

Past Meets Present
History Education in Northern Ireland

By Will Ehrenfeld
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Alan McCully, MA Education, University of Ulster

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Glossary and Definition of Terms

GFA – Good Friday Agreement, also called the Belfast Agreement; the treaty establishing power-sharing and ending the most recent violent conflict

DENI – Department of Education for Northern Ireland

11-plus – An exam taken during year 7 to determine whether pupils go to grammar or high school; this can determine whether pupils are able to attend university. Very controversial.

ELB – Education and Library Board; the local authorities for education, comparable to a school board or board of education in the U.S.

CCEA – Council for Curriculum, Education, and Assessment; independent body that administers tests and examinations in Key Stages 1, 2, and 3 and also the 11-plus

ERO – Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989.

Controlled Schools – State schools that are occupied by Protestant students and staff almost exclusively; managed by the state (ELB's).

Maintained Schools – Operated by the Catholic Church, these schools receive funding from the DENI and ELB's, dependent on the oversight role those groups are allowed to play.

Integrated Schools – Schools which are designed to teach Protestants and Catholics in an inclusive, bipartisan way. Staff and students must be even, with no majority larger than 60%.

Grammar Schools – Attended by 40% of post-primary students, these schools selectively offer admission to students who pass the 11-plus. Most graduates of grammar schools attend university, and the grammar schools in Northern Ireland are very well-respected internationally.

Secondary Schools – The alternative to grammar schools; generally students from secondary schools have a more difficult time gaining admission to university.

Key Stages – Schooling in Northern Ireland is divided into Key Stages 1-4; stage 1 is for children aged 4-8, 2 is 8-11, 3 is 12-14, and stage 4 is 15-16. School is required for young people up to age 16.

SIT – School for International Training, the program under the auspices of which this research was completed

ISP – Independent Study Project, the official title of this work

INTRODUCTION

“I think the tacit goal of education in Northern Ireland is a reduction of sectarianism.”

-Keith Barton, interview with the author

The inevitable question as a society emerges from conflict is how to deal with the past. Commemorate and remember or forget and move on? More importantly, how does this choice affect the participants in the conflict and other members of society—how is commemoration or disregard transmitted to the population? Looking around the world at societies emerging from all types and degrees of conflict, divergent approaches to this seminal question are taken at every turn. Centrally, societies must decide how to deal with perpetrators of violence; South Africa may have the most famous method for dealing with victims and perpetrators of violence: the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Here, the victim(s) or victims' family are given the chance to confront the attacker in a safe, public space; in exchange for agreeing to appear at the TRC and admitting their role, the perpetrator is given amnesty. Other states and regions transitioning from violent conflict have taken both harsher and more lenient approaches to dealing with the victim/attacker relationship, but there are still more crucial questions to be answered.

Ten years after the Belfast Agreement, Northern Ireland seems to be transitioning from consistent and repeated cycles of violence into a less violent but still divisive conflict. Despite the deaths of 3500 people as a result of the conflict, many in Northern Ireland disagree on the current status of the conflict. I have heard from people who firmly believe that the conflict is over and should be written up in the history books today, while others maintain that a conclusion

cannot arise without reconciliation and a true transition into a peaceful society. In addition, people have forgotten even to consider a basic question that is fundamental to resolving this conflict: why and how did it start? Why are people fighting, what motivates them? Casting the IRA (Irish Republican Army) or the UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force) aside as bands of terrorists is counterproductive, but similarly, assuming that the only way to end the violence is to accede to the demands of the paramilitaries is foolish, not to mention impossible on many levels.

In reality, the two warring factions in Northern Ireland are more alike than different. Catholic Nationalists and Protestant Unionists may differ in their perception of which nation they belong to, but there are very few cultural differences that an outsider could discern. In fact, the two communities in conflict have very similar cultures, come from the same civilization, and so by no means was the conflict inevitable. Additionally, the area of Northern Ireland is relatively prosperous, as are the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. The conflict is not about access to a limited resource. Many of these themes have been discussed and suggested as potential causes for the continuation of division and conflict, but I will join a plethora of scholars in arguing that the enmity that has been built up between Unionists and Nationalists is based on little more than conflicting senses of identity. Certainly myriad factors contribute to the ongoing division in Northern Ireland, but this is a central issue. Moreover, both communities in the North suffer from a scarcity of multiple identities; the goal, then, is “fragmenting rigid identifications.” (Smith, 2005) There are few common identities in the North, specifically because any label used by one community is like to be disregarded and even hated by the other.

