**The contrasting place of political history in the primary curricula of Ireland, north and south: a comparative study**

Based on a qualitative study of teachers, teacher educators and educational policy makers, this paper examines how, within the context of primary level history education, political history is framed within national curricula and practised within classrooms in Northern Ireland (NI) and the Republic of Ireland (RoI). Within the RoI, educational policy and practice appears underpinned by belief in children’s capacities to engage with complex ideas, against a relatively benign view of political history and within a tradition of teaching political history at primary level. In NI, political history is perceived primarily as contested and, despite challenge from teachers, policy level concerns cite the complexity of political history as necessitating the postponement of issues until second-level. The paper highlights the commitment of curriculum policy makers and educators, north and south, to further progressive history education and argues for curriculum, teacher education and ongoing consideration of children’s capacities to support these endeavours.

Keywords: history education; political history; contested history; post-conflict

# Introduction

For almost a thousand years, the political geography of Ireland has remained deeply contested. Actors and institutions have sought both violent and peaceful transformation of the divisions and possessions of the island, more recently aligned with the conflicting political aims of securing NI’s union with Britain or the achievement of a united Ireland, and often clumsily reduced to matters of religion (Smith 2001; Cairns and Darby 1998b). As such, the political histories of Ireland, north and south, whilst irrevocably entwined, are themselves contested and remain perpetual features of ongoing episodes of violence (Dunn 1986; Smith 2001). The most recent period of heightened violence beginning in the late 1960s, ‘the Troubles’, saw many thousands affected by conflict, including the loss of over 3,500 lives (Cairns and Darby 1998a). The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, 1998, provided the foundations for a period of relative peace, although, with the political conflict unresolved, low level violence and social division remain pervasive, particularly in NI (Smith, 2005; Leonard 2007). Peace remains delicately poised, grounded in political history, but vulnerable to the shifting political geography of Ireland, Great Britain and wider Europe (Author, XXXX), as illustrated through recent tensions surrounding Brexit (Author, XXXX).

This paper is drawn from an ongoing comparative study of the policy and practice of teaching history in Ireland’s two political jurisdictions. Previous writing (Author, XXXX) initially mapped the divergence in policy, curriculum and approach in the decades after partition in 1921 as educational and political imperatives dictated that each emerging state sought to consolidate its position by influencing the loyalties and identity of its young people through a focus on national narratives. It then traced a more recent convergence in trajectories. In a post-modern, increasingly globalised world, shared educational ideas founded on constructivism, and political aspirations emerging from the NI conflict and peace process, have acted in tandem to bring the respective history curricula back toward symmetry, thereby providing opportunities for cooperation. A second paper (Author, XXXX) further explored the role of history education, north and south, in promoting effective citizenship and a critical understanding of both national and transnational issues, relevant to the lives of the young. It acknowledged common approaches and, as yet, unresolved challenges. This paper focuses on one of those challenges i.e. the divergence in approaches, north and south, to the teaching of political history at primary level.

# Defining political history

Literature suggests that there is no clear line between political and social history even in the school history context. Traditionally, history teaching concentrated on the defining episodes of national development. The growth of social history stemmed from, according to Stearns (1983), a desire to explore history to a breadth and depth beyond ‘great events and great men of the past’ (3). Whilst an increased focus on social history has thrown light onto the lives of those far removed from traditionalseats of power (Gunn 2006; Parthasarathi 2006), Stearns (1983) notes that this shift also stood accused of ‘turning attention from struggles for power, or denuding these struggles of central content, by focusing on the less overtly political aspects of the human past’ (3).

Writing on Canada, Osborne (2003) suggests that key debates around the direction of Canadian history education centre on the complex relationship between political history (concerned with matters of the state) and social history (with a focus on society and associated sub-groups). This relationship, often conceptualised as an unhelpful binary, is further complicated by considerations of children's capacity for historical understanding and broader philosophical debates around the purpose of education (Osborne 2003). Osborne notes public criticism that the retreat from overtly political history education has damaged Canadian 'nation-building'. However, in conflict scenarios like Ireland it is exactly this overt use of narrow national stories to justify internal power relations that educators have identified as divisive (Walker 1996).

In acknowledging the impossibility of desegregating political and social history, for the purposes of studying primary provision we frame political history as the evolution of political relationships on the island of Ireland. This embraces both the internal struggles for political control between political and religious groups, and wider relationships with Great Britain. It particularly refers to the contested narratives leading to independence and partition.

Underlying Philosophies and Assumptions

Educationally, in both jurisdictions, the inadequacies of a didactic approach that viewed history as an inert body of knowledge to be learned, have long been recognised. In the quest for deeper understanding and greater relevance, history teaching has sought to become enquiry orientated, discursive and engaging, albeit constrained by the requirements of external state examinations at secondary level. There has been some acknowledgement that, previously, the unproblematic transmission of particular versions of the past, be they motivated by Irish nationalism or Ulster unionism, have helped shape negative attitudes. Therefore, educational policy-makers have accepted responsibility to ensure that school history encourages students to consider alternative perspectives and interpretations (Author, XXXX).

