***A Question of Identity? Purpose, Policy and Practice in the Teaching of History in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland***

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**Abstract:**

*This article traces the evolution of history education, north and south of the Irish border since partition of the island in 1921. It begins with an historical overview of the situation common across Ireland prior to partition. Subsequent developments in history provision in elementary, primary and early secondary education are traced in each of the two jurisdictions that emerged after partition, the Irish Free State, which became the Republic of Ireland, and Northern Ireland. In each case, the educational and political imperatives of each, which shaped these changes, and resulted in divergence, are identified, analysed and compared. Evidence is drawn from the dominant literature in each jurisdiction and on relevant curriculum documents. The paper concludes by demonstrating that in a post-modern, increasingly globalised world, shared educational ideas and political aspirations emerging from the Irish peace process are acting to bring the respective history curricula back into symmetry and, thereby, providing opportunities for increased co-operation.*

**Key Words:** Ireland, History Education, National Identity, Education and Conflict

**Introduction**

This article examines the teaching of history in Ireland and looks at its historical and ideological development over time, from the establishment of the national school system in the 1830s to current debates relating to how history should be taught during the ‘decade of commemorations’ (2012-2022), a period which includes the centenaries of key events and movements in the histories of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.1 Focusing on the teaching of history during the period of compulsory education with emphasis on elementary / primary education (5/6 years to 14 years), the article begins with a shared narrative from the setting up of the national school system in 1831 to partition in 1921/22.2 It then outlines developments in both jurisdictions, highlighting points of divergence and agreement between history curricula and between their underpinning ideologies and practices. The article concludes by discussing some critical issues that emerge in relation to the teaching of history in Ireland in the twenty-first century.

The methodology used was a simple one: drawing on the dominant literature in each jurisdiction and on relevant curriculum documents, the authors separately constructed critical narratives which served to identify emerging points of convergence and divergence between the two systems. These partial critiques were then subjected to an iterative process of dialogue and redrafting until the final article emerged. This approach is evident in the article, where the voice of each section is, to some extent, determined by the nature of the available sources while the overarching framework and the concluding arguments are shared constructions.

**A national system for all**

The national system of education set up in Ireland in 1831 was one of the first of its kind in Europe. Established 41 years in advance of the English system, it was multi-denominational and aimed *inter alia* to promote identification with the British Empire, increase governability and reduce poverty, and to extend state control of the education sector hitherto characterised by private denominational institutions and societies, and by a network of informal, localised and potentially subversive ‘hedge schools’ (Walsh, 2012, pp. 18, 19; Coolahan, 1981; Akenson, 1975).3 The multi-denominational character of this social experiment quickly fell foul of inter-religious rivalry and by 1870 the trend towards denominationalism was largely accepted (Coolahan, 1981, p.26). Overseen by a National Board, whose composition reflected key religious and economic interest groups of the period, the system changed little in the decades leading up to 1920, when efforts by the government to introduce local control through the establishment of County Education Committees were defeated, largely by the resistance of the Catholic Church (Walshe, 2012, p. 21; Akenson, 1975, p. 20). The system inherited by the Irish Free State, therefore, was both centralised and denominational. In contrast, in the new entity of Northern Ireland central authority had to be re-established by the fledgling Ministry of Education and, unlike its counterpart in the south, it met resistance from the Catholic hierarchy.

The narrow and literary programme implemented in national schools in Ireland between 1831 and 1900 was mediated through state-sponsored textbooks which prioritised education as a moral and socialising project (Coolahan, 1981, p. 20). Convinced that history textbooks would be inevitably partisan, the Board excluded from the curriculum ‘all systematic teaching of history’ (Fitzpatrick, 1991, p. 171). The *Revised Programme of Instruction*, however, which was introduced in 1900, sought to integrate history into the programme through sanctioned texts (Walshe, 2012, p. 53). By 1908, persuaded by the idea that history could be taught in an unbiased way, a primary history curriculum had been developed, along with a range of approved textbooks focusing on both Irish and British history (Fitzpatrick, pp. 173, 174). With significantly more Irish history content than its counterpart in lower second-level education, and reflecting the progressive character of the *Revised Programme,* the 1908 primary provision included an emphasis on local history and the use of historical poems and ballads. The debate in relation to bias and subversion resurfaced in the aftermath of the 1916 Easter Rebellion but the 1908 programme remained in place until partition led to the formation of two separate educational systems with divergent views on teaching history and its relationship to wider issues of identity and citizenship.

