Because if they didn't agree with it... like you have to know that that's not right. It's not fair.

Thus, clearly both sets of students were emotionally affected by what they encountered in the MFD and these feelings expressed themselves in support for victims’ families. However, caring impacted differently on the narratives associated with each community. For several Mitchell College students this disrupted a position on Bloody Sunday made familiar to them through family and others. For the girls from St Margaret’s, it consolidated the narrative template that they had brought from home.

#### *Reinforcement of / challenges to community narratives*

In Northern Ireland, funders of cross-community programs expect participants to encounter difference and be challenged to consider its implications. This expectation may lead to new insights into one’s own community but, chiefly, young people should gain understanding of the perspective of the Other. The project under scrutiny, by visiting a culturally familiar site and also taking students into the other’s “territory,” was likely to produce contrasting reactions from each group in each setting. Contrast there was but, when probed in focus groups, responses did not always align with community

expectations. The visits largely reinforced Catholics in their thinking but Protestants' views were challenged by what they experienced.

Students may have found the SM interesting enough, but it connected less to their pursuit of contemporary relevance, despite representing one aspect of what is often regarded as contentious unionist marching culture; one likely to be familiar to Mitchell students and alien to those from St Margaret's. In fact, the former's associations with the Apprentice Boys were mixed. Two students had direct family connections, but several had no community affinity with marching culture and two even expressed frustration at its practices:

I know they are doing the marches and stuff for a reason, obviously, because they are very protective of that. But it's always on such a large scale and it's always on really awkward days like say in December. You're trying to get Christmas shopping done and you're trying to go places, but it's all shut off because of the march.

In contrast, St Margaret's students' reactions to the SM were at best guarded, varying between tolerating difference and being dismissive of what the bands, music, and regalia stood for. For one girl "it was just different.... They express their culture in a different way than we do." For another, her mind was set. Marches "are pointless, they are a bit of, like, bigotry." Overall, then, by visiting the SM, there was little indication that Mitchell students had experienced cultural validation or that the community perspective of St Margaret's pupils had been significantly disrupted.

The MFD produced stronger responses. The continuing saliency of Bloody Sunday in public consciousness, allied to the emotive power of artefacts and testimony, resulted in indignant reactions towards perceived injustices suffered by victims and their families. The dominant reaction of Mitchell students was that the MFD had called into question many of their assumptions about Bloody Sunday, as illustrated in the three responses below:

If you would have heard that soldiers shot like 13 people dead, then you would have thought to yourself, if they are high soldiers they wouldn't just shoot for no reason. They would have had to have some motive to shoot. I didn't realize that they just came in and just shot.

Because the whole Soldier F being brought up again, before going to the [MFD] I was just thinking, he was a young soldier, he was scared because all these crowds of people were coming and trying to attack the army, so they shot back. But it wasn't like that! Very enlightening but it made me feel really sad. Like also knowing everything else the army did.

I come from a very, very Protestant background and I sort of like support the British army, but you can't defend that in any shape, form or fashion like. They showed no remorse and I'm shocked to find out that soldier F is only done for 2 murders and 4 attempted murders when he shot 9 people dead. Justice!

Contrastingly, the MFD not only confirmed but developed the partial narrative St Margaret's students had brought with them:

We didn't realize how bad it was and when you see a picture and hear the story it's even worse.

Yeah, I didn't know that the British army said anybody who was shot was part of the IRA. I didn't know that was their excuse for it. I never really knew they planted the bombs, the explosives on people.

Nor was that narrative open to challenge. When asked if a soldier's voice should be present in the museum, one girl replied, "Depends what he said about it. Like if he was trying to justify it or if he just admitted what happened."

In the case of Mitchell College, then, the MFD visit disrupted the "civil rights marcher as troublemaker/army as peacekeeper" narrative associated with a unionist background, while the experience for St Margaret's solidified the prevailing sense of past grievance held within the nationalist community. In the discussion section, we assess to what extent community background influenced students, and what roles critical and affective thinking played in student outcomes.

