

Research paper

Identifying the past: An exploration of teaching and learning sensitive issues in history at secondary school level

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Contextualisation

Although my research is conceptually anchored in the discipline of history, it draws on an eclectic range of disciplinary perspectives. The dominant stance taken is of a reflective practitioner of History at secondary school level who combines qualitative and quantitative methodologies through the use of archival material and empirical fieldwork. Data in the current paper is drawn from a range of surveys and semi-structured interviews.

Abstract: *My paper explores the apparent dichotomy between History as an academic school subject and information gleaned from the local myths which sustain the prejudices underpinning various community identities. Questions are asked about the extent to which school history can compete with external influences. Comparisons are made between students' and teachers' perceptions in two regions of the UK, Oxford in England and Mid Ulster in Northern Ireland. The findings appear to indicate that there are discrepancies between teachers' and students' views about the sources that are most influential in the learning process. I will suggest that these differences can be explained by not only conflicting interpretations of the nature of History as a discipline but also by the adopted methodological approach. However, the evidence suggests that History lessons in school make an important contribution to a young person's knowledge of their country and, by inference, to the process of identity formation.*

Key issues

Increasingly, recognition has been given to the part played by education in the construction of national identity especially in divided or multi-cultural societies but research into how teachers and students appraise the effects of formal History lessons in the process is limited. I therefore raise questions about History lessons' capacity to influence young people, especially when, in relation to Irish history, the topics are controversial: can the teacher 'compete' with other factors which have the potential to construct identity such as the mass media or community versions of history? Can any inroads be made into healing community divisions?

My current research indicates that although secondary school students feel comfortable studying most topics, issues relating to identity, particularly national identity, are the uncomfortable issues. In Northern Ireland learning Irish History can be contentious whilst in England learning topics relating to the Holocaust or Britain's Imperial past are the ones reported by young people to cause them at least some concern (TES, 2004).

Context and literature

It is not the purpose of my paper to uncover the complexities of the formation of national identity, but merely to appreciate the effect of school history, as perceived by students and teachers, on the factual knowledge and the attitudes/identities of students. I focus on the teaching of national history as that subject has always been considered to be a major

instrument for nation-defining. As Rusen reminds us: 'historical memory and historical consciousness have an important cultural function: they form identity' (Rusen, 2002, p 3). The relevance of national history education thus lies in the fact that it promotes certain identities and values in addition to conveying knowledge and skills. I am concentrating on the tensions that exist between teaching school history and factors external to the classroom such as the competing popular versions of the past.

Educationally, national identity is, as Meek reminds us, undoubtedly also coupled with language; children learn their culture as they learn to speak. Words come to children 'laden with overtones of significance as they begin to talk, to read and write' (Meek, 2001, p 17). From Meek's perspective as a linguist, language is an obvious cohesive factor. However, from the perspective of my research, it is not so much how the narratives are composed that matters, but rather if they have, as a distorted form of reality that perpetuates myths about the past, become more potent than reasoned facts. More precisely, is the more balanced view of the past apparently presented by History teachers in the classroom likely to have any effect on deeply entrenched prejudices?

Indeed, the political and social consequences of believing mythical ideas about the past has led, in areas such as in Northern Ireland, to the province being torn by violence for more than three decades. In other parts of the United Kingdom, prejudices have resulted in ethnic-based conflicts. A major spin-off has been the current debate over the role of history in the curriculum. It has been argued persuasively that history in Ireland is actually no more important than elsewhere in Europe but, at the same time, it is clear that for many people in Northern Ireland historical myths are influential (Walker, 1996, p 158) There is also a perception in Northern Ireland that children learn sectarian stories of the national past 'at their mother's knee' (Stewart, 1977, p 16; Byrne, 1997) and that these versions last throughout their lives. I argue that these versions dynamic as they undoubtedly are, have not been as uniformly pervasive as we have been led to believe and that school History can make more inroads into myths learnt outside the classroom than has been previously thought.

History syllabuses in Northern Ireland now make valiant efforts to address the excesses of sectarian bitterness in the province by grasping the nettle and including contentious periods of Irish history. Given the importance of the past in Northern Ireland society, as well as the perception that what is learned outside school is not a productive orientation toward history, educators have devoted careful attention to constructing a curriculum that provides students with a more balanced understanding.

