

Dáil debate, 22 January 2018

Junior Cycle Reform

Question:

30. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Education and Skills his views on whether the proposal to remove history and geography from the core curriculum at junior cycle is a progressive development for future generations of schoolchildren; the type of consultation that has taken place in the development of this proposal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [2766/19]

Deputy Kathleen Funchion

How was the proposal to remove history and geography from the core curriculum at junior cycle arrived at; what consultation has taken place to date in the development of the proposal; and does the Minister believe it would be a positive step in the education system, if pursued?

Deputy Joe McHugh

Since arriving in the Department, I have spoken publicly about how vital it is that young people learn from the past in order that they can plan for the future. At a national, European and international level, it has never been more important for people to understand the lessons of history. As we face the very difficult challenges of Brexit, while also addressing the many aspects of the War of Independence and the Civil War, the Decade of Commemorations will question the importance of understanding the historical context.

I have met officials of the NCCA and asked that a review of the optional nature of history under the new framework for the junior cycle be carried out. I expect to receive a report from the NCCA by the end of the first quarter of this year.

Prior to the introduction of the framework for the junior cycle, history and geography were core subjects only in voluntary secondary schools, which make up 52% of schools. However, it is important to note that currently 90% of students across all school types choose to study history and that 92% choose to study geography at junior certificate level.

The new junior certificate programme has greatly enlivened subjects, with a new emphasis on projects and self-directed learning. As part of the roll-out of the new framework for the junior cycle, history and geography were introduced to schools in September 2018. The minimum time allocated for the teaching of history and geography is 200 hours over the three years of the junior cycle programme, which is the equivalent of three 40-minute periods per week. I understand that for many schools this will lead to increased time provision for the teaching of history and geography.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion

I thank the Minister for his reply, but I am concerned. In general, I do not like the idea of anything being mandatory, particularly in education. I would love to do many things in the education system differently. Currently, Irish, English and maths are mandatory subjects. The Minister has mentioned that a report will be presented in the first quarter of this year. I am interested in knowing what will happen next because I am concerned that, if priority is not given in the junior cycle programme, the number of students taking history at leaving certificate level will be substantially reduced and that, ultimately, the number pursuing the subject at higher level will be decreased. In Britain the subject is currently only available as an elective to those aged 16 years and just 40% of students elect to take it.

As the Minister made reference to it, just as important as our national history which it is important to know - it is particularly apt that we are discussing this issue the day after the events celebrating an Chéad Dáil - is international history. I am particularly concerned about the teaching of history in looking at Brexit and all of the different things happening throughout the world. I also mentioned geography, but I am particularly concerned that if there is an option, students might

sometimes think history is boring and choose to opt out of taking it. It can actually be a good and exciting subject when taught correctly.

Deputy Joe McHugh

In the first part of her question the Deputy asked what would happen next. At the end of the first quarter of this year the NCCA will report. I am conscious that it has a decision to make and I do not want to predetermine the outcome. I have met the NCCA, my officials and many individuals and groups on the teaching of history. One of the motivations in having Irish, English and maths as core subjects in the junior certificate programme is that they benefit literacy and numeracy, but no subject is of more benefit to one's literacy than history. It is of benefit to one's research skills and in analytical and critical analysis. The Deputy is correct in pointing out that if fewer students take history at junior certificate level, the potential and propensity to take it at honours level in the leaving certificate examinations will decline. There is a little time to work through the issue. I have also asked for the curriculum to be looked at. Perhaps it could even include stair na teanga, the history of the Irish language, which takes us back 3,500 years and can open a lot of doors in respect of our placenames and who we are as a people. I hope that now in the Decade of Commemorations, the time has come for history to take its rightful place.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion

I welcome the Minister's response because he seems to be quite positive about the subject. I certainly support his comments on the history of the language. I am not fluent sa Ghaeilge. I wish I had studied it a little more at school. It is certainly something which should also be looked at. If one looks at the recent centenary celebrations in 2016, at how much children bought into them and they learned in school, it shows that the teaching of history can be very beneficial and helpful and it would be a real shame to lose it. We do

not want it to be a case of fee paying against non-fee paying schools. We do not want it to become an elitist subject, where only those attending fee paying schools will have the option to study history. I welcome the Minister's points because he seems to be quite supportive of the idea of keeping history and geography as core subjects and promoting and supporting them more. As I said, sometimes history can be viewed as not the most exciting of subjects, but that is a bit of a myth. If it was promoted differently, there would be a greater uptake and more students would take an interest in it.

Deputy Joe McHugh

On the Deputy's reference to the Irish language, there is a lovely seanfhocal, with which the Ceann Comhairle will be familiar - ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na daoine, which means that we live in each other's shadow. We are living in the shadow of the people who went before us. Tá dualgas don chéad ghlúin eile orainn. We have a responsibility to the next generation. Whether in respect of cultúr, teanga ná oidhreacht, we have that responsibility. In the evolving and fast-changing society in which we live, taking a step back and reflecting can be more important than ever. Táim dóchasach go mbeidh an comhrá fadúda an t-ábhar seo dearfach.