**History teaching in Northern Ireland, 5-14**

From the outset the unionist northern government was acutely aware of nationalist hostility from within and without as a threat to Northern Ireland’s existence. It moved early to re-impose central authority in education, this time from Belfast. In opposition, a third of Catholic elementary schools continued to show allegiance to Dublin until autumn, 1922 when the government there terminated the payment to teachers, thus forcing the schools into the northern system (Akenson, 1973, pp. 44-45). Once initial attempts to re-assert non-denominational education had failed, largely due to mutual suspicion and the self-interest of the churches, the government was prepared to use the power that it had over finance, school structures and curriculum to promote positive attitudes towards the United Kingdom and to guard against potential nationalist agitation in schools under the influence of the Catholic Church. Moreover, the fulcrum of political influence had moved eastwards. Akenson (1970, p.50) asserts that ‘parity with England came to dominate the social policy of the Ulster government’. Thus, after 1921, their actions ‘in most matters, and especially in education, diverge sharply from their southern counterparts’.

The Lynn Committee was set up to establish the structures of the new education system. Reporting in 1922 its recommendations clearly pointed to the role history education might play in orientating the new state politically when it declared that children ‘should acquire an elementary knowledge of the history of Great Britain, and of Ireland, especially Ulster as part of the United Kingdom’ (Cited in Smith, 2005, p.112). History education was to be an option only in the final three years of elementary education, but a compulsory component of secondary provision. Smith (2005) has briefly surveyed the Stormont decades, drawing on small scale research reports, official documents, inspection reports and anecdotal evidence. The picture that emerges of the elementary and early secondary years is one characterised by a tension in official attitudes. There was a desire to expose children to an ‘Ulster as British’ narrative but also unease that emphasis on a local dimension might legitimise the claim from Catholic schools to teach about Ireland’s past. Consequently, a watching eye was kept on the endorsement of suitable textbooks and, in the primary school, a lack of attention to history was more desirable than encouraging teaching which might be subverted by a nationalist agenda. In any case, this vigilance was probably wasted as Murray’s study of two primary schools in the mid 1970s demonstrates the power of schools from both communities, regardless of official policy, to transmit contrasting messages of identity through the ‘hidden curriculum’ (Murray, 1985). Hansard minutes of proceedings in Stormont in the 1950s and 1960s do show that, periodically, as confidence in the Catholic community was growing, and revisionism at academic level was gaining momentum, voices did speak out for a more inclusive approach to teaching Irish history (Smith, 2005, pp. 118-119). However, before any significant change took place greater forces took charge and in the late 1960s Northern Ireland began its descent into communal violence.

Bar external senior school examination syllabi and anecdotal accounts there is a dearth of evidence to illuminate students’ experience of the history curriculum in the two decades prior to the Troubles. However, Magee (1970), in an influential paper drawing largely on policy documents and his own extensive educational experience, presents a snapshot of history teaching north of the border just as violence was gaining momentum. He describes an official position which is suspicious of anything Irish and where ‘Irish history was taught only where it impinged in a significant way on the history of Great Britain’. In primary schools, history was treated as optional, Irish history was largely ignored and subject provision was ‘spasmodic, unco-ordinated and largely academic’ (Magee, 1970, p.5). Surviving resources indicate that the best work frequently involved children engaging in local studies, prompted by the enthusiasm of individual teachers. As for secondary level, history was taught extensively but, Magee (1970, p.7) concludes, it was ‘too verbal, too intellectualised’ and inaccessible and irrelevant to the majority of young people. When the Stormont parliament fell in 1972 direct rule from London prevailed and, over time, this opened up the possibility for a more constructive role for history teaching in fostering better community understanding.

Thus, in the past three decades NI has presented a case-study on how history education might respond to conflict, first during violence and then in a society seeking transformation. Northern Ireland’s divisions are closely associated with contested national identities where historical collective memory runs deep. Contemporary political actions frequently seek justification in real or perceived grievances in the past. Initially, critical educators sought to break the destructive connection between selective historical memory, community affiliation and antipathy to the “other” (Magee, 1970). Ways were sought that would encourage young people to better understand the root causes of division and thereby challenge the history they encountered at home and in the streets. Decisions still had to be made as to what was the most appropriate curriculum framework to achieve this while still developing children’s all round historical understanding; and at what age pupils should be introduced to potentially controversial material.

The decision to introduce a Northern Ireland Curriculum in the early 1990s was largely a consequence of direct rule. The Conservative led British Government’s decision to develop a National Curriculum for England was soon followed by a similar proposal for NI. What emerged mirrored closely developments in England but also allowed recent local history initiatives to be officially endorsed (Phillips et al., 1999). The history curriculum followed a similar structure to the constructivist English model. It, too, was underpinned by the idea that a curriculum founded on sound principles of historical investigation – the formulation of interpretations only when consistent with evidence, the sound grasp of the historical concepts of chronology, a sense of time and causation and the recognition that those who acted in the past did so from different perspectives – could then equip young people to engage with more complex historical questions as they progressed through school.