Identities that have been cemented over hundreds of years may not be immediately alterable or “fragment-able”, but the best and only way to directly address identity issues in each community is through education. The issue of education in Northern Ireland is one that has been

studied often, especially related to the development of identity and sectarian attitudes, but the role of history education in particular has been largely ignored in favor of a focus on the segregated school system or the new citizenship curriculum.¹ Yet history classes are a potent source of information and a key influence on the perpetuation of sectarian conflict, not to mention the development of children as pluralistic citizens. At a formative point in their development, students are likely to be susceptible to biased presentations and the instillation of sectarian attitudes. As a result, history teaching is fundamentally important to resolving and moving beyond the conflict in Northern Ireland. The key question guiding this research, then, is whether and to what extent history education in Northern Ireland provides a forum or arena for social and societal reconciliation.

The research for this paper was conducted over the month of November, 2008 in Belfast, Northern Ireland. I made use of a litany of primary and secondary sources, specifically interviews with experts in the field and current and former history teachers. Each interview or meeting that I participated in helped to guide my research moving forward, and in that way this was largely an improvised study. The direction of the research changed a number of times through the month, but at the point of writing I feel that the changeable nature of the study was a great asset rather than a drawback. I was able to speak at length with experts and respected scholars in the field, and each interviewee enhanced my understanding of the topic and allowed me to expand my thinking. I came out of each interview with new ideas for where this paper would go in tandem with an entirely different perspective on the issues. This speaks to the usefulness of keeping an open mind and allowing the subject matter to dictate the course of the research as well as the intelligence and helpfulness of the interviewees I spoke to throughout the

¹ See Tony Gallagher, *Education in Divided Societies* and Alan Smith, *Education in the 21st Century or Citizenship Education in Northern Ireland: Beyond National Identity?*

process. I must pass along warm regards and great thanks to all of them.

My background on this issue before coming to study in Ireland for the fall of 2008 was truly limited. I had not really considered the role of education in the North until arriving in the Republic and studying the Troubles. The more I learned about the topic, the more I sensed that education reform was truly the linchpin for reconciliation on the societal level in Northern Ireland. My academic and personal history is one that heavily respects and values education, and I have studied desegregation in the United States previously. My very recent experience as a post-primary student in an American public school—studying history and social studies—inarguably influenced and affected my research here. I expected to focus more on the segregated school system and the potential for integrated education to be a sort of panacea, but the course of my research led me away from that conclusion, at least initially. I struggled, therefore, to disguise my preconceptions and appear unbiased in order to get the most out of each interview I conducted; in review, my performance was acceptable but not exemplary in this area. Regardless of the conclusions included herein, I approached this topic with an open mind that was only opened further by the process.

My research brought me into contact with people who have extremely strong opinions about these issues. I will represent these ideas and opinions in as unbiased a fashion as is possible, but at times I found myself reacting to certain ideas either with revulsion or acceptance; I hope to keep this out of the paper entirely, but my own opinions will likely become clear by the conclusion. In addition, I ran into trouble as I attempted to observe history classes in action. First, there was and is no way to guarantee that history classes that I can attend within the month-long study period will focus on controversial topics or those related to this paper. And secondly, the legal process for admitting an outsider into a school is tedious and strenuous, and each person

I spoke to recommended avoiding it. I made amends by meeting with as many teachers as possible, since they are the focus of the project—but, in this case, I am required to take their word for how they teach and address issues in their classrooms. I unfortunately was unable to meet with a group of young people, due largely to the reasons mentioned above and also due to problems of access. In general, my skills as an interviewer have developed to the point where frequently I can notice points where a subject is stretching the truth or otherwise altering the reality of the situation in question, and I have taken that into account in my thinking. On the whole, I was able to execute my plans for research surprisingly well, with only minor setbacks. I hope this is clear through my presentation of information and ideas in the following pages.