Consequentially, four issues arise. The first concerns the move away from history teaching’s traditional role as one of using a legitimised narrative to aid identity formation and nation-building, to one where students have agency to make informed judgments on past events which influence the present. What does such a curriculum look like and how far does it accord with an enquiry-based approach? The second concerns the place of history teaching in promoting social change. How valid is it to employ the discipline of history to explicitly seek attitudinal and societal transformation? The third issue considers children’s maturity. Even if it is deemed important to raise difficult histories, at what stage of a child’s cognitive development is it appropriate to introduce the complexities of a troubled political past? And if, and when, is it permissible for students to be asked to explore their emotional and empathetic responses to such events? Fourth, when matters of curricula, social utility and children’s maturity are considered, what is the role of primary teachers in supporting peacebuilding processes?

**From Master Narrative to Critical Thinking**

Generally, throughout the twentieth century it was the norm that history teaching should contribute to a sense of national consciousness which emphasises the common characteristics and achievements that make the people of that “nation” distinct and special. Thus, teaching was selective and likely to fudge the distinction between historical accuracy and myth (Sylvester 1994; Korostelina 2016). In the context of post-partition Ireland, the Irish Free State, following the direction of most newly formed political entities, stressed its ancient cultural lineage, its subjection to English authority and the role played by its revolutionary movements in resisting that authority. In contrast, in NI, the unionist government preferred to emphasise the cultural links with Great Britain but not dwell on a political past, at least with younger students, which was bound to raise difficult questions concerning past indigenous grievances. A danger of propounding master narratives, it is argued, is that in societies where dominant ethnic or religious groups hold power such teaching usually leads to the eulogising of the in-group and the neglect, or demonising of the ‘Other’ (Carretero 2011; Korostelina 2016). It is difficult to assess how far this was actually the case in Ireland but, certainly after the outbreak of conflict in 1968, there were observers north and south who recognised that history teaching, as generally practised, was unlikely to be a positive influence (Richardson 2011).

Therefore, if history teaching is deemed part of the problem then post-conflict situations require remedial responses. One possibility is to replace the partisan myth with a new narrative that seeks to unify through emphasising common experience or a common foe, as is the current approach in Rwanda (Bentrovato 2016). Scholars question this strategy on the grounds that it defiles historical method and argue that by failing to deal with the legacy of a violent past, the resulting grievances are likely to resurface in future violence (Korostelina 2016, 307). Rather, scholarship points to an approach which Korostelina (2016) labels simply as ‘critical history’. A burgeoning literature in recent years (for example Carretero 2011; Bentrovato and Schulze 2016; Epstein and Peck 2017), while containing variations in emphasis, has broadly aligned with Bentrovato and Schulze's (2016, 21) assertion that in post-conflict societies history teaching should,

promote active, critical, inclusive, multiperspective, and democratic approaches that encourage young people’s historical understanding and critical thinking, helping them to deconstruct single truths and negative images of the Other and to critically confront and navigate divergent narratives of conflict.

However, it is also important to recognise that this approach ‘may well clash with a narrow and highly partisan version of family or communal history in which some pupils have been reared’ and that in such circumstances emotional reaction can distort cognitive reason (HA, 2007, 15).

**The Social Utility of History Teaching**

In the evolving field of education and peacebuilding, history teaching is being adapted to post-conflict situations. Usefully, Seixas (2017, 594-597) has classified three general trends, based on national origins. From Britain, he identifies using ‘the nature of the discipline’ to produce active learners who acquire rational historical knowledge to critically examine the past (Seixas 2017, 594). From Germany comes the notion of historical consciousness (Rüsen 2006) which sees historical understanding as a complex interaction between interpretations of the past, perceptions of the present and expectations for the future. Thus history education goes beyond ‘doing history’ but rather is aimed at ‘historical sense-making’ (Seixas 2017, 595-96). The American contribution advocates the application of the ‘inquiry method’ to historical study to the critical reading of historical evidence (Seixas 2017, 596-97). Essentially, this fuses with the disciplinary approach.

It is our contention that policy in Ireland, north and south, has been heavily shaped by an amalgam of disciplinary enquiry and aspects of historical consciousness, influenced by the imperative to address post-conflict challenges. Slater (1994) distinguishes between the intrinsic and extrinsic aims of history teaching. The former is in pursuit of the greater understanding of history within its disciplinary framework i.e. ‘doing history’; the latter seek to utilise history directly for societal change, for example the promotion of greater tolerance of others (Slater 1994, 126). In post-conflict environments, where historical abuses cause division, progressive educators advocate extrinsic aims to challenge those abuses. Therefore, the concept of historical consciousness, which sees the individual as buffeted by historical representations from both past and present, is useful. Paulson (2015, 37) nicely describes this as engaging with ‘the active past’. Curricula in both parts of Ireland support teaching critical history for social purpose but diverge as to when it is appropriate to introduce children to the contentious past.

