

Report on the ‘Big Pictures of the Past’ Research Project

Investigating young teachers’ and students’ perceptions of history

This article aims to draw attention to a significant research project that sought to identify the kinds of overarching views of the past that young teachers and young students possess. A commitment to the principles of ‘student voice’ underlay the project, a collaboration between the NCCA and UCD School of Education. We outline the scope and nature of the research and conclude with some key findings.

On 4 October 2023, the Minister for Education, Norma Foley TD, launched a report on a new area of focus in History education at second level. Since the beginning of the school year 2018/19, a number of learning outcomes set down in the Junior Cycle History specification (DES, 2017) are grouped under the heading ‘Developing the Big Picture’. For the classroom teacher, these learning outcomes require that students be assisted in developing more robust and more coherent ‘big pictures’ of the past, using overarching frameworks that help them make connections between ‘then’ and ‘now’.

The inclusion of these new learning outcomes prompted a group of researchers to investigate the kinds of ‘big picture’ that are available to first-year History students. Since two of the researchers are involved in teacher education in University College Dublin (UCD), the researchers also wished to assess the readiness of young History teachers on the Professional Master of Education (PME) programme to help their first-year students develop stronger ‘big pictures’.

The research was undertaken collaboratively by UCD School of Education and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). The project was driven by a strong awareness of, and commitment to, the important role of student voice in deliberation on matters



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affecting students' current and future educational experiences. The ideas and views of students in this report offer many insights that may help curriculum planners and classroom teachers as they seek to develop courses of study that reflect awareness of learners' needs and the underlying understandings that may block or facilitate deep and meaningful learning in the present. The students here include student teachers, whose ideas and views may also help shape the programmes of study that they encounter in teacher education courses.

Since there is some evidence that teacher- or educationalist-designed 'frameworks' can be helpful to students' learning, the researchers designed their own experimental framework – titled 'Our History Scaffold' – to be used by the student teachers and discussed with the first-year students towards the end of the school year 2019/20. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic intervened and plans had to be curtailed: the student teachers had limited opportunities to use the framework, and it was not possible for the researchers to meet students. It was decided to extend the research into a second year, 2020/21. Despite the challenges presented by pandemic restrictions, internet-hosted encounters with students took place and some interesting data were gathered on the use of the framework.

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Fifteen schools took part in the project: eight in 2019/20 and seven in 2020/21. First-year History students completed 257 student tasks, and 15 student focus groups met with the researchers. Focus groups had up to 10 students and were chosen at random from those who had completed the student task. In 2020/21, a second round of focus group meetings sought to assess the impact of using the framework.

While the initial focus group meetings with students were face to face, all encounters with students in 2020/21 took place remotely. Nine student teachers were also interviewed, and valuable data were gathered on their state of readiness to address 'big picture' issues in the classroom. Neither first-year second-level History students nor student teachers are *tabulae rasae*, and we have much to learn from the ideas and thoughts they bring to their engagements with history in the classroom, including lessons about how more robust 'big pictures' may be nurtured and maintained.

One of our findings with the first-year second-level students – and it is one borne out by research elsewhere, such as the *Usable Historical Pasts* report (Foster et al., 2008) – is that most tend to see the history they study as a set of unconnected events. For instance, one student's identification of their 'big picture' was 'Ancient Rome, WWI and WWII, the Moon landing, the Big Bang, the dinosaurs, the Irish War of Independence, and the Irish Civil War' – in that order, with no apparent connecting strands, no apparent understanding of the processes that work their way through historical time. In all settings, however,

there were students who had an awareness of processes at work over time; for example:

We learned to live in caves, leading to building houses. We learned to live together as a community, leading to civilisation, made money to buy and sell things, making an economy . . .

These examples help identify the nature of the challenges for teachers, for example, to help students see the processes at work in history over time, processes that underlie and may drive or impede the more eye-catching events that capture the headlines.

Another significant finding – one with clear implications for how history teachers approach their classes – is that ‘big picture’ thinking is closely connected with disciplinary understanding; that is, students are more likely to have ‘big pictures’ that are usable in their daily lives if they have an understanding of how history works. That is why strand 1 of the Junior Cycle specification is titled ‘The Nature of History’: students need to know not only *what* we know – or think we know – but also *how* we know what we know. Historical knowledge is not inert, and its very dynamism – and the questions that dynamism generates – is one of the ways we can excite interest among our students. And exciting of interest is key: No curiosity, no learning.

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