METHODOLOGY

“Kids can construct their own understanding of an historical narrative.”

-Carmel Gallagher, interview with the author

As mentioned previously, my approach to this project was grounded in a fairly solid belief in the power of integrated education to solve all problems facing the education system in Northern Ireland; needless to say, that idea was quickly destroyed upon beginning my research. As I looked more deeply at the issues, I found two sets of literature, one relating only to history education and another dealing with integrated. I was rebuffed when I emailed a professor at Stranmillis College, a teachers' college that is under the Queens University banner, asking for an interview. She informed me that, since her area of interest is integration, she would not be relevant to my proposed topic. This led to a bit of introspection and reconsideration of my vision and my essentially predetermined conclusion. At this point, I started back to the drawing board.

My research began with a cursory search on Internet journal databases and the libraries at Stranmillis and Queens. I quickly found what turned into my gateway into the subject matter in Alan McCully and Keith Barton's article, “History, Identity, and the School History Curriculum in Northern Ireland,”² which is useful both in terms of content and the authors. Both authors agreed to speak with me, and in fact Alan McCully who is a professor of education at the University of Ulster, Coleraine, agreed to advise me on this research. Professor Barton, currently at Indiana University, was for obvious reasons unable to meet with me for a face-to-face interview, but he graciously offered to speak over the phone and also via email. I spoke to both

² See *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 37 (1), p.85-116

men at length, and their expertise was extremely useful. I also received numerous sources of information and avenues for further research from Alan. In addition, through him I was able to meet with Alan Smith, another well-respected scholar on issues related to education in Northern Ireland and in divided societies more broadly. He is also the chair of the UNESCO Program in Education for Pluralism, Human Rights, and Democracy at the University of Ulster, Coleraine. After one day spent in Coleraine, I came away with ideas galore and several articles and books to research.

I spoke to a few other crucial sources, but it was these early contacts that proved most useful to my research. In addition to interviews, I methodically pored over each relevant piece of scholarly work on the topic of history teaching and education in Northern Ireland. Many people I spoke to gave me suggestions for articles and publications which might be useful, and in fact some of the people who were unable to meet with me provided the most useful information. Catherine Thompson of the Education and Library Board was one of these: she emailed a list of her colleagues who might be willing to meet with me and also six publications, four of which were directly relevant and are cited herein.

In terms of text sources, the most beneficial, in addition to the article mentioned above by Barton and McCully, were Margaret Smith's *Reckoning with the Past* and the Northern Ireland Education and Training Inspectorate report, *History Matters*, which was provided in digital form by Ms. Thompson. There are many more items that were of use through the period of research, but these were the highlights. I communicated with Ms. Smith, who is a professor at American University in Washington, D.C., and she was extremely helpful. The research for her book was conducted for her dissertation, which was coincidentally conducted at my college, Tufts University, and our shared experience at Tufts made her especially receptive to my request for

assistance. One of the best ways I found to locate resources and potential interview subjects was through academic literature. I identified respected and authoritative commentators by reading their writing, which not only helped locate people but also gave me an intellectual entry point into the proposed interview. That is how I located Alan McCully and Keith Barton as well as Alan Smith, Tony Gallagher, and the aforementioned Margaret Smith. In a way they self-identify as experts via the published research, and in fact they were all very friendly and willing to discuss their areas of interest with me.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

“Education is obviously at the heart of culture and how culture is maintained.”

