How Eighth Graders in England and the United States View Historical Significance

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Abstract
Research has suggested that one way students understand history is to assign significance to historical events. In this study, we identified and analyzed what events 44 adolescents judged to be historically significant. We also sought to determine what historical events the students considered important compared to one another. Finally, we examined the criteria and reasoning students used to construe an event to be historically significant. Because the sample included adolescents in 2 classes—1 in England and 1 in the United States—the study offers cross-national comparisons. Data consisted of student-generated lists, as well as students’ choices from a list of 47 events given to them, of the 10 most historically significant events of the twentieth century. From their self-generated lists, students were asked to select the event they considered most important and to explain why. In addition, 7 students from each class participated in a group interview. We found that the students showed an inclination to understand and learn from history and to find ways to conceptualize historical significance. Many were able to assign significance to major events, even though they had not studied them in depth in school. The study also sheds light on issues of national/cultural bias, personal relevance, and lessons to be learned from history as lenses through which to view historical significance, and it offers insights into the relation among national culture, school curriculum, and the perceptions of young people.

Recent studies represent a growing interest in the way young students think about and learn history (Barton, 1997; Barton & Levstik, 1996; Foster & Yeager, 1999; Levstik, 2000; Seixas, 1994; VanSledright, 1995; VanSledright & Brophy, 1992). These studies examined topics that range from students’ understanding of historical time (Barton & Levstik, 1996) to their ability to construct historical interpretations using primary documents (Barton, 1997; Foster & Yeager, 1999). All sought to gain a better conception of how children process historical information and assign meaning to events of the past. One goal of the research is to contribute to the design of a curriculum that will enable students to make meaningful connections between the past and the present. The studies revealed that even fairly young students approach the study of history with a base of knowledge and a capacity for understanding historical information and inquiry.

VanSledright and Brophy (1992) examined the way 10 students they interviewed at the end of fourth grade and early in fifth grade learned and understood history. They found that students often drew on a variety of sources, including prior knowledge, when discussing what they knew about the past. When students are taught history in context and provided a framework for understanding, they can make better connections between historical events and avoid misinterpretation and "fanciful elaboration." Barton (1997) and Foster and Yeager (1999) studied 12-year-old students’ understanding of historical evidence and found that even these students who had little exposure to academic history had a rudimentary understanding of how different people can have different views of history.

Research has suggested that one way students understand history is to assign significance to
historical events (Barton, 1998; Barton & LeVstik, 1998; Cercadillo, 2001; Epstein, 1994, 1997; Lee, Ashby, & Dickinson, in press; LeVstik, 2000, 2001; Seixas, 1994, 1997). Historical significance is a complex concept. For example, Cercadillo (2001) and Lee et al. (in press) noted that historical significance is not a fixed entity but one that can mean diverse things to various people in different eras. Barton (1998) argued, "people attend to the aspects of history they consider important, and thus the means by which they judge importance constitutes the foundation for all further encounters with history" (p. 5). This view is related to Vansledright's idea of "historical positionality" or "how things past, present, and future hang together" (p. 4). The relation between historical positionality and historical significance can offer insight into the best ways to teach students history.

Delving further into the complexity of historical significance, Lee et al. (in press) noted the importance of asking the right kinds of questions regarding the significance of a historical event. They asked readers to consider: What sort of significance? For what theme? For what timescale? For what questions? For whom? Further, they argued that significance can take many forms, including contemporary, causal, revelatory, intrinsic, and symbolic. For example, Neil Armstrong's first steps on the moon arguably had enormous symbolic significance in terms of America's technical and global superiority at the end of the twentieth century. But as an event that profoundly shaped the lives of millions, its intrinsic, causal, or revelatory significance is highly debatable.

Seixas (1994) examined high school students' views of events they considered to be historically important. Fourteen tenth grade students were asked to choose three of the most significant historical events of the last 50 years. Most students selected events with broad historical significance that could easily be linked with the present, such as the world wars and the rise and fall of communism. They saw history as a progression toward improvement in human development—for example, the development of Western intellectual thought. Seixas pointed out that many social studies curricula emphasize events in history that affect the majority of people and events that can easily be related to current issues. At the same time, he acknowledged the difficult task curriculum planners have, in that a simple framework of historical content does not necessarily provide students with a significant past, no matter how well chosen that framework may be. To keep up with the "new history," he stated, curriculum planners should be encouraged to broaden their view of what is historically significant.

The curriculum should build on students' knowledge and help them expand on this base of knowledge through participation in activities such as theme-based units. An example of this approach would be a unit on the rise of democracy, with the goal of providing students with a more effective way to link the present with the future. Seixas also argued, however, that finding out what students believe to be historically significant is the smaller task; the larger one is to discover how they think about historical significance and how to foster that thinking. In our study, we conceptualized historical significance in a narrow sense. We aimed to identify and analyze what events adolescents judge to be historically significant from their contemporary perspective.

We also sought to determine what historical events students consider important compared to one another. Finally, we sought to understand the criteria and reasoning students use to construe an event to be historically significant.

The research cited above provides much-needed information about the teaching and learning of history because the issue of historical significance is important in assessing students' understanding of history. A well-established body of research exists on younger students' (upper elementary through middle grades) understandings and capabilities in the study of history, but the issue of their conceptions of historical significance merits more attention. The present study was an attempt to extend current research by examining which events in history eighth graders, whose history study
has been minimal, consider to be historically significant. Furthermore, because the study focuses on how adolescents in England and the United States conceptualize historical significance, it offers insights into the perspectives of students from different countries.

Importance of Studying Conceptions of Historical Significance

Understanding children's conceptions of historical significance more robustly is important for two reasons. First, close analysis of these conceptions indicates how students' historical consciousness and historical understandings are shaped in educational settings. In other words, what children consider important or significant in history does not occur by accident but rather is formed partly on the basis of lessons or information learned in school. Thus, children's conceptions of what is historically significant may provide evidence of the effect that history learned in school has on young people. By listening to the voices of children and analyzing what they consider important in history, researchers may learn, by extension, what policy makers, textbook publishers, curriculum designers, and powerful interest groups consider important. They may understand more clearly what historical information is privileged and what information is suppressed in schools.

Researchers may form some sense of which historical stories are told and which are not. And, perhaps more important, researchers may learn to appreciate whose history is rendered significant to students and whose history is not.

