Big Pictures of the Past
Research Project

An investigation into the kinds of 'big pictures' that young teachers and young students possess and how these 'big pictures' may be made more robust

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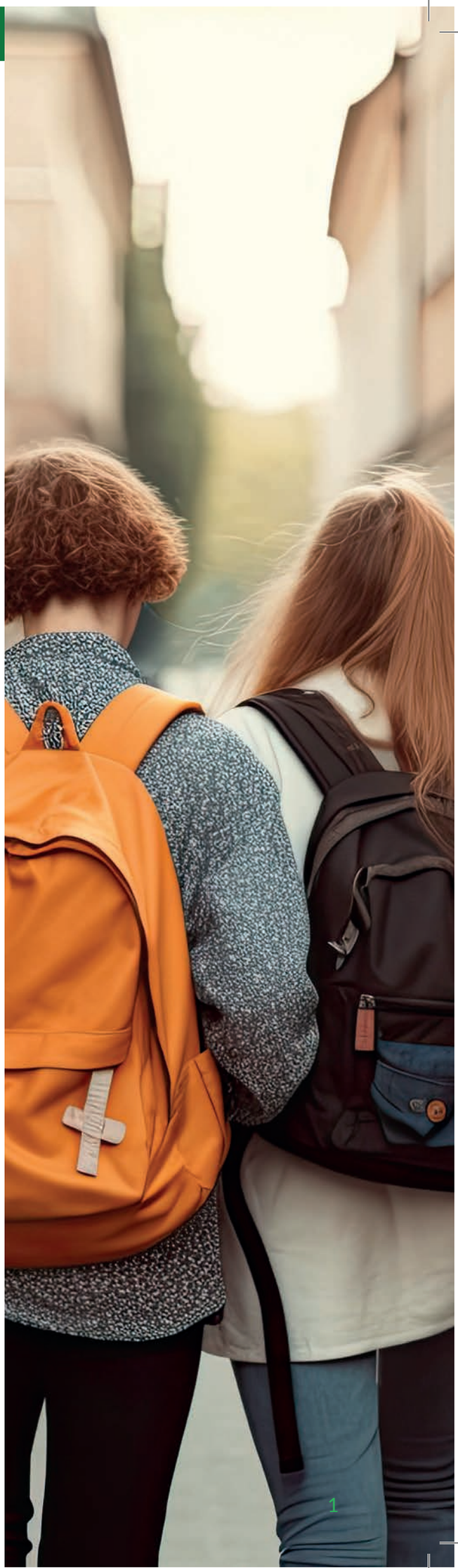
Introduction

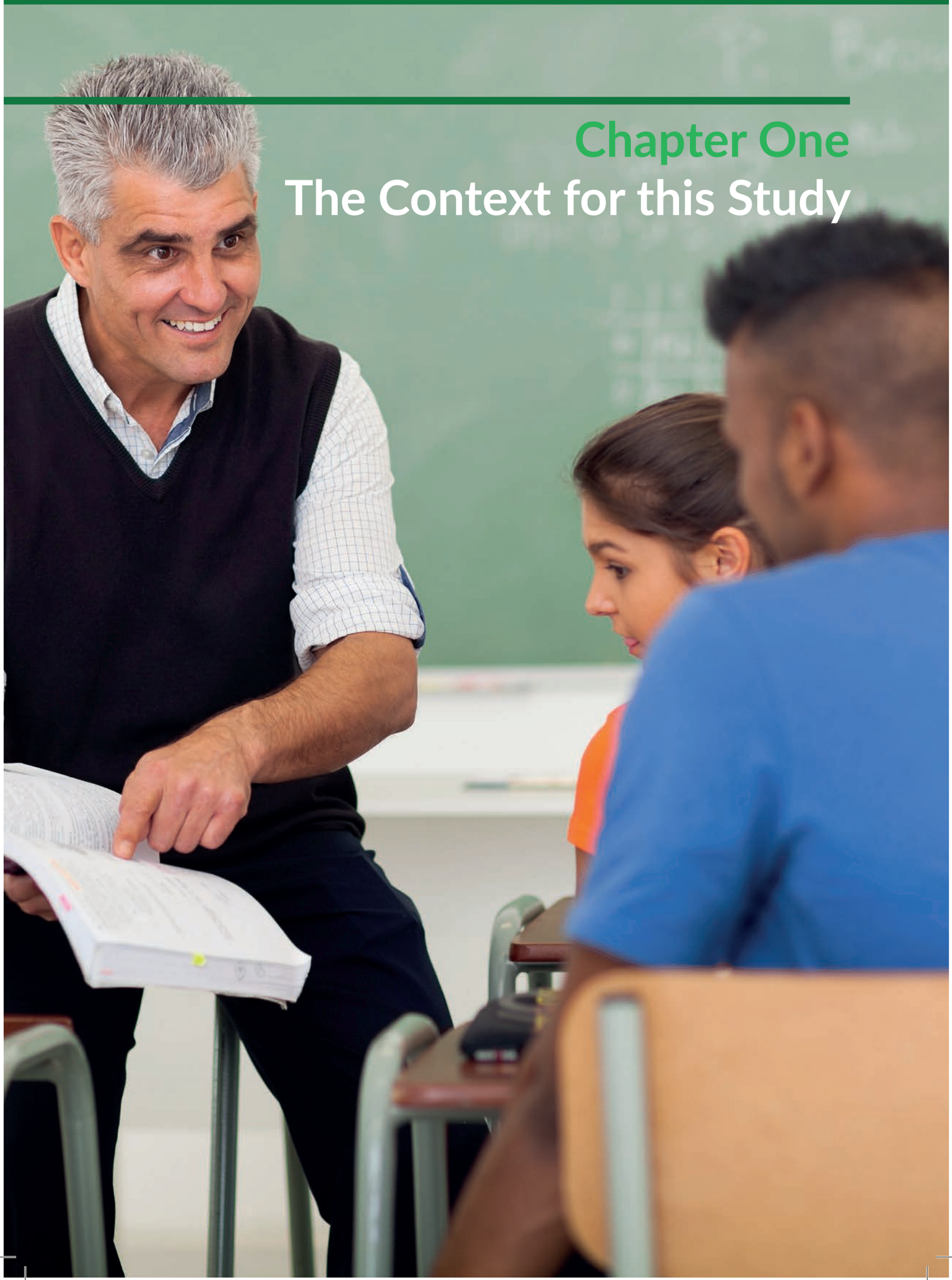
In September 2018, a new specification for Junior Cycle History became operational in second-level schools in the Republic of Ireland, replacing a syllabus that had been in place since 1989. While the previous syllabus placed emphasis on the concept of chronology, the new specification placed a new emphasis on students' 'big pictures' of the past and the need to help these become more robust. Also new was the emphasis on 'historical consciousness' and the need to locate 'big picture' understanding within a disciplinary context. In September 2019, the 'Big Pictures of the Past' research project – a collaboration between the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and University College Dublin (UCD) School of Education – began its work with student history teachers enrolled in UCD's Professional Master of Education (PME) programme and, subsequently, with first year History students from a cross-section of schools in the Dublin region.

The collaborative research project originated in a wish to gather data on the kinds of 'big pictures' that first year History students have and, consequentially, the nature of the challenge facing teachers in helping students develop their 'big picture' understanding. To explore the classroom practicalities of helping teachers to meet the challenges, a ten-era framework was developed, as an instrument for classroom use and to allow the researchers the opportunity to gather data on its use.

To better understand the challenges associated with 'big picture' understanding, the researchers worked with the UCD PME History Methods class of 2019–21 to attempt to appraise their preparedness for the challenges in question. Initially conceived as a one-year project focusing on eight schools, COVID-19 restrictions forced a re-think and the project continued into the school year 2020–21, with a further seven schools participating.

In brief, then, the research focused on the 'big picture' thinking of student history teachers and their first-year students, and the impact, if any, of the classroom use of an experimental framework. This report outlines the main findings and offers some recommendations.





Chapter One
The Context for this Study

1.1 Introduction: the *Framework for Junior Cycle* (2015)

Over a number of years – from 2015 – a new *Framework for Junior Cycle* – was introduced into Irish schools. The framework was the result of deliberations and consultations with a wide range of education partners – including students, teachers and parents – over the preceding five-year period. Its overarching vision was to place students at the centre of the educational experience in new and meaningful ways, guided by values of inclusion and respect. The framework was intended to increase the autonomy of schools in developing programmes that met the needs of learners in their own specific contexts. It also sought to move away from what was seen as an over-concentration on subject knowledge to a more balanced integration of knowledge, skills development, conceptual understanding and the cultivation of values.[1]

To guide the planning and implementation of the curricular changes envisaged, a number of principles are set down in the Framework document. These include an emphasis on 'Learning to learn,' the principles of 'Choice and flexibility' and 'Engagement and participation,' and the need for 'Inclusive Education.' An awareness of these principles helped to guide our work as researchers. To take just one example, the principle of 'Learning to learn,' as enunciated in the Framework document, is intended to 'support students in developing greater independence in learning.' If students are to develop greater independence as learners, it is important that we – and they – understand how they learn and how they understand the process of learning. Such understanding, we believe, is best assessed through conversations with students, where they – and we – have opportunities to 'tease out' understanding and probe for fuller explanations.

While some valuable insights were gained from written responses, the 'beating heart' of our research is, undoubtedly, the series of conversations we had with students.

To ensure the integration of skills across the curriculum, a number of 'key skills' are identified in the Framework, including 'Being literate' and 'Being numerate.' Each 'headline' skill has a subset of skills focused on the different abilities and dispositions that comprise the headline skill. Many of these have a relevance to the teaching and learning of history – as they do to a range of other subjects. One of the most interesting appears under the 'Being numerate' banner and has a direct and demonstrable relevance to consideration of issues around the 'big picture' in history. It refers to abilities in 'Seeing patterns, trends and relationships.' The relevance of this will become more obvious as the report proceeds; for the moment, suffice it to say that the identification of patterns of change in historical developments over time is an important element in developing a robust 'big picture.'

Another feature of the Junior Cycle Framework is that it includes twenty-four statements of learning (SOLs) which are to inform the programme devised by schools. Several of these statements have a relevance to history e.g.

> **SOL6: The student appreciates and respects how diverse values, beliefs and traditions have contributed to the communities and culture in which he/she lives.**[2]

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[1] Department of Education and Skills (2015), *Framework for Junior Cycle*. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills. Currently available at https://ncca.ie/media/3249/framework-for-junior-cycle-2015-en.pdf.

[2] Ibid., p. 12.

Not alone does this statement draw attention to how communities have developed and changed over time – a process that history as a discipline is uniquely placed to analyse and interpret - but it also highlights the importance of a 'bigger picture' dimension if we are to adequately understand the societies and multicultural polities that we inhabit. More clearly focused on the *temporal* dimensions of such a 'big picture' understanding is another statement of learning:

> **SOL8: The student values local, national and international heritage, understands the importance of the relationship between past and current events and the forces that drive change.**[3]

As well as promoting an appreciation of our historical inheritance at local, national and international level – all important if we are stay grounded in our immediate space whilst cognisant of developments on a wider scale – this statement of learning focuses attention on 'the importance of the relationship between past and current events and the forces that drive change.' The 'relationship' or nexus identified here is one that relates to what we refer to in Chapter 2 and elsewhere as 'orientation'. Essentially, what is involved here is the use of the past to inform our understanding of the present so that we are better placed to plan for the future, with greater clarity and insight than would otherwise be available to us.

For the student in the classroom, the intention is that s/he will experience an improved balance between development of knowledge, skills, conceptual understanding and moral perspective. In pedagogical terms, what is envisaged is a renewed focus on active and collaborative learning, with opportunities for learners to investigate and problem-solve in ways that make a difference to their daily lives. This is seen as vital in a context where 'information' is readily available via Internet sources, but 'fake news,' hate speech and political propaganda have easy access to social media platforms - and workplace changes occur with unpredictable frequency and at bewildering speed. Skills such as the ability of students to respond creatively to changing circumstances and to appraise the relative merits of conflicting texts will be important as never before, as will understanding of the nature of change and its 'drivers.' Values, such as the value of working with others and the value of being creative, are also intended to assist students to prepare for living and learning in tomorrow's world, with all its unknown situations and unforeseen challenges. Subject specifications for junior cycle have been designed to ensure an appropriate focus on knowledge, skills, concepts and values in all cases. How this applies in the case of history will be addressed in ***1.3***.

[3] Ibid

1.2 The Framework for Junior Cycle and assessment for student learning

The *Framework* document itself makes the bold claim that, 'The most significant change in the new Junior Cycle is in the area of assessment.'[4] In this regard, the *Framework* places strong emphasis on the role of formative assessment. It cites research which shows that students learn better when teachers provide effective feedback to students to help them understand how their learning can be improved. But how does one determine what constitutes 'effective feedback'? The answer given in the *Framework* is that 'Teachers will use the learning intentions and success criteria as the basis for providing feedback to help students plan their next steps in learning.'[5] As part of the process, students are also to be encouraged 'to reflect on how they are progressing in their own learning,' and to enter into dialogue with teachers on issues arising from this.

Whilst retaining a written examination at the conclusion of junior cycle, a significant feature of subject specifications under the *Framework* is the introduction of two Classroom-Based Assessments (CBAs), the second of which is linked to an Assessment Task which will form part of the final summative assessment arrangements. Notwithstanding this link to summative assessment, the *Framework* document argues that 'The introduction of Classroom-Based Assessments will emphasise the importance of formative assessment in supporting teaching and learning.'[6] The idea is that the CBAs will give students the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities and understanding in ways that would not be possible within formal examination arrangements. One of the stated purposes of the CBAs is to 'facilitate developmental feedback to students during their engagement with the assessment task and at the end of the process.'[7]

In essence, therefore, while dialogue between teacher and student in respect of assessment has always been a feature of good teaching, the Framework places a greater emphasis then heretofore on its centrality to classroom practice. It is the fulcrum around which effective formative assessment revolves and it is an integral element of the activities that comprise the preparatory ground for the CBAs. Our research was informed by this renewed emphasis on teacher-student dialogue in a formative assessment context and this is just one element of the student voice dimension that will be discussed in Chapter Three.