-David Limond, interview with the author

The dynamic of education in Ireland before 1920, similar to other areas of Irish history, boils down to a conflict between the British ruling class and Catholic peasants. Dating back to the time of the penal laws, Catholics were banned from receiving a formal education, so hedge schools developed to fill the void in formal education for Catholic children. The term “hedge school” is meant literally; due to the lack of space for lessons, class was often held under shelter of a hedge. After Catholic emancipation in 1829, a gradual strengthening of state-operated education was seen. National schools were established in 1831, in fact. This represented a “visionary attempt to create common culture” by educating pupils of different religious denominations together (Limond, 29/10/08). Despite this effort, the idea of integrated education in Ireland quickly unraveled. Protestants withdrew their children from the state schools so that they became de facto denominational, as Catholics attempted to alter the system to their benefit (Boyle, 1971). The end result of this back-and-forth was a return to religiously segregated education, which suited both communities. The divided system, which remains the norm in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland today, was firmly in place on the island by the 1870's (Limond).

After partition in 1922, the Northern Ireland educational system was modeled closely on the British system. Part of this is due to the British government's control over education in Northern Ireland during times of direct rule, but Unionists in the North also saw it as in their best interests to remain as closely aligned with the British as possible, be it socially, academically, or

structurally. The one significant difference, of course, was and still is the segregation of students based on religious identification in Northern Ireland. A move for integrated education in Northern Ireland took off in 1981, at the height of the Troubles, but it has yet to pick up any serious momentum. In years before this, general surveys as well as the Church of Ireland and the general assembly of the Presbyterian church expressed significant support for integrated education, but to this day very little progress has been made. Proponents of integrated education argue that it has made a serious impact on reconciliation, but to date only 61 integrated schools exist in the North, educating approximately 5% of all students (DENI report, 2005). The societal impact of these schools remains unclear, but due to their relatively limited scope and availability, their import in the peace process is assumed to be limited but not totally irrelevant.

It is difficult to draw conclusions regarding the historical path of history education in Northern Ireland schools, because very few official records exist; most information is anecdotal, and until 1990 no proscribed curriculum existed. Surprisingly, prior to 1990 history education was not mandatory in Northern Ireland, and although it is unlikely schools would ignore history entirely, the lack of any formal requirement implies a great deal of freedom and flexibility for teachers of history (Kitson in Cole, 2007). In addition, no singular textbook was required at any level, so it is impossible to look for hints of bias here. Through my research, I met people who went through school in Northern Ireland and took history classes before 1990, but each individual I spoke to had a different experience. Vivienne Quinn, for example, attended grammar school in Newry, a very Republican area, yet, she spoke of the heavy emphasis on British and English history in her schooling. Yet, when she became a history teacher in Dungannon, another Republican stronghold, she became aware of a Republican tenor and interpretation of history that was prevalent at her school (Quinn, 12/11/08). In addition, Davy

Hyland, who is a spokesperson for Sinn Fein on education, claimed to have been taught history with a strong pro-Unionist bias at his own school, also in Newry (Crow, 2004).

On the whole, studies show that controlled and maintained schools functioned with little obvious difference, but two studies in particular noted the existence of a “hidden curriculum”. (Darby et al, 1977; Murray, 1985) It is likely that due to the extent of the decentralization of curriculum formation and education, no widespread, top-down efforts existed to indoctrinate students with sectarian attitudes. Most likely, some teachers passed their own views on to their students and did so without awareness of the danger. And perhaps, teachers intentionally indoctrinated their students, although that is held out as unlikely and, if true, extremely limited in scope. As is almost always the case, most teachers are well-intentioned and do their best to educate their students in the best, fairest way possible.

With the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 (ERO), change occurred immediately and dramatically. While some lauded the order, passed with the approval and encouragement of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom, others attacked it for being too content-intensive and handcuffing teachers' creativity. The effects and outcomes of the act are seen differently as well, with some scholars suggesting that it had “liberalizing repercussions” while many teachers criticized the act's ignoring of the Northern Ireland aspect and the extra controls and checks placed on teachers (Smith, 2005; Quinn, 12/11/08). Opinions on this issue are firmly-held and close to the surface, it would seem. Yet, very little public debate or displeasure was exhibited as the act was discussed and later as it took effect. Meanwhile, England saw a great deal of suspicion and anger displayed upon passage of the ERO (M. Smith, 2005).