Understanding such issues as these in two countries can provide richer detail about how conceptions of historical significance develop. For, as Levstik (2000) argued, ideas of historical significance are cultural constructs transmitted to members of society in a variety of ways, and this is especially the case for national history. Levstik contended that, in the era of fragile nation-states, nationalist forces often influence what version of history schools convey to, or indoctrinate in, young people. Given the intense ideological battles over the national history standards in the United States and the introduction of national curriculum history in England (Foster, 1998), research on students' appreciation of historical significance can provide data on the extent to which nationalistic history achieves prominence in the minds of young people.

The second reason for studying children's conception of historical significance is related to the first. Although it is widely accepted that school history instruction shapes students' historical knowledge, a growing number of researchers also have revealed how other sociocultural factors affect students' appreciation of history. Indeed, increasing evidence has suggested that class, race, family history, popular culture, the media, and other social and cultural forces are important influences (Barton & Levstik, 1998; Epstein, 1994, 1997; Seixas, 1994, 1997).

Levstik's (2000) research, for example, has shown that students from diverse ethnic backgrounds often possess historical understandings that conflict with mainstream versions of America's past. Rather than viewing American history as a triumphant celebration of emancipation, progress, and exceptionality, many understand a different history, one that involves racism, injustice, and hardship. Attention to student understandings of what is important in history, therefore, can also show the extent to which some students understand an alternative historical story. Additionally, it may help to answer questions such as, To what extent and in what manner do students view events beyond mainstream history as important? How do popular culture and the mass media affect children's understandings of historical significance? How and why do students in different countries vary in their interpretation of what was significant during the twentieth century? What role do personal and family history play in shaping children's understandings of historical significance? Of necessity, detailed analysis of each of these questions and issues is beyond the scope of this study. However, attention to conceptions of historical significance from two different groups of students in two countries offers some important points of departure for further investigation of the intersection
between student understandings, national culture, and the teaching and learning of school history.

Method

Sample

The 23 American students who participated in this study attended a middle school in a city of approximately 100,000 in Florida. The school enrolled about 800 students from grades 6-8. Considerable socio-economic diversity and, to a lesser extent, some ethnic diversity were reflected in the student population. The student participants were all eighth graders, born in either 1986 or 1987 (ages 13-14), in a mixed-ability class of U.S. history. Of the 23 participants, four were African American, one was Hispanic, one was Asian, and 17 were European American. Although there were 24 students in the class, one student indicated that he did not wish to participate; thus, 23 participants completed the survey tasks described below.

The 21 English students who participated in the study attended a comprehensive high school situated in a small historic town. The school has a student population of approximately 750 and includes students from ages 11 through 18. The participating students were selected from year 8 mixed-ability history classes. All the students were white, and the vast majority were born in 1987 (age 14). In general, academic standards at this publicly funded high school are above average. However, the students sampled in this study spanned the ability range.

Students' Knowledge

To understand students' prior knowledge of history, we (a) conducted a series of semistructured interviews with a sample of 14 students and (b) examined the history curriculum these students had encountered in their respective countries. In terms of the participants' prior knowledge, the following points appear relevant. First, at the time of the study, all of the American students had nearly completed their state- and district-required eighth-grade U.S. history course, which spanned one semester rather than a full year because of the school's block scheduling. The course comprised a chronological survey from precolonial America to World War II, with a pedagogical format that combined lecture, discussion, textbook readings and related assignments, and cooperative learning activities. For historical events that took place after World War II, instructional time was relatively brief because the end of the semester was near; the teacher assigned group projects and presentations focusing on major postwar events in order to "cover" this material.

Interviews with American students revealed that most of their history semester had focused on "the Revolutionary War and becoming a nation," the Industrial Revolution, and the Civil War; then it culminated in World War II. They considered some of the earlier American history, "like the French and Indian War," less important and wanted to spend more time on more recent history, especially World War II and beyond. One student, Mark, stated that students had learned some historical trivia that was not important, "like that one president liked to go skinny-dipping."

The American students who were interviewed unanimously agreed that they learned more about history in school than outside of school. However, all stated that some of their historical background knowledge came from sources outside school, and they cited three main ones: family, television, and the Internet. Two said that their fathers loved history and frequently quizzed them on it at mealtimes; four cited influential grandparents ("My grand-mother is a professor and a history freak. ... I went to Boston with her and learned all about the American Revolution"; "My grandfather was a World War II veteran and loves history"; "My grandfather came here from Cuba after Castro took over, and I did an oral history interview with him"; "My great-grandmother likes to talk about the
Depression"). Two students enjoyed watching the History Channel (a cable television channel featuring documentaries and historically based movies) and had recently seen a program related to the American space program. All stated that they used the Internet for school history assignments, but they mentioned that it was "easy to get lost on-line.... Doing a search is overwhelming and repetitious.... It's easier just to go to the library." They appeared much more enthusiastic and confident about background knowledge they had gained from family and, to a lesser extent television, than from Internet sources.

With regard to the English participants' prior knowledge, it is important to note that all students of compulsory school age in England follow the prescribed mandates of the national curriculum. As a consequence, the year 8 students in this study, as those in all other schools across England and Wales, had not yet studied the twentieth century in secondary school. Rather, historical study was limited to the Romans, native peoples of America, and selected aspects of British history before the Industrial Revolution.

The only formal teaching of any twentieth century topic would have occurred in year 5 when they studied the evacuation of young children from urban and industrial areas of Britain during the Second World War. Therefore, the ability of English students to precisely identify events from the twentieth century may have been limited by their lack of familiarity with them.

However, all seven English students interviewed believed that they learned more about history outside than inside school. All claimed to watch historical programs on television, to use the Internet to find out about history, to have discussed historical events with their parents and families, and to have read books on historical topics. Closer examination of this tendency to find out about history from sources outside the classroom revealed that students often leaned toward more populist accounts of history. For example, three had engaged in historical computer simulations on topics such as the race to save the Titanic or strategic battles of the Second World War. Similarly, six students claimed to have read a popular series of books titled "Horrible History" that recount the most lurid parts of British history, including stories of war, torture, and execution. However, students also reported watching more serious programs such as the Discovery Channel and British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) documentaries, typically viewing Newsround (a television magazine program produced by the BBC aimed at school children and often providing historical context), and frequently discussing world events with adults. Thus, despite the fact that these seven students had no access to twentieth-century historical events through the formal curriculum, they appeared to be familiar with many twentieth-century topics.

Procedure

Listing and ranking historical events.

