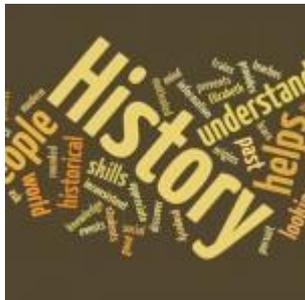


Removing history, as a compulsory subject from the proposed new junior cycle should be opposed_ Patrick Nulty, TD, Dublin West

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This article first appeared in *Lookleft* magazine and is on the need to retain history as a compulsory subject for the proposed new junior certificate cycle.

Much has been made of Government plans to scrap the junior cert. Instinctively, it is easy to favour plans for sweeping changes. Many of us have memories of too much rote learning in the secondary school system.

But it is far from clear that the plans released by the State's education think tank, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, will be good for children's education.

What the plans do are as follows: students entering first year in all schools will be required to study Maths, English and Irish as core subjects. All schools will then be free to offer a menu of other subjects. The number of core subjects studied at junior level will come down from eleven to eight.

There may be casualties in this new system. For example, science and languages will not be core. But we know that a language is compulsory requirement for entry into the NUI group of universities.

We know also that a knowledge of science is an increasingly important aspect of our conomic life.

However it is the downgrading of history into an option for schools that is of particular concern for me.

It is vital that young citizens have an understanding of history. The commodification of education is creeping further into the third level education sector and while scientific knowledge is crucial so too is an understanding of history and culture. After all history is far too important to be left to the historians.

How can we hope to comprehend how Ireland has evolved into what it is today without a thorough knowledge of the events, people and movements that have the shaped the development of our people?

Our interests are formed when we are young. The huge interest in local history and heritage is a fantastic community resource. All over the country, vibrant local history groups play a

community development role in shaping a distinct local identity as well as offering recreation and often an economic resource through attracting tourists. Why risk losing the next generation of local historians?

Rather than downgrading history as a subject we should be seeking to develop it. The Republic's education system has largely ignored the importance of social history -. Though an introduction to the history of how ordinary people lived and improved their lives in previous generations children can themselves aspire to active citizenship, and more fully understand the struggles which had to be fought by previous generations against exploitation.

Most educationalists favour bringing down the number of subjects studied intensely by secondary school students. Most also favour lessening the focus on big set piece exams.

But the downgrading of history within this framework would be a retrograde and dangerous step. Every child regardless of their socio-economic background has a right to understand history. In fact a knowledge of the past is crucial in questioning the present and fostering participation in a democratic society.

The good news is that these changes are not exactly a done deal. The first change will come on stream in 2014. It will be 2016 by the time the changes are fully rolled out. The campaign to maintain core status for history is gathering pace.

Catriona Crowe, from the National Archives, recently made an excellent presentation to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection. The History Teachers Association and Professor Diarmuid Ferriter have also made their concerns public. These voices are diverse and come from different points of view.

The importance of studying history in developing skills of analysis and critical thinking is clear. This time Education Minister Ruairi Quinn needs to listen to civil society.

We need more time to debate these changes, and we need a broader discussion of what is a holistic education for young people.

A willingness to challenge the status quo is important but change without regard to the consequences of certain so-called reforms is a myopic and dangerous approach to public policy. History should remain a central element of the junior cycle and the campaign to prevent this proposal from being imposed on the next generation of students is only beginning.

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