In NI the preparation of the excellent *History Guidelines for Primary Schools* (NICED, 1984) had already set a precedent for an evidence based approach to teaching history in primary classrooms. However, establishing sound enquiry principles now took on extra significance. The rationale contained intrinsic aims related to the fostering of historical thinking but also made explicit reference to the extrinsic aim of contributing to a more peaceful society (for extrinsic aims, see Slater 1995, pp.125-6). The History Working Party entrusted to draw up the new curriculum was directed to ensure that what emerged contributed to the cross-curricular theme of Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) (NICC, 1989; 1990, p. 89). In a society in conflict it was deemed particularly pertinent to develop critical thinking as a pre-requisite for teaching potentially emotive and divisive historical events in a measured and open way. This premise was an important influence in the way the original history curriculum was structured across the compulsory stages of primary and secondary education. It resulted in complementary but distinctive functions for the primary (key stages 1 and 2) and secondary (key stage 3) strands of the curriculum. The role for the primary school was envisaged as one that built a foundation of historical thinking, thus equipping older students at key stage 3, and beyond, to critically examine the more contentious past. The History Working Party proposals advocated that teachers ‘should not hold back’ from controversy but at the same time cautioned that sensitive materials ‘should be introduced at a time when pupils have sufficient maturity to possess the critical faculties to handle it appropriately’ (NICC, 1990, p.6). Ideally, in the Working Party’s view, this was aged 14 and over.

In turn, the cognitive model of progression adopted, together with commitment to EMU, influenced the working party’s selection of content. Most obviously, the core units of study selected were to be examined in their Irish, as well as their British and European contexts, thus ensuring for the first time that all children and young people would study aspects of Irish history. However, at primary level this would largely be confined to social dimensions with political history reserved for key stage three and beyond.

At key stage one, as in England, the emphasis on introducing children to the concept of evidence and to developing their sense of time and period was to be developed by studying people and events close to the children’s own experiences, related to the history of their own families, communities and familiar celebrations; and then more formally on a study of the recent past. Attention was on skills and concepts rather than pupils encountering anything that might be deemed culturally and politically sensitive. At key stage two (aged 9-11) compulsory units of study on the themes of Early Times, the Vikings and the Victorians were prescribed but, again, the emphasis was on social history and the lives of ordinary people. Even when tackling the Victorians in the final year of primary school political events were largely omitted from the official guidance materials. For example, when teaching the Irish Famine teachers would cover the traumatic experiences of those who suffered through starvation, eviction and emigration but be less likely to investigate the responsibility of Government for people’s suffering. Thus, a legitimate argument was advanced that concentration on the familiar and the social, allied to embedding critical skills, was in line with children’s cognitive maturity and would better prepare students to engage with Ireland’s contentious past at a later age. Yet, near contemporaneous research was indicating that even by the age of three many children in Northern Ireland have already acquired an embryonic framework of sectarian identification (Connolly, 1998). It might be argued that the history curriculum as designed allowed primary teachers to side-step responsibility to challenge the myths and partial understanding younger children may have acquired in their families and communities.

How far did the first NI History Curriculum achieve its aims? No official single subject evaluation was commissioned during the period of its implementation. An NFER Cohort study tracked 3000 students across five years of schooling between 1996 and 2003.It makes few direct references to history in the primary school but in recording views at the end of key stage two it found that pupils did not perceive socially orientated subjects like history to be given great importance; nor did they think that the curriculum, generally, was very relevant to their everyday lives (Harland et al.,1999).

Barton (2001a, 2001b) provides the main insights into the impact of primary history under the first NI Curriculum. His comparative study of NI and US primary students’ understanding of history highlights significant differences between the two, some of which he attributes to the nature of the respective primary history curricula. Whereas, the strong narrative approach of American school history influenced US children into seeing history’s purpose as providing a sense of national identity, pupils in NI thought history should help them learn about people different to themselves. Possibly, this reflects the emphasis at key stage two on investigating the everyday social lives of people from the more distant past. Further, NI children were more aware of the place of evidence in historical thinking, had a more complex grasp of chronology and sense of period and were better able to see forces for change beyond the level of human agency. Thus, Barton argued that the primary history curriculum was achieving two of its core objectives by building a foundation for the critical evaluation of evidence and by encouraging children to acknowledge and value difference. Yet he also observed that, even in the primary classroom, children showed interest in issues of identity and ‘by keeping controversy at arm’s length, teachers may be inadvertently surrendering to influences outside the school – influences that they might be uniquely qualified to challenge, and which pupils expect them to confront’ (Barton, 2007b, p. 42). He encouraged educators to facilitate the study of events from the past which develop a shared sense of identity, ‘one that transcends the community divide’ (Barton 2007a, p.13), as well as events illustrating difference.