We followed the same procedure in the two schools. The first and second steps took about 1 hour and were completed in the same class period. First, the students were given a "free form" piece of paper and asked simply to list up to 10 of what they considered to be the most historically significant events of the twentieth century. If they were unable to think of 10, they were to list as many as they could. The students did not have to rank events on their list, but they were asked to circle the one event that they viewed as the most significant of the century and, in a few sentences, to explain why they made this choice. In this part of the task, students were given no prompts or other information; everything they listed came from their own background knowledge and opinions. Second, students were given a handout we had developed (see app. A). We explained that this handout contained 47 "official" events that historians, teachers, students, and others in both the United States and Great Britain might view as some of the most significant events of the twentieth century. Students were asked to place a check mark by the 10 events from that list that they
considered to be the most significant of the twentieth century; then, they ranked the events selected from 1 (most significant) to 10 (least significant).

Asking students to write down the historical events that they considered significant without being influenced by an "official list" allowed them freedom in their selections. Following this activity with one in which students were asked to select from a list of events enabled us to compare the selections. Additionally, it provided insights into which "mainstream" historical event students considered most important.

We compiled the list of historical events in appendix A based on three procedures. First, those topics accorded most attention in textbooks and curriculum documents in both countries were selected (e.g., World War II, the Cold War, Communist revolution in China). We paid attention to common events that textbook publishers and state and national curriculum developers in both countries considered important. Second, we selected events that were featured regularly in textbooks and curriculum documents in one country but were less obvious in the other (e.g., the Falklands War, the Challenger explosion). Finally, we also inserted a few recent events not yet established in all textbooks but ones likely to be considered important by young adolescents (e.g., the death of Princess Diana, the Bosnian and Kosovo conflicts). Admittedly, our selection of events was subjective and is open to charges that some of the events in the list are ones we might construe to be significant. However, in part because two of the researchers are American and one English, we believed that an appropriate selection could be achieved. Indeed, in order to understand more fully what students considered important, we thought it preferable to insert these choices and give students an opportunity to select or reject them rather than to ignore them.

Group interviews.

The final step in the procedure was a group interview. We asked seven students from each class to participate after the surveys were completed; all who were asked agreed. Selection was not completely random; we chose students in order to reflect a diversity of ideas about historically significant events. In particular, the sample included (a) students who listed multiple events on the free-form listing; (b) students who found it difficult to list multiple events; (c) students whose lists appeared representative of other students'; and (d) students who selected atypical events (i.e., events that most other students had not considered significant). We did not, however, know the particular students we were selecting. As it turned out, each group reflected a balance between boys and girls, and the American group included one African-American female and one Hispanic female. The interview lasted for about 1/2 hours and took place in a vacant classroom where the students sat with the researchers in a circle (see app. B for the interview protocol). Although some students naturally were more vocal than others, all students participated in the interview and wanted to talk about a variety of topics related to history, including some that were not part of the interview protocol.

We tallied and categorized the survey (lists) data, transcribed the interviews, and drew conclusions about the survey and interview data through a process of analytic induction. We analyzed the data in two phases. First, we read the surveys and transcripts individually in order to classify students' responses. We individually recorded a rationale for our classifications and prepared a research memo in which we developed broad coding categories for the survey responses and interviews based on emerging patterns from the data. Then, we shared our analyses. Together we refined and merged our coding categories and used cross-case analysis and constant comparison to analyze the coded data further. We categorized the data on the basis of different student responses to the same questions or tasks, identified patterns in the responses, and then searched for examples and non-examples of the overall patterns or categories.

Results and Discussion
English Students

Survey/lists. Initially, students found problematic the task of listing 10 significant events from the twentieth century. Indeed, only five of the 21 students sampled actually cataloged 10 events. However, although two students enumerated only four events, on average most offered six or seven. Eighteen students said that World Wars I and II were among the 10 most significant events of the century, and 14 students believed the death of Princess Diana was of primary significance. These three self-generated choices appeared far more frequently than any others, with "the first man on the moon," "the invention of the television," and "England's victory in the 1966 Soccer World Cup final" each listed by five students. Other events offered by more than one student included the war in Kosovo (four students), the building of London's millennium dome (four students), the Persian Gulf War (two students), the election of Prime Minister Tony Blair (two students), the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II (two students), the Irish Republican Army's (IRA) cease-fire (two students), and the recent murder of BBC news presenter Jill Dando, chosen by two students.

Many English students listed events from their own personal or family life as significant. Eleven students included in their list of 10 events something personal to them such as the death of a family member or pet, the marriage of their parents, or the day they started school. Five students indicated that the day they were born was of major historical importance. One student even considered the day that she broke her wrist to be one of the most significant events of the twentieth century. Laura (all names are pseudonyms), who wrote that the day she was born was the most significant event of the century, justified her selection by arguing that unless she existed, she could not experience the world and be in a position to make judgments about historical significance; therefore, she reasoned that her birth had to be the most important event of the century.

When students were asked to identify and explain the single most important event of the twentieth century, a similar pattern emerged. Six students selected the death of Princess Diana, another six students focused on World Wars I and II, and four students regarded the first man on the moon as the most significant event of the century.

Students' responses to the researcher generated list of events echoed many of their free-response choices. World War II received 18 top-10 selections; World War I (17 selections), the space race (16 selections), and the death of Princess Diana (14 selections) consistently appeared as among the most significant events of the twentieth century. Student choices of the single most significant event of the twentieth century from the researcher-generated list consistently reflected self-generated events. Six students selected World War II as the most important event of the twentieth century, three students considered both the coronation of Queen Elizabeth and the death of Princess Diana to be of primary historical significance, and two students opted for the Holocaust and scientific/medical discoveries.

Interviews. The seven students who were interviewed were able to explain in some detail why they believed the two world wars and the death of Princess Diana were of particular importance. They were not surprised to learn that the death of Princess Diana appeared as one of the most frequent student selections of the most significant event of the twentieth century. Students argued that because she was "internationally famous," "she died in such a sudden and tragic way," "the media coverage was so enormous," and "it all happened so recently," it was inevitable that students would select her death as a major event. Certainly, the intensive media coverage and the outpouring of grief that occurred on an unprecedented scale in the United Kingdom following Diana's death may explain the dramatic imprint that the event made on the minds of these students.

The students interviewed found it difficult to justify the space race as a primary selection. Some
made vague observations such as "The journey into space helps us to know more about life on other planets" or "It helps to increase the speed of travel." Moreover, although two students were clear that "the race" was between "Russia" and "America" because "they don't like each other," others appeared to lack an understanding of why these two countries were competing.

A significant number of students considered technological innovations (12 students) and scientific and medical discoveries (nine students) to be of major historical significance in the twentieth century. The students who were interviewed were able to explain in detail why these innovations and discoveries were important in the century. In particular, they believed that the invention of the TV, the computer, and advanced telecommunications were responsible for "making life easier," for "helping people communicate more easily," and for "providing great opportunities for education and entertainment." One student made the point that technological innovations, transportation development, and the improvement of household appliances "just made life easier and better for people today than in days gone by." Others further agreed that advances in medicine made modern life much more comfortable and worthwhile than the lives of people in previous centuries.