**Cognitive Maturity, Empathy and Conflict**

The theoretical arguments for taking an enquiry-based, disciplinary approach when teaching history in post-conflict situations are persuasive in that, by demanding an evidential base, it encourages students to be critical of historical narratives from whatever quarter (Author, XXXX).Yet, adopting a critical approach, particularly where addressing controversial or sensitive themes, is perceived to require time, teacher confidence, and a positive disposition towards the capacity of children to engage which such issues (HA, 2007, 16). Therefore, before applying this to the teaching of political history at primary level, it is necessary to consider the age-related cognitive ability of students, and the affective challenges posed by post-conflict contexts. The enquiry method draws on the Brunerian idea of progression, that any idea can be introduced to young children if the teaching method is appropriate and is developed through a spiral model of deepening complexity. Advocates challenge perceived Piagetian constraints that children of primary age do not move beyond the concrete operational stage of cognitive development when learning history (West 1981; Cooper 1995). The research of Lee, Ashby and colleagues has established that cognitive understanding is broadly equated to age but that progression in history is complex, being related both to individual difference and learning conditions. Lee and Ashby (2000) found great variations within age groups and between individuals and schools. For instance, students’ depth of understanding and progress often varied across different aspects of historical thinking. Thus, those constructing a primary history curriculum in 1989 in England (and a year later in NI) were confident that children could be introduced to disciplinary history even if this did not address political content directly. For the ROI, the curriculum as a whole was deeply influenced by Brunerian philosophy. Developed during the lead up to the Good Friday Agreement, and situated within a broader framework of tolerance, multi-perspectivity and critical engagement, the ROI curriculum included a strong focus on social history and everyday life but, also, continued a tradition of engagement with political history in the senior end of primary which examined, among other things, the foundation of the Irish state and the historical roots of recent conflict (Author, XXXX). Thus, embedding critical history in curriculum reform of the 1990s offered history education in both NI and the ROI a promising pedagogical foundation through which to pursue extrinsic objectives. However, in NI primary history placed little emphasis on the overtly political and featured instead diversity through the social, cultural and economic experiences of ordinary people (Barton 2001; HA 2007).

Thus, literature is generally supportive of children’s emerging capacities to engage with historical complexity but the context of divided, post-conflict societies presents an additional challenge. As Cole and Murphy (2009, 1) have observed ‘where the wounds of identity based conflict are fresh, there are questions about whether, how and at what age children should learn about parts of the nation’s past – usually the recent past – that are difficult and expose deeply opposing views’. The emotional legacy associated with conflict prompts caution: the binaries of victim and perpetrator, the ‘fear, anger or bitterness for the Other’s involvement in one’s traumatic experiences’ (Zembylas and Kambani 2012, 109-10). Thus, apart from cognitive limitations teachers must take account of the emotional impact of covering sensitive history. Comparatively, it should be remembered that the Troubles directly affected many more families in NI than in the Republic. Yet, arguments that sensitive political history be left to secondary school must acknowledge that many children in NI have already acquired the foundation for sectarian attitudes at an early age (Connolly, Smith, and Kelly 2002).

The Role of the Teacher in a Post-Conflict Society

Latterly, education’s purpose in peacebuilding has moved beyond creating economic stability to pro-active engagement in classrooms, with the potential to contribute to positive, democratic change (Smith 2005; Bush and Saltarelli 2000). Focusing on the roles of teachers, Horner et al. (2015) caution against a technocratic approach, arguing that teachers, as ‘agents of democratisation’, should facilitate critical thinking and involve classes in deliberative democratic processes using participatory principles. Further, teachers need to offer children psychosocial support. Where they present knowledge as contested, and open to interpretation, pupils are more likely to develop the critical faculties necessary to contribute to societal change. Additionally, teachers require a broad analysis of past conflict and its legacy, including ‘understanding of their own biases’, if they are to work sensitively in the communities in which they live and teach (Horner et al. 2015, 45-46).

Therefore, beyond pedagogical skills, teachers require commitment and resilience if they are to pursue extrinsic objectives through teaching history. Work in NI has identified ‘avoidance’ and ‘risk-taking’ as key characteristics in determining teacher approaches (Author, XXXX). ‘Avoiders’, in the manner of ‘technocrats’, largely fulfil their curricular obligations but stay clear of history deemed difficult and eschew the view that history has a direct social utility. In contrast, ‘risk-takers’ embrace history’s capacity to inform contemporary debate by connecting past with present and relish the chance to challenge their students. In contested societies, in and beyond the history classroom, avoidance of difficult conversations is common often for good intent, either not to offend or provoke division or through lack of training and confidence (Gallagher 2004; Bell, Hansson, and McCaffery 2010; Loader and Hughes 2016; Bellino 2016). It can also be because teachers feel discomfort with certain perspectives relating to past events which run contrary to their own cherished beliefs and emotions (Zembylas 2019). To challenge avoidance teachers must be prepared to take risks, as ‘attention to emotion, rather than technicist pedagogy’ remains key in helping students understand the emotional legacies of the past (Zembylas and Kambani 2012, 125-26).