Key stage three is not the major focus of this paper but it is relevant to track the transitional impact of the original curriculum from primary to secondary education. Studies (Barton & McCully, 2005; 2010: Bell, Hansson & McCafferty, 2010) indicate that students’ understanding of enquiry did transfer and that students did value the role school history plays in helping them make sense of history they encounter in classrooms and elsewhere. Yet, the capacity to move beyond their own cultural allegiances to understand the past from other perspectives proved difficult, as did establishing connections between historical events and the contested present. Young men, particularly, as they grew older were more likely to draw selectively on their historical knowledge to support community orientated positions, perhaps, reflecting increasing politicisation with age. Several small scale studies also suggest that teachers while professing commitment to the rhetoric of an enquiry based, multi-perspective curriculum may be less proficient at carrying it through in practice (Conway, 2004; Kitson, 2007). A revised curriculum introduced in 2007 has both created greater flexibility to meet student needs and further strengthened the extrinsic aims of the key stage three history programme. Rather than eschewing the identity issue as was the case previously teachers are required to provide students with opportunities to ‘explore how history has affected their personal identity, culture and lifestyle’ (CCEA, 2007). Time will tell as to how far the changes will enhance history teaching’s contribution to societal transformation.

As regards the impact of revision on primary history at key stages one and two there are questions as to how far the move away from subject specific provision to an integrated *World Around Us* approach (embracing geography, history and science and technology) has sustained the foundation for enquiry, considered important for the more challenging work in the secondary school. Great emphasis is placed on developing generic “thinking skills” but there is a danger that this will be at the expense of understanding which is specifically historical. Certainly, the time spent on preparing teachers for history in initial teacher education has already been substantially reduced in response to curriculum change. Prescriptive content has been removed from statutory provision but accompanying guidance indicates that the expectation is that the emphasis will continue to be placed on social history. However, it should be noted that a strong citizenship dimension has been embedded into the *Personal Development and Mutual Understanding* strand of the curriculum which more directly addresses issues of community division than before.

**History teaching in the Republic of Ireland, 5-14**

The intention behind the educational policy of the newly independent Irish state from the 1920s to the 1960s was primarily one of Gaelicisation, the construction of a distinctive and singular national identity and the development of the Irish Ireland envisioned by its founders. The Irish education system in general during this period was characterised by administrative conservatism (Akenson, 1975) and by cultural nationalism in terms of its curriculum (Coolahan, 1981). The curriculum agreed by the First National Programme Conference in 1921-22 and by the Second National Programme Conference of 1926 prioritised the revival of the Irish language above all else, a policy which included the teaching of history (and other subjects) through the medium of Irish, even in areas where Irish was not children’s first language. The Irish language was seen as synonymous with Irish identity and the education system was identified as the main vehicle for its revival as the majority language. Available statistics suggest that by the 1940s history was taught through Irish in a majority of primary schools (Doherty, 1996 p. 339, fn 2).

The teaching of history was, in essence, a state-building project, particularly in the context of primary education. Prior to the introduction of free second level education in the 1960s, the majority of children completed their compulsory schooling in national primary schools. The second-level system was largely private and denominational and less subject to state control through inspection or through prescribed curricula. The primary sector, therefore, offered the most fertile ground for the reconstruction of Ireland’s ‘imagined community’ (Anderson, 1991; O’Callaghan, 2009, p. 19).The ideological thrust of the history programme is perhaps best articulated by this quote from the *Notes for Teachers*, issued in the early 1930s and which remained in use, with some modification, until 1971.

In an Irish school in which History is properly taught, the pupils will learn that they are citizens of no mean country, that they belong to a race that has a noble tradition of heroism, and persistent loyalty to ideals. In such a school no formal exhortation should be necessary to bring home to every pupil the worth of good faith, courage and endurance and the strong grounds there are for the belief that a race that has survived a millennium of grievous struggle and persecution must possess qualities that are a guarantee of a great future.

The *Notes* go on to broaden the definition of patriot to include ‘the ordinary people of Ireland who do their daily work faithfully’ and warn against any ‘distortion of the facts of history’ or suppression of facts ‘derogatory to national pride’ (Department of Education, 1934).

The nationalist ideology at the heart of the history curriculum, which included the implicit conflation of Irish identity with Catholicism, did not go uncontested.4 Protestant church leaders protested against the Catholic nationalist character of history textbooks and the enforcement of Irish language requirements, criticizing them as inherently sectarian (Jones, 1992; Doherty, 1996). Questions of ‘nationalistic bias’ surfaced from time to time in Dáil (parliamentary) debates and in public discourse, prompting one commentator to call for the setting up of a ‘small committee of experts’ with representation from the Department of Education, professional historians and teachers, ‘to examine how far this criticism is valid’ (Hibernia, 1962, p. 8).

