

Diarmaid Ferriter: Mr Quinn, please don't be the one to bring about the end of history

DIARMAID FERRITER – 23 MARCH 2013

History teachers from secondary schools are meeting in Dublin today to highlight their concern at the status of the subject they teach.

The contents of a policy document, A Framework for Junior Cycle, being championed by the Department of Education claims, according to Education Minister Ruairi Quinn, to set out "a vision, values and principles" for the junior cycle, describing "what students should know, understand and value".

There is a preoccupation in this document with the idea of "key skills" and much focus on literacy and numeracy, which few would doubt are essential components of education and learning at this level.

But the document also reveals a determination to downgrade other subjects and bunch them together as optional subjects of lesser importance, including history and geography, which under these proposals, will no longer be core compulsory subjects for the Junior Cert.

There is a sad irony to this; surely a detailed understanding of our collective past should be a priority in relation to what students "should know, understand and value"?

And why is a government that has stated its intention to take seriously the commemoration of the events from 1912-23 that led to the foundation of this State and that of Northern Ireland seeking to implement proposals that will ensure many students will have no knowledge of those key events?

Mr Quinn has made it clear what his priority is for 2016 and it is not about an appreciation and understanding of the significance of the 1916 Rising, but "to introduce standardised tests in Science for all students by 2016".

Enhancing students' scientific and numeracy skills should not be done by throwing history overboard.

This is not about invoking the cliché about learning the lessons of history; rather, it is about seeing history as essential to understanding who we are.

There is huge popular interest in history in Ireland, as evidenced by the success of history documentaries, lively radio programmes, the popularity of the online census returns for 1901 and 1911, people researching their family history and bestselling history books.

But it is an interest that needs to be nurtured from an early stage in order to keep the momentum and to establish a passion that, for many, will last a lifetime. It will not only deepen their understanding of their country's past but also give their analysis of the present much more weight and depth because of an appreciation of context, evolution and the cycles of history.

There has already been a serious undermining of history teaching in the UK, where most pupils disengage with the subject at the age of 13, which has had negative consequences.

Acclaimed British historian Niall Ferguson has highlighted the extent to which a neglect of British history has prevented a proper understanding of contemporary British problems.

In the history department in UCD we have a sign that proclaims HISTORY CAN TAKE YOU ANYWHERE.

It is accompanied by names of well-known broadcasters, novelists, lawyers and business people, all former history students, to highlight how the skills they gained through studying history have helped them to achieve distinction in their chosen field.

What they all share is an ability to communicate and analyse effectively and their grounding in history was essential to make this possible.

To continue this noble tradition, it is vital that students be first introduced to history in a meaningful way at second level in order to lay the foundations for engagement with a subject that will enhance their future no matter what they choose to do.

To have no knowledge of the past is to be permanently burdened with a lack of perspective, empathy and wisdom.

Knowledge of history allows us to debunk myths and challenge inaccuracies as well as deliberate amnesia and invented versions of the past.

It enables us to understand the formation of identity and the significance of diversity, nuance and context.

It is thus knowledge that we can bring to all experiences and walks of life.

To not embrace and reflect on history is to reject an essential cultural endeavour; to not think about evidence, proof and the methods of researching the past is to ignore crucial tools of enlightenment and empowerment.

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