

## School Curriculum

**Deputy Patrick Nulty:** I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this important matter today. Much has been made of the plans to scrap the junior certificate. Instinctively, people are inclined to support reform, change and what is perceived to be progress. However, the possible denigration of history in the new junior cycle curriculum is deeply retrograde and will potentially have a damaging effect not just on our education system, but on our democracy.

It is far from clear that the plans released by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment will be good for education. Under those plans, students entering first year in all schools will be required to study mathematics, English and Irish as core subjects. Schools will then be free to offer a menu of other subjects to study and the number of core subjects studied at junior level will reduce to eight.

There will be casualties in this new system. For example, science and languages will not be core. However, we know that a language is compulsory requirement for entry into the NUI group of universities. We know also that science is an increasingly important aspect of our economic life. Therefore, the downgrading of history into an option for schools 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 tertiary education sector and the secondary sector. 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 shaped the development of our island? 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 offering recreation and often an economic resource through attracting tourists. Why risk losing the next generation of local historians at such an early age and for no good reason?

Most educational experts favour reducing the number of subjects studied intensely at secondary level. Most also favour reducing the focus on big set piece exams, but the downgrading of history within this framework would be a retrograde and disastrous step. Every child regardless of socio-economic background has a right to understand history.

Knowledge of the past is crucial in questioning the present and never before has there been a greater need to question what is happening in the present.

The good news is that this is not a done deal. While the first change will come on stream in 2014, it will be 2016 by the time the changes are fully rolled out. What a terrible indictment it would be on our country that 100 years after the Easter Rising would see the final nail in the coffin of history as a compulsory subject in the junior cycle.

Ms Catriona Crowe, from the National Archives, recently made an excellent presentation to the Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection. The History Teachers Association of Ireland and eminent commentators such as Professor Diarmaid Ferriter and Mr. Fintan O'Toole have also made their views known publicly. These voices are diverse and come from different points of view. The importance of studying history in developing analytical skills and critical thinking is clear. I urge the Minister of State, Deputy Cannon, to listen to those voices in civil society. We need more time to debate these changes and we need a broader discussion of 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.

This is not an ideological question. People with a range of different opinions in society will coalesce around the issue. The idea that every child might not get an understanding and knowledge of history at least up to the junior cycle is deeply worrying for our democratic system and our knowledge of our society. We need the ability to question and comprehend the world about us as it becomes ever more complex. I appeal to the Minister of State, in the most non-partisan fashion I can, not to proceed with this deeply dangerous proposal, which has no public support.

Where did this notion originate? Who is driving it and why? Education is not just about the murder machine as Pádraig Pearse called it, but is about knowledge, culture and learning. I urge the Minister not to proceed with this proposal.

**Deputy Ciarán Cannon:** I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. I am replying on behalf of the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Quinn. Currently, only 52% or just over half of all post-primary schools are obliged to provide history as a core subject. Although that is

the case, it is great to acknowledge that over 90% of the students who sit the junior certificate enter the examination for history. However, there are currently over 5,500 students who do not present for history in the junior certificate examination.

In October 2012, the Minister, Deputy Quinn, published A Framework for Junior Cycle. The framework will be implemented on a phased basis from September 2014. While they are designing new junior cycle programmes, those responsible in schools will have to be mindful that there will be a change in how junior cycle programmes will be developed. They must be mindful not only of the principles and key skills, but also of the 24 statements of learning specified in the framework. These statements describe what all students should know, understand, value and be able to do at the end of the junior cycle process. The key statement of learning for history declares that every student "values local, national and international heritage, understands the importance of the relationship between past and current events and the forces that drive change". For all schools, teachers and students, the reality of that statement will mean a study of history predominantly as a full subject while some may have the option of studying history as a short course. The revised history specification, developed in consultation with stakeholders, will be available for implementation in schools from September 2017. Teachers will be provided with continual professional development in advance of that date.