Explaining students' responses. Most students' choices reflected their English background. Fifteen students, for example, believed England's victory in the 1966 World Cup soccer finals to be of major historical importance because, as Kate observed, "Football's such a big deal in England; it's so important to so many people." Others added that the event was so striking because it was the only time that England was a world champion and that defeating "the best countries in the world is important to our country." Other choices reflected a similar national/cultural bias. For example, students considered the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II (nine choices), the death of Queen Victoria (seven choices), and the election of Winston Churchill (seven choices) to be more significant than, for example, the Holocaust (four choices), the Vietnam War (three choices), the Cold War (one choice), the end of South African apartheid (one choice), and the Great Depression (one choice).

Some students tended to be influenced by their own cultural upbringing. For example, one student, whose father lived in Iran, included the Iran-Iraq war as one of the most significant events of the twentieth century. Similarly, Julie, who was born in South Africa, regarded the end of apartheid there as of primary importance, and Sean's decision to select the Irish Republican Army cease-fire as the most significant event of the century was influenced, he believed, by the fact that his father was Irish. Overall, however, many students' choices appeared to be a reflection of English culture and what English television presented as significant. Apart from the selection of major international events such as the two world wars, the Gulf War, the war in Kosovo, and the first man on the moon, most selections were British related. For example, the election of Prime Ministers Thatcher and Blair, the coronation of the queen, the building of the controversial millennium dome, the death of Princess Diana, the murder of Jill Dando, and the IRA cease-fire all reflected a distinctly British view of historical significance.

Another revealing aspect of the survey and interviews was the extent to which major international events were omitted from English students' choices. Such dramatic occurrences as the Russian Revolution, the Cold War, the Chinese Communist Revolution, the rise of fascism and Nazism, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the demise of the Soviet Union, and the Arab-Israeli conflict failed to make any student's list of top-10 events. Perhaps more surprising, no student considered the formation of the European Union to be a top-10 event of the twentieth century. In a similar vein, apart from noting the "first man on the moon," English students largely omitted any reference to major events in U.S. history such as the civil rights movement, the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., Watergate, and the Great Depression. The two exceptions were one student who listed "the assassination of President Kennedy" and who suggested that "Bill Clinton having an affair" warranted selection among the top-10 events of the twentieth century. Clearly students cited more
English and British historical events than European, American, or other international ones.

Students' primary attention to English or British history may be explained by three factors. First, in England, national curriculum history chiefly focuses on British history. As stated, students in year 8 would have encountered few aspects of world history and would have had limited access to twentieth-century history through the official school curriculum. Moreover, it is likely that the formal curriculum would influence students' understandings of what is historically significant. Second, the sample of English students was drawn from a school in a geographical area steeped in British history. Blenheim Palace, a magnificent eighteenth-century edifice, birthplace of Sir Winston Churchill and home to succeeding generations of British nobility, is in walking distance of the school. Additionally, Oxford, a living monument to the English past, is only a few miles away. One may reasonably assume, therefore, that the existence of so many tributes to British history and culture in the local area must affect students' historical appreciation. Finally, all of the students in the school were white and from predominantly middle-class or lower-middle-class families. With few exceptions, the students and their families had been born and reared in England and understandably projected a view of history in keeping with their heritage. English students from other ethnic backgrounds may have provided different results.

American Students

Survey/lists. With regard to the student-initiated listing of twentieth-century significant events, 16 of the 23 students who responded were able to list 10 events; the other seven listed from one to six events.

Most students, regardless of how many events they listed, made choices that seemed reasonable. Students listed World War II 20 times; the Great Depression (15), World War I (14), the space race and moon landing (12), developments related to transportation (11), the assassination of President Kennedy (8), various technological innovations (e.g., telephones, radios, movies, air conditioning, computers) (7), Vietnam (7), the Holocaust (6), the atomic bomb and nuclear arms race (6), the Cold War (6), the civil rights movement (6), and specific scientific and medical developments (e.g., Einstein's theories, cloning) (5). Other events were listed less often (two to four students): events and issues related to racism in America, the influx of immigrants into the United States, the development of new weapons and military technology, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, the fall of communism in Eastern Europe ("fall of the Berlin Wall," as some put it), the Watergate scandal, the Harlem Renaissance and development of jazz, other developments in popular music (particularly rap, which was mentioned twice), the increase in school violence as exemplified in the Columbine High School murders, the women's rights movement, and the Korean War. A few items listed once likely reflected the contemporary media culture in which many young people are immersed: the Y2K "scare," the JonBenet Ramsey murder, the deaths of John F. Kennedy, Jr., and golfer Payne Stewart, the murder of John Lennon, the sinking of the Titanic, the O. J. Simpson trial, the Super Bowl, and President Clinton's sex scandal.

Only three students included an event that did not take place in the twentieth century: the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin, the American Revolution and the framing of the Constitution, and the Civil War. World War II received seven first-place votes, with the Depression and space race at four each, the Holocaust with two, and one vote each for the Persian Gulf War, the Y2K "scare," "more peace between nations," the Harlem Renaissance and development of jazz, and World War I. One student did not indicate a first choice. Many of the rationales for the choices were logical and articulate: World War II "involved much of the world . . . and stopped the Nazi threat from spreading,. it was the turning point of the twentieth century because of the invention of the first nuclear weapon... there were so many deaths, especially of so many innocent people"; the Great Depression was "the worst position the U. S. has ever been in, so
many people had to do without... it changed our economy... we learned that bad things can happen to things that seem foolproof"; the Holocaust caused "the persecution of over six million Jews, and this is something that a person can never forget"; the space race "may someday be the gateway to living on other planets when Earth becomes overpopulated... it gave us many of our modern-day technologies"; the Persian Gulf War "could have resulted in World War III with all the new weapons of mass destruction." Four students either gave no explanation for their first choice or had difficulty articulating a rationale; for example, one student said the Holocaust was "the most horrible thing that happened" but did not explain the comment, and another said that the Great Depression was the most significant event because "a lot of bad things happened." Finally, one student selected World War I but seemed to conflate it with the Civil War, arguing that "we won, stopped slavery, and it defined our country and made us proud."