Certainly even those who take History beyond KS3 are likely to form opinions about the history of their country from a variety of different sources. History's contemporary significance outside as well as inside the classroom has been recently researched (reviewed in Levstik and Barton, 2001). In Northern Ireland, history's enduring relevance is evident from the symbols, flags and scenes from the past that are pervasive. Each of the two major cultural/political orientations has its own version of the past, and each invokes these historical narratives to justify contemporary attitudes and policy positions. (McBride, 1997; Walker, 1996)

For many in Northern Ireland, some version of history forms an integral part of their sense of identity (Buckley and Kenney, 1995; Devine-Wright, 2001; Gallagher, 1989) and representations of history, particularly as depicted in visual symbols, are an inescapable feature of life there (Jarman, 1998). Much of the research in the Province has focused more specifically on the role of history in conceptions of identity (Buckley and Kenney, 1995; Jarman, 1998; McBride, 1997; Walker, 1996). More recently a major study undertaken by Barton and Mc Cully (2002) has revealed something of how children come to construct the

historical component of their identity in Northern Ireland, and examined the role of the school curriculum in the process. Their findings indicated that the largest single source of identification with history focused on items associated with Protestant or Catholic communities, politics, or religion. There were also indications of a stronger identification with the content of the school curriculum among students at Protestant schools, whereas those at Catholic schools were more likely to identify with events from the recent past, which are not part of the required curriculum.

A comparative study

Until the mid-1990s, young people in Northern Ireland could leave school without having studied any Irish History. In Oxford, until curriculum changes instigated by the National Curriculum in 1989, it was possible to study History through to Advanced-Level (AL) without having done any modern British History. Was this state of affairs desirable? Did the subsequent move towards teaching national history have any impact on how young people learn about national history or about how teachers viewed sensitive issues in the classroom? In Oxford no directly relevant research has been undertaken but a small-scale project has produced some empirical evidence on the teaching of the Holocaust (Hector, 2000). However, the focus here was mainly on Religious Education. Others such as Peter Vass have concentrated on thinking skills and the learning of primary history (Vass, 2004). Much excellent related research has had a theoretical and moral base (Pring, 2000) or concentrated on teacher education and development in selected schools in different areas of England (Husbands, Kitson and Pendry, 2003). Important though these studies are, they have not paid specific attention to the development of children's ideas about history and identity, whether in school or out. More recently comparisons were made between student's perceptions of history in Northern Ireland and Oxford (Barton, McCully and Conway, 2003). But, as far as I have ascertained, this is the only research undertaken in Oxford that compares teachers' as well as students' perception of national history.

It can be argued that there is no genuine basis for making a comparison between students in Mid-Ulster doing the history of Northern Ireland and students in Oxfordshire doing the Holocaust. Of course the two topics are controversial but the relationship of Oxfordshire students to the Holocaust is not analogous to the relationship of Northern Irish students to the Troubles. These latter students are living through the Troubles. They encounter its effects directly. Whilst the Holocaust is a massively important topic, students in Oxfordshire are not living through it. Nor – perhaps with the odd exception – do they have relatives directly affected by it. These contrasting contexts added value to this comparative study by giving me an opportunity to appraise the multifaceted nature of the effects of history teaching in sensitive and non-sensitive situations. It must be admitted however that the choice of the two regions was initially determined by the fact I had taught in both Oxford and Dungannon.

History teaching in Northern Ireland in 1990

From 1974 until 1989, I was the only Catholic teaching History in a controlled school (funded through the local Education and Library Board), in Dungannon Northern Ireland. I was curious to know how Protestant pupils reacted to being taught Irish History by a Catholic, a most unusual phenomena until the development of integrated education in the past ten years. Thereafter, as more teachers were teaching students from a religious background that differed from their own, my research focus shifted in line with current trends. Initially, I also aimed to probe further into the extent to which Irish History was thought to be influential in changing my students' attitudes to current affairs. When I started my research very little work had been done on the role of history in the Northern Irish curriculum.

