

Understanding How Student Teachers Engage with ‘Big Picture’ Thinking as Part of the History Junior Cycle Specification

The focus of this research builds on the new Junior Cycle History specification, which examines how ‘big-picture’ thinking can be used in Irish post-primary classrooms. This article examines the experience of student teachers in navigating the new specification and suggests possible supports to assist them in their practice.

Big Picture research project

In *Ireland’s Education Yearbook 2023*, we wrote about research that interrogated our understanding of ‘big-picture’ thinking, relating to the experience of first-year History students in Irish post-primary schools. We now report on the experience of student History teachers on the Professional Master of Education (PME) programme, interrogating their own understanding of big-picture thinking and the challenges they face.

In England, Kate Hawkey (2015) found that the most significant change and challenge for history teachers is the scale of perspective required in interrogating ‘big pictures’ in history. The Big Picture research project at University College Dublin questions student teachers’ conceptual understanding of big-picture thinking and seeks to identify the supports they need in developing such understanding in their Junior Cycle students.

PME History student teachers, representatively sampled from single- and mixed-gender comprehensive colleges, community schools, voluntary secondary schools, and Gaelscoileanna, were invited to participate. Semi-structured qualitative interviews interrogated their experience of the History curriculum and their



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understanding of big-picture thinking. After coding and data analysis, a conceptual framework emerged.

Student teachers were asked: What is your understanding of the expression 'big picture of the past'? How would you sum up your own 'big picture' of the past? And what do you think you will need to do to help your students develop a workable 'big picture' of the past? Criteria characterising a clear understanding included awareness that a big picture is one that encompasses the 'broad sweep' of the past, helping students 'make connections' between 'events and developments in different times and places'.

Findings

For most of the student teachers, the conceptual, broad-based type of framework that facilitates historical connections began to take shape only at undergraduate level. Most had difficulty outlining their own big-picture construct. Some pointed to the lack of big-picture focus in their own history education; others admitted that their big picture was fragmented, usually linking this to the selective and topic-focused nature of history teaching and learning. There was no cohesive framework with discernible stages of development, 'turning points', or other distinctive markers. Some participants were even apologetic about perceived gaps in their historical knowledge.

High unanimity was found in response to the third question, inviting strategies to help their students develop big-picture understanding. Classroom use of timelines was a popular response: 'use of timelines and drawing connections between topics studied allows the student to be aware of the fact that more than one element of history may be happening at a given time'. The significance of timelines was demonstrated through models and applications. Interactive timelines, which could expand and contract, were coupled with partial timelines which required completion by students. Timelines were linear and layered as students navigated chronology in the new Junior Cycle specification. Complementary use of visual sources, to help students develop a 'sense of period' or reinforce their understanding of 'how we know what we know', was identified as important.

For some student teachers, temporal and spatial awareness were coupled in understanding big pictures in history. One used the image of a globe in conjunction with timeline work, as a symbol of the big picture. She also linked these with historical causation:

... the importance of knowing what is coming before and after. So what was before? Did it have an impact, yes or no? Did the beginning of that event, and then in turn the conclusion of that event, did that kickstart anything in the following?

'A big picture is one that encompasses the broad sweep of the past, helping students make connections between events and developments in different times and places.'

One student noted the challenges for students with additional needs, for whom visual prompts may have limited impact.

Two of the three elements deemed necessary for big-picture understanding have been noted: an appreciation of the ‘broad sweep’ of the past, which facilitates ‘making historical connections’. The third relates to disciplinary awareness that a big picture is not developed in a vacuum but is part of a broader understanding of what the discipline of history entails. This element was implicitly identified as intrinsic to big-picture understanding, linked to students’ ability to analyse change; the development of historical empathy in students is closely allied to their ability to ‘understand these bigger connections’.

Several respondents said their knowledge of ‘modern’ history (20th–21st century) is stronger than that of earlier history. This may present challenges in helping students to develop a practical, everyday ‘big picture’ of the past, particularly if teachers’ own historical knowledge is similarly orientated and lacks an overarching dimension.

Big Picture Framework

Phase 2 of the project involved constructing a ‘Big Picture Framework’ - a visual representation of 10 distinct eras with identifying images and descriptors.

Phase 2 of the project involved constructing a ‘Big Picture Framework’. This classroom resource was a visual representation of 10 distinct eras with identifying images and descriptors. It was anticipated that the student teachers would use it regularly, working with students to locate and orientate subject matter in the appropriate era. It was designed to help students process episodes in time, in terms of historical process and change, which would help them make connections between eras as learning outcomes. This could prevent students from seeing history as a series of stand-alone events. The student teachers were asked to work with the experimental framework, providing data on the level of support it offered in classroom practice.

Summary findings suggest that perhaps the biggest challenge in helping student teachers develop stronger big pictures of the past among their class groups is ensuring that they themselves have the necessary understanding, so that pedagogical approaches and resources used are most likely to be successful. This would inform methodology and promote confidence in dealing with big-picture learning outcomes. There was awareness of the need to help students see the wider context in which events occur, and their wider repercussions. Widespread adoption of an appropriate framework for classroom use was a useful step in equipping student teachers to help their students achieve big-picture learning outcomes.

These findings align with other history research projects working with scaffolds and frameworks in England (Shemilt, 2000), USA (Ryley, 2013) and the

Netherlands (De Rooy Commission, 2001). The challenge for the future is how to encourage the widespread use of frameworks in History classroom in Irish post-primary schools, to help student teachers develop more robust big pictures. This requires planned and meaningful attention in initial history teacher education courses and the provision of continuing professional development programmes.

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PROMOTE Event for Early Career Female Researchers



L-R: Dr Sinead Ni Murchadha, Róisín Shanahan, Nicola Kelleher, Eoin Molly and Dr Aisling O'Neill from WETB (Waterford Education & Training Board)

On 13 November 2024, South East Technological University (SETU) welcomed early career researchers to their third PROMOTE Project training session.

PROMOTE is an initiative involving four partner universities that provides guidance on career progression for female researchers in the early stages of their careers.

The event aimed to showcase the wealth of skills and experience researchers bring to diverse sectors, both within and outside academia, and inspire attendees to explore various career opportunities.