[4] Ibid., p.35.

[5] Ibid., p.36.

[6] Ibid., p.37.

[7] Ibid., p.37.

1.3 The Junior Cycle History specification

In the opening two sentences of the Junior Cycle History 'Rationale',[8] explicit reference is made to two concepts that are fundamental to our understanding of what constitutes historical study. The two concepts are 'time' and 'evidence.' (Implicit reference is made to other key concepts, including historical causation and historical reasoning, also, but we shall confine our comments here to the two that are explicitly referenced.) The sentences read as follows (with emphases added): 'The study of history is about exploring human experience over **time** and how that experience has shaped the world we live in today. By asking questions of available **evidence**, students of history can make rational, informed judgements about human actions in the past and examine why people were motivated to act as they did and the effects of these actions.'[9]

Thus, from the outset, the specification is clear about what the study of history entails. 'Reading accounts of the past' does not fit the bill, as such accounts may be partisan – as in politically-skewed, single-perspective accounts of past events – or purportedly 'factual' and, in manner of presentation, definitive, but showing little awareness of the evidential underpinning of genuinely historical accounts, as in *some* textbook approaches. Rather, the emphasis is on the nature of history, what differentiates history from other academic disciplines and, indeed, from other ways of studying the past or writing about the past. So 'time' is pivotal: students are to explore 'human experience over time and how that experience has shaped the world we live in today.'[10] And, with regard to *how* that exploration is to be conducted, the specification is equally clear: 'By asking questions of available evidence, students of history can make rational, informed judgements about human actions in the past and examine why people were motivated to act as they did and the effects of these actions.' Any classroom approach that does not take adequate account of these approaches is out of step with the specification.

The manner in which the framework for the Junior Cycle History specification is constructed places strong emphasis on the approach to historical study just outlined. The specification has 'three interconnected strands',[11] of which the first, Strand 1, is entitled 'The nature of history'. Not alone is 'The nature of history' Strand 1, it is also described as the 'unifying strand', in that 'its learning outcomes should inform students' engagement with strands 2 and 3, which are contextual strands.'[12] There is no attempt here to downplay the importance of 'substantive' history i.e. the episodes, events and processes that comprise the subject matter of history. Rather, the point is that the exploration of these historical phenomena is to be conducted through the lens of 'historical evidence' – with a constant focus on 'how we know what we know' – and the lens of

[8] Department of Education and Skills (2017), *Junior Cycle History*. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills, p.4.

[9] Ibid., p.4.

[10] Ibid., p.4.

[11] Ibid., p.10.

[12] Ibid., p.10.

different representations of 'historical time''; and, also, the other 'lenses' identified in the learning outcomes (LOs) for Strand 1.[13] (These would include, for example, 'historical empathy', LO 1.1; 'historical significance', LOs 1.3, 1.7 and 1.9; and historical change, LO 1.4.)

1.4 The Junior Cycle History specification and the 'big picture' in history

In its focus on the exploration of 'human experience over time and how that experience has shaped the world we live in today',[14] the Junior Cycle History specification highlights the need for a 'big picture' dimension, if students' ability to comprehend some of the patterns that help to make the vastness and murkiness of the past accessible to human understanding is to be realised. Thus, one of the three elements listed under 'Strand one: the nature of history' (p.16) is 'Acquiring the big picture,' and this element comprises three learning outcomes, 1.9, 1.10 and 1.11. It will be helpful to look at each of these learning outcomes in turn to get a clearer sense of what the attainment of each one is likely to involve.

The first of these states that:

Students should be able to

1.9 demonstrate awareness of the significance of the history of Ireland and of Europe and the wider world across various dimensions, including political, social, economic, religious, cultural and scientific dimensions.[15]

Undoubtedly, this is the most ambitious and challenging of the three LOs, and one that will likely require the full three years of junior cycle to bring it to a significant degree of realisation, as it encompasses a 'long and wide' acquaintance with events, episodes and processes of Irish, European and world history. Indeed, it is difficult to see how it is realisable at this level without the conscious adoption of a 'big picture' approach with some kind of framework to guide students and to 'scaffold' their learning. In order to gain some insights into how a framework could support students, we developed a framework of our own, closely aligned with – though not confined to – phenomena that students would be likely to encounter in studying Junior Cycle History, to which we assigned the working title, 'Our History Scaffold.' The framework is discussed in 1.8 in this chapter.

The second of these learning outcomes states that:

Students should be able to

1.10 demonstrate chronological awareness by creating and maintaining timelines to locate personalities, issues and events in their appropriate historical eras.[16]

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[13] Ibid., p.16.

[14] Ibid., p.4.

[15] Ibid., p.16.

[16] Ibid., p.16.

Here, in contrast to 1.9, we have a learning outcome with which students are likely to be engaged from the beginning of their junior cycle study of history. Indeed, what is sketched out here is a pedagogical approach which should be helpful in efforts to achieve all three 'Acquiring the big picture' outcomes. History teachers have long used timelines in the classroom to help students' chronological understanding, in terms of both sequence and duration; we believe that 'mapping' such timelines onto the broad sweep of a framework such as 'Our History Scaffold' can only enhance the support being provided to students.

The third of the three learning outcomes affirms that:

Students should be able to

1.11 make connections and comparisons between people, issues and events in different places and historical eras.[17]

If students are to make such connections and comparisons between different historical eras, it is difficult to see how this could be done without the sort of overarching perspective that historical frameworks such as 'Our History Scaffold' are designed to provide. Recourse to such a framework makes it easier to connect and make useful comparisons e.g. between the origins of farming in the neolithic period; the hierarchical structures and land use arrangements of the feudal period; the mechanisation of agriculture from the period of the agricultural revolution onwards; and contemporary developments, some of which look backwards to times when less damaging means of encouraging crop and animal growth were in use. But, if we can learn lessons from the past, what lessons can be learned from the experience of teaching 'big picture' history in other jurisdictions? This is discussed in ***1.6***.

1.5 The rationale for including the 'big picture' in Junior Cycle History

In its opening 'Rationale,' the Junior Cycle History specification makes the following strong assertions about the reasons for studying history:

> **Studying history develops our historical consciousness, enabling us to orient ourselves in time and to place our experiences in a broader framework of human experience. Being historically conscious transforms the way that we perceive the world and our place in it.**[18]

The understanding of 'historical consciousness' which underlies these assertions arises from a decades-old discourse on the study of history to which historians and history educationalists such as Jörn Rüsen, Denis Shemilt, Peter Lee and Kate Hawkey have contributed. Central to the work of these writers, and other contributors to the debate, is that an important dimension of historical

[17] Ibid., p. 16.

[18] Ibid., p.4.

consciousness is the notion of orientation in time. As expressed by Lee (2004), in studying history, young people

> **learn ways of thinking about the past that (it might be hoped) will help them to orientate themselves in time, bringing past, present and future into a relation that enables them to cope with living their lives as temporal lives. In short, school history should develop historical consciousness.**[19]

This inviolable link between historical consciousness and successful orientation in time is what drives the case for 'big picture' teaching in the history classroom. It is a link that is explicitly recognised in the Junior Cycle History specification. The excerpt from the Rationale (p.4) cited above continues as follows:

> **Having a 'big picture' of the past helps to develop our historical consciousness. It allows us to see major patterns of change and gives us a framework to understand and put into context the knowledge that we gain about the actions of people that came before us.**[20]

This accords well with Rüsen's (1989) argument that:

> **Historical consciousness deals with the past qua experience; it reveals to us the web of temporal change within which our lives are caught up, the future perspectives towards which that change is flowing.**[21]

This 'perspective of change in a world of change' as the Leaving Certificate History syllabus[22] calls it, is emphasised again in the penultimate paragraph of the Rationale:

> **This way of seeing the world deepens our understanding of the relationship between past and current events and the forces that drive change …**[23]

In pondering the implications of these ideas for classroom practice, it is clear that, at one level, what is called for is a reinvigoration of practices that have been used in the history classroom for many years. Thus, in exemplifying how the key skill of 'Being numerate' may be deployed in the history classroom, the specification notes that 'Students create timelines to show understanding of chronology and the big picture.'[24] Teachers have made use of timelines in the History classroom for many years, but the reference here to 'big picture' may require an extra dimension for some. Does the reference here to 'the big picture' imply a broader – or, in some way, different – perspective than that traditionally used in history classrooms? The short answer is probably 'Yes.' In introducing

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[19] Peter Lee (2004), 'Walking backwards into tomorrow: historical consciousness and understanding history', in *International Journal of Historical Learning, Teaching and Research 4 (1)*.

[20] Department of Education and Skills (2017), *Junior Cycle History*. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills, p.4.

[21] Jörn Rüsen (1989), 'Historical consciousness: narrative structure, moral function, and ontogenetic development,' in *History and Memory*, 1, no.2, p.39.

[22] Department of Education and Science (2003), *Leaving Certificate History Syllabus*. Dublin: The Stationery Office, p.3.

[23] Department of Education and Skills (2017), *Junior Cycle History*. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills, p.5.

[24] Ibid., p.9.

the 'Acquiring the big picture' element of Strand 1, the specification document speaks of 'a usable historical framework that allows students to see the past in a broad global context', and it continues as follows:

> **A 'big picture' framework helps students to see significant patterns of change over time. As students learn, they can place their new knowledge and understanding in this framework, extending it and deepening it as they continue to ask questions of the past and acquire new knowledge and understanding. The 'big picture' also allows for students to deepen their chronological understanding and to appreciate how history is characterised by 'eras' or 'ages' of change. A rapidly-taught 'big picture' of the past can be revisited and developed regularly over the three years of students' learning in junior cycle.**[25]

In order to tease out the potential benefits of the approach outlined here, the researchers designed an experimental framework given the working title, 'Our History Scaffold.' This framework will be introduced and discussed in 1.7 of this chapter. Its use in the classroom by our student teacher collaborators enabled us to gather some data on its effectiveness in facilitating learning: the methods used will be outlined in Chapter 3 and the resulting data will be reviewed in Chapters 4 and 5 of this report. In devising the framework, we sought to draw on international experience and literature on the use of frameworks and these will be the focus of the rest of this chapter.

1.6 International research on students' 'big picture' of the past

A preoccupation with issues relating to time and the importance of context in understanding historical episodes and processes has long been a feature of discourse amongst historians and history teachers. Since the 1990s, discussion has increasingly focused on the need to give students a wider perspective that enables them to make connections between disparate phenomena they study and develop a more coherent, overall 'big picture' of life in the past. Much of the discourse around 'big picture' teaching in a European context has been generated by the work of the German historian and philosopher, Jörn Rüsen. Among those who have analysed and interpreted his reflections in the English language is Peter Lee, formerly a senior lecturer in the Institute of Education, London. Over time, the work of both men has been widely disseminated, interrogated and discussed, and has been influential in triggering research on some of the issues raised, not least the concept of 'historical consciousness' developed by Rüsen and the associated concept of orientation in time and the 'big picture' perspective with which it is linked. Rüsen's work has attracted attention and generated interest outside of Europe, in the US and Latin America, in Taiwan and China, and he has toured widely as a lecturer and conference facilitator, being

[25] Ibid., p. 12.

particularly popular in Brazil. Lee was a key contributor to the H*ow Students Learn: History in the Classroom* report published by the US National Research Council in 2005. More recently, historians and history educators such as Peter Seixas and Penny Corfield have helped to move the debate forward in new and challenging ways. The arguments of these and other contributors to the discourse are reviewed in Chapter 2.

Another impetus to 'big picture' thinking is increasing globalisation and the 'shrinking' of the world due to on-going developments in communications and transport systems. Environmental concerns have also increased the need to look at developments in a supranational context. Hawkey (2014) makes the case for 'Introducing more planet-wide environmental perspectives into the history curriculum'.[26] Traditionally, history has focused on human history with little recourse to natural history for explanations and interpretations. However, commentators such as Hawkey and Nordgren have increased awareness of the need to broaden our conceptions of what constitutes 'historical evidence' to include natural phenomena and processes. The term 'Anthropocene' was coined to denote a new geological era where human activity plays the major role in shaping our environment and this, too, has implications for how we frame our historical enquiries. Indeed, Nordgren (2023) argues that the cumulative effect of human activities on the atmosphere, the oceans and the biosphere have re-shaped the world so much that history as currently conceived is an insufficient guide to orientation and that 'narratives that separate human experiences from their environment (nature, climate, animals)' are 'becoming obsolete'.[27]

As the argument for adopting a 'big picture' frame of reference grows stronger, a number of initiatives in the United States have promoted a focus on students' 'big picture' of the past. One of these, *World History For Us All* is a collaborative project spearheaded by the UCLA Department of History's 'Public History Initiative.' A central plank of the *World History for us All* approach is the identification of nine 'big eras,' where each successive era is shorter than the previous one. More widely publicised perhaps is the *Big History Project*, pioneered by David Christian, and which has been endorsed by Bill Gates, amongst others. The project encompasses the known history of the universe and includes the identification of eight 'thresholds' which have seen significant forward movement from Threshold 1, The Big Bang, to Threshold 8, The Modern Revolution ('why change accelerates faster and faster'). While initiatives such as these have increased awareness of the need to help students see the bigger picture more clearly, our focus here will be on the research community that has identified the underlying philosophical and pedagogical issues that are central to the debate on 'big picture' teaching. That debate has been given added impetus by findings such as those contained in the *History for All* report (Ofsted, UK, 2011) which found that the chronological understanding of students was 'often underdeveloped and so they found it difficult to link developments together.'[28] A desire to help junior cycle students 'link developments together'

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[26] Kate Hawkey (2014), 'A new look at big history', in *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 46:2, 163–179. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

[27] Kenneth Nordgren (2023), 'History curriculum in the Anthropocene: how should we tell the story?' in Tierney, R.J., Rizvi, F., Erkican, K. (eds.) *International Encyclopaedia of Education*, Vol.7. Amsterdam: Elsevier, pp.296–307.