As it happens, consonant with other impulses towards change, such a committee, comprising of historians and educationalists, was set up four years later by Fianna Fáil, the party then in government. It is worth noting that this occurred at a time when there was a renewed and intense focus on the Irish revolutionary period, and, in particular, the Easter Rebellion of 1916, the half-centenary of which fell in 1966. In subsequent decades, the celebratory nationalism deemed to be characteristic of the commemorations at this time became embedded in public discourse as one of the factors that contributed to the Troubles. The unreflective teaching of a narrow, nationalist school history programme was identified as another.5

However, more recent research into the history of 1966 has revealed a more complex and differentiated story, suggesting, among other things, state efforts to embed a modernising agenda into the commemorative events, rather than a backward-looking celebratory nationalism (Daly and O’Callaghan, 2007). Indeed, prompted by the growing belief of politicians that the economic future of the country was generatively tied to the quality of its education system and, in particular, to the issue of access, education itself was on the cusp of change and within five years had undergone something akin to a revolution.

Charged with considering how history should best be taught across the education system, the Study Group on the Teaching of History in Irish Schools established in 1966, signalled a move away from the narrow and inward-looking provision characteristic of of the system since the foundation of the state. The Study Group was conservative and traditional in its conceptualisation of children’s capacities. Nonetheless, its recommendations for primary level, which included a focus on historical concepts and processes, on social, economic and local history and on the links between past and present, foreshadowed many of the changes brought forward by the 1971 Primary School Curriculum (Study Group on the Teaching of History, 1967; Department of Education, 1971a, 1971b). While the 1971 curriculum continued to draw on the rhetoric of ‘sublime patriotism’, it went beyond the recommendations of the Study Group, promoting engagement with historical sources, and with local, social and global history. Premised on a child-centred perspective, it supported active and experiential learning across the curriculum and espoused an integrated and constructivist approach to knowledge. History became part of a broader subject, Social and Environmental Studies, which included geography, civics and elementary science (Department of Education, 1971b, p. 87). While history could be introduced informally from first class (6/7 year olds) onwards, it began formally in third class with a focus on early and medieval history and on ancient civilisations. In senior primary, the focus shifted to significant periods in European history and to Irish political history, particularly the key epochs, events and individuals that punctuated the overarching narrative of independence. Patch studies of life in a Norman Castle, the Great Irish Famine or the 1798 Rebellion and line of development studies on themes such as energy and transport, introduced a new vocabulary into history teaching and novel ways of organising children’s learning experiences through field trips and collaborative group work.

However, while 1971 marked a watershed in curriculum at policy level, it was less successful at the level of practice. Although there was some evidence of an increase in project-based work, the teaching of history continued to be dominated by the textbook, while there was little engagement with local history or with the local environment as a site for historical learning in the majority of classrooms (Department of Education, 1983; Motherway, 1986; 1988; Irish National Teachers’ Organisation, 1996). This failure of implementation was a recurring problem within the system and evident at each stage of curriculum reform from 1900 onwards (Walsh, 2012). On the other hand, there is little dispute that from the perspective of children, the 1971 reforms in general supported a more holistic, open and ‘child conscious’ (Sugrue, 1990, p. 11) learning environment, which made a significant difference to children’s experiences of school.

If the 1971 curriculum embodied education’s response to the modernising agenda of the 1960s, the Primary History Curriculum 1999 (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 1999) captures the tendencies towards multiplicity, deconstruction, and critique characteristic of post-modernism and of globalisation. As an expression of the state agenda in history, it is one that no longer sees the need for school history to prioritise an agreed national story, or instill in children a privileged national identity.

Influenced by inquiry-oriented curriculum developments elsewhere, particularly in the UK, and premised on a view of historical knowledge as provisional and constructed, it promotes critical and reflective engagement with the evidence of past lives and communities and with the historical roots of present day attitudes, structures and contexts. Organised in four class bands (Infant Classes, First and Second Classes, Third and Fourth Classes and Fifth and Sixth Classes), the 1999 curriculum presents its content in strands and strand units, with an over-arching strand focusing on skills and concepts. There is gradual progression outwards from the child’s direct experience to the wider world and, premised on a spiral rather than a chronological approach to history, children visit and re-visit time periods over the course of their primary schooling in increasingly complex ways. There is a strong focus on local and social history throughout the curriculum, with political history again introduced in the final two years (fifth and sixth classes), a characteristic feature of Irish primary history curricula since the foundation of the state. Similar to the 1971 curriculum, it is part of an integrated subject area, Social, Environmental and Scientific Education, which it shares with geography and science.