I calculated that between 1980 and 1989, I had taught 53 pupils at 'A' Level. In 1990 I succeeded in circulating 26 questionnaires and received 24 replies, 18 of which were from females (Conway, 1991). Most of the students were still living in Ireland, but two had moved to England, and three others were living in Scotland, France and Canada respectively. Although I devised 15 questions that sought to explore a range of students' attitudes, only the responses to one will be reported here. The relevant question aimed to discover how they prioritised factors that had informed them about the troubles in Northern Ireland.

	(%) Response (Number of questionnaires)
Learning History at school?	79 (19)
A combination of things	67 (16)
Personal experience	67 (16)
Friends	38 (9)
Television	38 (9)
Reading	38 (9)
Family background	21 (5)

Table 1. Responses to the question: 'What has influenced your understanding of the troubles most?' (Total: 24 questionnaires)

The statistics suggested that learning Irish History at school was the most influential source. As one boy put it: 'Obviously I form opinions based on the sum of my acquired 'knowledge' but studying Irish History did alter some preconceptions.' A comment was written by the girl who moved to Scotland. She stated that what had influenced her most was: 'Moving out of the Province and being able to see the troubles from the outside; also cross-community events'. A girl who remained in the Province acknowledged that: 'All these things have contributed, but at times it is still difficult to understand people's thinking'. Another commented: 'what influenced me most were both my family background and my friends'. One boy simply stated: 'personal experience.' This was a poignant reminder that many of these young people had direct experience of violence; a number had close relatives in the security forces and on two occasions my class was interrupted to bring the sad news of a father being shot. Not surprisingly, such memories occasioned a deep feeling of resentment against the perpetrators and reinforced the tension that existed between the more balanced academic knowledge presented in the classroom and the emotive forces beyond.

I was further intrigued by the fact that teachers interviewed at the time tended to think that factors outside the classroom were more influential. Most of those I interviewed reinforced the view held by the Professor of Irish History at Queen's University Belfast that children were coming to school already imbued with their own version of history acquired at home, thereby frustrating teachers by having: 'the received sectarian tradition deliberately or unconsciously transmitted by parents to children.' (Harkness, 1979)

History teaching in Oxford in 1990

The extent to which studying Irish History at school was considered to be influential by the young people responding to my questions surprised me.

In 1990 I was to teach sixth formers in Oxford that had similar views to those I had taught in Northern Ireland. This became apparent after I distributed a questionnaire. All agreed that learning history changed people's views of contemporary problems more than any other factor. All valued history lessons at school especially when they had to confront sensitive

political issues. One girl wrote: 'I think that everyone, no matter what party their parents vote for, should be given a clear and unbiased opinion of what the main parties stand for. This is the best thing about our History lessons; we are given facts about essential topics'. What came through in both regions was an eagerness to be informed about so called 'facts'.

Questionnaire circulated to students in Mid-Ulster and Oxford in 1996 and 2001

The extent to which studying History at school was perceived to be influential was to become a major focus of my future research. I undertook a much larger survey in 1996 and in 2001. I distributed questionnaires to Protestant and Catholic secondary school students in Mid-Ulster and to state and independent secondary schools in Oxford. The purpose was to gain insight into a number of related problems by exploring secondary school students' perceptions of history in the classroom. The current paper concentrates primarily on two aspects of students' views: their reaction to being taught sensitive issues in History and their perceptions of the factors that helped them develop opinions about the history of their country.

The sample

I targeted a sample of students who were representative of the age, gender, range of ability and socio-economic circumstances of students in both regions.

In 1996, ten schools in each region were contacted that fitted the following description: in Oxford they were non-selective Middle and Upper schools in the state sector and selective and non-selective independent schools; in Mid-Ulster they were selective and non selective, as well as controlled (Protestant) and maintained (Catholic) schools. (There were no integrated secondary schools in the area in 1996.) As far as possible, equal numbers of males and females and the full range of year groups were included. In both regions seven of the ten schools contacted agreed to participate. In January 2001 the same schools were asked to repeat the exercise. Due to administrative changes, amalgamation of schools, and in one case a lack of response, only five schools in each region were involved in the research in 2001.

Out of a total of 1,737 students, 59% were females and 41% were males; 58% were members of the 1996 cohort and 42% belonged to the 2001 cohort. In Northern Ireland, 60% were recruited from Catholic schools and 40% from Protestant schools, broadly reflecting the sectarian divide in the area. The inclusion of only 43% of students in English state schools and 57% from independent schools represents an imbalance, because most young people attend state schools. The age range was from 11 to 18 years.