[28] Ofsted (2011), *History for all: History in English schools 2007/10*, p.4. Report currently available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/413714/History_for_all.pdf.

underlay our decision to develop a framework that could be 'trialled' in the course of the research and that we hoped would be a useful classroom resource and a means of generating debate on some of the many issues that surround 'big picture' teaching.

1.7 The experimental framework, 'Our History Scaffold'

Our purpose in designing the framework was to provide an exemplar of the kind of device that we argue needs to be more widely used in schools to help students see the 'big picture' of the past in a structured and informed way and, through regular use, to help students see more clearly how disparate episodes studied in the classroom link up and connect, in a variety of ways, with other episodes or historical phenomena studied. We also wished to see the framework used in schools in a research setting, so that we could garner *some* data on how its use was viewed by both student teachers and the first year History students that they were teaching. The research methodology employed is set out in Chapter 3.

In introducing the framework we have developed, it is important to set out clearly the meanings we attach to the terms 'framework' and 'big picture', as the terms are sometimes used almost interchangeably. By 'big picture,' we mean a type of mental construct that allows students of history to place the historical phenomena they study in a temporal and disciplinary context that aids historical understanding and facilitates orientation in time, linking past and present in ways that strengthen the ability to prepare for the future. By 'framework,' we mean a device used to equip students to order and make connections between different historical phenomena studied so that their historical understanding is strengthened and their ability to orient themselves in time is improved. Frameworks are intended as the means whereby more robust 'big pictures' are developed in the minds of students.

The past two decades have seen much discussion of the types of framework that are best suited to developing students' ability to orient themselves in time. Sometimes, the term 'framework' itself is not favoured and terms such as 'frame of reference' are preferred. One of the most influential voices has been that of Denis Shemilt who has suggested four possible synoptic frameworks that he proposes could anchor all historical study that children and young people engage in: these would focus on modes of production; political and social organisation; growth and movement of peoples; and culture and mind.[29] Rogers (2010) sets out how a Shemilt-inspired synoptic approach has been trialled in a Leeds (UK) school.[30] While it may be the case, as Rogers (2010) argues, that, 'As yet the synoptic frameworks approach is the only practical solution to offering students a view of the past as a whole', its practical application poses many challenges: one of the key requirements noted by Rogers (2010) is that 'it forms the core of the whole programme of study.'[31] As we were

[29] Denis Shemilt (2009), 'Drinking an ocean and pissing a cupful', in Symcox, L. & Wilschut, A. (eds.), *National Standards: The Problem of the Canon and the Future of Teaching History*. Charlotte, Carolina: Information Age Publishing.

[30] Rick Rogers (2010), 'The use of frameworks in teaching history'. Conference workshop, Association for Historical Dialogue and Research, Nicosia, 22–23 October 2010.

[31] Ibid.

not in a position to ensure that the framework we devised would occupy such a core position in the schools with which we were working, we looked for a model that would be less demanding in organisational terms and yet supportive of the classroom work being carried out by our student teacher collaborators and their first year History students.

In considering the type of framework that would be likely to be helpful to history teachers in an Irish context, one of the approaches considered was that recommended in the Netherlands by the de Rooy Commission in 2001, with its ten eras of developmental significance and recognisable icons to identify the different eras.[32] The approach seemed to chime well with the span and focal points of the Junior Cycle History specification and provided a helpful, foundational base for our own model. In developing that model, we sought to put a greater emphasis on process and on facilitating inter-connections between different eras. We used the working title of 'Our History Scaffold' to indicate that the framework is intended to assist the building of stronger 'big pictures' but not as a permanent, unchanging fixture.

We acknowledge that thematic frameworks such as our own are regarded with less favour among researchers than synoptic ones. Howson (2009), for example, suggests that such frameworks 'are unlikely to be the most suitable approach for developing big pictures'.[33] However, Howson (2009) also acknowledges that 'They are attractive because they can be implemented without having to rip up curriculum traditions …'. From our perspective, the research context required an approach that would not place undue pressure on the student teachers attempting to deploy the framework but would, rather, assist the teachers in achieving learning outcomes that they were expected to achieve with their students. We also wished to provide a resource that would be more widely available to teachers and that would encourage them and, hopefully, empower them to engage more fully with the debate around 'big picture' thinking. Much work remains to be done in the Irish context to develop research that explores what Howson (2009) refers to as the 'Potential and pitfalls' in teaching 'big picture' history.[34] We hope that 'Our History Scaffold' may play a role in generating informed discussion on the issues.

[32] See https://histoforum.net/2009/historymaker.html.

[33] Jonathan Howson (2009) 'Potential and pitfalls in teaching big pictures of the past', in *Teaching History*, 136. London: The Historical Association.

[34] Ibid.

1.8 The structure of 'Our History Scaffold'

The ten eras that comprise the framework have been given the following descriptors:

- Early hunter-gatherers and farmers invent tools and weapons
- Early civilisations develop alphabets, cities and politics
- Europe becomes Christian; Europe becomes feudal.
- Cities grow and states multiply.
- Explorers and reformers bring change
- Monarchs consolidate power
- Revolutionaries challenge monarchs
- Industrialisation and democracy advance
- World wars change the face of the Earth
- Television and computers change how we communicate

For each era, two images (all public domain) have been identified to facilitate student recognition, as research suggests that students' sense of period and chronology is strengthened by the use of visual prompts. The ten eras and associated images are set out in Table 1. Larger versions of the twenty images are included in Appendix E. (Note: Some minor, but significant, changes have been made to the wording of certain eras since the briefing sessions for which Appendix E was originally prepared.)

We believe that the experimental framework satisfies most of the criteria set down by Lee (2004) in an influential paper,[35] and specifically the following:

- Any framework must be taught within a metahistorical framework.
- A framework must be an overview, composed of revisited patterns, not a mere outline story. It must be something that can be taught rapidly.
- A framework should be a progressive structure that can be built on and expanded as new knowledge is acquired.
- Frameworks must be open, capable of being modified, tested, improved.

(These criteria are given fuller consideration in chapter 2).

With its emphasis on process and on change through time – for example, in relation to farming – the framework aligns well with the Junior Cycle History Strand 1 focus on 'The nature of history'. It is our view that Strand 1 learning outcomes are crucial to the success of the proposed model, since disciplinary understanding needs to underpin any work on acquiring a 'big picture'. Indeed, this is clearly signalled in the specification itself, where the three elements – each encompassing a set of linked learning outcomes – are entitled, 'Developing historical consciousness,' 'Working with evidence' and 'Acquiring the big picture.' These provide useful reference points for classroom work with 'Our History Scaffold,' albeit, in the case of the last-mentioned, we would favour the notion of 'developing more robust big pictures,' eschewing any implication that there is a 'definitive' 'big picture' that students are expected to 'acquire.'

[35] Peter Lee (2004) 'Walking backwards into tomorrow: historical consciousness and understanding history', in *International Journal of Historical Learning, Teaching and Research 4 (1)*.

In respect of the learning outcomes from Strands 2 and 3 of the specification (the so-called 'contextual' strands), we are also satisfied that the proposed framework aligns well with students' areas of focus, providing a good basis of substantive knowledge on which to build a wider contextual framework. (See Appendix E for exemplification of this alignment.) A majority of the eras indicated in the framework should be encountered at some level by junior cycle students, with the framework offering the opportunity to extend students' contextual knowledge and understanding.

The framework is also intended to facilitate the making of connections and comparisons between eras, in line with specification requirements. In ***1.4***, we showed how focusing on a theme such as farming can assist student learning. Other themes will inevitably arise in the course of classroom work. One such is 'communication.' Computer technology is changing how we communicate today, but the historical past has seen many changes in means of communication such as those brought about by the invention of alphabets (highlighted in Era 2) and the invention of the printing press, and students can be invited to consider the impact of successive developments in communications technology . The framework (See Table1) is intended to encourage teachers and their students to make such connections and to expand on these connections as relevant subject knowledge is encountered.

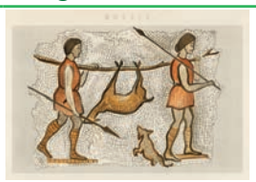
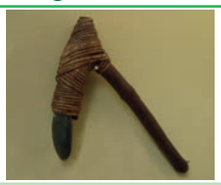
Era	Image 1	Image 2
Early hunter-gatherers and farmers invent tools and weapons		
Early civilisations develop alphabets, cities and politics	Δδ	
Europe becomes Christian; Europe becomes feudal		
Cities grow and states multiply		
Explorers and reformers bring change		
Monarchs consolidate power		
Revolutionaries challenge monarchs		
Industrialisation and democracy advance		
World wars change the face of the Earth		
Television and computers change how we communicate		

Table 1: 'Our History Scaffold', eras

References

Department of Education and Science (2003), *Leaving Certificate History Syllabus*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Department of Education and Skills (2015), *Framework for Junior Cycle*. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills.

Department of Education and Skills (2017), *Junior Cycle History*. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills.

Kate Hawkey (2014), A new look at big history, in *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 46:2, 163–79. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Jonathan Howson (2009), Potential and pitfalls in teaching 'big pictures' of the past, in *Teaching History*, no.136, pp.24–33, London: The Historical Association.

Peter Lee (2004), 'Walking backwards into tomorrow: historical consciousness and understanding history', in *International Journal of Historical Learning, Teaching and Research 4 (1)*.

Kenneth Nordgren (2023), History curriculum in the Anthropocene: how should we tell the story? in Tierney, R.J., Rizvi, F., Erkican, K. (eds.) *International Encyclopaedia of Education*, vol. 7. Amsterdam: Elsevier, pp. 296–307.

Ofsted (2011), *History for all: History in English schools 2007/10*, p.4, Report currently available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/413714/History_for_all.pdf.

Rick Rogers (2010), The use of frameworks in teaching history. Conference workshop, Association for Historical Dialogue and Research, Nicosia, 22–23 October 2010.

Jörn Rüsen (1989), 'Historical consciousness: narrative structure, moral function, and ontogenetic development,' in *History and Memory, 1*, no.2, 35–60.

Denis Shemilt (2009), Drinking an ocean and pissing a cupful: how adolescents make sense of history, in L. Symcox and A. Wilschut (eds.), *National History Standards: The Problem of the Canon and the Future of Teaching History*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 141–209.

Chapter Two
Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

As noted in ***1.5***. and ***1.6***, over recent decades, history educationalists from Rüsen, Shemilt and Lee to Corfield, Hawkey and Nordgren have focused attention on the pressing challenges associated with the attempts to improve the 'big pictures' with which our students of history operate. In this chapter, we review some key contributions to the on-going debate. As many of the fundamental principles that underlie the debate can be traced back to the work of Jörn Rüsen, we shall begin our discussion with some consideration of his influential 1989 paper on historical consciousness.

2.2 Jörn Rüsen's discussion of orientation in time

As Rüsen argues in his seminal 1989 paper, history is 'not merely a perspective on what has been'; rather it is 'a meaningful nexus between past, present and future'.[36] That nexus is meaningful, so the argument goes, insofar as it is used to guide our decision making in the 'here-and-now', on practical issues that have implications for our future. Or, as Rüsen expresses it:

> **Historical consciousness has a practical function: it bestows upon actuality a temporal direction, an orientation which can guide action intentionally by the agency of historical memory. This function can be termed 'temporal orientation.'**[37]

Such orientation, as Rüsen points out, can take a number of forms. For example, in what Rüsen describes as the 'traditional' form, 'the beginning of historical consciousness,' the cultural and life patterns that we inherit are valued and applied in daily life: 'They shape identity-formation as a process in which roles are assumed and played out.'[38] Such orientation has its limitations: we may value much in our historical inheritance but there are elements of identity that can be exclusivist and intolerant of others. In what Rüsen calls the 'critical' form of historical consciousness, the need to muster evidence comes to the fore and inherited values are appraised critically in light of the historical evidence; as Rüsen puts it: 'Critical narratives confront moral values with historical evidence of their immoral origins or consequences.'[39] This dual emphasis on orientation and critical appraisal is also evident in the 'big picture' deliberations of those who have engaged with the work of Rüsen in developing their own thinking on its implications for the teaching and learning of history.

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[36] Jörn Rüsen (1989), 'Historical consciousness: narrative structure, moral function, and ontogenetic development', in *History and Memory*, *1*, no.2, 35–60, p.39.

[37] Ibid., p.40.

[38] Ibid., p.45.

[39] Ibid., p.48.

2.3 Peter Lee's analysis of 'big picture' teaching and learning

In pondering the implications of Rüsen's work for the teaching and learning of history in schools, Lee (2004) emphasises that Rüsen want students to think about the history they are learning: 'students should make their history part of their 'mental furniture', and it must not remain at the level of inert information.'[40] In other words, history must play a meaningful role in the student's life, 'and the part it plays is that of providing orientation in time',[41] so that, through their study of history, students can better understand the present and have clearer perspectives on the future. Lee goes on to argue that 'If students are to have a meaningful connection of this kind, they will need some sort of framework of the past to form one element in the relationship.'[42] Access to such a framework, however, cannot be taken for granted: evidence emerging from the CHATA research project in which Lee was involved at the time was 'consistent in suggesting that access to a usable historical framework cannot be assumed to be common even among students specializing in history up to age 18.'[43]

If frameworks are a *desideratum* for students studying history in school, what sort of frameworks are best deployed to help students achieve the critical levels of historical consciousness discussed by Rüsen and Lee? Lee (2004) identifies a number of criteria to guide the fashioning of frameworks. While Lee rightly acknowledges that these criteria are provisional not definitive, they serve a useful 'yardstick' function that subsequent researchers, including ourselves, have found helpful.