History is one of 21 subjects available to schools for inclusion in the new junior cycle programme. Of those 21 subjects, only Irish, English and mathematics have mandatory status. Advocates of geography, modern languages, science and the arts have also sought additional time or mandatory status for their subjects. The more subjects that are made mandatory or compulsory, the less choice there is for our junior certificate students. Curriculum choice is an important factor in motivating students to learn and in encouraging them to remain in school to the completion of the senior cycle. It is important that the focus of the educational experience for our students is on the totality and the quality of learning throughout the three years of the junior cycle. The minimum time allocated for subjects such as history will be 200 hours or the equivalent of three 45 minute periods per week over three years. For many schools, this will actually lead to an increased provision rather than a decreased provision in history. This will allow not only for a deepening of the student's historical knowledge but, more important, for the deepening of the student's ability to analyse, interpret, write and develop historical skills more thoroughly. Neither I nor the Minister, Deputy Quinn, is questioning the role of history in education as the framework is delivered. In fact, we are affirming its role.

**Deputy Patrick Nulty:** I thank the Minister of State for his reply. Let us consider the senior cycle, for example. Subjects such as applied mathematics and classics are on the curriculum, but how many children get the opportunity to study them in school in practice? Very few. By

and large, they are only taught in schools with significant external resources, with some exceptions. I call on the Minister of State to engage with this question directly. If the Minister's reforms proceed, does the Minister of State believe that ten years from now there will be more or fewer students in the junior cycle taking history? As the Minister of State has said, the overwhelming majority of students do history at the moment, so why tamper with that?

History is unique and critical. It goes to the core of who we are and what we are. Every child has a right to know about the history of this island, given what we have been through in recent years and during several tumultuous decades. People have all sorts of analyses, opinions and interpretations of that. The study of history allows people to think critically.

The Minister of State has not explained why we should not continue with history as a compulsory subject. What will happen - I guarantee it - is that over time fewer schools will offer history and fewer students will have the option to study it. The schools with the greatest resources offer the greatest subject choice. That is a fact. However, a knowledge of history is a crucial element of democracy. This is why I am calling on the Minister of State to reconsider this proposal.

History is different from other subjects referred to by the Minister of State. English, Irish and mathematics are compulsory for good reason. The Minister of State would not suggest that they should be optional subjects. Why not retain history? What is the problem with it? I imagine the history curriculum requires reform over time, as does the curriculum of all subjects, but I hear no great clamour for reform like what we have heard for the Irish curriculum. This is a crucial issue and the legacy of the Minister of State and the Minister, Deputy Quinn, in the Department of Education and Science will be judged by decisions such as this. I genuinely believe that if the Minister proceeds by undermining history further it will damage our democracy and our education system. The vast majority of citizens I speak to - I imagine it is the same for the Minister of State - want their children to have a knowledge of history and want it to be taught in school. Otherwise, it will become elitist.

**Deputy Ciarán Cannon:** I have every reason to expect that in ten years' time we may have a similar if not an increased number of students studying history. I do not see any facet of the new junior certificate framework that in any way threatens that proposition. The implementation of the framework provides an opportunity to recast history as a vibrant student-centred subject with a significant emphasis on the relevance of past experiences to our lives today and in future. Deputy Nulty has referred to this aspect. The role of history in the new junior cycle will be balanced against the contribution of the other subjects in

enabling students to engage with a new broad and enriched junior cycle programme that meets the requirements of the principle statements of learning and key skills.

History teachers currently attract some 90% of students to study history although in fact only 50% are obliged to do so. That is taking place because of the love of the subject and the fact that history teachers are engaging students' interest. The teaching of the subject allows them to delve, analyse and critique historical people and events and thereby develop an empathy and understanding that may inform their perspectives of events today and, hopefully, enhance their wisdom in terms of decision-making in future. That is the essence and the spirit of the reform that is being carried out. That should continue to be the case as the framework is implemented in the coming years. I am sorry but I do not share the fears of Deputy Nulty to the effect that this will in any way undermine the teaching of history. In fact, I believe it will enhance the teaching of history in future.

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