Zembylas (2017; 2019), drawing on the work of Boler, Britzman, Farley, Butler and others, provides new insights into teacher avoidance. He sees emotional response, ‘affect’, as central in resisting what Butler calls ‘troubled knowledge’. When teaching difficult histories in divided societies, there is the likelihood of ‘a sense of identification between those studying the history and those represented in history’ and this influences how one responds morally – or does not respond - to traumatic events (Zembylas 2017, 2). What results is a wilful ignorance of the vulnerability of the Other. Essentially, this is not a mere absence of knowledge but a ‘deeply epistemic resistance to know’ (4). Zembylas argues that in schools this leads to an ‘emotional regime’ which reinforces ‘identification with ‘our’ vulnerability and the disidentification with vulnerable others’ (7). He concludes that ‘the challenge is to turn discomfort into a productive learning experience’ conducive to encouraging learners to move outside their comfort zones and question cherished beliefs and assumptions (7). This requires ‘affective disruption’ which opens up individuals to acknowledging the vulnerability of others (Zembylas 2019, 196-199). In the context of Ireland, then, where violence driven by religious and political divisions has been endemic, it might be expected that an ignorance of vulnerability would be discernible in the educators interviewed for his study.

Whilst framing the teaching of political history, this literature review identifies the disciplinary approach as a precursor for teaching difficult history and also the cognitive and emotional tensions encountered when teachers seek to apply historical learning to contemporary political positions. It describes the different curricular responses in NI and the ROI to a post-conflict agenda. With this frame we examine our findings, moving beyond an examination of policy, to probe the philosophies and embedded assumptions held by a cross-section of educators engaged in policy creation, curriculum design, and educational practice. Ultimately, we seek to examine how the two jurisdictions respond to the question of whether or not to teach political history to children in upper primary and we consider the implications of those responses.

**Methods**

Within this qualitative study, the research team undertook semi-structured interviews over a period of two years with a purposively selected sample of sixteen individuals informed about the teaching of history at primary level across the island of Ireland. From both jurisdictions, four practicing primary teachers, two teacher educators and two educational policy makers were interviewed about their experiences of, and perspectives on, the teaching of history at primary level. The interview schedule explored the purposes of history education, the conceptualisation of history education within the primary curriculum, as well as pedagogical approaches to history education within post-conflict societies. The sample included four males and 12 females, with varying degrees of experience within the education sector. Participants’ experience ranged from 6 to 20+ years. The interviews were audio-recorded and verbatim transcriptions were uploaded to a qualitative research analysis software package (NVivo) before a process of thematic analysis, in line with the study’s social constructivist position, was undertaken.

Table 1. Stages of analysis

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| Stage One | **Sharing alternative perspectives:** Research team completed a reading and familiarisation of one selected interview transcript. Individuals completed a pre-coding of the transcript, labelling passages of transcript considered significant (Saldana 2012). Passages were shared and discussed to consider different interpretive perspectives (Bazeley 2009). |
| Stage Two | **Initial coding and consensus:**Individuals completed coding of two transcripts, one from each jurisdiction. Latent and semantic labels, including in vivo codes, which mirrored the language of participants or invoked pre-existing conceptual frameworks, were attributed (Braun and Clarke 2012). Coding decisions were focused on the central research questions and the goals of the study. The codes ascribed were then shared and discussed and group consensus formed (Saldana, 2012). |
| Stage Three | **Refining Codes:**Each individual code was ascribed a ‘code definition’ which pinpointed the criteria for inclusion or exclusion. |
| Stage Four | **Developing themes:** Data within each code were explored, in particular with a focus on interrogating outliers and negative cases. Coded data were reviewed for similarities and overlaps, and for “patterned response or meaning” (Braun and Clarke 2006, 10) which could form the basis of the theme. |

Quality of theme was ascertained in relation to the weight of supporting data, the clarity of boundaries with other themes and their relation to the research questions. When defined and ordered into a logical framework, these themes included the position of history in the primary curriculum, disciplinary approaches to history, educational philosophies underpinning the teaching of political history, and the role of teacher education in these processes. However, an exploration of all of these themes is beyond the scope of this paper which focuses, in detail, on the relationship between two particular themes: ‘political history as contested history’ and the ‘complexity of political history’.

Findings: Political history as contested history

From an NI perspective, political history as contested history emerged as the dominant lens through which the teaching of political history at primary level was viewed. Consistent with curricular traditions within the RoI, however, southern participants did not identify the teaching of political history in primary classrooms as necessarily difficult or controversial, except in relation to aspects of the Troubles and, in some cases, the Irish Civil War. Angela (Teacher, RoI, 6-10 years’ experience), for example, described Irish history as having ‘a relatively uncontentious story to tell, except probably the Civil War part’. This view of political history as ‘relatively uncontentious’ on the one hand, and the conflation of political history and contested history on the other, presented a significant point of contrast between RoI and NI. Nonetheless, there was general agreement amongst participants, across both jurisdictions, that children needed opportunities in school to engage with contentious issues and to develop the skills that enabled them to negotiate complexities. Mary (NI, Teacher Educator, 6-10 years), for example, argued that, as children become increasingly aware of their ‘own traditions and backgrounds’, they need to develop the skills to appreciate ‘other people’s views’ and to engage with different ‘political stances’. Similarly, Brigid (ROI, Teacher, 6-10 years) argued that children need to understand that the past ‘isn’t black and white. There are lots of different perspectives and there is bias everywhere’.