First, in Lee's words, 'any framework must be taught within a metahistorical context.'[44] What this involves is exploring the nature of the discipline, including the manner in which historians construct historical accounts based on available evidence. The aim here is not to create 'mini' historians but to enable students to evaluate historical accounts that they encounter; to learn to see the difference between partisan narratives and ones that are more tentative and evidence-focused.

Second, a framework must be an *overview*. 'It must,' argues Lee, 'be something that can be taught rapidly, into which other history can fit, either by being assimilated to the existing framework, or by adapting and changing the shape of the framework.'[45] The pedagogical approach envisaged is one where a shape is quickly sketched out by the teacher and then returned to at intervals, as new classroom discoveries lead to an enrichment of the framework.

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[40] Peter Lee (2004), 'Walking backwards into tomorrow: historical consciousness and understanding history', in *International Journal of Historical Learning, Teaching and Research 4 (1)*, p.3.

[41] Ibid., p.8.

[42] Ibid., p.8.

[43] Ibid., p.24.

[44] Ibid., p. 11.

[45] Ibid., p.12.

The third criterion identified by Lee is that 'the subject of a framework should be human history, not some sub-set of it.'[46] One consequence of this would be a focus on broad developments in human societies, identifying significant patterns of development, material, social and cultural, and helping students to assess the significance of change.

The fourth criterion is that 'a framework should be a progressive structure, allowing students to elaborate and differentiate it as they revisit it in the context of encounters with new passages of history.'[47] As new learning is incorporated into the framework, the framework itself must adapt and accommodate greater complexity. Once again, this process of adaptation is dependent on regular revisiting of the framework.

The fifth and final criterion is that 'any framework must be an open structure, capable of being modified, tested, improved and even abandoned in favour of something else.'[48] Students need to be encouraged to reflect on the usefulness of the framework they are using and its limitations. Such metacognitive activity takes us back to the first criterion: our concern here is as much about teaching students' ways of thinking about the discipline of history as it is about ways of thinking about the substantive past.

2.4 The pursuit of workable frameworks

Shemilt's (2009)[49] proposal for four 'synoptic' frameworks to 'anchor' all the historical studies that children engage in was mentioned in ***1.7***. Writing in the same year, Howson (2009)[50] bemoans the fact that 'big synoptic frameworks had not been incorporated into successive national curricula in England', and he adds, '…synoptic frameworks of this kind have never been directly encouraged because they do not exist for history education as yet and hence are not in practitioner traditions.' Counsell (2011) suggests that frameworks have 'considerable theoretical power' but have enjoyed 'only limited trialling in the classroom.'[51] One trial deserving of attention is that described in Rogers (2010).

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[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid., p.11.

[48] Ibid., p.12.

[49] Denis Shemilt (2009), 'Drinking an ocean and pissing a cupful', in Symcox, L. & Wilschut, A. (eds.), *National Standards: The Problem of the Canon and the Future of Teaching History*. Charlotte, Carolina: Information Age Publishing.

[50] Jonathan Howson (2009), 'Potential and pitfalls in teaching big pictures of the past', in *Teaching History*, 136. London: The Historical Association.

[51] Christine Counsell (2011), 'Disciplinary knowledge for all: the secondary school curriculum and history teachers' achievement', in *The Curriculum Journal*, 22, pp. 201–25.

Rogers (2010) explains how a synoptic framework – inspired by the four areas of human activity proposed by Shemilt (2009) – was applied in a school in Leeds, England.[52] (See ***1.7***) For 'ease of orientation', the four strands were divided into five epochs, each one named after the largest social groupings impacting life at the time: thus, the epoch of bands was followed by the epoch of tribes; then the epoch of kingdoms, followed by the epoch of empires; and, most recently, the epoch of multi-national organisations. This framework was used as the basis for teaching all students between the ages of eleven and fourteen, and was regularly referred back to as the teaching and learning proceeded. Key questions were designed to tease out the distinguishing characteristics of each epoch and how different epochs interact with each other. One strength of this type of synoptic approach, as Rogers (2010) notes, is that 'most of the change lacks a named human agent', and this makes it easier

> **to … explore the nature of gradual change on a historical, non-personal level which should break the student away from the everyday conceptions of person A did X to person B causing situation Y …** [53]

Rogers goes on to identify potential pitfalls in the use of synoptic frameworks but argues that 'As yet the synoptic frameworks approach is the only practical solution to offering students a view of the past as a whole.'[54]

Writing in 2014, the editors of *The Guided Reader to Teaching and Learning History* summarised the 'state of play' in relation to frameworks thus:

> **There is agreement … that children need not merely a timeline of events … but also a 'sense of period,' enabling them to recognise the distinctive features of particular periods, and a 'framework' or mental map that allows them to orient themselves in time – relating the past to the present and thus to the future …** [55]

Tellingly, the editors add: 'There is also a strong consensus that so far history educators have not been very successful in equipping young people with such a framework.'[56] This view is echoed in Chapman (2017): '… there is very good reason to think that most students complete their history education in England without developing usable 'big pictures' of the past.'[57] While Chapman adds that, 'It seems very probable that a great deal could be achieved through sustained research in this area',[58] the pursuit of workable frameworks, it seems, continues to be a 'work in progress'.

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[52] Rick Rogers (2010), 'The use of frameworks in teaching history'. Conference workshop, Association for Historical Dialogue and Research, Nicosia, 22–23 October 2010.

[53] Ibid., p.7.

[54] Ibid., p.8.

[55] Richard Harris, Katherine Burn and Mary Woolley (2014), *The Guided Reader to Teaching and Learning History*. London: Routledge, p.128.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Arthur Chapman (2017), 'Research and Practice in History Education in England: A Perspective from London', in *The Journal of Social Studies Education*. Vol. 6, 13–41, available at https://journal.unesa.ac.id/index.php/jsse/issue/view/162 pp. 31–2.

[58] Ibid., p.32.

2.5 Students' conceptual understanding of 'big picture' thinking

The historical content that students encounter in a framework, or elsewhere in their history class, can easily become a 'given' story to be re-hashed in a mindless way, 'learned off' with little or no thought. Such inert 'knowledge' serves no meaningful educational purpose and is easily forgotten. If we wish students to be able to apply what they learn in flexible and life-enhancing ways, then, as Chapman (2017) argues, 'we need to equip them with conceptual understandings and tools with which to interrogate and re-structure what they learn.'[59] One of the findings of the U.S. National Research Council's report, *How People Learn* (1999) was, as Lee (2005) reports, that 'students need a firm foundation of factual knowledge ordered around the key concepts of the discipline.'[60] While the substantive concepts that students need to engage with vary according to the area of study, there is a set of concepts which arise from the nature of the discipline of history itself, the way it operates, the kinds of explanations it offers, and the bases on which it does so. Sometimes referred to as disciplinary concepts or metahistorical concepts, the generally preferred term is 'second order' concepts. Among the second-order concepts identified as key by Lee (2005) are: time, change and evidence. These three, along with the concept of 'significance', are the ones we decided to focus on in our focus group 'entry' interview questions with first year history students, which are discussed in ***3.4.2***.

The concept of significance is one that looms large in any consideration of 'big pictures' as criteria for inclusion or selectivity are considered. A widely influential approach to judging significance is found in Counsell (2004), with its 'five Rs' for thinking about historical significance.[61] The five Rs (Revealing, Remarked upon, Remembered, Resonant, Resulting in change) include a number that have an obvious relevance to 'big picture' thinking and its use for orientation. For example, 'Resonant' is glossed as 'people like to make analogies with it; it is possible to connect with experiences, beliefs or situations across time and space.' Enabling students to connect with 'experiences, beliefs or situations across time and space' is precisely what frameworks set out to achieve. The relevance of 'Resulting in change' is surely evident. 'Remembered' is glossed as, 'the event/development was important at some stage in history within the collective memory of a group or groups.' There is an opportunity here to discuss with students why some events are remembered while others are not. Questions such as these need to be part of the critical toolkit that support 'big picture' building in ways that create dynamic rather than inert knowledge.

[59] Ibid., p.17.

[60] Peter Lee (2005), 'Putting Principles into Practice: Understanding History', in M. Suzanne Donovan & John D. Bransford, *How Students Learn*. Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press, pp.31–77.

[61] Christine Counsell (2004), History and Literacy in Y7: building the lesson around the text. London: John Murray, p.80.

'Dynamic knowledge' is, of course, as much a process as a target i.e. students can only become good at historical thinking by engaging in historical thinking. Nokes (2011) makes the case that 'engaging young people in historical thinking is developmentally appropriate.'[62] He adds the proviso that 'historical thinking is not beyond students' Z[one of] P[roximal] D[evelopment] when the proper forms of scaffolding are provided.'[63] Among the forms of scaffolding and support he goes on to discuss are pre-teaching unfamiliar vocabulary, posters on classroom walls with reminders about procedures to be followed (e.g. in analysing a text), and graphic organisers. As Nokes (2011) notes:

> **Students need numerous, regular opportunities to engage in historical reasoning so that strategies become automatic and attention can be shifted from engaging in strategies to constructing evidence-based interpretations of events.**[64]

In other words, as the students become more competent, the scaffolding can be gradually removed, allowing students to become more independent and to engage more directly with the substantive matters under study. And one of the objectives of that engagement will be, as the quote above suggests, to construct 'evidence -based interpretations of events.' The concept of 'evidence' is crucial here in that historical thinking or historical reasoning cannot proceed except through the lens of *evidence* i.e., as students and/or teachers of history, we cannot make assertions about the historical past unless we have some evidence to support our assertions. As Lee (2005) puts it,[65] 'The concept of evidence is central to history because it is only through the use of evidence that history becomes possible.' At the classroom level, the focus on evidence makes good pedagogical sense: as one of the early advocates of source-based classroom work, John Fines argues:

> **Learning to cope with the problems of evidence is challenging, mind-stretching, satisfying and it helps make sense of what is being studied.**[66]

It also tends to bring into play some of the other concepts, such as time, change and significance, that give history its distinctive character and *modus operandi*.

Wilschut (2019) references one of the ways in which these concepts inter-connect when he observes that,

> **... working with evidence is closely associated with a historical consciousness of time, because evidence has a dual character: it originated in the past, but still exists in the present ...** [67]

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[62] Jeffery D. Nokes (2011), 'Recognizing and Addressing the Barriers to Adolescents' Reading Like Historians', in *The History Teacher*, Vol. 44, No.3, 379–404. Long Beach, CA: The Society for History Education, p. 381.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Ibid., p386

[65] Peter J. Lee (2005), 'Putting Principles into Practice: Understanding History', in In M. Suzanne Donovan & John D. Bransford, *How Students Learn*. Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press, pp.31–77.

[66] John Fines (1994), 'Evidence: The basis of the discipline', in H. Bourdillon (ed.), *Teaching History*. London: Routledge, 122–5.

[67] Arie Wilschut (2019), 'Historical consciousness of time and its societal uses', in *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 51: 6, 831–49. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, p. 840.

Students are constantly reminded to consider the provenance of documents and the context in which the phenomena described occurred: therefore, the issue of time – how long ago? how long in duration? – is constantly in play when evidence is interrogated. Wilschut (2019) also makes the point that, 'Thinking about time is an essential element in … history teaching.'[68] A 'big picture' framework can help students to establish context more clearly by linking developments to what has gone before and what comes after. As Rogers (2009) observes, 'Historical structure can only aid historical thinking.'[69] People who do not study history in a school context will have an awareness of time, but it will be one based, most likely, on the cyclical recurrence of the seasons and the celebration of birthdays and anniversaries, or on the social incidence of different generations living at the same time. Understanding the meaning of time in history is different – and more challenging – as the span is so vast and the range of human experiences so variable. The role of the history teacher is pivotal: as Wilschut (2019) remarks, 'Historical awareness of time is also the exclusive result of education and will not emerge spontaneously.'[70]

If historical awareness of time is the exclusive result of education, then, the same may also be true of change. If, as Foster (2009) writes,[71] students 'understand change as being intentional, episodic events, change becomes simple to explain, deterministic and even worse, dull.' Acknowledging her debt to Lee (2005), Foster (2009) goes on to argue that, 'the key to understanding the complexity of change and continuity is the recognition that change is a process, and a frequently graduated and unintended one at that.' The mention of 'continuity' here reflects the widespread consensus among historians and history teachers that students need to be helped to understand that not everything changes when something changes. In explaining the model of historical thinking used in Canadian schools, Seixas (2017) identifies what he sees as a key question,[72] '… for historians and citizens alike: what changed and what remained the same …?' Corfield (2009) considers the challenge of including continuity in the history classroom and – in the context of how best to implement 'big picture' thinking – proposes a model that can be applied to any historical period or theme and which accommodates the reality of the interplay between slow change, no change and radical change:

> **No one element or outcome is elevated above all others. Instead, it is the dynamic through-time interaction and interlocking of the core processes of continuity (persistence), micro-change (momentum) and macro-change (turbulent upheaval) which frame an ever-changing history.**[73]

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[68] Ibid., p. 832.

[69] Rick Rogers (2010), 'The use of frameworks in teaching history'. Conference workshop, Association for Historical Dialogue and Research, Nicosia, 22-23 October 2010, p.4.

[70] Arie Wilschut (2019), 'Historical consciousness of time and its societal uses', in *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 51: 6, 831–49. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, p. 846.

[71] Rachel Foster (2009), 'Speed cameras, dead ends, drivers and diversions: Year 9 use a 'road map' to problematise change and continuity', in *Teaching History*, 131, 4–8. London: The Historical Association.

[72] Peter Seixas (2017), 'A Model of Historical Thinking', in *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 49: 6, 593–605. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, p. 600.

[73] Penelope Corfield (2009), 'Teaching history's big pictures: Including continuity as well as change', in *Teaching History*, 136, 53–9. London: The Historical Association.

Acknowledging the widespread applicability of the model, the editors of *The Guided Reader to Teaching and Learning History* (2014) add that it 'provides a potential framework for approaching longer-term study in the history classroom.'[74] One can readily see how it might enhance the use of other frameworks such as *'Our History Scaffold'* by raising important questions about what distinguishes and what connects different historical eras. Such questions may be raised at different levels of a student's education in history and with varying degrees of critical acuity, so the question that naturally arises is, how do we know the degree of understanding that students have reached? What does progression in understanding look like?