The contrast between the 1999 history curriculum and earlier curricula is striking in terms of the extent to which it embraces an open-ended, rather than a bounded conceptualisation of national identity which ‘seeks to imagine ‘us’ without ‘them’ (Tormey, 2006, p. 322). Where identity is focused on, it is in the context of multiple and nested identities – personal, local, national, European and global – while its conception of Irish identity is a plural and inclusive one which seeks to build children’s respect for, and openness to different communities and perspectives (Waldron, 2004). Characterised by Tormey (2006) as signifying a movement away from a ‘post-colonial’ to a ‘globalised’ curriculum (p. 312) and by Waldron (2004) as ‘relentlessly post-nationalist’ (p. 217), the 1999 history curriculum can also be seen as a response to the local historical context which saw the emergence of the Northern Ireland peace process after decades of conflict. Indeed, one could argue that while globalisation may have provided the ideological frame for the curriculum, the state’s need to institutionalize its educational response to the peace process provided its moral and political purpose.

While its strengths are evident, the curriculum is not without its flaws. Although it endorses an investigative approach to history, it ignores to a large extent the role of historical questions in driving that investigation. This weakens its capacity to promote an inquiry-oriented approach to history and may, in practice, reduce the role of evidence to an *ex post facto* illustrative or motivational function, rather than seeing it as part of the process of constructing historical knowledge. While the embedding of a multi-perspectival approach across the curriculum means that the narratives of non-dominant groups can be made more visible, the curriculum fails to problematise the historical roots of structural inequalities of class, gender or ethnicity. Moreover, the low visibility of myths, stories and legends particular to Ireland may limit the future capacity of children to recognise and critique common cultural tropes and iconography and to reflect critically on their use and misuse (Waldron, 2004, p. 219).

Furthermore, while the Irish primary history curriculum holds much that is to be welcomed in terms of its engagement with identity, pluralism and diversity, its failure to engage with a broader framework of citizenship education leaves issues of identity in an uncertain and uncritical space. Citizenship education within the curriculum is located within Social and Personal Health Education and, while it focuses in the main on promoting participative citizenship and the practice of democratic processes within the school community, it includes a focus on national symbols, heritage and culture with specific emphasis on emblems, flags and celebrations. Removing such aspects of citizenship from their historical context and eschewing a more critical and reflective approach in favour of a celebratory one is problematic at the best of times; in the context of the upcoming ‘decade of commemorations’, it is particularly so. It is likely that this reluctance to see history as a relevant or necessary part of citizenship education in the current curriculum derives, in part, from earlier debates relating to the role of school history in fuelling physical force nationalism and a consequent reluctance to address directly its role in the construction of what it means to be an Irish citizen. Constructed, as it was, during the period of negotiations that preceded the Good Friday Agreement, some measure of avoidance or nervousness may have been inevitable. Yet, while it eschews open engagement with citizenship, it is very explicitly engaged in a future-oriented process of identity construction, which seeks to imagine Irish identity as plural, cosmopolitan and respectful of difference.

While the history syllabus at lower second level has gone through a parallel process of change, its revisions do not have the same resonance in terms of identity construction. Indeed, they present as gradualist and disciplinary-focused when compared with the fundamental shifts at primary level. The introduction of the Junior Certificate syllabus in 1989 (Department of Education and Science, 1989) represented the first reform of note in a sector characterised as academic and exam-oriented. Premised on the idea of ‘new history’, it emphasized the development of historical concepts and skills, as well as the role of evidence and interpretation in the construction of historical knowledge (Crowley, 1990). However, there is little evidence in the text of the syllabus, or in the accompanying guidelines of any commitment to student-led enquiry or, indeed, to enquiry as a paradigmatic mode of engagement with history. While there was some revision of content in 1996, the syllabus has remained largely unchanged in terms of its areas of focus. More recently, efforts by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) to ‘rebalance’ the history curriculum have been overtaken by significant reform of the Junior Cycle itself which will see a rebalanced syllabus implemented in 2017 (NCCA, 2008a). Among the more controversial aspects has been the decision to remove history as a core subject at Junior Cycle, a status it has held for most of the second level sector since the early 1920s.6

In terms of students’ experiences, while the research base is slight, there are some evident themes that recur over time. Teaching in general at second level has been critiqued over many decades as exam-oriented, and textbook-led (Gleeson, 2012; Raftery et al., 2007), while recent research indicates the continuing influence of terminal examinations on history teachers’ choices in terms of content and method (Raftery et al., 2007). In a study of history teachers’ identities, O’Boyle (2004) suggests that the teaching of history is also characterised by an avoidance of controversial issues and a momentum towards ideological conformity and consensus (p. 425). While there is some suggestion that enquiry-oriented approaches to history are gaining ground at second-level (DES, 2006) transmission-based, textbook-led teaching still remains a key if declining issue across the curriculum at both primary and second level in the Republic of Ireland (NCCA 2008b, 2008c; Eivers, Sheil & Cheevers, 2006; Waldron et al, 2009).