In any event, the legislation instituted marked changes to every level of education in the

North. In addition to the common curriculum, school choice is increased for parents, and in fact this act permits parents to vote to change the status of their school to integrated. There is also greater encouragement of cross-community endeavors and the required implementation of Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) and Cultural Heritage, two programs meant to reduce strains between the communities by encouraging knowledge and comprehending of the other side and alternative points of view (Gallagher, 1995). In addition, the ERO altered programs for funding and local management of schools. The changing governance of schools, in addition to the curriculum, may have simultaneously increased local control while taking power out of the hands of teachers. The ERO, taking effect in 1990, radically changed the system of education in Northern Ireland as well as history teaching.

Most significant was the introduction of a common curriculum to history departments across Northern Ireland. Despite the lack of knowledge and evidence prior to this, it is fair to assume that history was taught differently in various schools, not simply based on religious identification but also on attainment levels, geography, and other extraneous factors. On the other hand, a more meaningful change may have occurred in 1988, with the introduction of evidence-based instruction style for history. Often referred to as inquiry-based, this previous reform likely impacted the teaching of history more directly than the ERO. Influenced by the Schools History Project, which continues to have significant impact on history teaching in Northern Ireland, the conduct of teaching history in Northern Ireland was altered dramatically by a new focus on process rather than product. Or, teachers sought to involve students in forming their own narrative of history through inquiry and exploration of evidence (Kitson in Cole, 2007). This aspect of teaching is still crucially important in Northern Ireland, and experts point to the formation of individual, independent narratives, through history and elsewhere, as an

important factor in reconciliation (McCully, 6/11/08; M. Smith, 2005).

Since the early 90's, history teaching has experienced moderate curriculum changes but nothing as significant as the changes in 1988 and '89. The most glaring reform was the change of focus from content to “learning objectives”. Carmel Gallagher, who at that point was Curriculum and Assessment Development Manager for CCEA, and as such was at the forefront of curriculum change, discussed a severe reduction in required content in 1996. Later, in 2007, there was an additional restructuring of the curriculum in history. At this point, teachers were returned the high degree of autonomy they had enjoyed prior to 1990, and many educators rejoiced in this new capability of teaching creatively and specially gearing lessons toward their students (Gallagher, 11/11/08).

GOALS FOR HISTORY EDUCATION

“The great aim of education is not knowledge but action.”

-Herbert Spencer, British social philosopher, 1820-1903

With the aforementioned reforms in mind, it is necessary to investigate and delve into the contemporary context of history education in Northern Ireland. One major focus of this study is the divergent opinions on the goals of history education. John Slater interestingly draws a distinction in the dual purposes of school history: intrinsic and extrinsic purposes, meaning those focused on learning history “for its own sake” or those more “concerned with changing society,” respectively (Slater, 1995). In this paper, discussing the Northern Ireland system in the wake of violent conflict, I will delve further into the division here and utilize three discreet areas of purpose in history teaching: intrinsic, defined as above, extrinsic individual, and extrinsic societal. The individual goals would be instilling a sense of tolerance and skills in the individual, whereas societal goals focus more on reconciliation and cultural understanding; the category of extrinsic societal purposes includes ideas which hope to unify society and cut down division in Northern Irish society. In other words, the latter is meant “to improve community relations,” while the former is more focused on insuring that “pupils have a better knowledge and awareness of how key events in Irish and British history are perceived...and how the past continues to be interpreted on the streets of Northern Ireland.” (McCall, 2007)

The intrinsic aims of history, while valued by some, seem to have been discarded in progressive settings for some time. All of the history professionals I interviewed from Northern Ireland made clear that they would fall into the extrinsic camp, if not in so many words. Yet, Alan McCully noted that of the teachers he comes in contact with, very few look at the extrinsic

aims of history (McCully, 6/11/08). In any case, the divide seems to be between more conservative teachers and professionals and those who are willing to take risks in order to encourage social change (Kitson and McCully, 2005). Intrinsic aims assume to some extent that there is value in history in and of itself, that it can be both an ends and a means. This is the traditional expectation of history classes in the United States especially, but it has largely been subsumed by the focus on external aims in Northern Ireland. While there is debate as to whether an intrinsic focus should be the primary goal of history education, for the purposes of this research more attention will be given to extrinsic aims broadly, specially the divide between the two types of extrinsic aims.