2.6 Progression in conceptual understanding

In an influential article, Lee and Shemilt (2003) make a distinction between the notion of progress (with its 'aggregationist assumptions', reflected in public examinations) and that of 'progression':

> **'Progression' was juxtaposed with 'aggregation' to emphasize that progress in history could be more than an increase in the amount of information pupils could recall: learning history was not just learning 'one damn thing after another.' Research suggested that children's ideas about the past changed as they grew older and that it was possible to view these changes in terms of development.[75]**

A key argument made by the authors is that children's understanding of different historical concepts develops at different rates, so that a model of progression that bundles the concepts together and tries to identify what degree of understanding a child should have attained by a certain age is inherently flawed. Instead, they argue, there is a need to construct different models of progression for different concepts, such as 'change' and 'evidence.' Taking 'evidence' as an example, they demonstrate how a child's understanding may develop through six identifiable levels of understanding, from a 'pictures of the past' perspective that accepts accounts of the past uncritically to an understanding that historical evidence can only be meaningfully assessed when it is seen in its historical context. Over the years, the authors have drawn on the lessons of research to draft models of progression for other areas of conceptual reasoning, such as historical accounts[76] and causal explanations.[77] In their 2009 article, they write of 'conceptual thresholds' that students need to cross as their understanding of a particular concept develops.

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[74] Richard Harris, Katherine Burn and Mary Woolley (2014), *The Guided Reader to Teaching and Learning History*. London: Routledge, p.147.

[75] Peter Lee and Denis Shemilt (2003), 'A scaffold, not a cage: progression and progression models in history', in *Teaching History*, 113, 13–23. London: The Historical Association.

[76] See Peter Lee and Denis Shemilt (2004), 'I just wish I could go back in the past and find out what really happened: progression in understanding about historical accounts', in *Teaching History*, 117, 25–31. London: The Historical Association.

[77] Peter Lee and Denis Shemilt (2009), 'Is any explanation better than none? Over-determined narratives, senseless agencies and one-way streets in students' learning about cause and consequence in history', in *Teaching History*, 137, 42–9. London: The Historical Association.

The 2003 article contains another significant emphasis i.e. the importance of identifying students' misconceptions: 'Ignorance of preconceptions risks the assimilation of what we fondly think we are teaching to sets of ideas the children already have.'[78]

Another approach to monitoring progression arises from the work of the Canadian Historical Thinking Project and is set out in Seixas and Morton (2012).[79] While also emphasising the importance of identifying student misconceptions which act as blocks to learning, rather than conceptual 'thresholds' or levels Seixas and Morton identify a series of 'guideposts' which, they argue, represent gold standards for students to attain in respect of particular second-order concepts. The guideposts, they argue, are non-linear and, therefore, not designed to be split into smaller steps. Instead, the focus is on helping students to overcome their misconceptions and move towards the gold standards represented by the guideposts. Ford (2014) explains how the Seixas and Morton model influenced the approach to planning for progression in a Leeds comprehensive school:

> **Planning for progression might therefore be better represented, not by the creation of a series of level-like steps from the most basic operations to the most complex, but by setting out clear descriptions of good-quality history and then slowly challenging the misconceptions that prevent students from producing such work.**[80]

Some parallels may be drawn with the work on what is referred to as 'epistemic cognition,' which has been defined as[81] 'the cognitive process enabling individuals to consider the criteria, limits and certainty of knowing.' (cited by Maggioni et al., 2009, attributed to Kitchener, 1983[82]). As discussed by Maggioni et al. (2009),[83] 'Research suggests the conception that people have about the nature and justification of historical knowledge influences their learning experience.' For example, for those students who see history as a mere mirror of the past the critical dimensions of genuine historical studies and the evidential basis of historical knowledge are easily elided.

In an interesting study in a Dublin primary school, Ní Cassaithe et al. (2022) found that:

> **The range of stances and the diversity of children's thinking that emerged from the interviews highlight the need for educators to be familiar with children's epistemic beliefs about history, particularly the ones that can act as bottlenecks.**[84]

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[78] Peter Lee and Denis Shemilt (2003), 'A scaffold, not a cage: progression and progression models in history', in *Teaching History*, 113, 13–23. London: The Historical Association.

[79] Peter Seixas and Tom Morton (2012), *The Big Six Historical Thinking Concepts*. Toronto: Nelson.

[80] Alex Ford (2014), 'Setting us free? Building meaningful models of progression for a 'post-levels' world', in *Teaching History*, 157, 28–41–23. London: The Historical Association.

[81] Liliana Maggioni et al. (2009), 'Walking on the Borders: A Measure of Epistemic Cognition in History', in *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 77 (3), 187–213.

[82] K. S. Kitchener (1983), 'Cognition, metacognition and epistemic cognition and epistemic cognition: a three-level model of cognitive processing', in *Human Development*, 4, 222–32.

[83] Liliana Maggioni et al. (2009), *op. cit*.

[84] Caitríona Ní Cassaithe, Fionnuala Waldron and Thérèse Dooley (2022), "We can't really know cos we weren't really there": Identifying Irish primary children's bottleneck beliefs about history, in *Historical Encounters* 9(1), 78–100.

These 'epistemic bottlenecks' are ones that can stymie the efforts of classroom teachers to convey an understanding of the nature of history and how historical knowledge is constructed. The authors give the following examples of key epistemic bottlenecks concerning the nature of history:

- History is the past.
- History is finding out what is true and false.
- History is facts about the past that must be learned.
- History is fixed and uncontested.
- History cannot change, it has happened already.[85]

For students who see history as simply a 'mirror' of the past and something that is fixed, junior cycle learning outcomes that require students to be able to 'consider contentious or controversial issues in history from more than one point of view' or 'develop historical judgements based on evidence' will be difficult, if not impossible to absorb, unless the students are challenged on their everyday beliefs and shown how history as a discipline actually operates. As Ní Cassaithe et al. (2022) argue, 'Teachers need to be familiar with these bottlenecks and incorporate ways to challenge them into their pedagogical approach to learning.'[86] One fruitful way may be to raise questions with students as to 'how we know what we know.' In their interviews with primary pupils, Ní Cassaithe et al. (2022) found that 'some of the children's comments showed that questions posed were unlocking new ways of thinking.'[87] It may be helpful, therefore, to view epistemic bottlenecks – once identified – as opportunities to help students 'move on' in their learning to more sophisticated and robust ways of understanding how historical accounts are put together and how historical judgements are made. The 'guideposts' identified by Seixas and Morton (2012) – discussed in the previous paragraph - may be helpful in this regard. In tandem with a developing sense of how evidence and interpretations of evidence shape historical accounts, a 'big picture' perspective should add to students' developing disciplinary understanding of how history operates. As Wilschut (2019) argues, 'Together with evidence, chronology serves as the guardian, guidepost and delineator for those who create historical narrations', since the laws of chronology must be observed to keep the record straight.[88] Or, as Howson (2009) argues, with more explicit reference to the 'big picture' dimension:

> **... ... potential for great achievements in history education ... is likely to be realised through an increasingly sophisticated disciplinary understanding applied to a progressive framework structure which will in turn allow for complex 'big pictures' of the past – ones that are usable for orientation and allow children to fathom and explain their world in the present and consider what the future might hold.[89]**

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[85] Ibid., p.86.

[86] Ibid., p. 93

[87] Ibid.

[88] Arie Wilschut (2019), 'Historical consciousness of time and its societal uses', in *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 51: 6, 831–49. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, p. 842.

[89] Jonathan Howson (2009), 'Potential and pitfalls in teaching big pictures of the past', in *Teaching History*, 136. London: The Historical Association.

2.7 Some insights from the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, the well-meaning attempts by the de Rooy Commission, 2000-2001,[90] to introduce a framework that would assist orientation, became embroiled in the debate on the need for a national historical 'canon'. The statutory adoption of the framework in 2007 (officially referred to as a 'frame of reference') also raised questions about how framework-related knowledge and understanding can best be assessed: an early tendency was a reluctance to let go of questions that only asked for reproduction of knowledge. Van Drie et al. (2009)[91] describe a system of categorisation developed to assist teachers and examiners in distinguishing between levels of mastery of the framework (which involves a focus on ten identified 'eras' of history). The first level involves simple reproduction of the ten eras while the second requires identification of the eras from a series of (unfamiliar) sources. Level 3 requires that students use the framework to orient themselves in time by making connections between developments in different eras. The authors conclude that the system of categorisation could be used as a useful instrument in planning progression in the use of orientation knowledge and that, by the examination stage, the main focus should be on mastery of Level 3. In sifting through examination responses by students, the authors found that responses categorised as Level 3 required some form of historical reasoning, an essential element in the development of more robust 'big pictures'.

A common problem identified by researchers who interview students about their experience of school history is that many students find abstract textual representation of the past challenging. This prompted a team of researchers in the Netherlands to assess the value of active construction of multimodal representation of historical phenomena (Prangsma et al., 2008).[92] Eighty-five students, aged 12-13, working in pairs, tackled a series of four history tasks. In order to assess the learning, one of three modes of representation was adopted by each pair: textual representation, visual-textual representation or visual-textual representation integrated in a timeline. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the mode of representation that showed the best results – at least in the short term – was that where visual-textual representation was integrated in a timeline. As the researchers note:

> **Combining text and visualisations requires translating visual information into verbal information and vice versa, and then relating them to each other.**[93]

[90] For a brief introduction to the issues, see https://histoforum.net/2009/historymaker.html.

[91] Jannet van Drie, Albert Logtenberg, Bas van de Meijden and Marcel van Reissen (2009), "When was that date?" Building and assessing a frame of reference in the Netherlands, in *Teaching History*, no.137, pp.14–21, London: The Historical Association.

[92] Maaike M. Prangsma, Carla A.M. Van Boxtel and Gellof Kanselaar (2008), Developing a 'big picture': Effects of collaborative construction of multimodal representations in history, in *Instructional Science*, Vol. 36, No .2, pp.117–36. New York: Springer Publishing.

[93] Ibid., p.118.

On its own, a timeline only shows temporal relationships: the sequence of events, the duration of particular episodes or eras. Other visualisations, including drawings and causal diagrams can better represent phenomena – such as processes of change – and causal relationships. The study suggests that integrating these into a timeline appears to have the potential to deepen student learning – although more research needs to be carried out in this area, as the authors acknowledge.

In reviewing 'educational strategies which can be deployed to teach students how to make connections between past, present and future,' Van Straaten et al. (2016)[94] consider the potential of what they refer to as 'longitudinal lines', which explore long-term developments in a particular domain (or domains) of human existence, such as labour, religion, food or protection. Such narratives, which examine long lines of development are sometimes referred to as 'diachronic,' meaning that they are concerned with how the particular aspect(s) of human existence developed over time. The authors distinguish between the diachronic approach and historical overview knowledge which lacks any organising principle, arguing that 'Overview knowledge without an explicit narrative structure probably does not serve the purpose of making connections between past, present and future.'[95] Diachronic narratives, on the other hand, lend themselves to 'back and forth' comparison and contrast, and can encourage students to look towards their own futures with a perspective informed by the experience of people in the past. The authors' conclusion is that 'Longitudinal lines seem an appropriate strategy to teach students how to utilize historical knowledge in contemporary social contexts.'[96] In this regard, it is worth noting that Learning Outcome 3.14 of the junior cycle History specification requires that students be able to 'illustrate patterns of change across different time periods in a chosen theme relating to life and society.'[97] This would appear to offer the scope to apply a 'longitudinal lines' approach in junior cycle and offers another potential route for helping students develop more robust 'big pictures of the past'.

2.8 Conclusions

The work of Jörn Rüsen identifies with great rigour the role that history potentially plays in helping students to achieve a workable orientation in time so that they can better understand the present and have clearer perspectives on the future. Peter Lee has drawn out from Rüsen's work some of the key lessons that we need to take on board to help our students achieve successful orientation. One of these is that students need a framework of the past to help them order and make connections between the various episodes of history that they encounter. Lee also proposes some criteria that frameworks need to conform with if they are to achieve the desired outcomes. These include the need to link frameworks to a disciplinary context that makes clear to students the nature of history as an area of study. Another criterion is that frameworks should be provisional

[94] Dick Van Straaten, Arie Wilschut and Ron Oostdaam (2016), 'Making history relevant to students by connecting past, present and future: a framework for research, in *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 48:4, 479–502. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

[95] Ibid., p.492.

[96] Ibid., p.493.

[97] Department of Education and Skills (2017), *Junior Cycle History*. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills, p.18.

and adaptable, so that new learning can be incorporated and the framework re-shaped as student understanding grows. In England, Shemilt's proposals for synoptic frameworks that focus on core areas of human activity over long periods of time have been much supported in principle, and trialled successfully in individual schools, but have yet to gain mainstream acceptance in terms of policy adoption or widespread use in schools.

A recurrent theme in literature on 'big picture' thinking is the need to equip students with the conceptual understanding and thinking 'tools' that allow them to interrogate and re-structure their learning, so that otherwise inert knowledge becomes dynamic as it is absorbed into the thinking patterns and historical understanding of the student. The concept of significance is seen as key in that it alerts students to the reality that not all past events are, or can be, recalled in the history books and that criteria for selection are applied. The concept of evidence is seen to be fundamental to the discipline of history and as one that helps students make sense of what they learn. The concept of time challenges the philosophers but, in history, is important in helping students to order events and, with the aid of a framework, to see the 'bigger picture.' The concept of change is seen as pivotal in the growth of historical understanding as students are helped to see the nature of change as process rather than event and that continuity is a key element in all processes of change.