**Divergence and convergence: a North/South perspective**

Over the course of eight decades, curriculum policy in the Republic of Ireland in relation to history has evolved from one in which a nation-building agenda was articulated through the transmission of an agreed national story and the promotion of a privileged and exclusive national identity, to one which embraces both the constructed and provisional nature of historical knowledge and the idea of multiple perspectives. These changes have been prompted in part by the meta-discourses of modernisation, neo-liberalism and globalisation, and the resultant bonds forged between education and the economy, as well as by the growing influence of constructivism and related theories in education. More local discourses were also influential: debates about historical revisionism arising from the historiographical revolution begun in the 1930s which gained momentum with the growing unrest in Northern Ireland (see Brady, 1994); voices which challenged the role of school history in providing a context in which extreme nationalism could continue to flourish and, more recently, discourses about diversity and multi-culturalism which shattered the illusion of homogeneity implicit in earlier curricula.

As for Northern Ireland, prior to the Troubles, the use of education for political purposes was less overt but no less pervasive. Yet, in trying to consolidate the state all that educational policy achieved was deeper segregation and resistance from the minority Catholic community. Association with the rest of the United Kingdom meant that the modernist and post-colonial forces for social change which prompted the educational reform movement in Britain from the 1960s did have an impact on Northern Irish education a decade later, for example by bringing history based on disciplinary approaches to educators’ attention. Of course, by then the conflict was endemic and, to their credit, policy makers wrestled with how constructivist approaches to teaching and learning might be adapted to foster greater community understanding and trust. Expectations for education’s role in peace-building have gained momentum with the peace process and the Good Friday Agreement. The Revised Curriculum claims to be a response to 21st century change, both local and global. It places Local and global Citizenship at its core and history is asked to take on stronger social utilitarian aims. Indeed, the onset of the decade of commemorations has heightened the interest of civic society in teaching history to a point were some are concerned that its disciplinary rigour in schools may be threatened (McCully, 2012, p.154). However, from whatever direction educational policy comes, the structural segregation imposed on schooling at Northern Ireland’s birth remains a constant, constraining influence.

Currently, one could argue that history curricula in the RoI and in NI now have more in common than not, particularly at primary level. Both present a shared view of history and of the role of enquiry in the construction of historical knowledge; both emphasise social and local history and prioritise making connections between children’s environments and the historical past. Both recognise the interconnectedness of learning and support integration and interdisciplinary approaches to varying degrees. Neither puts forward a definitive or singular notion of identity but seeks to locate children within a range of communities, from local to global. If the northern curriculum has a more explicit articulation of the role of history in citizenship education, albeit that the boundary is becoming blurred, the silences within the southern curriculum in this regard are ones that are full of possibility and open to development. One significant difference between the two curricula, however, and one which has remained constant over time, is the exclusion of political history from the NI primary curriculum and its inclusion in the southern curriculum.

Tormey (2006) argues that the reflexive construction of identity embedded in the ‘skills and methods’ of the Primary History Curriculum of the Republic, together with the conceptualisation of identity evident in its aims, objectives and content, amount to identity construction as ‘a self-conscious project’ for children in primary school. Drawing on Giddens (1991), Tormey argues that this is ‘not unproblematic’ and suggests that both ‘the unbounded sense of identity and the existence of such perspectival work for young children might be thought to increase anxiety and uncertainty at a time when one might be better served building a sense of trust and certainty (p. 321)’. Are Tormey’s reservations, justified? Is the inclusion of political history which requires the problematising and deconstruction of received identities a step too far for primary school children?

From a southern perspective, it is probable that, notwithstanding the existence of dissenting voices, the consensualism inherent in the idea of a dominant national narrative meant that the political topics included in successive curricula at primary level were never conceptualised as controversial or problematic in the first place. While confining it to senior classes implies some recognition that political history is cognitively complex, up until the most recent curriculum that complexity did not extend to include issues of meaning, interpretation, perspective and identity. Even so, the southern curriculum in general endorses the Brunerian premise that complex ideas can be introduced to young children in age-appropriate ways. In Northern Ireland Tormey’s reservations have, to date, been shared by curriculum planners who have steered teaching away from political history at primary level. This has raised its own dilemma in that there is a danger that children develop an exclusive identification with the past unchallenged by schooling. Perhaps Barton’s call for some emphasis on common aspects of the past has potential in helping children to see identities as multi-faceted and not necessarily conflicting.