The questions

A range of questions were asked to discover students' responses to being taught history in general and sensitive topics in particular (see Appendix 1 for a summary of the questionnaire). The strategies followed by the teacher, and the students' views on the purpose and impact of being taught History at school was also investigated.

Students' responses

Despite a change in the government with Labour coming to power in 1997, and in the peace process with the Good Friday Agreement 1998, there were no substantial changes in what

young people stated about contentious topics in the curriculum. Only 10% expressed concern at being taught sensitive issues (see Table 2 which presents the results for all students). What came through from students in both regions and in both cohorts was an eagerness to be informed about the so-called 'facts', which they agreed were best taught in School History.

	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Don't know (%)
It is wrong to teach sensitive issues in History in case you offend people	10	75	15
It is important to teach even topics that might embarrass people in order to learn the truth	66	10	25*
Teaching sensitive issues in History creates bitterness	22	46	32
My teachers views are biased	14	60	26
Learning History makes people tolerant of others	44	21	35
History has no relevance to life	10	80	10

Note: Rounding up error on percentage

Table 2. Students' views on history as a sensitive issue (the data of both cohorts and both regions combined)

The mean response to 'liking history' was 3.8 on the 5-point scale. This established History's general popularity with all age groups in every school surveyed in both the 1996 and 2001 cohort.

	Mean scores (scale 1-5)
History classes	4.30
History books	3.52
Relatives	3.32
Television	3.28
Own experience	2.79
Newspapers	2.73
School subjects	2.43
Friends	2.24

Table 3: The responses of students in all schools in 1996 and in 2001 regarding their perceptions of what factors have been influential in learning the history of their country.

There was some disparity between the views of my past pupils in 1990 and the perceptions of young people in both the 1996 and the 2001 surveys. Although all the surveys considered school history to be influential, the later surveys suggested that it was even more influential. It is interesting to note that the 1990 sample concerned an elite with a special interest in

history whilst the subsequent surveys aimed to be representative of all students. Another way of interpreting it is to note that the 'elite' sample moved closer to the teachers' views.

Teachers' interviews 1996 and 2001

The sample

Forty seven teachers were interviewed in total. Twenty four were interviewed in 1996 and 27 in 2001. Twenty six came from Mid-Ulster and 21 from Oxford. There was an almost equal spread between controlled and maintained schools in Northern Ireland and state and independent schools in Oxford. Nearly all the teachers were Heads of Department and nearly all were over 40 years of age. This sample is therefore more representative of Heads of Departments than of History teachers in general.

The questions

Two of the areas investigated in these semi-structured interviews were:

1. The extent to which History lessons in school are more important in providing information about national history than any other factor.
2. The extent to which learning history at school leads to prejudice reduction.

Questions were often worded as follows: 'What factors do you think are most influential in determining the way a student thinks about their country' And 'What effect do you think learning History at school has on reducing racial or religious prejudices?'

Purpose and political and educational context

Although History's capacity for the shaping of the collective mind has always been obvious, it was given heightened emphasis in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in the late 1980s with the controversies over introducing a national curriculum (Aldrich, 1991). Greater awareness of the rights of minorities formed part of the rationale behind the Education Act of 1986 that forbade the teaching of partisan views. This did not lead to serious interference with History teachers but it tended to reflect widespread rumours about teacher bias. It also gave impetus to the drive to define the purpose of History teaching, particularly to highlighting its role as a weapon for prejudice reduction or to what many teachers cynically referred to as 'social engineering.'

A particular concern of Irish teachers interviewed in 1990 was that teaching more contemporary Irish history might 'bring the troubles of the streets into the classroom.' Before the ceasefire of 1994, at a time when many were being forced by the National Curriculum to teach Irish History for the first time, this was a common worry. Students began to study national history in KS3, and each of the three required years of study featured a core module focusing on a period deemed essential for understanding Irish history, but placed within the wider context of Britain and Europe; topics include the Normans, conquest and colonization, the Act of Union, and partition.

