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Northern Ireland

Alan McCully

Introduction

Unusually for a divided society which has experienced violent conflict, the nature of the history curriculum has not been a significant political issue in Northern Ireland (NI); nor have textbooks been a major source of dispute. This is because control of the school curriculum has remained outside the direct influence of local politicians. Rather, debates have been largely within the domain of educationalists. This has allowed history educators to respond positively to finding ways by which the teaching of history might contribute to greater understanding and social cohesion in a deeply fractured society.

It has been long recognised that, in NI, events from the past have been used in selective and partisan ways to justify the contemporary political positions of one community and, in so doing, denigrate the other.[1] Consequently, progressive educators have seen it as an imperative that school history should challenge prevalent historical myths and provide young people with a more reasoned understanding of Ireland's past. Yet, when two communities see the present from such different perspectives, a common and agreed-upon narrative of the past is unlikely. Instead, history teaching has adopted a process-led, enquiry-based approach. This was formally recognised in the first statutory NI Curriculum in 1989.[2]

Here, this curriculum's strengths and limitations are examined. Furthermore, current areas of debate are identified which suggest that the revised curriculum, introduced in 2007, has been taking history teaching forward.

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Context/Historical Background

NI is emerging from violent conflict. At its heart is a disputed national identity. From the partition of Ireland in 1922, the majority Protestant, or unionist, population held power and professed its political and cultural allegiances to the United Kingdom. The Catholic, or nationalist, population, deprived of political influence and favour, identified as Irish and sought reunification with the Irish Republic. Further, the school system was, and remains, largely segregated, with Protestant and Catholic children attending state and denominational schools respectively. Each sector tends to reflect, and reinforce, the dominant cultural ethos of their respective communities.[3] In 1968–1969, discontent due to the denial of civil rights for the minority population fuelled deep-seated communal tensions which, in turn, led to three decades of internecine conflict. The political settlement, reached through the Belfast Agreement signed in 1998, attempted to overcome division by making power-sharing a mandatory form of government; this led to legal equality and parity of cultural esteem, allowing Northern Ireland's citizens to hold either British or Irish passports. Both prior to and after 1998, official policy has acknowledged that education has a role to play in conflict transformation.

Empirical evidence regarding history taught in schools prior to 1968 is sparse. The prevailing view is that state schools avoided Irish history in favour of English history and taught the former only at senior examination level when it was relevant to the latter. Catholic schools, too, followed these examination syllabi but, without a prescribed curriculum in the junior years, had more freedom to pursue teaching which supported a nationalist view of Ireland's past.[4] Either way, little happened to challenge the collective memory of unionists that led them to maintain their links with Britain for safety and security reasons, or of the nationalists that depicted a long and violent struggle for freedom from British persecution.

The history curriculum of 1989 marked an important development in educational policy though, in truth, it consolidated ideas that innovative teachers from both communities had been pursuing for several years. In NI, though the statutory curriculum is the responsibility of a state-funded organisation, it is structured in such a way as to distance it from direct political interference. The curriculum had several salient features. Between the ages of 5 and 14, it stated, history teaching should foster conceptual understanding, investigative skills and critical thinking which, with the growing maturity of pupils, should then be applied to contentious aspects of Ireland's past. For the first time, therefore, pupils would study Irish history from the twelfth to the twentieth century.

However, rather than encountering events in a given narrative, they should engage with alternative perspectives and interpretations and reach conclusions for themselves based on the critical examination of evidence. The island's history should be viewed as shaped by waves of settlers each making distinctive contributions rather than as a struggle of one group to justify its supremacy over another. Surprisingly, this caused little public reaction. Cynics might argue that politicians at the time were too locked in bitter enmity to take heed of the subtleties of curriculum change. However, as the new curriculum placed the emphasis on enquiry and examining a range of perspectives, it was difficult to accuse those diffident towards it of partisanship.

This curriculum operated until 2007, straddling the years of ceasefires and post-conflict political accommodation. There has been no official evaluation, but a range of evidence is available from school inspectorate reports,[5] small-scale teacher studies[6] and studies of the views of young people.[7] These are of value because they represent a fully-fledged case study of enquiry-based, multi-perspective history teaching and serve as a model for the international community in other post-conflict regions.