## **Discussion and Implications**

In addressing the research focus, the impact of the commemorated past on young people's historical, political, and cultural understanding, this study is valuable because it adds to our understanding of how

cognitive and affective learning interact; in this case, how a grounding in critical history can operate in the interface between school and emotive representations situated in communities, in deeply divided societies. Our study indicates that when students are critically prepared, visits to museums of the other community which combine a strong evidential base with the persuasive and emotional power of presentation, can stimulate new thinking, through affective disruption (Zembylas, 2019). Conversely, when the museum ethos is aligned with students' dominant community narrative, critical thinking can be swamped by the emotional force of exhibits and testimony, with the possibility of entrenching sacrosanct positions.

Data collected from the MFD proved the more valuable to research. The inclusion of the SM was important in the context of balance in a divided society but its 17<sup>th</sup> Century focus and cautious treatment of late 20<sup>th</sup> Century commemoration, meant that, in the eyes of students, it lacked the relevance, immediacy, and vibrancy of the MFD. Each museum represented its own community's perspective but it was evident that students had been prepared for that cognitively through history teaching and, generally, understood that they should question what was in front of them, even if such scrutiny was less evident in practice. However, alongside evidential argument, affective responses clearly impacted on student learning. Personal background was one filter at work when interpreting events but a major force acting in the MFD was a caring dimension, generated by testimony and artefacts. Yet, caring prompted disruption in one group and not the other. The critical difference was that St Margaret's students' thinking largely accorded with their community narrative, but many Mitchell students were provoked to question previous understandings.

St Margaret's students' reactions in both museums reflected a broadly Irish nationalist perspective. In the SM, a few indicated that they were keen to experience the unionist/loyalist standpoint yet several reacted negatively to displays of contemporary loyalist marching. Importantly, the SM did not generate the level of empathetic engagement experienced in the MFD, nor did St Margaret's students get opportunities to discuss contemporary unionist commemoration, and to hear from unionists why they think nationalist hostility to marching is misplaced. Thus, their community narrative remained unchallenged. St Margaret's students may have arrived at the MFD critically alert, but the evidence presented, and its emotive display, fitted seamlessly with their own (incomplete) knowledge and their

community's wider narrative of historical grievance and pursuit of social justice. In line with Zembylas (2017, p.2), "a sense of identification between those studying the history and those represented in history" did not prompt critical questioning and, thus perhaps, contributed to "wilful ignorance". Even when challenged in the focus group to consider the inclusion of other voices such as those of soldiers or police officers' widows, students resisted modification of the "injustice" stance. Yet, the inclusion of those very voices (either in the museum or in the classroom afterwards) might have been the stimulus for disruptive thought.

For Mitchell students the SM had mixed associations. For some, loyalist marching culture was familiar, but others were ambivalent. Thus, in comparison to St Margaret's, an underlying (unionist) template was less deeply engrained across the group and, therefore, the sense of identification weaker. The SM was less likely to engender cultural affirmation through affective associations. Mitchell students' responses to the MFD surprised the research team. Instead of resistance or suspicion to what, for many unionists, is a hostile narrative delivered in alien territory, students were moved by the experience and persuaded by the evidence. This caused many of them to reassess their positions hitherto, by questioning what they had previously gleaned from family and their faith in the British Army to behave appropriately. There were several clear examples that affective disruption was at work, notably the girl whose opinion "was sort of changing because now I know there was people who had genuine reasons to join the IRA," or the boy who now challenged his father's view that Catholic activists simply hated Protestants, "but it wasn't all of these just extremists, it was just people to get justice somehow and doing it peacefully wasn't working." Such shifts in position in Northern Ireland, even on one specific issue, are significant because they work against entrenched norms. Sometimes, it might appear that emotional impact had caused Mitchell students to abandon their own community narrative and, instead, appropriate that of the MFD. Some did accept victims' testimony uncritically but, within the focus group transcript, there was also evidence that individuals were internally deliberating as to how what they encountered could be accommodated with previous perceptions. For instance, the boy featured above, retrospectively, wished that in the MFD he had presented "an illegal [civil rights] march" narrative from a unionist perspective to hear how museum staff would have responded. Therefore, with Mitchell students, cognitive and affective influences worked together to create



dissonance. Students were positively moved by the justice narrative promoted by the museum, but they were also applying a critical mindset fostered in the classroom.