While a shared understanding of the school as an appropriate site to interrogate difficult and contested knowledge was evident, this understanding played out differently in both jurisdictions in terms of curriculum and classroom practice. Several subthemes and relationships, identified in the data, helped illuminate the underpinning experiences, perspectives and assumptions that shape these contrasting understandings. In terms of curriculum, these were the inter-relationships between curriculum principles, post-conflict framing and systemic assumptions regarding children’s capacities, whereas decisions made about practice were influenced by contextual and personal constraints.

Table 2. Factors underpinning contrasting understandings of curriculum and practice

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| **Underpinning Curriculum** | **Underpinning Practice** |
| Curriculum principles  Post-conflict framing  Children’s capacities | Living Conflict  School and Community  Biography and emotions |

Factors underpinning curriculum

As noted earlier, both curricula shared key theoretical, conceptual and curricular influences and principles, including the idea of historical enquiry and social constructivism. Participants were generally supportive of the idea of children investigating past events through engaging with evidence, and coming to an understanding of historical knowledge as provisional and interpretative. Regardless of jurisdiction, historical enquiry was seen as providing children with opportunities to understand ideas such as multiple narratives, perspective and bias. Despite this shared understanding, differences emerged regarding how this should play out within formal curricula and classroom practice.

A post-conflict curriculum

While both curricula were deliberately crafted to respond to the needs of a post-conflict society and sought to promote openness to different perspectives and narratives, their approaches to political history and, within that, to contested histories, was very different. In the RoI, the long standing tradition of teaching Irish political history continued, with emphasis placed on promoting multiple perspectives, awareness of bias and worldview, and attention to evidence. In NI, similar skills and capacities were developed, but through social and world history. Engagement with Irish political history was postponed until children progressed to secondary education. The assumptions underpinning these differences were strongly reflected in the data, along with a shared commitment to history’s potential to develop key understandings and skills in post-conflict contexts.

Crafted when peace negotiations were underway, the RoI Primary History Curriculum (NCCA, 1999) was deliberately framed within a post-conflict paradigm. Edward (RoI, Policy, 20+ years), influential in the field of curriculum policy, noted that history teaching had become a focus of attention from the beginning of the Troubles:

... there was a really strong sense that unless certain skills and attitudes were developed through good historical understanding we were missing an opportunity… to let people learn to live together properly, to understand their past, to appreciate them, to appreciate that there were differences, but that they were not insurmountable ones to living together.

Edward argued strongly for engaging with political history topics in primary curricula, even where those topics could be seen as contentious, a view shared by Michael (RoI, Teacher Educator, 20+ years), who reasoned that the state had a ‘duty’ to ensure that school curricula include opportunities for children to engage with important historical topics.

... if you want to build a healthy society then you have to address the issues that are there in society, those issues are extremely difficult and extremely divisive … I think the curriculum should reflect the issues that have been the major issues to the society and if they continue to be controversial in the contemporary, then so be it.

For Úna (RoI, Policy, 20+ years), a senior curriculum policy maker, corralling curriculum into safe spaces was potentially self-defeating in that it was no guarantee that children’s exploration of the past would respect imposed constraints.

The problem [for curriculum] is that even in the places you think you can go, you will find yourself in places that you didn’t think you were going to end up.

Efforts to constrain classroom discourse from addressing historical topics that exerted contemporary influence, then, were seen by Úna as potentially futile. While both Edward and Michael acknowledged that some aspects of political history could be seen as contested/controversial, this, in their view, increased their importance in terms of curriculum, rather than being seen as a reason to avoid them or to avoid political history in general.

From a NI perspective, curriculum decisions regarding political history were also rooted in a post-conflict framework, though resulted in radically different conclusions. Catherine (NI, Policy, 16-20 years), a significant figure in curriculum policy, argued, for example, that ‘Northern Ireland … is a contested space’ so political history ‘is always contentious’. At primary level, Catherine suggested that teaching political history may reinforce prejudice ‘particularly with teachers who maybe are not skilled in controversial issues’. Primary curriculum designers in NI, in Catherine’s view, did not avoid the idea of conflict and difference completely, but decided…

...to take it more into mutual understanding and cultural heritage and more that traditions-based approach and …how do we arrive at these kinds of things, rather than ‘this is what happened’, because ‘this is what happened’ doesn’t really help young children’s understanding ... the factual historical story is not a particularly helpful story, so it comes back to that business about where are you as a nation state, and if we are looking at the Republic, maybe there is that sense of nationhood … it is not contested in the same way…

While Catherine argued the necessity for curriculum constraints, there was some disagreement amongst NI participants on this point. Patricia (NI, Policy, 20+ years), for example, viewed the NI curriculum as constraining in terms of political history. While, in her view, political history could be taught at primary level, ‘you would need a risk-taker of a teacher’ to move beyond what was outlined in the curriculum, ‘it depends on the teacher, it depends on the context, it depends on the school’. On the other hand, John (NI, Teacher, 20+ years), a school principal, did not see the curriculum as a constraint. The curriculum, he argued, ‘is probably more free than ever’.