In the researcher-generated list, the most frequently circled events were: World War II (22 times), World War I (17), the Great Depression (17), the space race and moon landing (16), the women's rights movement (15), the assassination of President John F. Kennedy (14), various technological innovations, ranging from the car to television to the computer and Internet (14), the civil rights movement (12), the Holocaust (10), the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. (10), the development of the atomic bomb and the nuclear arms race (10), the Vietnam War (9), the invention of the airplane (9), scientific and medical discoveries (9), and the Cold War (9). The Korean War was circled twice, as were the Russian Revolution, the rise of global terrorism, and the famines in Africa. Items that were not mentioned in the student-initiated responses but were circled somewhat frequently on the researchers' survey included the AIDS epidemic (8), the death of Princess Diana (5), the rise of Nazism and fascism (4), and the 1960s music and fashion cultural movement (4). Gandhi and Indian independence were circled once, as were the Challenger explosion and the Arab-Israeli conflict.

In terms of the single most significant event of the twentieth century, from the researchers' list six students selected World War II, five selected the Great Depression, three selected the space race and/or moon landing, two selected the Holocaust, and one vote each went to World War I, the invention of the airplane, the atomic bomb and nuclear arms race, the Cold War, the AIDS epidemic, scientific and medical discoveries, and the assassination of JFK. Some of the students' choices were essentially American: events related to the civil rights and women's rights movement, Martin Luther King, Jr., Vietnam, and the death of JFK. Interestingly, like the English students, the U.S. students' focus was decidedly not on a number of significant international events; none of the American students circled the following: the Chinese Communist Revolution, the Northern Ireland conflict, African civil wars and the end of colonialism, the formation of the European Union, the Chernobyl nuclear accident, the end of South African apartheid, and the Balkan conflicts in Bosnia and Kosovo. Nor did the American students select any British-related events on the list, except for the death of Princess Diana. Finally, they did not list any events from their personal lives or family histories as the English students did.

Interviews. Overall, the American students' choices were somewhat less culture bound than the English students'. The majority chose events that tended to affect more people around the world on a large scale, such as world wars, the Depression, the space race, the Holocaust, the atomic bomb and nuclear arms race, and transportation and technological developments that brought people around the world, in a sense, closer together. However, their written statements and interview responses indicated that they tended to view these events mainly in terms of American involvement or effects (e.g., "If the U.S. hadn't won World War II, we would be speaking another language right now"); the Gulf War was "a big deal because Iraq could have bombed America"; the space race resulted "in the National Aeronautical and Space Administration (NASA) inventing things for us" and "Neil Armstrong going to the moon"; "World War II was the first time we used the bomb"; the Great Depression "changed our economy" and was "the worst position the U.S. has ever been in; it
was our lowest moment in history). American students repeatedly used the pronouns "we," "our," or "us" to describe occurrences in American history. As Levstik (2000) has argued, using history taught in school to establish a collective "community of identification" is a powerful force in America. Despite research showing that many students understand American history to be plagued by injustice, brutality, and discrimination, students appear willing to share overtly in the collective celebration of America's past by employing pronouns such as "our" and "we."

In the group interview, students elaborated on their explanations of why particular events were historically significant, and most students demonstrated a good grasp of some of what happened during World War I and World War II, the Holocaust, the Great Depression, and the space race. For example, they talked about the significance of the use of atomic weaponry in World War II, the brutality of trench warfare in World War I, the factors that led the United States in and out of the Depression, and the horrors and persecution in the Holocaust under the Nazi regime. Additional student insights and issues that arose from the follow-up interview are discussed below.

Follow-up Interview In the follow-up interview, students were asked if it was important to study history and to explain why or why not. They were also asked to describe topics they had studied the most in their history class this year and what they viewed as the most and least important topics.

The importance of studying history. The American students all asserted that history study was important, giving various reasons consistent with VanSledright's (1997) findings: "We need to learn from our mistakes," "We need to stop doing the same stupid things," "You learn how badly people have been treated in the past so we don't do the same things to people again." They also said that "it's interesting" and "you find out things you didn't know." Five of the English students interviewed echoed the remarks of their American counterparts. For example, Pete noted that "history teaches you lessons ... you can learn from past mistakes." Sean also commented that "history makes you aware of your roots and why you are here ... without history we wouldn't know anything about ourselves." Linda believed that it was important to know about "change and development."

Historical significance: Most and least important topics. Students were also asked to explain what in their view made some-thing significant or important in history. They agreed that a significant event has to have an effect on more than one person and usually on large numbers of people. From the English group, Charles suggested that events of major significance affect "millions of people," possibly including the deaths of large numbers of people. Not surprisingly, therefore, in many student selections from both groups, World Wars I and II appeared to be of primary significance. Another English student, Sean, noted with great insight that the two world wars influenced "the land that countries owned, religion, language, and the way people lived their lives for years to come." Interestingly, English students considered history associated with the British royal family to be of most importance in the study of the past (before circa 1750). Most believed that the "Gunpowder Plot," the English Civil War, and the rule of the Tudors and Stuarts were of primary significance. Students appeared less concerned with aspects of British social history. Nevertheless, two students complained that they had repeatedly been told about Henry VIII and his six wives and that, as one student put it, "after a while it becomes boring."

The English students interviewed also construed significance in terms of the fact that history is an evidence-based discipline. In discussing what makes an event significant, one of them remarked, for example, that events of significance typically have "tons of evidence to tell you about what happened." One English student also noted "you can tell if an event is important by how much has been written about it and how often it has been studied." The students interviewed appeared equally aware of and comfortable with the notion that historians disagree over what actually happened in the past and that "new evidence
can change our understanding of events." None of the American students articulated this viewpoint. English students' attention to the construction of history is perhaps not surprising, given the emphases of national curriculum history. Fundamental to teaching and learning school history in England is that students appreciate the disciplinary nature of the subject. Unlike typical practice in many American schools, in all years of compulsory education in England students are continually engaged in the analysis of historical evidence and the evaluation of historical interpretations.

Three American students offered additional conceptions of historical significance. Violeta stated that significance is related to "a hero or major figure, especially one involved in a tragedy, like JFK or Martin Luther King." However, she also explained that "just because someone is famous doesn't mean it's important," citing the O. J. Simpson trial as relatively insignificant in the scope of twentieth-century history. Tiffany argued that there must be "a lot of bad stuff happening, like in the Depression or the Holocaust," and Linda said that "it's about the amount of money spent, like on space exploration."

Additional Interview Findings

Current relevance of historical events.