The Debates

A curriculum, as experience shows, frequently deviates from that which is planned. Studies of the NI history curriculum show that teachers interpreted the document in accordance with their own views about history teaching. After all, teachers are products of society and subject to its influences and pressures. Yet, evidence indicates that most NI history teachers strive, at least in their conscious practice, to teach in a balanced and non-partisan way. Rather, the discernable division is between those who have taught history within the confines of the intrinsic aims of the discipline and those who have sought to use their teaching for extrinsic purposes to promote social change.[8] The former have largely embraced the philosophy of enquiry-based history, welcomed aspects of its innovative pedagogy and been happy to apply it to potentially sensitive aspects of the past. However, they have then been reluctant to explore the political significance of such events in the present. They are comfortable when enquiry remains within history's academic parameters but it is not their role to engage pupils in contemporary political debate. The latter take a social utilitarian view and sees history as important for promoting social change through challenging young people's cultural and political values. The curriculum favours the extrinsic approach. This is unfortunate only in that it has made it difficult for teachers to openly voice any apprehension towards the

curriculum. Teachers require open debate to help history teaching move forward in a more consensual and coherent way. Until 2016, no association of history teachers existed to facilitate this.

This matter has become more pressing with the advent of the revised curriculum of 2007[9] which places even greater emphasis on preparing pupils to be 'contributors to society'. The sweeping away of prescribed content and placing of the emphasis on schools to address directly the relationship between the past and pupils' sense of national identity has created an even greater danger that teachers will feel deskilled and overwhelmed. The revised curriculum has also introduced a Local and Global Citizenship Programme into secondary schools. The local dimension includes preparing young people to resist sectarianism and racism and to participate fully in the new political structures. Initially, some history teachers perceived citizenship education as a threat to their established position in the curriculum, but others are perhaps being too easily seduced by its social relevance and are allowing their history teaching to stray into areas which compromise their disciplinary rigour. The nature of the interface between history and citizenship and the need to identify the relationship between their complementary but distinct characteristics is another pressing issue for teacher debate.

Internationally, research evaluating the effectiveness of enquiry-based, multi-perspective history teaching on pupils' learning in conflict environments is still in its infancy. Work in NI provides some illumination. The overall outcome is encouraging. Recent studies of young people's experiences of history[10] reveal that they value the insight that school history brings, in that they expect it to provide new knowledge and alternative perspectives to the history they encounter in their communities. Yet, deeper analysis also shows that there continues to be major gaps in pupils' historical knowledge, particularly related to recent conflict. Even when young people are exposed to enquiry-based history, as they become politicised, they tend to use knowledge selectively to support the dominant views of their respective communities. It is difficult for young people to move beyond the formative family or community narrative even when they value what they encounter in schools.

These findings raise questions about pedagogy and practice since the early 1990s. Possible explanations are that:

1. Enquiry-based history lays too much emphasis on cognitive understanding, despite communal allegiances associated with national identity having deeply felt emotional associations. Unless teachers are confident with handling emotional reactions, pupils may fail to connect the formal learning in school with the raw allegiances that matter in the community.

2. Teachers convince pupils of the worth of a multi-perspective approach yet often lack the pedagogical skills to fulfil these expectations in practice.
3. Constant reference to the two dominant perspectives of unionism and nationalism, while broadening pupils' understanding, also tends to perpetuate the view of the conflict as being two opposing and irreconcilable blocks, whereas historical study should reveal a more nuanced picture, in which individuals and minorities act in ways different from the majority in their respective communities.

In an increasingly mature post-conflict learning environment, history educators must consider these explanations and develop practice accordingly.

So far, the issues raised have been confined largely to educational debates. Latterly, the legacy of the recent past has engaged the attention of civil society. Subsequent to the Belfast Agreement, NI has struggled unsuccessfully to find a mechanism for dealing with this; moreover, the question of justice for 'victims' of violence has been a recurring obstacle in the road to political progress. An officially commissioned *Report of the Consultative Group on the Past*[11] foundered on the question of paying financial compensation to all victims of violence, whatever the circumstances. In the absence of consensus, non-governmental organisations and other funding agencies intervened. Initially, this concentrated on 'psychological truth', particularly to enable those hurt and traumatised by violence to have their stories heard in a cathartic environment.[12] These initiatives have been led by lawyers, psychologists, therapists and community activists. Whether through indifference, timidity or exclusion, historians and history educators have been conspicuous by their absence.