There is a convincing argument also, that, whether we like it or not, children are already constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing their ideas of identity, including community and national identity, responding to influences, negotiating contradictions, buying into old stereotypes and creating new ones every day, in school and out. Furthermore, when given the opportunity, children will recognise and critique the inconsistencies, biases and tropes embodied in their ideas of national identity and the mechanisms that shaped them in ways that are open and reflective (Waldron and Pike, 2006). In this context, the idea of childhood as a place apart where identity remains unquestioned, implicit in Tormey’s critique, may be a luxury neither jurisdiction can afford.

**Conclusion**

From a common starting point the accounts above have illustrated that very different political and administrative regimes acted upon history teaching, north and south, in the decades which followed partition in 1921. Cultural and political forces in each jurisdiction quickly led to contrasting educational structures and this helped shape what history was taught and, to an extent, how it was taught. As demonstrated, history teaching was utilized, somewhat simplistically, both north and south, to consolidate attitudes to the respective states and to boost identity formation. The enduring contrast in approach has been the willingness in the south to promote teaching about overtly political events and personalities originally as a means of legitimizing the origins of the Irish state and, more recently, in pursuit of understanding and a more inclusive approach to national identity; and in the north the official shunning of such issues, initially to contain expressions of Irishness and, more latterly, to avoid the potential to contribute to division at a young age.

However, common threads can also be detected across the decades. As the 21st century proceeds a number of influences, emanating both from within and beyond, are restoring elements of symmetry to history provision on the island. Today, influenced by the Troubles and post-conflict transformation, and by cultural diversity brought about by immigration, the concept of identity has become more problematic in both states at a time when the political imperative has become one of reconciliation. Arguably, in response, history teaching has come to value complexity, diversity and inclusivity. This is reflected less in the content covered and more in curriculum structures and pedagogical approaches adopted, as illustrated in recent curricular revisions in both jurisdictions. Northern Ireland’s administrative ties with the UK have probably meant that progressive educational ideas arrived sooner than in the Republic but it is significant of common influences that, at their own pace, both systems now advocate evidence-based, multi-perspective aims for historical learning set in a wider interdisciplinary framework. Further, history teaching north and south is more self-conscious than before of its potential to influence social attitudes although much has yet to be done to articulate the distinct but complementary relationship with citizenship education.

It would be naïve to underestimate the constraining impact that the pressures of accountability and instrumentalism, associated with two heavily examination orientated educational systems, have on creative approaches to teaching and learning. Yet, overall, history teaching in Ireland is in a reasonably optimistic place. There is an emerging consensus that the subject should be taught through the process of critical enquiry and that it must be made relevant to the needs of children’s and young people’s everyday lives. Having experienced nearly a century of divergence, approaches are now moving back into line. This is timely as the decade of commemorations rapidly advances. At a wider societal level the series of anniversaries present both the potential for triumphalism and deep partisanship and the opportunity to re-think the impact and significance of Ireland’s last hundred years in a way which facilitates greater mutual understanding and interconnectedness. School history is in a good position to make a contribution to the latter, not least through establishing cross-border communities of practice amongst teachers and students.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The authors would like to thank Pauric Travers and John Dredge for their advice in the preparation of this article.

**Notes**

1The Decade of Commemorations refers to the decade 2012 to 2022 which includes the centenaries of a range of key historic events beginning with the centenary of the Ulster Covenant in 2012 and ending with the foundation of the Irish Free State in 2022. It includes events such as the 1913 Dublin Lockout, the 1916 Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme and spans the course of the First World War and the Irish Revolution.

2 Northern Ireland (NI) was established by the Government of Ireland Act in 1921 and the Irish Free State was established by the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1922.

3 ‘Hedge Schools’ were unofficial schools which grew up in response to the Penal Laws, enacted in the late seventeenth century, which *inter alia*, included a prohibition on Catholic education.

4 Demographically, on its foundation the southern state was overwhelmingly Catholic with a small (approx. 7%) Protestant minority. This minority decreased in size over the ensuing decades and by the 1990s represented approximately 3% of the population. More recent census document a growing diversity among the population.

5 See, for example, Dáil Eireann Debate, Vol. 259 No. 2, p. 48. Downloadable at <http://debates.oireachtas.ie/dail/1972/02/23/00048.asp>. Irish historiography of the period, from the 1930s onwards, was also characterised by intense debate relating to historical research, the writing of history and historical revisionism which grew in intensity from the 1970s onwards and included debate amongst historians around the teaching of history, as evidenced by Fitzpatrick, 1991 and Doherty, 1996. See Brady, 1994 for an account of revisionism during the period.

6 See the website of the History Teachers Association of Ireland for an account of the debate regarding the ‘threat to history’ at <http://www.htai.ie/>.

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