All of the students interviewed provided insights on the relevance or effects today of many events they had listed, but there were some key differences between English and American students. Two English students thought World War I had significance for their lives. Pete, for example, believed that "we'd be speaking German now if we had lost the war." Linda also commented that "the map of Europe would look very different if the result had been different," and Julie stated that "without World War I, World War II would never had happened, and so many people in our families would have been spared their lives." The English students interviewed commented on how other notable events affected lives today. For example, Julie believed that the end of apartheid in South Africa was important in showing the world that "racism was not good" and that "all people should have equal opportunities." Sean hoped that the IRA cease-fire would mean that "no more bombs would be exploded" and that people on both sides might now "live in peace." Charles also noted, with some sophistication, that the landing on the moon captured the imagination and "makes you think about people's potential to achieve things." Notably, one of the English students took pains to point out that, because of the huge sums of money collected for charity as a result of the tragedy, Princess Diana's death had the salutary effect of "helping thousands of unfortunate people live better lives." Another commented, "Millions of people continue to be personally affected by her death."

The American students, in contrast, seemed less certain about the effects on people today of some of the events they named, especially the world wars, likely because both wars were fought on distant territory and the human toll seemed more remote. Still, they believed that World War II continued to be a cause of suffering for some people in Japan, and they said Americans should remember that "we should never do it again; we should avoid war." Although World War I received many votes for historical significance, no one viewed it as having any effect on people today. The Depression "taught us to be smarter about our money, to protect it more and have bank insurance," but some thought that most people still had not learned much about financial management. The space race, as Tiffany put it, "is not even a race any more because now we are helping each other in space, and we may need to live there some day when it gets too crowded here." The Holocaust, according to Tiffany, "means that we need to make sure our leaders are not insane"; Violeta added, "We should beware of worshipping a leader, and beware of how cruel people can be ... we need to remember we are all united in our humanity, and that everyone can suffer the same way." Interestingly, although Shakira characterized the Y2K issue as highly significant "because it is scary right now and I'm living right now," and others dismissed it as "bogus ... the media just scared people into wasting money on it and made stupid movies about it," discussion of Y2K led to ruminations on students' fears of

Events not deemed important. When asked to consider events that individual students had listed on only a few occasions, the American students seemed to consider them carefully and eventually attributed more significance to them than they had originally assumed. For example, the Harlem Renaissance "affects our music today ... it was a rebirth of black culture, which was needed in America ... the poems by Langston Hughes said important stuff about racism." Watergate was understood as an event resulting in the first presidential resignation, but it was also about "how the president is not always perfect and can't get away with everything." Watergate also led to a discussion of President Clinton; Tiffany expressed anger that "he was fooling around while we were paying him to work for us." Finally, the discussion of school violence, especially Columbine, focused on "how some kids don't get enough attention from their parents" and on "things that go on at school that people don't know and that (school officials) try to hide." To Violeta, Columbine was about "hate. Those kids (who committed the murders) didn't pay enough attention in history class because they didn't learn anything about hatred and suffering."

Moral issues. In addition, some American students attached historical significance to events that facilitated what researchers have termed "historical empathy" and "historical perspective taking" (e.g., Ashby & Lee, 1987; Davis, Yeager, & Foster, 2001; Downey, 1995; Foster & Yeager, 1998; Por- tal, 1987; Yeager, Foster, Maley, Anderson, & Morris, 1998). Historical empathy and perspective taking emphasize students' complex understandings of why particular historical actors did what they did in certain situations, without trying merely to sympathize or overidentify with their feelings. In the interviews, four American students mentioned empathy-related issues that seemed to make particular events stand out for them, especially those with moral dimensions. For example, in a discussion of World War I, Violeta wondered what it was like for a soldier to meet the enemy face to face in a trench and have to kill him; she wanted to know how this could happen and what the soldiers went through during and after the war. Similarly, three others wanted to know why and how the U.S. government decided to use the atomic bomb on Japan, why Germans "let Hitler do the things he did," and "what possesses kids to take guns to school and shoot their classmates."

Still, although students from both countries who participated in the interviews were interested in moral issues and had earlier expressed the hope that history study would teach people to learn from their mistakes and moral failings, they did not frame historical significance in terms of morality, fairness, and justice issues as explicitly as the students in Levstik's (2001) New Zealand study did. Nor did they view history as a progression toward equity and justice.

In fact, they doubted that people learned moral lessons from history, as evidenced in comments such as, "in some places Jews are still being persecuted today"; "we didn't learn anything from the Depression about how to use our money wisely"; "some people just don't care and are taught to hate"; "we still treat immigrants bad"; "those kids [who committed the murders at Columbine High School] didn't pay enough attention in history class because they didn't learn anything about hatred and suffering." Vivid events. The interviews of students from both countries revealed an affinity for vivid historical facts and details that were sometimes the "triggers" that helped them to recall and characterize the significance of events. For example, they talked about the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the Zimmerman telegram, the Lusitania, the use of poison gas, and trench warfare as part of World War I. They recounted "gross" stories of "rats in the trenches," but they also broadly characterized the entire war as wasteful, brutal, and traumatic on a scale never seen before. Sometimes, however, the vivid facts were all that the students could remember and represented their entire characterization of an event. For example, when the Holocaust came up, students seemed to miss the "big picture" of why and how it happened and launched directly into descriptions of "Jews having their heads shaved and gold fillings taken from their teeth ... lining up
people and shooting them ... putting them in showers and turning on the gas."

Overgeneralization. Some students also tended to oversimplify or overgeneralize some historical events in the interview discussions. For example, in the discussion of the Holocaust, although they knew a lot about how the Jews were persecuted, some expressed a view of Hitler as the only reason for the Holocaust, and the Holocaust as being solely about Jewish persecution; as one student said, "Hitler was mean and stupid because he blamed a Jewish doctor for letting his mother die." As for the Depression, although the American students, for example, could talk about "Hoovervilles," bank reforms, and Social Security, they agreed that "Hoover got us into it, and FDR got us out of it."

Interest. Finally, the American students initiated a tangential discussion about what made history study interesting, not just important or significant. They liked their current U.S. history teacher because "she groups things and covers things so you can cover what you need to and still go deep on the good stuff." All agreed that they would prefer depth about "interesting stuff" rather than "cramming in as much as possible." They dismissed their textbooks as "useless and boring; you don't learn any- thing from it and it's not interesting. It doesn't give enough details. The good stuff is not even in there, like what happened in the bombings in World War II." Fred asserted that "you can learn fine without the textbook if you have a good teacher."

Conclusion

Many of the students in this study had a good grasp of the concept of historical significance, as well as of events that could reasonably be considered historically significant in the twentieth century. In addition, several interesting issues emerge from the study that warrant consideration as part of the discussion on history for middle school students.