Those interviewed in 1996 were less nervous. This may have been due to having had the experience of teaching the new Common Curriculum and realising that it was possible to take the sting out of more contentious issues either by teaching earlier periods or by adopting a more neutral teaching strategy. This entailed the presentation of documents that 'spoke for themselves'. Those Irish teachers interviewed in 2001 after the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 had brought greater optimism of stability to the province, and, like their English

counterparts, were more likely to refer to the effects of family breakdown and the role of television and film as being factors competing with the classroom.

In England, teachers were influenced by the debates over the National Curriculum in History which were presented as being (i) centred around a document or a narrative based approach; and (ii) the claims made by the New Right since the 1980s that there has been a 'flight from British history'. The most popular syllabuses have been those which offer predominantly world history, encouraging some journalists to claim that: 'GCSE students can't study British history any more' (The Observer, 1996) Although since 2003 the GCSE criteria require elements of British and European history to be taught, it is nevertheless the case that only a minority of pupils over the age of 14 in England study British or any history.

The National Curriculum in England specifies a multi-cultural approach. This was particularly apposite in the years after Labour came to power in 1997 due to the controversy over alleged new waves of immigrants, especially asylum-seekers, being continuously broadcast. Oxford teachers, especially those in the state sector, were keen to provide a more inclusive curriculum to meet the needs of growing numbers of overseas students. This gave rise to more potentially contentious topics such as African and Asian history in the context of British Imperialism, and, after the attack on the twin towers in New York in 2001, to the Crusades.

General findings

Without exception, all teachers referred to factors outside the classroom as being important but different emphasis was placed on these factors depending on when and where the interview took place, and what the teacher believed to be the role of History and the teaching strategy adopted.

The majority of teachers I interviewed in Mid-Ulster agreed that it was important to teach topics steeped in contention such as national history: they could provide the necessary corrective to sectarian myths, thereby making some headway at least towards healing community rifts. But most were concerned about how this should be done. Many favoured a version of a neutral chair strategy; only a minority were prepared to make their political and ethical views more explicit. By contrast, it was the teachers in Oxford who tended to be prepared to declare their political or ethical stance. My research also indicates a close correlation in both areas between the teacher's ideology, the strategy adopted and the degree to which the teacher finds a topic sensitive. When a topic is felt to be emotional, teachers tend to rely more on the use of documents rather than on discussion.

What emerged was overwhelming agreement that it was factors external to the classroom that were most influential in the formation of the political views of the young. This was true of teachers in Mid-Ulster and Oxford and showed no change over the years 1996 and 2001. Nevertheless, teachers in Northern Ireland, particularly in the earlier cohort, were in varying degrees more cautious about the impact of their History teaching on prejudice reduction. They also demonstrated a wider range of responses: some crediting young people with a high degree of political awareness, others being dismissive of their students' interest and knowledge of politics.

Teachers in both regions and in 1996 and 2001 complained that prejudices were closely linked with family background:

'I'm afraid that irrespective of how broad-minded you think you are teaching or how objective you think your deliverance of the subject is, it is a case of when they go home they have their own messages maybe stronger than any messages

in the class room could be and that's the biggest factor in determining their political attitudes'. (Irish teacher, 1996)

'You can spot bias. It can be deliberate depending on background and upbringing.' (Oxford teacher, 1996)

'I don't expect the child from a racist family in a housing estate to naturally have anti- racist, anti sexist opinions of life.' (Oxford teacher, 2001)

By 2001, teachers were also drawing attention to the role of films. 'It is the background of an independent school in that they come from families that talk a lot that have a lot of fixed middle class prejudices. At the risk of being prejudiced myself. A lot of it comes from home and some of it comes from films.'

Three interviews conducted after the attack on the Twin Towers, but before the war on Afghanistan, did not reveal any significant shifts in ideas but gave teachers an opportunity (which most seemed to take) to explore contentious issues more openly:

'We had a lot of discussions about September 11 and some of the children didn't go along with the line that America should declare war on terrorism. Other children were very pro the line the television and newspapers were taking so it was very heated'.

The extent to which young people are politically aware, or indeed politically active, was discussed. Some teachers commented that the problem was ignorance of the history of their country as much as external negative influences. Moreover, teachers noted the extent to which young people compartmentalise knowledge. This was complicated by the fact that it was also thought possible for students to have a different view for a different audience:

'They express very republican views in front of each other because of peer pressure and they don't want to be the odd one out'.