Thanks to the work of Lee and Shemilt and others, progression in student understanding has received increasing attention in the literature over the past two decades. Where once an aggregationist approach was widespread, there is now widespread acceptance that development in student understanding takes place at variable rates, and that the variability differs from concept to concept. They and others have developed models of progression to assist teachers in the classroom, including such elements as 'conceptual thresholds' that students reach as certain criteria seem to fit. Seixas and Morton, on the other hand, argue the case for a series of 'guideposts' that can be used to 'steer' student learning. In common with Lee and Shemilt, they emphasise the importance of helping students to overcome their misconceptions, misconceptions that act as blocks to learning. Our understanding of how such misconceptions affect learning has been enhanced by the work of Maggioni and others on 'epistemic cognition.' The work of Ní Cassaithe and her colleagues deepens this understanding and points towards ways in which 'epistemic bottlenecks' can be identified and challenged.

In the Netherlands, the ways in which some practical issues have been tackled may provide some pointers for Irish educators and examiners. For examiners, one lesson from the work of van Drie et al. may be that questions about framework-related knowledge need to go beyond mere reproduction of knowledge. The work of Prangsma et al. suggests that classroom tasks for students – in this case for pairs of students – may be more effective if they incorporate a mix of textual, visual and timeline elements. The work of Van Straaten et al. on 'longitudinal lines' – which are used as devices to explore particular domains of human existence over time - have significant parallels with Learning Outcome 3.14 of the Junior Cycle History specification and its requirement that students be able to 'illustrate patterns of change across different time periods.' We have much to learn from the experience of colleagues elsewhere in Europe and the wider world and, hopefully, some insights of our own to offer in return.

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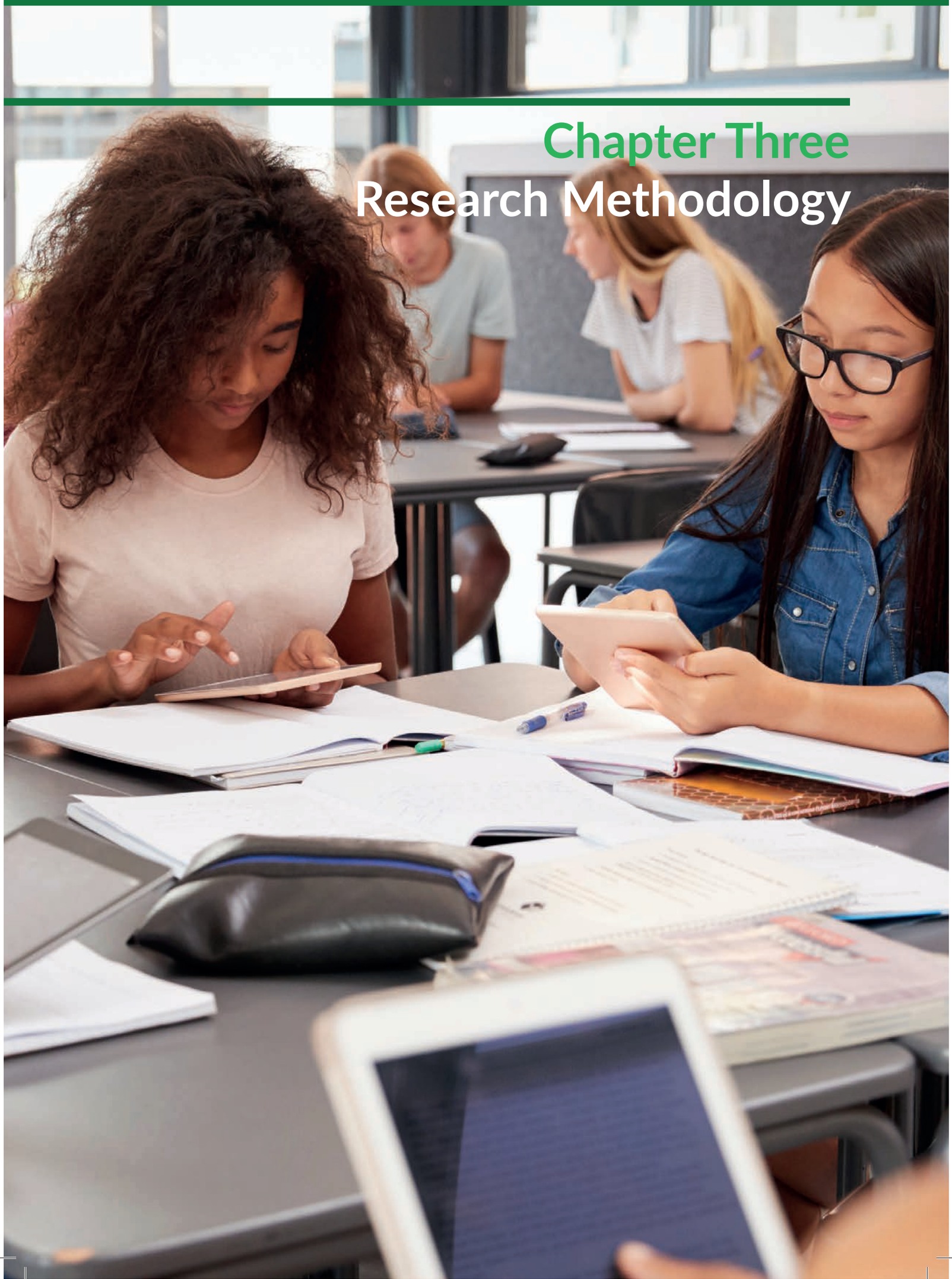

Chapter Three
Research Methodology

3.1 Purposes of the research

As discussed in Chapter 1, in September 2018 first year junior cycle students in Irish schools and their teachers began teaching and learning exchanges based on the new specification in History. In line with developments in other subjects, one of the features of the specification is a focus on learning outcomes, where the desired understanding and abilities that students are intended to acquire are clearly identified. For the first time in a history course in this state, a number of the outcomes identified relate to students' 'big picture' of the past, and a new challenge for teachers is to identify classroom activities and approaches that can help students to achieve these outcomes.

A question that arises, then, is how well equipped are our teachers to respond to the challenges associated with 'big picture' teaching and, as an ancillary question, what types of support may they need to help students achieve mandated learning outcomes? These students – engaged in the study of History in junior cycle – will not arrive in the classroom as blank canvases, and that gives rise to a further set of questions on matters likely to affect the dynamics of 'big picture' teaching in the classroom. What sort of conceptions of the past do students entering junior cycle have? What sort of 'big picture' of the long span of the past, if any, do twelve- to thirteen-year-old students tend to have? What understanding do these students have of the manner in which history operates as an academic discipline? These and the many other questions which they generated, prompted our initial research design. Also, we decided at an early stage that we would devise a framework of our own and assess its potential to help teachers and students achieve 'big picture' learning outcomes. As well as its potential to enrich our research data, we saw this as a vital component in the transactional space of in-school research, where the piloting of a new resource provided some counter-balance to the schools' readiness in facilitating our interaction with the students.

3.2 Approach to research

Our research approach was qualitative in nature. Our overriding desire was to attempt to capture the participant perspectives of the student teachers and first year post-primary History students with whom we were engaging. The concept of 'student voice' helped to steer our approach in ways that will be discussed in ***3.7***. While our purposeful conversations with student teachers and first year History students were to be the culmination of our research, we gathered preliminary data via written responses to a questionnaire (in the case of the student teachers) and a 'student task' (in the case of the first year History students). These responses helped to inform the conversations we had with both sets of participants.

Our initial plan was to carry out our research over one school year, 2019–20. In the first stage of our research, we worked with a group of UCD postgraduate students enrolled on the Professional Master of Education (PME) programme who were teaching History to first year students. These student teachers were in the first year of a two-year programme. To assist our research, nineteen of the students completed a questionnaire (Appendix A) which sought to identify their thinking on 'big pictures' of the past. Eight of the nineteen students subsequently volunteered to contribute to the on-going research and these were interviewed by two of the researchers as a follow-up

and opportunity for elaboration of their questionnaire responses. (For interview schedule, See Appendix B.) Briefings on the use of the framework, 'Our History Scaffold', were given to these eight volunteers in preparation for its classroom use (See Appendix E for briefing materials used) and, at the end of the school year, the eight were to be interviewed again to attempt to gauge the impact on each of involvement in the research project and, also, to hear their views on the use of the framework in the classroom. However, due to COVID-19 lockdowns, the student teachers did not get the anticipated opportunities to use the framework and the planned interviews were deferred.

Meanwhile, following our identification of eight PME 1 students who wished to assist us in our research, our interviews with the eight, and a briefing regarding the research plan, the next phase of the research involved working with a first year History class being taught by each one of our eight volunteers. First, a student task (Appendix C) was completed by students in each class under the supervision of their teacher. The task sought to identify the historical phenomena that the young students found most memorable as well as their ability to give a narrative of past events. Following analysis of the response to these tasks by the researchers, two of the researchers visited each of the eight schools to meet a focus group of students (usually ten or so) from the class that had completed the student task and pose questions that we hoped would garner insights into their perceptions of history and the nature of their pictures of the past. (For focus-group interview schedule, see Appendix D.) We planned to return to each of the eight schools later in the school year to attempt to gauge the impact of the use of the framework but, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, COVID-19 lockdowns rendered that impossible. We now had to decide whether to carry the research forward into another school year.

3.3 How COVID-19 restrictions affected our research approach

COVID-19 arrived in Ireland in March 2020 as the researchers were looking forward to visiting the classrooms of the focus groups they had met earlier in the school year. The intention had been to hold the focus group interviews with the first year History students in May 2020. This now proved impossible, nor was it possible to make any alternative arrangement given the constraints under which schools - and student teachers and their students – were operating at the time. Following deliberation among the researchers, and subsequent discussions with our eight student teacher volunteers, it was agreed that the process of research in first year History classrooms would be undertaken in the new schools where each of the eight was to spend their second year of placement, in the next school year, 2020–21. The hope was that, on this occasion, it would be possible to complete the process as originally planned, finishing the year with a return visit to each of the eight schools involved and an 'exit' interview with each of the eight student teacher volunteers.

In the event, two of our volunteers had to withdraw from the project early in the 2020–21 school year (for reasons unrelated to the project), and one of these was replaced (in September 2020) by a fellow PME student history teacher who had maintained a strong interest in the project from the

beginning. Thus, in the 2020–2021 school year, our research sample was based on seven student history teachers and first year history students in the schools where they had their PME Year 2 school placement. Our plan for this second year of research was to complete the process originally planned for the school year 2019–20.

Thankfully, in the school year 2020–21, we did manage to complete the process of research that we had planned. However, because of the on-going restrictions on the opening of schools and the new emphasis on remote learning, all encounters for the purposes of the research – including briefings and interviews with the student teachers and interviews with focus groups of first years in the schools – took place remotely, via the Zoom platform. This presented challenges for all concerned, not least the dependence on a platform that was new or relatively new to most participants and technology that was variable in performance and reliability. Also, all focus group interviews in the 2020–21 school year involved communicating remotely with mask-wearing students who had to maintain a social distance from each other, and whose teacher – whilst maintaining an appropriate distance – often had to carry a laptop computer to different parts of the classroom so that individual voices could be 'seen' and heard. The willing cooperation of our student teacher collaborators played a huge part in helping the researchers achieve such levels of success as they managed to achieve. (For ease of reference, we refer to the first set of interviews with both student teachers and first year History students as 'entry' interviews; we refer to the second set of interviews with both groups as 'exit' interviews. For 'exit' interview schedule used with focus groups, see Appendix F.)

Another challenge for the researchers was the remote nature of the contact with the first year students, as well as the constraints imposed by the need for the students to wear masks. In the pre-COVID focus group interviews, it was possible for the researchers to develop a rapport with the students, focusing initially on creating a relaxed, friendly and 'chatty' environment for discussion. It was also possible to 'read' students' reactions from facial expressions and other indicators of interpersonal communication. All of this, we believe, helped to create an atmosphere, where students were open and authentic in their responses and frequently spoke at length. Post-COVID 'Zoom' sessions were different – for example, responses tended to be shorter. However, given the circumstances, we were pleased at the insights we gained from these encounters which certainly expanded the parameters of our understanding of how young people view the past and the 'lenses' which they employ in so doing. These insights, and others from the previous school year, are discussed in Chapter 5 of the report.

3.4 The main research questions

Following on from the purposes of our research, as outlined in ***3.1***, our main research questions may be divided into two sets, one aimed at the student teachers and the other at the first year History students.

3.4.1 Questions aimed at the student teachers

Beginning with the questionnaire, the main questions addressed to the student teachers were as follows:

- What is your understanding of the expression 'big picture of the past'?
- How would you sum up your own 'big picture' of the past (in 10 or 12 sentences)?
- What do you think you will need to do to help your students develop a workable 'big picture' of the past?

When eight of the nineteen student teachers who completed the questionnaire were subsequently interviewed (in what we refer to as the 'entry' interviews), the main import of the questioning was to tease out responses given to the questions on the questionnaire, allowing time for elaboration of views, as appropriate. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing space for reference to individual responses to questions on the questionnaire, whilst maintaining a focus on the main questions listed above.

In respect of the 'exit' interview questions, the intention was to ask a set of questions to gauge the impact of use of the framework on the student teacher's teaching. These interviews did not proceed as planned in the school year 2019–20, as explained in ***3.3***, and the specific questions asked were not formulated until shortly before the interviews occurred at the end of the 2020–21 school year, in June 2021. The following were the three questions used to frame the interviews:

- How has your involvement in the project impacted on your teaching of history over the past two years?
- What would you say you are doing differently in the classroom as a result of your involvement in the project?
- Can you talk to us about how useful a 'Bigger Picture' approach is in the classroom and how it might affect your teaching in the future?

3.4.2 Questions aimed at the first year History students

In the student task, the two questions to which the students were invited to respond were as follows:

- Of the history that you have studied at school or that you learned from other sources such as family visits or books or television programmes, what parts do you remember best?
- From the history that you have learned, what 'big picture' of the past would you give to a visitor from outer space to help her/him understand the world in which we live?