…we have the opportunity to develop and look at the needs of our own school … nothing would stop us from wanting to study... the 1916 Easter Rising... or how the Irish got involved in World War 1…

Like Patricia, however, he felt that the context of the school would determine whether teachers actually did so. He then argued that the absence of political history at curriculum level had implications in terms of resources and collective experience.

Take the political dimension, it is not happening across Northern Ireland, so there isn’t that pool of resources … there isn’t that kind of … shared experience of teachers coming together and saying ‘this is the way we have done it, and we have tried this and we have tried that.

Thus, for some, curricular constraints had a negative impact on the development of expertise and resources, and teaching political history, while possible, brought with it an element of risk.

Assumptions regarding children’s capacities

Although children’s capacities to engage with complex histories were seen as related to curriculum design by all participants, age related limitations were offered as a key justification for primary curriculum policy in NI. Yet, there were dissenting voices. For Margaret (NI, Teacher, 20+ years) for example, age did not present a barrier to engagement with contested histories; rather, early engagement could provide some protection against indoctrination.

…I think then as they grow up and go out into that world out there, that still has bias, it still has prejudice, I think the younger they are taught the facts of what happened, the less likely they are … to be influenced by propaganda, by someone’s personal opinion.

In terms of policy, however, it was strongly argued that complex histories should be postponed until children were older. In Catherine’s (NI, Policy, 20+ years) view, where political history was concerned…

…there was the obvious things that couldn’t be avoided…but to try and unravel those perspectives and give them an historical background, I mean, we can hardly do that at Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4.

For Catherine, taking a multi-perspectival approach on political history was ‘conceptually …too difficult’. However, she noted that

…there definitely was a clear philosophy…building conceptual understanding of the nature of history and the disputed nature of history and the nature of sources and the nature of truth to get to the stage where, hopefully, at some appropriate time, raising these… everybody has a past, everybody has a tradition … you build the mutual respect before you then introduce the controversy.

From a southern perspective, however, while children’s capacities were recognised as emergent, it was generally argued that these could be built on and not seen as a reason to step away from, or postpone, complex or contested issues. Edward (RoI, Policy, 20+ years), for example, saw important opportunities to extend children’s thinking and argued that while you cannot expect a 12-year-old child …

…to have the same understanding as an 18-year-old … you can begin to open their eyes to the fact that there can be motivation and bias and that the account of the past looks completely different depending on which side of an issue you are on.

Michael (RoI, Teacher Educator, 20+ years), in particular, argued vehemently for the need to engage with difficult issues from the start, characterising the avoidance of complex histories as ‘a complete abandonment of responsibility’. Drawing, perhaps, on Gallagher (2004) who noted that the perception of schools as ‘oases of peace’ was prevalent in NI in the 1970s, Michael maintained that…

… the evidence I think from Northern Ireland is that you know some people say, you see the school as some sort of oasis and you keep everything out, you don’t engage with the wider issues, you know the issues that are dividing political society outside, but the evidence is that children imbibe that in any case, and if the school or if the curriculum stands back from it, they are going to acquire it from the streets or from their own family … and I don’t think that is necessarily a good thing, I think it would be better if those issues, difficult as they may be, are addressed in school.

While the views of NI participants were mixed it was evident that the decision to postpone engagement with difficult histories was consciously taken by policy makers and justified largely by a perceived deficit in children’s capacities to deal with the complexities of controversial history. RoI participants, on the other hand, focused on the emergent nature of those capacities and the opportunities offered to build children’s understanding progressively. In addition, keeping controversial history out of the primary curriculum was seen as both an ‘abandonment of responsibility’ and ultimately self-defeating, as schools cannot be seen as separate from the society in which they operate.

Factors underpinning practice

For teachers, regardless of whether or not the curriculum included a focus on contested histories, a range of local constraints emerged which influenced decisions they made about whether or not to engage. These were particularly evident in the northern data.

Living Conflict

Although NI has emerged from a period of heightened violence following the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, the political conflict at the epicentre of this unrest (NI’s union with Ireland or Great Britain) remains and the emotional impact of episodic violence perpetrated by state and non-state actors has left society deeply divided. Participant teachers from both jurisdictions perceived the antecedents of violence to still be close to the surface, and, as Judith (NI, Teacher, 6-10 years) and Margaret (NI, Teacher, 20+ years) suggested, the possibility of a return to the violence of the Troubles continues to be a serious concern.

We are in an area which is exceptionally volatile and you just have to be very careful of what you say. (Judith)

I would find it difficult to talk about the Troubles, about the recent Troubles because I think it is still bubbling there (Margaret)

Some sensitivity to the NI context was also evident in the southern data. Maria (RoI, Teacher Educator, 16-20 years), for example, recognised an on-going vulnerability and acknowledged the impulse to go with ‘what is safer, maybe, or to shy away from what is a very contested view’ in relation to historical events that are ‘still very much alive today’.

