

Eamon de Valera? Did he play for Barcelona?

Teachers claim students will grow up ignorant of geography and history under Ruairi Quinn's plans. Kim Bielenberg reports

KIM BIELENBERG – 01 MAY 2013

Geography and history teachers fear their subjects are being downgraded as part of the reforms of the Junior Cycle.

Although they have not been compulsory in all schools, geography and history have effectively been core subjects in the vast majority, until now.

Now teachers are mounting a campaign to maintain their pre-eminent status.

Under plans for a reformed Junior Cycle, they will be reduced to optional subjects.

The teachers warn that large numbers of pupils will be able to pass through secondary school without any exposure to history or geography as main subjects.

There was evidence from social media in Britain in recent weeks, when former prime minister Margaret Thatcher died, that many teenagers did not know who she was.

Alongside Albania, Britain is one of the few countries where history has been made an optional subject in second-level schools.

Can we expect a similar lack of historical awareness here – with teenagers growing up clueless about Eamon de Valera and Michael Collins?

Peter Lydon, vice-president of the Association of Geography Teachers of Ireland, said: "A knowledge of geography and history forms part of a core of an individual's identity.

"If you take them away or leave them to chance, you undermine the contribution an individual can make to society," he added.

History teachers have enlisted the support of prominent historians such as Diarmaid Ferriter, who fired off a salvo at the minister in the Irish Independent recently.

He warned that Mr Quinn's plans could ensure that many students might end up ignorant of such events as the Lockout, the 1916 Rising and the War of Independence.

The minister has hit back, claiming that the Junior Cycle will make a knowledge of history more compulsory.

Although it will no longer be a core subject, schools will have to comply with 24 Statements of Learning.

Mr Quinn says, under his new framework, history will be protected, because schools will have to ensure each student will have to "value local, national and international heritage". Niamh Crowley, a Waterford history and geography teacher and spokeswoman for the History Teachers' Association of Ireland, said the requirements in the new Junior Cycle programme were "airy-fairy".

The framework sets out how the requirement to value heritage could be met.

The subjects, short courses "and other learning experiences" that could contribute include Chinese and religion as well as history itself.

Ms Crowley said: "One of the strengths of our current system is that students have a broad education and good general knowledge, but that will no longer be the case if history is just an option.

"In the Junior Cycle, students learn about a vast range of topics, from Martin Luther to the Nazi era.

"If it is optional, there is a danger that we will have a similar situation to that in Britain, where it is an elite subject mainly taught in middle-class private schools."

The decline of history in British schools since it was made optional past the age of 14 has led to much soul-searching.

In fee-paying schools, half of all pupils (48pc) take the subject, while only 30pc study it in state schools.

The historian Tristram Hunt has described the downgrading of the subject in schools as "state-sanctioned amnesia".

He said, in an article in The Guardian, that the coming generations were in danger of becoming detached from the past and losing their capacity to call power to account.

In Ireland, 92pc of Junior Cert students currently study geography, and 90pc do history.

Fintan O'Mahony, the ASTI's history representative and a teacher at Scoil Mhuire in Carrick-on-Suir, Co Tipperary, explained that a downgrading of the subjects was likely to have a knock-on effect at the Leaving Cert.

"Once it becomes optional, it is inevitable that the numbers will drop and that will mean fewer studying the subjects at the Leaving Cert."

Mr Quinn has argued that teachers will be able to inspire further study through new short courses.

He gave as an example young people in Wexford studying the local Battle of Vinegar Hill, or teenagers in Trim studying Norman castles.

Mr O'Mahony said: "Students might choose to do just a short course in history, but this could lack the breadth needed as a preparation for the Leaving Cert."

Shelagh Waddington, lecturer in Geography at NUI Maynooth, said: "If one of the general purposes of education is to create good citizens, students should be studying geography and history. In Australia, they have brought in a new curriculum because they found that students were not learning enough history and geography of their own country and the world"

This story appeared in the printed version of the Irish Independent

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