It might be hoped that Lord Saville's recent report into the events of Bloody Sunday in 1972 will mark a turning point, in that its unexpectedly frank and unequivocal conclusions on the misconduct of British troops signalled a more open and considered climate in which stories of the recent past can be examined through the critical lens of historical truth. Research indicates that young people do want to know more about 'The Troubles' in school. At the age of 14 to 16, an elective course is provided for those taking the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examination, but, inevitably, the pressure for results makes it difficult for teachers to dwell too long on the human dimensions of conflict. However, the revised curriculum of 2007 offers flexibility and is encouraging risk-taking teachers to engage their younger pupils, both cognitively and affectively, with sensitive history from the recent and not so recent past and to help them make links with their own lives today. This is reawakening the debate regarding age appropriateness and the presentation of sensitive issues.

The challenge facing history teaching is ever quickening, for Northern Ireland is now in the midst of a decade of historical centenaries. The second decade of the twentieth century defined the future of a partitioned and troubled island. Between 2012 and 2022, there are a series of anniversaries including those of the signing of the Ulster Covenant, the outbreak of World War One, the Easter Rising, the Battle of the Somme and the partition of the island which will inevitably attract some who wish to use past events to promote exclusive and partisan interests. The implications are serious, for historians have argued that the furore caused by the commemorations of the Somme and the Rising in 1966 were a significant precursor to the violence which followed two years later. Politicians and civic society, north and south, are aware of the dangers but also of the opportunities that these anniversaries provide to challenge old certainties and bring fresh insight from the perspective of a new Ireland, committed to resolving its differences through peaceful dialogue. Historians and history educators are stepping forward to ensure that an informed and critical public debate takes place around the collective memory and commemoration associated with these events.

Documentation

Official documents relating to history teaching in NI are largely confined to those relating to statutory curriculum provision or accompanying guidance material. These documents are useful in tracing the evolution of approaches since 1989.

The *Proposals for History in the Northern Ireland Curriculum* were produced by the working group set up to construct the first statutory NI history curriculum. Its focus was evident from its introductory pages:

> History remains a live issue in Northern Ireland, but what passes for history does not always live up to its name. Too often partial views, prejudiced accounts and dangerous myths have been harnessed to processes inimical to the pursuit of truth. The members of the Working Group have been particularly anxious, therefore, to construct a programme of study that has balance and breadth and that pays due attention to objectivity and the disciplined use of sources.[13]

After consultation, *The Northern Ireland Curriculum: History* emerged. It emphasised the importance of fostering enquiry into key aspects of Irish history. A minor review in 1996 resulted in *The Northern Ireland Curriculum Key*

Stages 3 and 4: Programmes of Study and Attainment Targets for History. This addressed teacher concerns regarding content overload but made no concessions to those who felt 'overburdened' by the social responsibilities placed upon them. Indeed, pupils were now expected to explore:

> The cultures and lifestyles of people who are different from them within Northern Ireland, these islands and beyond, in order to understand and respect others, and where appropriate to question and challenge prejudice and stereotypes, for example neighbourhood graffiti and wall murals, and one-sided interpretations of significant historical events.[14]

However, an official school inspectorate report of 2006, *History Matters*,[15] reminds us that innovative curricula rely on committed teachers for their execution. The report concluded that 'the systematic linkage of the past and present is not a sufficiently strong aspect of history teaching in Northern Ireland'. Furthermore, '[t]he manner in which controversial issues in Irish history are addressed continues to require attention. Contested events are (usually) noted within the written planning, but classroom practice varies considerably and issues related to their current significance are not explored in a sufficiently detailed manner'.[16]

The revised curriculum, *Northern Ireland Curriculum Environment and Society: History* (2007),[17] advances even further down the social utilitarian road. In developing pupils as 'individuals' and 'contributors to society', teachers are given the flexibility to:

- Explore how history has affected their [pupils'] personal identity, culture and lifestyle;
- Investigate how history has been selectively interpreted to create stereotypical perceptions and to justify views and actions;
- Investigate the long- and short-term consequences of the partition of Ireland and how it has influenced Northern Ireland today, including key events and turning points.[18]

Twenty years after the Belfast Agreement, civil society is supporting the increasingly positive responses of teachers. *The Report of the Consultative Group on the Past* advocates 'working with young people so that they are provided with the skills necessary to ensure there is no repeat of the past, including through education programmes, to inform young people, in a balanced way, about the nature and impact of the conflict'.[19]

Conclusion

NI presents an innovative and creative case study as to how history teaching might respond to deep societal conflict. This intervention has been led by history educators from its two main communities working together. The question to be asked is less about the issues this has raised and more about why, given a divided society, it has not generated a greater social debate. As popular engagement with the various centenary commemorations continues, history teaching must take the opportunity to demonstrate its worth to the lives of pupils, their families and their communities.

Notes

1. B. Walker, *Dancing to History's Tune: History, Myth and Politics in Ireland* (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, The Queens University of Belfast, 1996), 57–74.
2. Department of Education Northern Ireland, *The Northern Ireland Curriculum History: Programmes of Study and Attainment Targets* (Belfast, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1991).
3. D. Murray, *Worlds Apart: Segregated Schools in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Appletree Press, 1985).
4. M. Smith, *Reckoning with the Past: Teaching History in Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2005), 107–121.
5. Education and Training Inspectorate, *History Matters: Report on a Survey on the Extent to which the Teaching of History in Post-primary Schools Helps Prepare Young People to Live in Northern Ireland's Divided and Increasingly Pluralist Society* (Bangor, Department of Education, 2006).
6. See M. Conway, 'Identifying the Past: An Exploration of Teaching and Learning Sensitive Issues at Secondary School Level', *Educate* 4, no. 2 (2004); A. Kitson, 'History Education and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland'. In *Teaching the Violent Past: History Education and Reconciliation*, ed. E. Cole (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 123–153.
7. See K. C. Barton and A. W. McCully, 'History, Identity and the School History Curriculum in Northern Ireland: An Empirical Study of Secondary Students' Ideas and Perspectives'. *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 37, no. 1 (2005): 85–116; J. Bell et al., *The Troubles aren't History Yet: Young People's Understanding of the Past* (Belfast: Community Relations Council, 2010).
8. For definitions of 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic' aims, see J. Slater, *Teaching History in the New Europe* (London: Cassell, 1995), 125–126.
9. Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, 'Northern Ireland Curriculum Environment and Society: History', accessed 23 June 2016, http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk/.

10. K. C. Barton and A. W. McCully, 'History, Identity and the School History Curriculum'; Bell et al., *The Troubles aren't History Yet*; K. C. Barton and A. W. McCully, 'Secondary Students' Perspectives on School and Community History in Northern Ireland', *Teachers' College Record* 112, no. 1 (2010): 142–181.
11. House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, 'Report of the Consultative Group on the Past', presented to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, in accordance with the Terms of Reference given to the Consultative Group on the Past, 22 June 2007, accessed 23 June 2016, http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmniaf/171/171.pdf/.
12. M. Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History after Genocide and Mass Violence* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 127.
13. Ministerial Working Group, *Proposals for History in the Northern Ireland Curriculum* (Belfast, 1990), 8.
14. Department of Education Northern Ireland, *The Northern Ireland Curriculum Key Stages 3 and 4 Programmes of Study and Attainment Targets for History* (Bangor: DENI, 1996), 4.
15. Education and Training Inspectorate, *History Matters* (Department of Education, 2006).
16. Ibid., 16.
17. Northern Ireland Curriculum: 'The Statutory Curriculum at Key Stage 3: Rationale and Detail' (Belfast: CCEA, 2007) http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk/docs/key_stage_3/statutory_curriculum_ks3.pdf (accessed 13 November 2017).
18. Ibid., 43.
19. 'Report of the Consultative Group on the Past', presented to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, 22 June 2007, 138. http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/victims/docs/consultative_group/cgp_230109_report.pdf (accessed 13 November 2017).

Further Reading

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Smith, M. *Reckoning with the Past: Teaching History in Northern Ireland*. Oxford: Lexington Books, 2005.

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