Schools and communities

There was some sensitivity, north and south, to the possibility of parental resistance to teaching contested themes. Judith (NI, Teacher, 6-10 years), for example, cited the possibility of ‘upset parents’ as a reason for not teaching ‘that kind of history’. For Angela (RoI, Teacher, 6-10 years) her preparedness to take on controversial issues with children was tempered by fear of a ‘backlash’ from parents. Referring to a series of hunger strikes in the 1980s that occurred amongst nationalist prisoners seeking recognition as political prisoners, Angel argued that:

I would have no problem dealing with, say, the Hunger Strikes…I know I could do it in a fair and interesting manner for the kids but I know there would be a backlash from parents because there is still a lot of polarisation here.

Angela’s readiness to teach about recent conflict was constrained also at school level, as her principal had decided ‘not to cover the North’.

The role of schools appeared to be an important factor in determining whether or not primary teachers engaged with contested issues. Patricia (NI, Policy, 20+ years) for example, placed particular emphasis on the importance of schools providing a supportive environment in the face of parental objection. In a similar vein, Michael (RoI, Teacher Educator, 20+ years) suggested that teachers might be dependent on schools to act as some sort of buffer between parents and teachers in relation to the teaching of contested issues, and that without this, teachers were at risk of isolation in the face of parental complaints. It is important to note that the idea of parental resistance was a perceived threat and remained at the level of expectation with no concrete examples of actual resistance offered in either jurisdiction.

Biography and emotions

The study confirmed findings elsewhere relating to the extent to which personal biographies and emotions could act as constraints on teachers and promote avoidance of areas of the curriculum deemed as controversial or sensitive (e.g. Loader and Hughes 2017; Zembylas, 2017, 2019). As Margaret (NI, Teacher, 20+ years) explained, where children of different traditions shared the same educational space, she was alert to the possibility of causing offence:

I don’t want to offend a child in my class because Catholics are in the minority in this school and I wouldn’t want them to pick up on that I am stuck with these Troubles and you know, ‘why did this happen?

Others feared being seen as bringing undue influence on their students. Judith (NI, Teacher, 6-10 years) for example, explained that:

I don’t want to be known as the person … ‘Oh, she influenced our son by telling him all this or teaching him this’, I think you have to try and be very politically correct yourself, to stay on the straight and narrow…but no, I will not be teaching that kind of history here.

For some, teaching political history that was connected to the recent past was emotionally loaded. Having lived through the Troubles, they recognised heightened sensitivities.

We are a generation of teachers who grew up through it, you know, who don’t feel comfortable teaching something that they, they actually lived through, and maybe some of the more recent historical past, through recent difficult agenda.   
(John, NI, Teacher, 20+ years)

... maybe it is because I lived in [town in NI] and I lived through the heart of it, I still think it’s a bit sensitive.   
(Margaret, NI, Teacher, 20+ years)

In summary, while participants in both jurisdictions shared the view that schools should engage with difficult knowledge and contested histories, for some NI participants, including policymakers, this engagement should be postponed until children were older, and better equipped cognitively and emotionally, and this approach has become embedded into curriculum policy. For NI teachers, there were other, more local constraints, including the on-going nature of conflict, parental and school expectations, their own biographies, and personal emotions. From a southern perspective, children’s capacities to engage with controversial and complex histories were conceptualised as emergent and participants supported engagement with controversial histories at primary level in ways that were age appropriate. More importantly, such engagement was seen as crucial to children’s future capacity to understand complex narratives and an important, if not critical, component of a post-conflict history curriculum. By and large, there was consensus across participants in the RoI, regardless of their role as policy makers, teacher educators or classroom practitioners. While teachers were supportive of this approach, however, there was some acknowledgement that teaching about more recent conflict may meet with resistance at school or community level.

Similar to the findings of Zembylas (2017, 2019), amongst our teachers particularly, ‘affect’ was creating resistance to the teaching of ‘troubled knowledge’. However, we argue that this was not necessarily ‘wilful ignorance’ to the vulnerability of the Other. Rather, teachers were generally aware of the need for children to understand alternative perspectives; yet, some NI teachers, in particular, found it too challenging (at least at present) to transform the personal discomfort emanating from their lived experience of conflict into positive learning opportunities for others.

# Discussion

You could argue that differences found in the teaching of history north and south, whether at the level of policy or practice, were a question of two traditions. One jurisdiction, keen to establish itself in the initial stages of nationhood, ensured that children were taught an agreed national story during their period of compulsory education and established a tradition of teaching political history in upper primary which has continued unchallenged. The other, fearful of giving legitimacy to an alienated minority and keen to establish itself as a core component of the United Kingdom, favoured British history and, in later decades, focused its enquiry at primary level on a relatively safe menu of global, social and local history. Yet, while there is some truth in this analysis, it disregards to a large extent the commitment of curriculum policy makers and teachers, north and south, to engage in a meaningful way with peacebuilding education in the context of progressive history education.