Official History

First, it was noteworthy that the student-generated lists of events in both groups reflected "official" history to a great extent - in other words, "the authoritative grand narrative of 'really' significant history" (Seixas, 1997, p. 27). The students' choices from our list also emphasized many prominent events from the "official" history or "grand narratives" of U.S. and British history. This tendency was true for both groups despite their disparate experiences with twentieth-century history study. That is, the American students had studied this century in school, whereas the English students had not. Moreover, the Americans claimed to have learned most of their history in school and the English to have learned most of it outside of school. This result at least suggests the possibility that an "authoritative grand narrative" pervades a given society or culture and is consistently reinforced in the official school curriculum.

The data from the English students reveal the effects of curriculum on young people's perceptions of the past. Despite the claim of English students that they learned more about history outside than inside school, they nevertheless appeared to be influenced by their school's history curriculum. As such, many British historical events-covered extensively in year 8 and preceding years-were featured in student choices of historically significant events. The fact that these students had not yet studied global events of the twentieth century appeared to have influenced their perceptions of the world and perhaps limited their view of the past to a more nationalistic and insular one. One wonders about the extent to which their view of historical significance in the twentieth century may change at the end of year 9 when all English students study the twentieth century in some depth. Similarly, attention to the issue of historical evidence—a strong implicit feature of the English national history curriculum—appeared to influence students' appreciation of the past. Overall, therefore, the students seemed acutely aware that an event's significance often is determined by how historians and others use historical evidence to portray the past.
Unofficial History
However, there was also a good deal of "unofficial" history in the student-generated lists of English and American students that was drawn from various sources: family, the media, and/or events they had read, heard, or studied in an anecdotal way that had some sort of personal resonance. For example, many English students listed events from their own lives; also, students from both countries listed sporting events and prominent media stories; and some American students listed the Columbine High School shootings, developments in popular music, events, or trends related to minority groups in the United States (e.g., the Harlem Renaissance, immigration, racism), Y2K (which segued into a discussion of their fears of the end of the world), and even air conditioning (perhaps mentioned humorously as a significant issue for young people growing up in the southern United States).

As noted previously, many English students tended to ascribe major historical significance to their own personal or family life. Responses such as these may be viewed two ways. On the one hand, they may be interpreted as evidence of a self-absorbed, naive, or even whimsical response to the interview questions. On the other hand, they may reflect the students' belief that because they are part of history, their history and the history of their families have as much significance as anyone else's history. When the English students were asked why their fellow students had listed events from their personal lives (e.g., the death of a relative, the first day at school), the explanations proved revealing. One student agreed with Laura that history is "about ordinary people, not just about well-known people." Others similarly stated that they had learned in history that "all people were important" and suggested that they enjoyed studying how "normal people" went about their day-to-day lives. Pete further commented, "We are all a part of history, so why not write about our lives? In some ways they might turn out to be as significant as anyone else's [life]."

Indeed, Seixas (1997) argued that students—especially minority students learning history within the context of the dominant culture—can "build a significant past around (their) own particularistic concerns" rather than relegating themselves to the margins of "significant" history (p. 27). Levstik and Barton (1997) have emphasized the importance of personal histories as a way of engaging all students in history study and helping them to see that they are "in" history. Levstik and Barton also noted that the use of personal history can introduce students to key elements of disciplined inquiry, particularly the idea of significance. Students can learn through their investigations that history is not necessarily everything that ever happened but is more about events that have considerable influence. Also, they can learn to view historical information critically, keeping in mind the essential "significance" question, "So what?"

Significance
We also noted that many students understood ideas about significance and significant events that their school history study had not emphasized as much as it did other historical topics. The English students had had little school experience with twentieth-century history, whereas the American students spent a preponderance of their eighth-grade history semester studying events prior to World War II, then had to cover the war, the Holocaust, and postwar history quickly in the remaining 2 or 3 weeks of the semester in an independent study/group project format. Still, many were able to conceptualize significance and to assign significance to major events, even though they had not studied them in depth in school. In other words, they somehow knew, perhaps partly because of their knowledge of history obtained outside school, that some events were important. Furthermore, they tried to distinguish between legitimate historical significance and media hype and to provide rationales for their thinking. For example, the death of a celebrity was not necessarily significant on the grounds that "just because someone is famous doesn't make him important," although some English students viewed the death of Princess Diana in terms of its broader meaning and how it reflected what was happening in society. Also, the American students recognized that the Columbine murders had been a media obsession focusing on the personalities of the killers and their
victims, but they also believed that there were larger moral issues underpinning the tragedy and that the murders reflected "something wrong" in American society.

Additionally, although many students seemed confident in explaining why and how events were significant in twentieth-century history, they were sometimes less certain and less articulate about the relevance of historical events to the world today. We posed this question in the interviews because we wondered if students would consider this type of relevance important and related to "significance." The American participants interviewed did not seem concerned about relevance to today, but the lack of it did not diminish their enthusiasm for history. When one researcher asked a probing question about relevance, the American students responded, "We don't need history to be relevant, just interesting. .... We like the stories our teacher told us."

Indeed, these students liked the vivid stories and details of history-and sometimes got lost in them. The fascination with narrative and historical detail has both advantages and disadvantages to which teachers will need to attend; Barton (1997), for example, cautioned that "the uncritical presentation of stories about the past has serious drawbacks" (p. 424). Among them are concerns that students will oversimplify historical events like the Holocaust and Great Depression, as some students in this study did, that they will not have access to alternative or more complex historical interpretations, or that they will not learn to examine the historical evidence on which stories and details are based and the broader significance of the events they study. Undoubtedly, the interesting stories and details are fun and are what draw students in. However, teachers may wish to consider how to use this material appropriately so that students also can learn to think critically about historical information, to frame and critique multiple interpretations of history, and to build a "big picture" of significance into which historical events fit.

By and large, historical significance for these students also seemed simply to mean that history fit into their lives somewhere that they may not actually use it, but somehow it resonates with them and helps them to understand aspects of history. As Shakira put it, "some of this stuff just sticks with you." A number of students mentioned examples of how history fit into their family relationships and conversations, as well as lessons learned about human behavior through their history study.