In the first category of extrinsic aims, those focused on the development of personal traits, many teachers focus on the creation of Democratic skills and the ability to function in society. On the Northern Ireland history curriculum for Key Stage 3, for example, the first objective is titled “developing pupils as individuals,” and subheadings include ideas like moral character and personal understanding. Under Objective 2, the element of citizenship also would fit under this heading (History Strand, 2004). Kellie Lavery, the head of history at St. Mary's Christian Brothers' Grammar School, describes the value of history education as “its ability to allow a pupil to question, to investigate, and to begin to make judgments based on a careful analysis of the facts.” Moreover, she described the study of history as enabling for students, talking specifically about the development of individual abilities and individual students. She really summarizes this classification with one comment: “We have always tried to encourage the perception that the purpose of history is not to change society but to change students and their view of the world and to enable them to make their own choices...I feel that the study of history as a vehicle for reconciliation is important in that it may not change society, but it can change the

pupils, and then they can change society.” (Lavery, 26/11/08) This point of view, clearly, does not give lesser bearing to a hope for societal rejuvenation and reconciliation, but it is a more grassroots, bottom-up focus than is seen in the third area. It is typified by the inquiry-based approach to education, which seeks to teach skills rather than facts.

In the last subfield, focus on societal aims, often the local context informs the reasons underpinning the societal focus. Carmel Gallagher, who is a former history teacher, noted that due to the society she comes from, she and her colleagues from Northern Ireland, especially conflict areas (Ms. Gallagher grew up in Derry), are particularly exercised to work towards mutual understanding. She went on to suggest that education definitely has a peace-building role and questioned the value in an opposite point of view: “Education is obviously about making things better...how can you stand back at injustice and not form a view?” (Gallagher, 11/11/08). In addition, while Alan McCully did not explicitly express his own views of the “right” way to teach history nor did he draw a distinction within the extrinsic area, he noted that the ERO and accompanying curriculum change were intended to bring about social change when they were initially introduced (McCully, 6/11/08).

American educators Keith Barton and Steve Cohen both offered eloquent commentary about the need for extrinsic foci. Barton, a professor of education at Indiana University, suggested that history may not have any intrinsic aims that ought to influence history teaching. In general Barton straddles the line between individual and societal aims herein, whereas Cohen, a former history teacher in Boston and current professor at Tufts University (and my former professor), clearly dictated his greater interest in helping students understand the world around them. “My real feeling is that kids forget most of the specifics anyway,” he said, following a discussion of the goals of history. Rather than learning details about particular events, Cohen in

his teaching sought to make the links between past and present clear as a way to illuminate the present situation (Cohen, 25/11/08).

CURRENT SITUATION IN THE HISTORY CLASSROOM

“There's no consensus on what education should do.”

-Vivienne Quinn, interview with the author

Teachers and students hold a range of views on the issues discussed above. In addition to the myriad voices cited in the preceding section, some significant survey data is available to analyze the trends. For example, 75% of teachers in a survey conducted by believe that history should “have a social and societal role ensuring that the next generation gain skills to analyze events from many perspectives.” This counters the past narrative of schools being “safe havens” in a time of conflict, and the majority point of view seems to be suggesting that schools must be proactive in avoiding a re-eruption of violence (McCully, 2008). Alan McCully, who has focused on filling in the research gaps between the curriculum and practice of history in Northern Ireland, still sees gap between policy and practice. He argues for the connection between past and present to be made more explicitly in classrooms, and in general has noted that teachers in many cases fail to go far enough in raising controversy and challenging students.³ His colleague and frequent collaborator Keith Barton makes the same comment, suggesting that “many teachers there (in Northern Ireland) completely disavow any attempt to contribute to reconciliation (Barton, 11/11/08).

