

Compulsory history, an anathema

Understanding is something better developed than given

‘I would urge that the Irish school system of the future should give freedom – freedom to the individual school, freedom to the individual teacher, freedom as far as may be to the individual pupil. Without freedom there can be no right growth, and education is properly the fostering of the right growth of personality’ – Pádraig Pearse, *The Murder Machine*.

Pearse’s words come to mind in the debate about the possible impact on history in second-level schools on foot of Minister for Education Ruairí Quinn’s proposals for a new Junior Cycle framework. Criticism has focused on the retention of just three “gateway” subjects – Irish, English and mathematics; all other subjects are to be offered at the discretion of the school and dependent on student subject choices.

Critics consider this to be a downgrading of history and want it to be compulsory for pupils sitting the Junior Cycle. At the moment, history is compulsory for students in about half of all post-primary schools so the degree of alarm being expressed is overstated.

The Minister’s initiatives are coming just as Ireland enters a lengthy period of commemoration. The dead as well as the living have a stake in these changes. Critics refer to the need to “understand the present, to develop the idea of the student as a citizen and to give understanding of what it is to be Irish”. However, the notion of “giving understanding” is somewhat problematic, as understanding is something that is better developed rather than given.

Most would agree that every child should develop an appreciation of the past, of where they fit in the chronological thread of civilisation and develop the motivation and skills necessary to enable them to explore and relate to the past, even if only to understand the present better.

If we accept this view, the question then becomes one of agreeing on what is the best way of doing this. The study of history is one way. But it is not the only one and might not even be the best one. Who would argue against the value to the historical imagination of the study of Yeats’ *September 1913*, of an introduction to Renaissance art or of an introduction to the classics?

The single most important attribute a young person should have acquired at the end of the Junior Cycle is a love for learning.

Compulsion of any sort is likely to diminish this possibility. There is a difference between what a student should do and what a student must do. It is ironic that historians should find themselves arguing for compulsion, given the experience of compulsory Irish. History teachers would be the first to acknowledge that few things beget subversion better than compulsion.

Indeed of any subject specialists, historians have probably least to worry about regarding the take-up of the subject in the reformulated framework. Students enter second level having taken eight years of a highly regarded history curriculum in primary school. It is surprising that opponents of the Minister’s plans make no reference to this. Furthermore, unlike many subjects, history teachers have a multitude of teaching and learning props close to hand in the landscape and daily lives of the children.

The Minister’s proposals are based on the assumption that we can trust schools and our young people to enter into this realm of study voluntarily. They also assume that we can trust their teachers to find new ways of accompanying them in this learning adventure.

They will be released from the straitjacket of a tightly prescribed syllabus and will be free to enter with their students into a collective project of the exploration of the past drawing on the props and artefacts that previous generations have provided for them.

Finally, they are based on the conviction the teacher and student will both recognise the enriching potential of this pursuit in the celebration of one's place in the long thread of human endeavour.

Compulsion and celebration are uneasy bedfellows.

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