In explaining the contrasting outcomes, additional to the asymmetrical nature of the challenges posed by each museum, the complexity of different group profiles shaped by background, must not be forgotten. The environment of Mitchell College, an academically selective school, with its emphasis on teaching critical, disciplinary history, may have contributed to their students' capacity to think more independently. Also influential may be that as a group they were more socially and attitudinally diverse. Being a school with a significant number of Catholic pupils may have contributed to a more open dialogical environment. More speculatively, changing power structures in Derry over time may be contributing to the Protestant community becoming more accommodating as it accepts its lost political dominance. In contrast, St Margaret's is more culturally homogeneous and its students, while familiar with disciplinary history, are drawn from a wider attainment range. Situated in a catchment area strongly associated with Irish republicanism, previous research shows that young people from republican districts are frequently politicized through the grievance/injustice narrative (Barton & McCully, 2012). However, it is also important to state that the accounts presented in the MFD, albeit emotively packaged, have a strong evidential base, largely ratified by the Saville Inquiry. Therefore, advocates of critical history teaching would expect students to be persuaded by such evidence. This did happen but it was enhanced by the emotional force generated by the stories of victims.

Both Aidan and Brian undertook the museum visits not just to boost students' knowledge but, also, to challenge them to think differently. The outcomes confirm what we know; that museums do engage young people both cognitively and affectively in ways that "humanize" the Other and encourage reflection on past certainties. However, in this regard, the visits proved more successful for Mitchell College than St Margaret's, largely because what the MFD offered was more conducive to creating affective disruption for the out-group than was the SM. It could be argued, then, because the St Margaret's girls had existing positions largely consolidated by their MFD experience, that they might be better served, instead, by a visit to the statutory Ulster Museum in Belfast where challenge is certainly present but carefully directed across both communities (Crooke, 2010; Reynolds & Blair, 2018). To do so, however, would be to miss a key aspect of teaching history in divided societies. Outside of school,

young people habitually encounter partisan messages. Visits to public institutions like the Ulster Museum are valuable in signaling social cohesion but, we argue, that through community museums like the SM and MFD students have to deal with the realities of division. If they are to emerge from schooling more critically aware and resilient, encounters with difficult histories are an imperative. However, in this case, for symmetry to occur the SM needs to be more confident in presenting its contemporary culture and giving more emphasis to its post-1969 Troubles presentation; and the latter should display genuinely held views of unionists who lived (and suffered) in that period. Thus, those from a nationalist background might experience disruptive thinking.

It is unlikely that community museums such as the SM and MFD will alter their cultural and political orientations; therefore the onus is on teachers to ensure that students are properly prepared to apply criticality to visits. Generally, students in our study, through previous classroom experience, were better able cognitively to undertake the museum visits but not as well equipped to accommodate the emotional impact when encountering difficult histories. Particularly, the affirmation of a dominant perspective, as with St Margaret's students in the MFD, warrants attention. Zembylas (2019) envisaged pedagogy which disrupts, and further research is required into how students can be prepared to understand (and withstand) emotional affirmation. Time pressures prevented detailed preparation and proper debriefing relating to the museum visits. Our study suggests that both processes are important. Even focus group talk demonstrated that students needed opportunities to process their experiences and enter into dialogue around what they encountered, and what interested and challenged them. Indeed, students from both schools reacted positively to the idea that future visits might be coordinated to enable cross-community perspectives to be shared afterwards.