There is a broad and growing consensus in the relatively small field of academics

³ See interview with the author, 6/11/08 and *Teaching History in Areas of Recent Conflict: The Irish Context*, 2008

interested in history education in Northern Ireland that the lofty goals set out by the DENI in the form of curricula and teacher education are not being met. Catherine Thompson's research on the issue is particularly illuminating and suggests just that: the official aspiration of “what history could help deliver” and the actual practice of teachers is “mismatched.” She found that teachers tend to avoid controversy and, along with that, they do not make use of opportunities to promote social reconciliation as well as they might (Thompson, 2007). Furthermore, a report by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) in 2006 has helped to inform this debate. In the publication, which centered on research conducted with interviews and surveys of teachers and school officials, ETI found that in whole school and departmental planning, schools and history departments generally care about issues like tolerance and respect. While several schools in the study have specific programs addressing division and diversity, the majority only deal in generalities. The largest concern voiced in the report is the dearth of explicit connections between past and present. “The findings of this survey indicate that the systematic linkage of the past and the present is not a sufficiently strong aspect of history teaching in Northern Ireland.” (ETI, 2006)

To rationalize the complaints lodged by McCully and others regarding the essential deficiency of teachers in living up to expectations formed by DENI and explicated in the curriculum, it is important to consider the profession of teaching in a broad sense. What type of person decides to become a teacher? Alan Smith, the UNESCO Chair in the School of Education at the University of Ulster, suggested that a number of those who enter the teaching profession are “conformists,” assuming the profession to be safe and not especially progressive (Smith, A., 6/11/08). Other scholars have similarly characterized teachers and education officials as conservative and averse to progressive reforms in history education. Before the Good Friday

Agreement especially, the Ministry of Education and DENI were “populated by individuals for whom 'don't rock the boat' was the guiding premise.” (Smith, M., 2005) Although the statutory bodies seem to have liberalized and become more reform-minded since 1998, teachers and schools still tend to avoid controversy.

For students, the reality of education is a bit different. Perhaps due to the lack of coherence in DENI policy and teacher behavior, students seem to experience a hardening of sectarian identities especially during the period of the curriculum that is intended to oppose this, Key Stage 3. Research by Conway as well as Barton and McCully led to findings that were both encouraging and disappointing. By studying how identity forms for children in Northern Ireland during secondary school years, the researchers found evidence that students value history and in fact history classes were cited as the most influential source of information about national history—with history books, ostensibly read in class, as the second most important source. Yet the results are not entirely positive: while students appear open to learning which affects identity formation and in fact rely upon it, schools do not seem to be taking advantage of these opportunities as much as possible, and in the absence of an alternative identity, from schools or elsewhere, sectarianism takes root. Additionally, while nationalist/unionist identifications do not “dominate” the identifications of pupils studied, these divisive identities grow in importance over the course of study of national history (Barton, McCully & Conway, 2003). As a result, it appears that students become more entrenched in their sectarian attitudes despite the best efforts of DENI, administrators, and teachers.

PROBLEM SOLVING AND LOOKING AHEAD

“The history our pupils learn today will shape how they make history tomorrow.”

-Anonymous history teacher, Northern Ireland

A great many problems with history teaching in Northern Ireland have been identified thus far, so the time for reflection is nigh. To begin, there are many important, positive efforts currently underway to deal with some of the problems mentioned above. In order to bring history teachers more into line with the curriculum, Alan McCully and the UNESCO Centre at the University of Ulster published a booklet with summaries of recent research on teaching history in Northern Ireland, and every history teacher in the country receives a copy of this booklet.⁴ While there is not an effective method to gauge usage of the booklet after it is distributed, the fact that teachers are given the information in an easy to read, abridged format suggests that the booklet is read significantly more than the research included therein would have been otherwise.

