

## **The Teaching of History in Community Schools**

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Is there validity in differentiating between the teaching of history in community or comprehensive schools and in general secondary schools? Some may argue, perhaps, that as all second-level schools have a common basic structure there is no point in considering the place of history in the context of one educational milieu alone without reference to the overall benefits of the subject in the broader order of learning. At a time when the status of history in the curriculum is being called into question, might it not be better (this argument runs) for all history teachers to stand united in the defence of their beloved discipline? The reflections which follow, based as they are on purely personal experience of teaching history in a suburban Dublin community school, are in no way intended to deflect from this unity of purpose. Rather they may serve as a very modest guide to the increasing number of young teachers who are embarking upon their careers in this type of school. The adaptation of school to suit the demands of community schools is governed by the location of the school, the practical facilities therein, the varying aptitudes and abilities of the pupils and the philosophy of the schools. This latter considers academic achievement important but emphasises the development of the whole person, giving the pupil a sense of responsibility, social case and a set of values which enable him or her to interact successfully with members of the community. Furthermore the provision of adult education facilities in line with a growing consciousness of their worth, is a vital function of the community school. Central to the genesis of community schools in the late sixties was the concept of educational opportunity, irrespective of the area in which the students reside or the means of their parents. Hence community schools are generally located in the heart of a populous area in the city and at a focal gathering point in rural areas.

In order to examine the nature and importance of history in these innovative schools, reference will be made firstly to the practical advantages which accrue for the history teacher from the availability of a wide range of aids and facilities. Secondly, and more importantly, the specific value of history in these schools will be assessed as an agent of community-building. Thirdly, it may be useful to advert to the value of including history (considered in this context) in some of the vocational and cultural programmes

which are or will be characteristic of this system of schooling. Essential to the state's approach to the actual foundation of community schools in the early seventies was the provision of modern equipment and extensive facilities in each subject area. History and other subjects in the humanities were allocated large rooms for teaching purposes, and more particularly, to house a library relating to each discipline as well as relevant aids and resource material. The history room has become a focal point in the community school as it provides an invaluable display area for students' projects and an effective resource centre for teachers' aids. These usually include a video and tapes, slides and film-strips, document packs and miscellaneous matter on current affairs.

History constitutes a separate department in the community school, with a head who calls regular meetings of teachers involved in the subject. These provide a forum for evaluation of methods, facilitate the co-ordination of syllabi and enable teachers to share difficulties and to receive the support and encouragement of colleagues at times when these are most needed. Reinforcing and complementing this departmental structure, the system of pastoral care provides scope for a broader approach to the teaching of the subject in the classroom where the groups are all mixed. Thus drama and role-playing are an accepted part of communication in the learning situation in the classroom and history teachers can capitalise upon this wealth of self-expression. A valuable supplement to the regular and structured school programme is the allowance made for Outward Bound. The possibility of efficiently organised and well-run school tours under the auspices of this department can be of enormous benefit to teachers and students of history.

Physical resources and structures may enhance and facilitate the teaching of history in community schools. They do not justify it. The achievement of the ideals of this system of schooling may be aided by the tapping of the rich possibilities which are inherent in the study of history. The subject can make a very valuable return on the investment in raw facilities for its effective teaching. For history is undoubtedly a great stimulus to the building of community. It can foster a sense of identity and be an antidote to rootlessness. This is of particular importance in the context of the social upheaval in the movement of inner city populations to newly developed suburbia where most community schools are situated.

At a basic level the history of family can stimulate a pride in one's lineal traditions. Contact between pupils and grandparents who still reside in central urban areas can open up the heritage and lore of past generations. The teacher can foster this identification with a family unit by stressing the continuities of family living such as crafts and trades, marriage patterns and recurrence of names. To take an example from the Dublin experience where new estates and housing schemes have apparently obliterated the link with the past, it can be very instructive for children to realise the tenacity of family settlement. Thus many Taylor families still live in the vicinity of Swords where they were very well established in Tudor times, there are Seagraves still resident in the Cabra area as there were five hundred years ago and Barnwells are to be found in the traditional family region of Fingal in north county Dublin.

The study of the history of locality can be enjoyable and fulfilling for teachers and pupils in community schools because here the interaction of individual families develops into real community. Pride in community fosters an awareness of the positive features of the environment and can prevent the growth of the vandal mentality. For pupils to realise, that the local railway, old cemetery, ruined abbey or large house have shaped the rhythms of life and death of people in past generations, their patterns of belief and worship, their recreation, their business activity, can excite feelings of respect and belonging. Moreover the school and community may be interwoven by the mounting of exhibitions of old photographs, models of local monuments and buildings, maps, art-work and artefacts.

At the level of citizenship pupils in community schools may be shown that an urban community is more or less than a group of interacting localities. To cite the experience of teaching in Dublin once again, civic-mindedness and civic pride are fostered by the establishing of the continuity of the city's growth through the ages. Pupils should not feel that there is an alien element in the history of their city but rather be encouraged to embrace its rich traditions. This approach could have an impact on the soaring crime rate, and possibly lead to the creation of an urban community aware of its worth and noted for its caring attitudes. The sources here are particularly exhaustive when one considers the unbroken pattern of settlement extending back over a thousand years.

We now turn to the application of history to courses which are characteristic of the kind of school under review. Those students who are not studying for departmental examinations usually opt for a pre-employment course (involving work experience and a humanities programme designed to help students in the world of work).

Providing a history component for such a course may be a challenging business for the teacher. Positively it means that the teacher has absolute freedom with regard to aims, methods and content but low levels of academic ability and resistance to a subject which seems of no practical value make the freedom less alluring than it first appears. The planner of such a course may choose to teach a programme of Irish studies which would include the teaching of a basic history of Ireland. The intrinsic value of local history has already been noted and in the experience of some teachers who have organised these courses lectures from members of local history associations have proved to be a very popular. So too have guided walks and tours in the locality. Similar possibilities are opened up for pre-Leaving Certificate secretarial classes, while post-Leaving secretarial classes may follow a contemporary history and current affairs programme. Debates on subjects such as partition, constitutional change and political parties in Ireland involve a history dimension, as does the discussion of international diplomacy and problems.

Community schools are young institutions with many of the problems associated with emergent bodies. Traditions are built over time and as yet the community schools have a very short history. Many of the points made here are ideals which will take time to become realities. Give the resources of these schools, however, and the rich possibilities of history as a discipline, there is little doubt but that the subject will come to affirm many of the claims made for it here. It is to be hoped that the pupils' history studies will not only provide them with a sense of being firmly rooted in time and place, but will also help in the overall direction of all forms of education: teaching them to think.