We suggest that two aspects of pedagogy might be developed to help students deal with difficult histories in field settings, but also in classrooms. The first is introducing students to how interpretations, or representations, of the past are framed. Keenan's suggestion (2019) that prior to museum visits students be introduced to the role of curation is a promising start. Particularly, he argues that this enables those from the host community associated with the museum to understand its wider significance and potential to influence their own (and outsider) opinion. Freedman's (2015) research extends interpretative framing to the practice of historians and textbook writers, but these are essentially in the

cognitive domain. We argue that students must also be alert as to how language, and visual and oral stimuli, influence their reception of narratives, be it in the field or classroom. Second, students must be given opportunities to grasp that experiences related to their own backgrounds impact their emotions and, in turn, that this affect influences, positively or negatively, their engagement with historical representations. For example, in Northern Ireland, McCully and Pilgrim (2004) used popular, stereotypical, fictional characters from TV to enable their students to gain insight into how those from loyalist and republican backgrounds (and by extension, themselves) might view graphic images of the Irish Famine. However, teaching approaches which challenge community orientations involve knowledge, skill, and risk on the part of the teacher and can only be facilitated effectively when, first teachers, too, have opportunities in training to experience the dimensions of affective learning through personal experience. Zachrich et al's. (2020) record of a US teacher's visit to the Hiroshima Peace Museum and McCully and Montgomery's (2009) field trip with student teachers to the execution courtyard at Kilmainham Jail, Dublin, Ireland, illustrated the profound impact such experiences can have on teachers' pedagogical understanding.

This study involved two schools, chosen, somewhat opportunistically, to avail of an already existing cross-community initiative. Although from across the Northern Ireland divide, their academic mix, geographical locations, and socio-economic characteristics were not an exact match for comparison. Therefore, findings must be treated cautiously, and the research requires replication using a range of schools. Further, we are aware that broad references in the paper to emotions and affective responses do not do full justice to the complexities at work when students encounter difficult material in museums. Therefore, in future research we would wish to take up the offer of Baron and her colleagues (Zachrich et al., 2020) to apply their categories of affective learning to tease out more exactly the nuances of students' interaction with difficult history in community settings. Outcomes would inform practice, enhance criticality, and make students more conscious of how their formal learning interconnects with divergent community narratives.

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## **Appendix A Post-visit questionnaire for pupils**

1. What school do you attend?

QUESTIONS 2 TO 7 ASK YOU ABOUT YOUR VIEWS ON THE SIEGE MUSEUM VISIT.

2. Was the visit to the Siege Museum an enjoyable experience? Yes/No
3. List 3 things that you learned during the visit to the Siege Museum.
4. Give 3 words which best describe your thoughts and feelings during the Siege Museum visit.
5. Were you surprised at anything you saw during the visit to the Siege Museum? Yes/No  
If YES, what surprised you?
6. Were you angered by anything you saw during the visit to the Siege Museum? Yes/No  
If YES, what angered you?
7. What did the visit tell you about how those who set up the Siege Museum remember the past?

QUESTIONS 8 TO 13 ASK YOU ABOUT YOUR VIEWS ON THE MUSEUM OF FREE DERRY VISIT.

8. Was the visit to the Museum of Free Derry an enjoyable experience? Yes/No
9. List 3 things that you learned during the visit to the Museum of Free Derry.
10. Give 3 words which best describe your thoughts and feelings during the visit of Museum of Free Derry.
11. Were you surprised at anything you saw during the visit to the Museum of Free Derry?  
Yes/No  
If YES, what surprised you?
12. Were you angered by anything you saw during the visit to the Siege Museum? Yes/No  
If YES, what angered you?
13. What did the visit tell you about how those who set up the Museum of Free Derry remember the past?
14. Next year, should your year group do a similar visit to both museums? Explain your answer.  
Would you make any changes?

## **Appendix B Focus group questions/prompts**

### *Overview*

- Did you enjoy the visits? Worthwhile? Why? / why not?
- What stood out for you during the morning?
- Did the visits relate to what you have / are learning in school?

### *Siege Museum*

- Had any of you been there before?
- Did you learn anything new?
- Did you ask all the questions you wanted to? Were there any questions you wish you had asked?

- How did you feel when in the Siege museum? Were you comfortable? Did you identify with any of it? What about symbols?
- How might someone of a different background see it?
- Would you be comfortable in bringing a friend from a different background there?
- Do you think it tells you the whole story? Anything missing? Avoided? Propaganda? Why? / why not?