And,

'You can be teaching about the Ulster plantation, the famine or Derry and you might as well be taking a French class. They seem to compartmentalise knowledge and take on board the message given by their community or their peer leaders in their community much more than their teacher'.

Preliminary examination of my data suggests that many teachers in both regions regard ability level (gauged by academic success) to be a potent factor in determining the extent to which that the student's is likely to have more balanced views: the higher the perceived ability, the more the students were thought to be critical of sectarianism or racism. However, if the student holds strong views inculcated by the community then History classes may have little impact on prejudice reduction. The brighter might know more but they were capable of taking a 'cafeteria' approach to the subject, and depending on the external factors at work, often selected facts that sustained preconceived notions whilst they rejected facts that they found to be unappetising. There were many references made to the intransigence of the students in clinging to their deeply held views, ones acquired outside the classroom and against which the teachers' apparent partiality was impotent.

'Weaker pupils are often set in their ways and have certain ideas that they are reluctant to change. I think assumptions have to be challenged.' (English teacher, 1996)

'Unfortunately you tend to reinforce existing prejudice particularly in lower streams. This makes discipline and control difficult. Few children change their views even when they hear reasonable logical argument'. (English teacher, 2001)

Students interviews

I tried to assess students' views not only from the comments they wrote on their questionnaires but also from 9 interviews I conducted over the years 1996 - 2001. On the whole they were much more positive than their teachers about the impact that learning History at school had on their political views. Some students however reflected their teachers' concern about the impact Irish History had on the views of their contemporaries.

'I did Irish history as part of my GCSE and I wouldn't have the opinion that most of the people in our school would have. They would say 'Down with a free Ireland we're British' and yet they sat through the whole of the history lessons and they come out of the lessons and they ignore it.'

There was a noticeable change of emphasis between the survey findings and the slant of students' views when they were interviewed. The interviewed students were more likely to take a line similar to the teachers. Those interviewed were less sanguine about the impact learning more history had on their contemporaries than the findings of the questionnaires had indicated.

Teachers' interviews 2004

In 2004 I circulated a summary of my research to 8 of the teachers that I had interviewed in 1996 and 2001. It is interesting to note that although all agreed that my findings were 'interesting and important', one teacher reflected what others had inferred when he said: 'School history is only a small part of the influence brought to bear on pupils. For instance history may be enjoyed and objectively taught but then pupils return to the tribal areas in which they live hence our impact is lessened'. (TES, 2004)

Conclusions

It is apparent from interviews with teachers that they consider the impact of their classroom teaching to be limited and probably not as important as external influences. They insist that there is very little they can do to challenge deeply held beliefs absorbed from parents or from the community. They voiced opinions about pupils' ignorance of the facts of history and their susceptibility to sectarian prejudices. The questionnaire results however showed that students attributed more importance to history lessons than to other sources in shaping their knowledge of history.

Is there any way in which this apparent discrepancy can be explained or the conflicting accounts reconciled? Any analysis must take the different methodological approaches and the different interpretations of the nature of history as a discipline into account.

First, as regards methodology, the validity of comparing the finding from a students' (or indeed any) questionnaire with lengthy, probing interviews with teachers must be considered. Discrepancies between the two may be incontrovertible or they could be more apparent than real. I think that neither scenario fits the claims made here. Or, at least, neither tells the whole story. Certainly it is true that there are intrinsic problems created when findings from a

survey are compared with data extrapolated from interviews. I will not attempt here to make a case for the superiority of the quantitative over the qualitative.

It is more apposite that I acknowledge that in their response to my question about learning about the history of their country, the young people surveyed were considering primarily the contribution History lessons made to their factual knowledge. Teachers, when interviewed, were more concerned about the inculcation of beliefs and long term changes made to attitudes, particularly as regards community relations as a result of learning History at school. In other words both students and teachers were responding to conflicting interpretations of the purpose of History.