In the focus group 'entry' interviews with the first year post-primary students, questions were formulated to get some measure of the students' conceptual understanding. The four concepts underlying the questions posed were: significance, time, evidence, change. The main questions posed were as follows:

- Who do you think are the most significant people in the last 2,000 years or so?
- (The people named come from different eras of history.) What is your understanding of an era?
- Why is history important? What exactly is history anyway?
- Can you talk to us about important changes that have happened in the past and why these changes happened?

In the case of the 'exit' focus group interviews, the intention was to get some sense of the impact of the use of the framework on the first year students in question. As with the student teachers, the specific questions asked were not formulated until shortly before the focus group interviews took place towards the end of the 2020–21 school year This was the weakest element of our research as, due to COVID-19 restrictions, it had not been possible for the student teachers to use the framework as extensively as we would have wished. Nevertheless, we consider the data generated to be of sufficient interest to warrant its inclusion in this report. Our initial questions focused on processes highlighted in the framework, to attempt to gauge student understanding of the significance of the processes highlighted. The final two questions sought to assess more directly the impact, if any, of the use of the framework. The 'headline' questions were as follows:

- What can you tell us about the first humans to live on the island of Ireland?
- Some historians describe farming as the most important invention in the history of humankind. Why do you think that is?
- Any idea what the word 'civilisation' means?
- Why has religion been important in the history of Ireland and of Europe?
- When has technology changed human history?
- (We'd like to talk to you now about the history framework that your teacher has been using in some of your lessons.) Have you found the framework helpful?

In conclusion, it should be noted that the principal purpose of all questions posed at interviews to the student teachers and the first year students was to extend our understanding of the thought processes and understanding of our interviewees, and we believe we made significant progress in achieving this objective. Further research needs to be done on the ways in which frameworks can assist Irish students in making greater sense of the history they study, and we hope this report will encourage others to engage in such research.

3.5 Research instruments used

The research questions outlined in ***3.4*** were conveyed through a number of targeted research instruments. Again, it will be helpful to look in turn at the instruments used with the student teachers and with the first year History students. Due to pressure of time and other professional commitments of the researchers, it was not possible to pilot any of the instruments used in the research. The matter did receive consideration but the arguments for piloting were superseded by the determination to see the research proceed in a timely fashion in the school year 2019–20.

3.5.1 Research instruments used with the student teachers

Initial data were gathered through a questionnaire (Appendix A) with a set of questions (See ***3.4***) that was designed to elicit their 'big picture' understanding. Completed by nineteen student teachers in the first year of their two year Master's (PME) programme, the data generated were used to shape and inform the 'entry' interviews with the eight who expressed a wish to have

further involvement with the project. (For interview schedule, see Appendix B.) These interviews were conducted by two of the researchers with each one of the eight in a room in UCD. With the students' approval, interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed.

The 'exit' interviews were the medium for questions (See ***3.4.1***) that sought to identify the impact on their teaching of involvement with the research project and the likely future impact on their teaching. (For interview schedule, see Appendix G.) Again, the interviews were conducted by two of the researchers, on the UCD campus, and interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed.

In the table below, using the pseudonyms deployed to preserve the anonymity of our student teacher research participants, we set out the details of participation over the two school years in question.

	Number who completed questionnaire	Number who took part in 'entry' interview	Number who took part in briefing on use of framework	Number who took part in 'exit' interview	Number who oversaw completion of student task
2019–2020	19	8	8	0	8
		Jacinta, Josephine, Margaret, Ronan, Sadhbh, Tom, Ultan, Rose	Jacinta, Josephine, Margaret, Maud, Sadhbh, Tom, Ultan, Rose		Jacinta, Josephine, Margaret, Maud, Sadhbh, Tom, Ultan, Rose
2020–2021	0	1	7	7	7
		Richard	Jacinta, Josephine, Margaret, Richard, Sadhbh, Ultan, Rose	Jacinta, Josephine, Margaret, Richard, Sadhbh, Ultan, Rose	Jacinta, Josephine, Margaret, Richard, Sadhbh, Ultan, Rose
Total number who took part in research	19	9	9	7	9

Table 2: Numbers of student teacher research participants, 2019–21.

3.5.2 Research instruments used with the first year History students

The initial instrument used to gather data from the first year History students was given the designation 'student task' (See Appendix C). In part, this was to distinguish it from that used with the student teachers which had the slightly more formal designation 'questionnaire.' 'Task,' with its suggestion of some element of challenge, seemed more appropriate for the 12–13 year old cohort involved. The two questions posed – as set out in ***3.4.2*** – were intended to be student-friendly and the use of the Comic Sans font sought to reinforce this. The task was completed by a total of 127 students (across eight schools) in the school year 2019–20 and by 130 students (across seven schools) in the school year 2020–21. As well as providing a rich vein of data on students' ideas about history and the past, the students' responses also helped to inform the conduct of the focus group 'entry' interviews, where some reference was made to student task responses.

Given the clear links identified in the literature between 'big picture' understanding and students' conceptual understanding, the questions used in focus group 'entry' interviews (See Appendix D) were framed around four key concepts of the discipline, as explained in ***3.4.2***. In terms of generating conversation with the students, the initial focus on significance and concluding focus on change proved especially successful in achieving informative engagement. Focus groups were composed of ten or so randomly-chosen students from the class group which had completed the student task. On some occasions, due to absences or change of mind on the part of individuals, numbers dipped slightly below that mark. In 2019–20, the total number who took part in focus group interviews was 75; in 2020–21 the number was 68. On all occasions, the PME student collaborator who was teaching the class History was also present. All focus group interviews were recorded – with the permission of the school authorities, parents and the students involved. All of the interviews were subsequently transcribed. A brief summary of the numbers of first year History students involved in our research over the two school years is given in the table that follows.

	Number who completed student task	Number who took part in initial focus-group interviews	Number who took part in follow-up focus group interviews
2019–2020	127	75	0 (due to COVID-19 restrictions)
2020–2021	130	68	68 approx.

Table 3: Summary of numbers of first year History students who participated in the research project, 2019–21.

As noted in the table, no students took part in focus group 'exit' interviews at the end of the 2019–20 school year: this was due to COVID-19 restrictions. Indeed, this was the main reason for extending the research into a second school year. Fortuitously, this enabled the use of the written task and focus group 'entry' interview schedule with a second cohort of students and some critical analysis of similarities and differences in the responses given. It also enabled focus group 'exit' interviews to take place towards the end of the 2020–21 school year. (For interview schedule, see Appendix F.) All interviews during the 2020–21 school year took place using the Zoom platform.

3.6 Ethical considerations and principles

An application for ethical approval, submitted to the Human Research Ethics Committee in UCD, was approved in correspondence dated 12 November 2019. The reference details for this approval are as follows: HS-19-65-Dredge-Ferris, *Big Pictures of the Past*. Advice from the Committee helped to steer our course in ensuring that the study operated within agreed ethical parameters: the advice was greatly appreciated, and we strove our utmost to ensure that ethical principles protected the best interests of all participants.

Beginning with the student teachers, an information sheet was prepared and issued to every prospective participant i.e., all students in the PME 1 History Methods class of 2019–20. The issues addressed included: the rationale for the research, why this group was being invited to take part, how the data would be used, how their privacy would be protected and their right to withdraw from the research study at any stage.

A similar process was undergone in respect of all the first year History students who were prospective participants. (These would be students in a first year History class taught by one of the eight student teacher collaborators in our research.) In this case, there was a need to prepare information sheets for each of three groups viz. the first year students themselves, their parents/guardians and school management. Consent forms were prepared for the adult groups mentioned, the parents/guardians and school management. Once these had been signed, assent forms were issued to the young students to ensure their assent to their participation.

In all aspects of the study, great care was taken to ensure that ethical standards were upheld. The approach was also informed by the principles associated with the published literature on Student Voice and this will be discussed in ***3.7***. Initial interviews with the student teachers were conducted in a quiet room and are more accurately described as semi-structured conversations with the students. All responses were listened to respectfully and responded to sympathetically. In 2020–21, the reliance on the Zoom platform presented extra challenge but, in terms of ethical principles, a similar approach was adopted and similar standards were upheld. To protect the privacy of the participants, pseudonyms are ascribed to each student teacher and schools are not named.

In focus group interviews with the first year History students, initial encounters took place in their own classrooms and every effort was made to treat all respectfully and to encourage students to express their thoughts. A similar approach was followed when Covid restrictions prompted recourse to Zoom. For all focus group interviews the student teacher was present in the room with her/his/their students. Students were constantly reminded that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions we posed, that we were there to hear their thoughts on the matters under discussion. No student is identified by name in the analysis.

3.7 The Student Voice dimension

The concept of 'student voice' arises from a conviction that conversations between teachers and students are central to student learning, and that we, as teachers, can enhance the learning environment by affording students opportunities to articulate their thoughts on matters that affect their experience of learning both inside and outside the classroom. The concept of student voice is underpinned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: Article 12.1 requires that state agencies 'shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.'[98] In April 2021, the 'National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making' was launched by the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Mr Roderick O'Gorman.[99] The stated purpose of the framework is to support 'departments, agencies and organisations to improve their practice in listening to children and young people and giving them a voice in decision-making.'

For us as researchers, 'listening to young people' was our main priority. It was important for us to speak with students and listen carefully to what they had to say, to improve our understanding of how they 'saw' the past and the extent to which they grasped its overarching extension across time. In framing our discourse with the students, it seemed appropriate to us to draw on a model of participation – the 'Lundy model' – that has been influential in a number of recent educational projects, including the Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools (ACCS) collaboration with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) on 'Student Voice at the centre of learning and school life', 2021.[100] The Lundy Model takes its name from Professor Laura Lundy of Queen's University Belfast (QUB) who has been instrumental in its development.

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[98] *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, adopted by United National general assembly resolution 44/25 on 20 November 1989.

[99] See https://hubnanog.ie/participation-framework/.

[100] The project was the subject of an ACCS/NCCA publication, *Student voice at the centre of learning and school life* (2021).

3.7.1 *The Lundy Model of Participation*

The model seeks to provide a structure that will vindicate the child and young person's right to express their views. In order to ensure the latter, four distinct elements are identified. These elements are listed in the order in which their application tends to arise and are as follows: space, voice, audience, and influence.[101]

The 'space' element may be seen as having both spatial and temporal implications. Children and young people must be given time and space to express their views. Essentially, what is required is that safe and inclusive opportunities are provided for the formation and expression of views. When such opportunities are provided, there is no guarantee that the children and young people will speak out in the manner anticipated. The 'voice' element, then, is that they must be facilitated to express their views – and the role of facilitators is crucial here. The 'audience' element requires that their views be listened to, especially by people who have the power to make decisions that will affect the lives of the children and young people in question. Finally, the 'influence' element requires that the views expressed be acted upon, as appropriate. While this does not imply that every proposal made in good faith by children and young people will be adopted and implemented, it does require that the views expressed are carefully appraised and that feedback is provided where policymakers are reluctant to take proposals on board.

3.7.2 How the Lundy Model was incorporated into our methodological approach

In seeking to address the 'space' element of student voice, it seemed to us appropriate to provide the first year History students with more than one means of communicating with the researchers, to accommodate students who felt more comfortable expressing their thoughts in either spoken or written form. Thus, we had the 'student task' (or 'written task') for students to complete before our first visit, administered by our PME student collaborators. In the initial series of visits, where two interviewers met the students in the presence of their History teacher who was our student teacher collaborator, the interviewers sat opposite each other and invited students to sit either side of us, in an elliptical formation. This sought to ensure that we had a shared space where conversation could flow freely. This brings in the 'voice' element, whereby the students could see that we were eager to hear their views and understand their thoughts on history and the past. This element was strengthened by the fact that we had read the written tasks in advance and were in a position to draw on responses contained therein in the course of the focus group interviews. As subsequent school visits had to take place via Zoom, due to Covid restrictions, we were reliant on the generosity, ingenuity and hard work of the student teachers to achieve meaningful engagement with their students: that we managed to adhere to the Lundy principles as well as we did is a tribute to their dedication and expertise.

On first meeting with the first year students, at the beginning of each focus group visit, as an 'icebreaker' exercise, we asked the students – in groups of two or three – to list the most significant people of the last two thousand years or so. We emphasised that this was not an

[101] ACCS/NCCA (2021) *Student voice at the centre of learning and school life*. Dublin: ACCS/NCCA, p.15.

examination; there were no 'right' or 'wrong' answers, as such, and we simply wished to hear their thoughts on all matters discussed. The students were given markers and large sheets of poster paper and were free to cross out or add to as they saw fit. We then invited students to name their choices and discussion ensued. This proved an effective means of helping the students to feel relaxed and confident in sharing their thoughts and constituted a significant enhancement of the 'space' and 'voice' elements of the Lundy Model.

Initial introductions had made clear to the students that we were researchers from the School of Education, UCD, and the NCCA, and that we were there to hear their thoughts and views, some of which might well feature in our final, written report. Thus, the 'audience' element of the Lundy model was addressed in ways that emphasised the strong interest of the researchers in hearing what the students had to say. In documenting the students' thoughts, along with our own analytical commentary, we seek to highlight the benefits in taking young people and their views seriously. Here, the 'influence' element comes into play. In making return visits to the schools in Year 2, via Zoom, we demonstrated to students the seriousness with which we take what they had to say. We also indicated to the students and their management our eagerness to have them represented at the launch of the report, by students from the focus group, if at all possible. Further realisation of the 'influence' element will be achieved, we believe, by the publication and widespread distribution of this report.

In our interaction with the PME student teachers, we were dealing with adults, not the children or young people for whom the Lundy model of participation was originally devised. Yet it seemed to us that the principles underlying the Lundy model were equally valid when applied to this group of grown-up students, on the cusp of significant career commitments but with somewhat muted voices on educational matters in their current student incarnation. (We do not mean to suggest that these PME students had few opinions on current educational issues but, rather, that their current lives as students provided few opportunities for their voices to be heard beyond the academy.)