*Museum of Free Derry*

- Had you been there before?
- Did you learn anything new?
- Did you ask all the questions you wanted to here? Were there any questions you wished you had asked?
- Would the visit have been better if you had been with another school/with other pupils from a different background? Why? / why not? Anything missing? Avoided? Propaganda?
- What would you expect their reaction to be?
- Did you feel the museum tells the whole story/ Why? Why not?

*General*

- Did you feel uncomfortable at any point during the day? Inside/ Talking? Walking?
- Is it worthwhile having special museums for each of these themes?
- Why do you think each of the museums exist?

**Appendix C Coding categories for analysis of the focus groups**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Expectations of the two museums</li> <li>○ Former knowledge of contested events <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Through community and family</li> <li>○ Through school</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Influence of own background on perception of the museum</li> <li>○ Understanding of history <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Level of engagement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Interest</li> <li>▪ Relevance to today</li> <li>▪ Connection to school history</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Evidence of reflective / historical thinking</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Evidence of empathetic understanding</li> <li>○ Deepest impressions of visits</li> <li>○ Perceptions of the purpose of the museums</li> <li>○ Internal persuasive discourse <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Evidence of internal debate</li> <li>○ Reinforcement of community narrative</li> <li>○ Challenge to community narrative</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Thoughts about similar visits in the future</li> </ul>
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**Appendix D Examples of coding from the focus groups**

<b>Coding category</b>	<b>Example of coded text</b>
Former knowledge of contested events	“we are all 15 and 14, so obviously we are all Catholic, so that's 15 years of having that in your head. That one side. There is not many of us that would get that opportunity to listen to the other side, and if we do then it wouldn't

	be for as much as 15 years. So we are going in to that with our background and not knowing theirs. So it influences you.” (St Margaret’s Focus Group)
Evidence of empathetic understanding	<p>“In history you can’t get as much of a feel for how it must have been for like either side because you are just reading up a textbook. I feel like when it comes to museums like that, both of them, it’s nice to get like more of a personal feel to how people interpret it.” (Mitchell College Focus Group)</p> <p>“they were like real people, they were actual people, it’s not like a story or nothing that happened. It made you visualize it and stuff.” (St Margaret’s Focus Group)</p>
Internal persuasive discourse	<p>“my dad told stories about the IRA and made it out that they were just a whole group of people who just hated Protestants and just wanted them all dead. But after like hearing like the MFD, it wasn’t all of these just extremists, it was just people to get justice somehow and doing it peacefully wasn’t working” (Mitchell College Focus Group)</p> <p>“I thought Bloody Sunday was like Catholic resistance, if you know what I mean. I didn’t really know that soldiers just came in and shot without caution and remorse. I thought there had to be some kind of fight. In the middle of the Bogside. It was strange realizing that the British army would do that.” (Mitchell College Focus Group)</p>

<sup>i</sup> In Northern Ireland the conflict known as The Troubles, which lasted approximately 30 years, ended in 1998 with the signing of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement. At the heart of the conflict were tensions between members of the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist community which wanted NI to remain within the United Kingdom and members of the Catholic/Nationalist/Republican community which saw NI’s future as part of a united Ireland. Over the course of this troubled period of history, some 3,600 people were killed and more than 30,000 injured. Although there has been some twenty-years of peacebuilding deep divisions still exist. Therefore, Northern Ireland is widely regarded as being a divided society. It is one that is still in transition, heavily segregated along ethno-sectarian lines, particularly in housing and schools.

<sup>ii</sup> For an elaboration of tensions relating to the Londonderry/Derry place name see:

<https://www.britannica.com/place/Londonderry-city-and-district-Northern-Ireland>

<sup>iii</sup> The recent receipt of public funding by both museums has required both to engage with community relations objectives (see Crooke, 2010).

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.thesiegemuseum.org/>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.museumoffreederry.org/>

<sup>vi</sup> The “planting” of the nail bomb is one of the few accounts presented in the MFD about Bloody Sunday that was not verified by the conclusions of Lord Saville’s Public Inquiry (H.M. Government, 2010).