History's lessons about human behavior-both optimistic and pessimistic- seemed to offer students an important lens through which to view historical significance. In their responses to the first follow-up interview question, the American students emphasized that history study helps people learn from their mistakes and facilitates understanding so that particular groups of people will never again be persecuted as they have been in the past. Later, all seven of the American students elaborated in the interview on some insight they had gained-not all of it hopeful, but at least explanatory-about behavior and/or the moral lessons that history teaches. For example, the Holocaust serves as a cautionary tale about hatred, prejudice, and blind obedience of a leader; World War II was a human tragedy because of the first use of the atomic bomb and as an exemplar of why war must be avoided in the future; the Columbine murders were a reminder of what happens when students do not learn the right things at home and at school; and the Depression and New Deal were a case study of economic failure through which people should learn the importance of affording more protection from this type of disaster in the future. Clearly, this is tricky territory, and few would argue that history study is a panacea that can erase hatred and prejudice. Today, teachers may find themselves walking a fine line between giving students a realistic understanding of some of the more brutal and shameful historical human behaviors that seem to be repeated and facilitating students' insight into where progress has been made, wrongs righted, and justice achieved.

Perhaps most important, both groups' responses suggest that students lacked perspective on significant international events unrelated to their national/cultural biases. As stated previously, such
dramatic occurrences as the Russian Revolution, the Cold War, the Chinese Communist Revolution, the rise of fascism and Nazism, the Holocaust, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the demise of the Soviet Union, and the Arab-Israeli conflict failed to be itemized by any of the English students in their lists of top 10 events. Like the English students, the Americans did not focus on significant international events; none of the American students chose the following from the researchers' survey: the Chinese Communist Revolution, the Northern Ireland conflict, African civil wars and the end of colonialism, the formation of the European Union, the Chernobyl nuclear accident, the end of South African apartheid, and the Balkan conflicts in Bosnia and Kosovo. Furthermore, although the English students mentioned a few events that involved the United States (Vietnam, JFK's assassination, the Clinton scandal), the American students did not select any British-related events on the list, except for the death of Princess Diana.

Barton and Levstik's (1998) and Levstik's (2001) research on national identity and historical significance indicated that a nation's "geoposition" influences understandings of history; in other words, where a nation is situated in a global sense, its relations with other countries, and its proximity to centers of power shape how history is taught and learned in that nation. Levstik (2001) argues that American students, in particular, tend to focus on their own national history and on their country's role in major world events, and they view themselves as "teachers of the world" on historical issues, as having little to learn from the rest of the world. One could reasonably assume that this focus would appear in any nation whose "geoposition" places it in the center of world power. The tendency to focus on one's national history and national role in world affairs clearly was present in both the English and American groups in this study.

The students in this study, however, demonstrated little inclination to view their countries as "teachers of the world" or as case studies of gradual progress on social justice issues. Indeed, the students appeared eager to understand history, to explore why significant events had happened-both in their country and in other countries-that had caused injustice, suffering, sadness, as well as more positive developments such as social justice or economic progress. Because of their lack of exposure to many of the internationally significant events in the survey, they did not have the background knowledge to articulate perspectives on those topics or on what could be learned from them. From this study, we are cautiously optimistic that, for these groups of young students, the inclination to understand and learn from history and to conceptualize historical significance is there. What these students seem to need is the opposite of what Levstik envisioned for New Zealand children-that is, they need a broader curriculum that facilitates the study of historical significance outside one's own country.

A central goal of history study is to help students appreciate not only that certain events are considered important but also why they are (and were) considered significant by interpreters of the past. To understand the how is to understand more about the discipline of history and how the past is constructed. For example, the fact that the American Revolution is not considered significant enough to be mandated in the English national history curriculum says a great deal about the relative value of historical significance. Our study offers some intriguing insights into the relation between national culture, school curriculum, and the perceptions of young people. Additional studies using larger samples of students from diverse locations may further clarify and extend the understanding of students' perceptions of historical significance and their relation to national identity.
Appendix A

Researcher-Generated List of Events

Below are some of the events that historians, teachers, students, and others in both the United States and Great Britain selected as some of the most important events/happenings of the twentieth century. Place a CHECK MARK by the TEN events from this list that you think are the most important. Then for each event you selected, place next to it a number ranking from one to ten (1 = most important, 10 = least).

Death of Queen Victoria/End of Victorian Age
Vietnam War and Anti-War Movement
World War I
Civil Rights Movement
Russian Revolution
Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.
Wright Brothers and Charles Lindbergh Pioneer the Airplane
Northern Ireland Conflict and Peace Accord
Space Race/First Moon Landing
Women's Rights Movement
Watergate Scandal/President Nixon Resigns
Stock Market Crash/Great Depression
Arab-Israeli/Middle East Conflict
Rise of Nazism/Fascism
Margaret Thatcher Elected Prime Minister
World War II
Falklands War
Holocaust
African Civil Wars/End of Colonialism
Winston Churchill Elected Prime Minister
Technological Innovations (e.g., car, radio, TV, computer, Internet, etc.)
Armenian Genocide
Establishment of National Health Service
Formation of the European Union
Gandhi's Leadership of Independence for India
Scientific/Medical Discoveries (polio vaccine, penicillin, DNA, Einstein theories)
Mao Leads Chinese Communist Revolution
Korean War
Rise of Terrorism around the World
Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II
Chernobyl Nuclear Accident
Cold War/Anti-Communist Movement
AIDS epidemic
Development of Nuclear Weapons/Dropping of Atomic Bombs on Japan/Nuclear Arms Race
Challenger Explosion
Famine in Africa
Assassination of President John F. Kennedy
Persian Gulf War
1960s-"Swinging '60s" Music and Fashion Movement/Beatles
Breakup of the British Empire
England Wins the Soccer World Cup
Breakup of Soviet Union/Fall of Berlin Wall
Cambodian Genocide under Pol Pot Regime
South Africa Apartheid Ends/Nelson Mandela
Death of Princess Diana
Balkan Conflicts/Bosnia and Kosovo Crises
Appendix B

Interview Protocol

1. Why is it important to study history? Or is it important? If not, why not?
2. What were the most important things/topics that you studied the most in your history class this semester?
3. What are some of the least important things you've learned about history? Why are these things not important?
4. What makes an historical event important?
5. Where do you learn more about history in school or outside of school? If outside, where do you get your information about history? (Possible prompts-TV, Internet)
6. If outside, what are the most important things you've learned about history outside of school?
7. Here are some of the events that ranked highly in the survey. Tell us briefly what you know about each of them.
8. You've explained what each of these events was about and what happened. Now let's go back through this list and tell me how each of the events affects/impacts us today.
9. All of you listed as the number 1 event of the twentieth century something that a lot of others might also list (historians, etc.). Let's go around the group and each of you tell why you put this specifically as number 1—that is, The biggest event of the twentieth century.
10. Some who answered the survey listed some other events in their list of the most important of the century. Just picking some at random, can you tell why these might have been included on the top 10 list?
References