Also, before going further, it is important to note that history education in Northern Ireland, in many ways, is excellent. The A-level scores given to pupils in Northern Ireland are consistently the highest in the United Kingdom, with children from the North outperforming their counterparts nationally by 8% (Smyth, 2007). In addition, Northern Ireland has a higher percentage of secondary schools that are grammar schools, indicating a larger cohort of high-achieving students (Hines, 2007). In fairness to England, Scotland and Wales, though, Northern Ireland is the only area where the eleven plus exam still determines attendance at grammar school. Still, with the statistic above in mind, it ought to be clear that any criticisms of the

4 Supported by the Inter-Board History Panel with funding provided by The Nuffield Foundation

education system is intended as constructive and not excessively critically.

To go further into solving the “problems” facing history education in Northern Ireland, we need to be more definite in the type and scale of the issue to be addressed. It seems that the most pressing concern facing the system of history education in the North, and perhaps Northern Irish society as a whole, is the dearth of what Margaret Smith calls interactive pluralism. She defines this idea as a comfort level with difference that allows members of one community to take an active interest in the ideas and identity of members of the other community. Interactive pluralism “implies a willingness to regard the political environment, as well as the grassroots, as a shared space.” (Smith, M.E., 2005) The biggest obstacle to forming a truly interactive pluralism is the rigid identity conflict in Northern Ireland, specifically the lack of multiple identities and the maintenance of negationism in identities; that is, Protestants/Unionists define themselves as not Catholic and sometimes anti-Catholic, and the very opposite is true for Catholics/Nationalists. One method to encouraging and making possible interactive pluralism, and some would argue the best way, is via history education in schools.

The previous reforms to history education, particularly inquiry-based methodologies and the common curriculum, have already been hugely beneficial in this regard. Obviously additional reforms are needed, and some of these may be outside the realm of education. A truth commission has been suggested by many as Northern Ireland has been emerging from violence, but as yet there appears to be a stalemate on that front. Other ideas focus on the need for societal integration and communal civil society, an end to housing segregation, and demolishing the peace walls that line Belfast and parts of other cities. The list of proposed reforms is long, but some are left off the table which may be the most impacting.

Despite evidence and argumentation downplaying its importance, both in this research

and across the literature, integrated education is the only proposed solution which can maximize the positive impacts of history education meaningful in a social and societal context. The root of the conflict in and about Northern Ireland⁵ is sectarianism and rigid identities that are incompatible. Competing historical narratives and the complete separation of the two communities entrenched and continues to entrench the conflict, especially in cities like Belfast and Derry. As Alan Smith, noted for his scholarly work on integrated education, said, divided education is both a symptom and a possible cause of division and mistrust between the two main groups in Northern Ireland, but, he added, the education system in Northern Ireland is functioning “in a way that promotes separate rather than shared development, which makes it difficult for state-building.” (Smith, A., 6/11/08) Margaret Smith also concludes that integration is crucial to developing her concept of interactive pluralism, explaining that “integrated schools are the only hope for overcoming the profound social and cognitive divisions.” She goes on to explain that in order to properly promote the practice of interactive pluralism in students, which is the most effective way of instilling such attitudes in the general public, it must be model-able in the classroom, which means that both communities must be present (Smith, M.E., 2005).

The debate over this issue is heated and quite contentious. There is an additional body of research on integrated education that has only been touched on here; a majority in Northern Ireland have supported integration in vague terms for decades, but agreement seems to be lacking on the element of how to go about it. In addition, studies and experiential evidence have indicated that in terms of specifically history education, integration is unnecessary to educate students. Alan McCully suggested that, while he believes in the eventual need for integrated education, students can be challenged in single-community schools (McCully, 6/11/08). On the

5 The phrasing “the conflict in and about Northern Ireland” was coined by Healing Through Remembering

other hand, Stephen Ryan, a professor of peace and conflict studies at Magee College in Derry, spoke of the “hidden message” inhered in a system of entirely separate education. The mere existence of segregation implicitly suggests a fear of or aversion to pluralism and, for that matter, interaction in the first place.

CONCLUSION

“Education is the ability to listen to almost anything without losing your temper or your self-confidence.”

-Robert Frost

Conclusion—review of topic, paper, etc.

-potential for progress, other info?

--check binder for details on assignment.

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