At the level of practice, the teachers in our study displayed several of the characteristics identified by Horner et al. (2015) as fit for teaching in post-conflict contexts. All saw beyond mere curriculum delivery by acknowledging their role in influencing children’s cultural and political understanding. Further, they demonstrated aspects of ‘reflexivity, reason and judgment’ (Horner et al., 2015, p. 20) by showing sensitivity to potential tensions within local communities and awareness of their own biases. However, for some this emboldened practice and for others it was constraining. For teachers in NI their constraints were local and personal: their sensitivity to conflict as a lived and continuing experience, their expectations of resistance from parents, communities and schools, and their personal biographies of conflict and its emotional legacy. Not all constraints were local. The absence of curriculum support, resources and access to shared experience were also cited as factors. Curriculum either enables or constrains practice in this sense. If controversial or difficult histories are not in the curriculum in the first place, then they are defined as outside of normal practice, keeping teachers’ everyday practice within safe parameters and consigning the teaching of controversial/contested histories to the realm of risk taker. Risk-taking itself can have positive and negative outcomes. Magill (2016), for example, cautions against ‘activist teachers’ who engage with controversial issues primarily to promote their own ‘strongly held personal perspectives’ rather than viewing them through the lens of multiple perspectives. On the other hand, risk-taking can be seen in positive terms (Author XXXX; Magill, 2016) and Kitson (2007) has argued for the concept of the ‘considered risk taker’. Within this study even those teachers who were most resistant to risk taking, displayed many of the characteristics required for peacebuilding education, conforming, perhaps, to Magill’s concept of the ‘reluctant avoider’, sensitive to the legacy of the past but unsure of how to move forward (Magill, 2016). Moving forward, in this regard, requires a response at policy level in terms of curriculum and teacher education.

It is true that having a curricular space for controversial or contested histories does not, in itself, guarantee that difficult histories will be taught or taught well. For both the RoI and NI, serious engagement with teacher education would be required, particularly at school level. As Loader and Hughes (2016) argue, without teacher education on controversial issues, teachers’ lack of comfort with contested histories and their reluctance to engage with resistance, whether from students, parents, schools or wider community, make them less likely to challenge or seek to overcome ‘the prevailing culture of avoidance’ (128). As well as building capacity in knowledge and pedagogy, teachers require support to engage in critically reflective practices, which enable them to interrogate their own biographies, emotions, expectations and role as political actors. Thus, discomfort, as Zembylas argues, can become transformative (Zembylas, 2017, 2019). Where the RoI is concerned, such reflexivity is also important to ensure that teachers and schools interrogate their own positionalities with regard to Irish history. While the current post-conflict framing of the history curriculum in the RoI foregrounds multiple perspectives, the idea that some history is inherently difficult has less currency. Where history is not seen as problematic, it is not problematised.

In terms of curriculum, however, different approaches to the inclusion of political history, north and south, are underpinned by contrasting perspectives on children’s capacities to engage with complex histories and on the interconnectedness, or not, of political and social history. As noted earlier, in the South, belief in children’s capacity is underpinned by a relatively benign view of political history and a long tradition in teaching political history at primary level. In the North, where political history was seen mostly through the lens of controversial history, complexity was used as a reason for postponing engagement until children were older, though in this study this was contested somewhat by classroom teachers. Similar to the views expressed by several participants across the study, previous studies have suggested that, rather than being insulated from conflict, young children are influenced by family-based and community-based learning that may leave them with an understanding of history that perpetuates negative conflict (Connolly, Smith, and Kelly 2002; Bell, Hansson, and McCaffery 2010). There is a strong argument that unless these narratives are challenged early, sectarian, racist or xenophobic views will be harder to shift. As noted earlier, the evidence suggests that children can engage with difficult knowledge if appropriately supported, while postponing such engagement risks the early entrenchment of divisive and biased perspectives.

The separation of social and political history and the relative exclusion of political history from primary schools within the northern curriculum raise serious questions relating to how power is conceptualised and interrogated within a given historical context. The idea that issues of poverty, suffrage, slavery, famine, land use, industrialisation and others could be addressed from the perspective of social history alone without addressing the political structures, narratives and practices that underpin them, is difficult to justify. Teaching the Great Irish Famine (1845-52), for example, which is on both curricula, without addressing its politics in terms of causation, narrative and consequences, suggests that famine arose from social and agricultural practices alone, rather than as part of a wider political system, with political responses and both political and social consequences. Attempts to create a firewall between social and political history is, at best, misleading and weakens the potential of history education to contribute to peace-building education in a post-conflict context.

In summary, whilst the evidence suggests a considerable foundation for the ongoing development of progressive peacebuilding history education on the island of Ireland, constraints should be recognised and addressed. This requires ongoing engagement at curricular level with a critical review of current provision, along with the development of teacher education programmes for all teachers that address their confidence and competence in the teaching of controversial or contested histories. Given the current complex relations at European level, which impact on relationships between the RoI and the UK, and compounded by historical cross border complexities between the RoI and NI, it is important to ensure the continued progressive framing of curricula, north and south, and to avoid a return to more nationalist agendas.

Finally, research which offers comparison and collaboration across contested international borders, such as that between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, presents a significant contribution towards strengthening progressive history education and the wider peacebuilding process in such contexts, neither of which can be taken for granted on a divided island.

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