The survey did not delve deeply into the roots and impact of prejudice because it was designed to do a different and much less subtle job. The questionnaire considered the more mechanistic, functional side of History with questions about liking, relevancy and knowledge transmission. The teachers' interviews added a further dimension; within their scope lay questions of motivation, morality and emotion. These feelings could not be fully explored within the confines of the survey. However, I was able to obtain deeper insights into the function of classroom History by using both methods and at the same time facilitate the process of triangulation.

It is important to evaluate my research against the backdrop of violent sectarian/racial clashes and seminal upheavals in History teaching in Northern Ireland and England; in this way the link between history teaching and national identity is clarified. My questions reflected the political problems of the time. In the early 1990s there was the thorny issue of making the teaching of Irish History compulsory. Many in the higher echelons of educational policy making were determined to grasp the nettle and force teachers in all secondary schools in the province to teach even the most contentious periods throughout all the key stages. Similarly, the teaching of British history in England was sensitive because it was considered to fall short of the need to accommodate an increasingly multi-cultural population. My research in 1996 suggests that young people were receptive to learning national history but that their teachers were cautious about how to teach it effectively.

When students and teachers were interviewed there was agreement about the extent to which knowledge does not automatically confer tolerance. Nevertheless, regardless of how history is ultimately interpreted, students generally come to class with the expectation that they will learn facts or, as they so often said, the 'truth' about the past. They were particularly eager to know about such sensitive issues as the history of their country. It is interesting that even after controls had been made for liking history in both regions (Oxford and Mid-Ulster) and for both cohorts (1996 and 2001) there was increased recognition of the important contribution that school history makes to learning about one's country, especially amongst older students. Teachers tended to under-estimate the extent to which young people are appreciative of the knowledge they get in History lessons at school. By 2001 teachers in Northern Ireland were more confident about tackling sensitive issues but they were still dubious about its outcome.

How does the school curriculum impact on the development of transmitting values in history? I am not sure. My research was designed to explore ways in which the subject is perceived rather than to appraise its impact. Nevertheless, a few tentative suggestions can be made. An optimistic interpretation is that school History provides students with the tools to tackle sectarianism in whatever guise. A more pessimistic interpretation is that by focusing on the potentially divisive events of the national past, the school curriculum actually feeds into the negative aspects of students' community identifications: 'facts' can be distorted to provide the raw material for the construction of sectarian prejudices.

It is important that we make the most of our opportunity to exert a positive influence over the minds of the young. If teachers resist being a moral force (and I think we should not), we will surrender to the streets our opportunity to be the primary vehicle for the transmission of critical information. Although the evidence points to the growing influence of television between 1996 and 2001, we can compete with the lessons learnt from the home, the street and the tabloids. Teachers may be right to be concerned about the adverse influence of relatives and television: certainly this opinion was reinforced by interviews I did with students. But it must not be overlooked that, for the majority of students, History classes in school were perceived to be by far the most influential source in the process of learning the history of their country.

History teachers ought to be congratulated and encouraged by these findings. It is apparent that according to my research undertaken in secondary schools in Oxford and Northern Ireland between 1990 and 2004, the trend is for young people to enjoy their History lessons at school. They also see the subject as being relevant to their lives. Moreover, when it comes to their perceptions of who or what has helped them to develop opinions about the history of their country, the classroom is by far the most important source of influence in both regions. If teachers are not made aware of the positive feedback they receive from students they may be less confident about tackling sensitive topics such as national history.

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Appendix 1

Summary of Questions in the 1996 and 2001 Students' survey

1. How much do you like history? [On a Likert-type scale ranging from a low of 1 to a high of 5].
2. How were you taught history? [A range of strategies were given].
3. What topics did you feel uncomfortable being taught? [Up to 6 could be chosen and reasons given for the choice].
4. Who or what has helped you to develop your opinions about the history of your country? [They were asked to evaluate the degree to which eight different sources helped them to develop their opinions about the history of their country (ranging from 1, 'unimportant', to 5, 'very influential'.) The eight factors stated were: History classes, parents/relatives, television/films, history books, other school subjects, newspapers, friends, and personal experience].

5. To what extent do you agree with the following statements?
- It is wrong to teach sensitive issues in History in case you offend people
 - It is important to teach even topics that might embarrass people in order to learn the truth
 - Teaching sensitive issues in History creates bitterness
 - My teachers views are biased
 - Learning History makes people tolerant of others
 - History has no relevance to life