Again, as with the first year History students, the student teachers had more than one means of expressing their thoughts and views, if they so wished: the voluntary nature of participation was at all times foremost. The creation of 'space' for these encounters was challenging, given the students' crowded schedule and range of responsibilities, but the levels of enthusiasm were high, especially so in the case of the eight student teacher research collaborators. It is here, also, that the 'voice' element was strongest, as they willingly – indeed, eagerly – agreed to sit down with the researchers and answer questions on similar themes to those in the questionnaire. The challenge for the researchers was to ask questions that encouraged an openness on the part of the student teachers and allowed them to articulate their own understanding of and position on a range of issues relating to 'big picture' teaching and its pedagogical implications.

The 'audience' element was clear from the outset as we responded to students' questions on the details of the research process but was most evident, perhaps, in the face-to-face interviews, which were enhanced by our prior scrutiny of their completed questionnaires and our explicit

commitment to developing our understanding of their thoughts and views. Prior scrutiny of the questionnaires allowed us to 'pick up' on points made therein and seek clarification or fuller understanding of apparent meanings and implied suggestions. The 'influence' element may be most evident in the exposure given to the thoughts and views of the participants through the publication and dissemination of the report, but it also surfaced in a number of individual cases where a new-found confidence in articulating pedagogical ideas seemed linked to the seriousness with which the researchers responded to the ideas expressed.

The 'Lundy model' (@ProfLauraLundy)/twitter

3.8 Data analysis

In line with the principles of qualitative research, data analysis was conducted over an extended period of time, as coding categories were identified and refined and patterns of response were noted. As Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) note, '...the coding method is a procedure for organizing the text of the transcripts and discovering patterns within that organizational structure.'[102] Once these patterns had been identified, the writing got under way, but with an openness to further refinement of the argument emerging from the codified data: as Maykut and Morehouse (1994) note, '... writing up one's research is part of the analytic process.'[103]

[102] Carl Auerbach and Louise B. Silverstein, (2003), *Qualitative Data: An Introduction to Coding and Analysis*. New York: New York University Press, p.35.

[103] P. Maykut and R. Morehouse, (1994), *Beginning Qualitative Research: A Philosophic and Practical Guide*. London: The Falmer Press, p.145.

3.8.1 Analysis of data from the student teacher questionnaire

Once the questionnaire responses had been collated, colour coding was used to identify patterns of response and common threads of reflection, as well as individual insights that seemed to us particularly significant. Since the questions related to 'big picture' understanding, the approach to coding was informed by our own understanding of the concept and its many ramifications, including its link to disciplinary understanding. These matters are discussed further in Chapter 4. While the data were of intrinsic interest, they were also helpful in shaping the approach to the interviews with the eight student teachers who became our research collaborators.

3.8.2 Analysis of data from the student teacher 'entry' and 'exit' interviews

In the case of the 'entry' interviews, once the interviews had been transcribed and collated, an exercise in colour coding was undertaken to attempt to identify the patterns that would form the nexus of our main findings and conclusions. Since the interview schedule questions mirrored those used in the questionnaire, similar patterns and threads of reflection emerged but new insights and reflective responses were also noted.

In the case of the 'exit' interviews, the interview schedule designed to gauge the impact on the student teachers of their classroom use of 'Our History Scaffold' (See ***4.3***) helped to steer the codification of responses and the identification of patterns 'lurking in the undergrowth' of the raw data. Again, other responses of interest were noted and considered for inclusion in the discussion of the data. Ultimately, data were included for discussion in the analysis based on the extent to which they contributed to our understanding of the issues set out in ***3.1*** which underlay our research.

3.8.3 Analysis of the data from the student task in 2019–20 and 2020–21

Again, as with the student teacher questionnaire, colour coding was used to identify patterns of response. The analytical framework employed was influenced by the report of the *Usable Historical Pasts* (2008),[104] project and its distinction between a perception of history as a sequence of events in time and a perception of history as a series of processes at work over time. The analytical framework is one that might well have emerged from the data anyway but its ready availability was a useful tool in getting the analysis under way. The need to re-run the task with a second cohort of students proved fortuitous, as it enabled an element of comparative analysis and reflection on both recurrent and divergent patterns.

[104] Stuart Foster et al. (2008), *Usable Historical Pasts: a study of students' frameworks of the past*. Full research report. ESRC end of Award report, RES-000-22-1676. Swindon: ESRC.

3.8.4 Analysis of data from the first year students' 'entry' and 'exit' interviews

In the case of the 'entry' interviews, once the interviews had been transcribed and collated, the exercise in colour coding was undertaken once again to identify patterns and begin the process of constructing an argument. The manner in which the questions asked were framed around a set of disciplinary or 'second order' concepts (See ***3.4***), provided a readymade schema for the analysis of responses. As with the student task, the availability of data from two school years, 2020 and 2021, provided greater scope for comparative analysis.

In the case of the 'exit' interviews, these took place during the 2020–21 school year only as interviews planned for May 2020 had to be cancelled due to COVID-19 restrictions. The process of analysis was similar to the above but the focus this time was on the impact, if any, of classroom use of the framework 'Our History Scaffold.' As the interviews took place via Zoom – and many lessons had taken place using the same online platform – data was somewhat 'thinner' than in previous encounters and the analysis is less assured as a consequence. Nevertheless, it is our view that the analysis generated sufficient levels of insight to justify inclusion in the report.

3.9 Research project fieldwork timetable, 2019–21

Our original intention was to complete the field work elements of the research project in the school year 2019–2020. Since this proved impossible due to COVID-19 restrictions, the field work continued into a second school year, 2020–2021, and was completed in that year. It may be helpful to set out in tabular form the stages of our research over the period of two school years. Some other dates are included, such as briefing sessions, so that a clear outline of the overall research approach emerges.

'Big Pictures Of The Past' Research Project Fieldwork, 2019–2021		
Date	**Event**	**Follow-up**
03-Oct-19	Ethical review approved	Preparation of consent forms
20-Nov-19	Questionnaire completed by 19 PME 1 History Methods students	Beginning of process of data analysis
12-Dec-19	Follow-up interviews with 8 of those who had completed the questionnaire	Interviews transcribed and process of analysis begun
15-Jan-20	Briefing session on the research plan for 8 student teacher collaborators	Schools contacted; approval secured; parents and students contacted and permissions secured.
27-Jan-20	'Student task' administered by our 8 collaborators in a first year History class which they are teaching.	Collation and analysis of student responses
05-Feb-20	Focus-group interviews in 8 schools got underway	Transcription of interviews and process of analysis begun
13-Mar-20	Briefing meeting on 'Our History Scaffold' for our 8 collaborators	Preparation for classroom use of 'Our History Scaffold'
20-Mar-20	Schools required to close due to COVID-19 pandemic	Consultation with 8 collaborators on future of project; agreement to extend project into 2020-2021 school year.
29-Sep-20	Strategy for continuing the research agreed.	Student task to be administered in new placement schools, focus group interviews to take place remotely using Zoom platform
05-Oct-20	Following withdrawal of 1 of original 8 collaborators, new recruit interviewed.	Transcription of interview
8 October 2020 and 26 November 2020	Briefings on administration of student task and conduct of focus group meetings	Administration of student task in 7 schools; collation and analysis of responses
05-Dec-20	First focus group interviews took place	Transcription of interviews and process of analysis begun
20-Jan-21	Withdrawal of 1 of 8 collaborators due to pressure of work.	Research will now focus on 7 schools.
08-Mar-21	Briefing for 7 collaborators on 'Our History Scaffold'	Classroom use of 'Our History Scaffold'
13-Apr-21	Zoom meeting with 7 collaborators to plan for second round of focus group interviews	Schedule of visits agreed
04-May-21	Beginning of focus group interviews with first year History students	Transcription of interviews and process of analysis begun
2/3 June 2021	Exit interviews with 7 collaborators took place	Transcription of interviews and process of analysis begun

Table 4: 'Big Pictures of the Past' project fieldwork timeline.

References

Carl Auerbach and Louise B. Silverstein (2003), *Qualitative Data: An Introduction to Coding and Analysis* (2003), New York: New York University Press.

ACCS/NCCA (2021) *Student voice at the centre of learning and school life*. Dublin: ACCS/NCCA.

Stuart Foster et al. (2008) *Usable Historical Pasts: a study of students' frameworks of the past*. Full research report. ESRC end of Award report, RES-000-22-1676. Swindon: ESRC.

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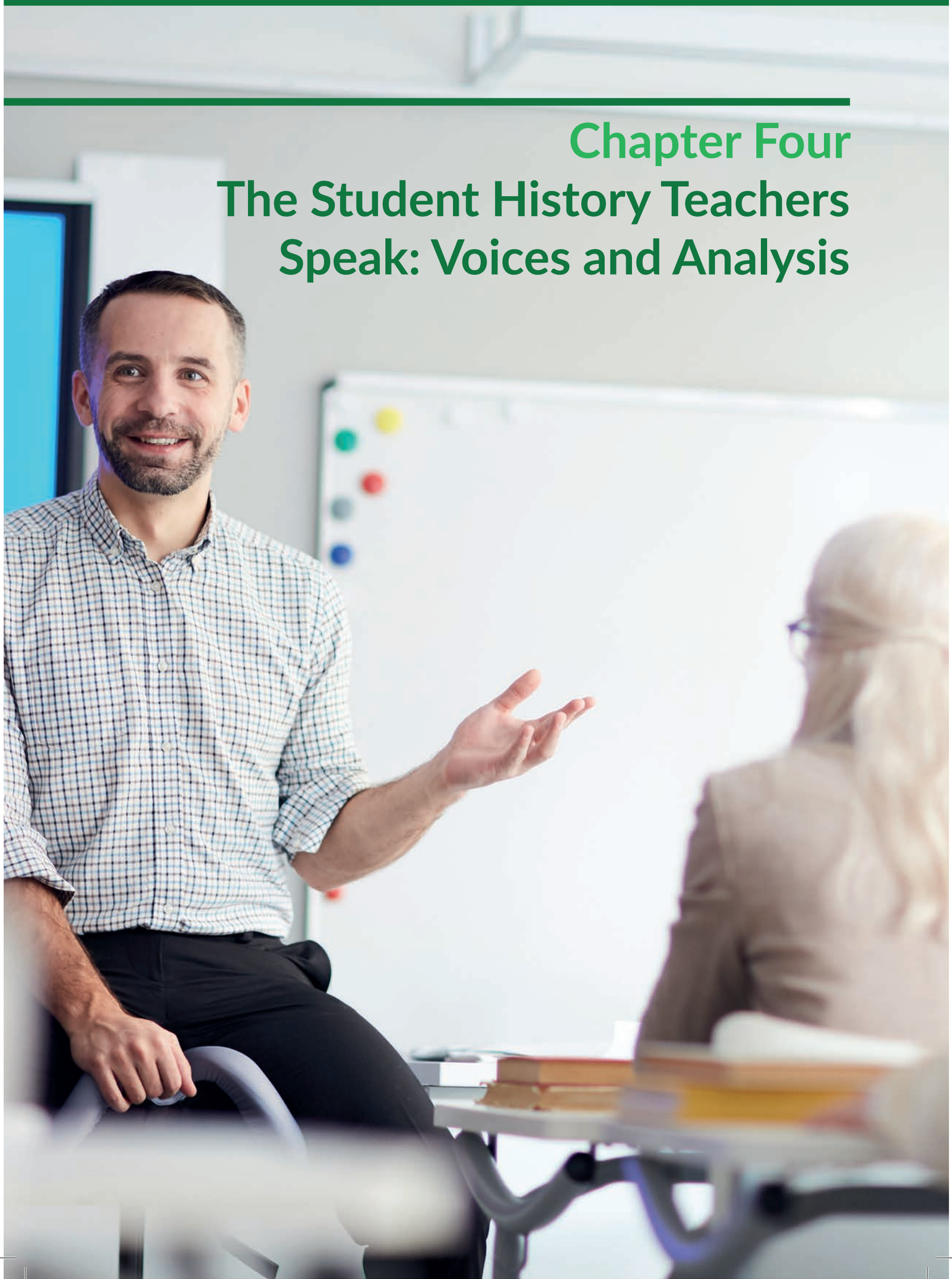
Chapter Four

The Student History Teachers Speak: Voices and Analysis



4.1 The questionnaire: responses and analysis

The following are the questions to which the student teachers were invited to respond:

1. What is your understanding of the expression 'big picture of the past'?
2. How would you sum up your own 'big picture' of the past (in 10 or 12 sentences)?
3. What do you think you will need to do to help your students develop a workable 'big picture' of the past?

The responses to each question will be separately address in this chapter.

4.1.1 What is your understanding of the expression 'big picture of the past'?

Of the nineteen students who completed the questionnaire (two anonymously), in responding to Question 1, only six expressed what we would characterise as a clear (albeit imperfect) understanding of the concept of a 'big picture'. (Five of the six were among the eight who subsequently volunteered to work with us in the next stages of the research.) Five others expressed a partial understanding. The following are what we would see as the main features of 'big picture' understanding:

1. Awareness that a 'big picture' is one that encompasses the broad sweep of the past.
2. Awareness that the ability to make connections between events and developments in different times and places is an important dimension of a 'big picture'.
3. Awareness that a 'big picture' is not developed in a vacuum and is part and parcel of a broader understanding of what the discipline of history entails.

Of the six respondents mentioned above, five exemplified the first feature above. Whilst not explicitly stated, it could be argued that such an understanding is implicit in the case of the sixth respondent, Maud (see below). Four exemplified the second feature also (one of these, in response to question three rather than question one.) The only one of the six to mention the third feature was Maud who made a pertinent and insightful observation in her response to Question 3. This is discussed below.

The following responses to Question 1 give an indication of the levels of understanding displayed.

> **Richard:** … it is a mental understanding and view of history not as a series of individual events but instead one connected development over time. … [It] enables students to fully understand and connect historical events.

> **Margaret:** [It] is an understanding of the chronological progression throughout time, specifically with the knowledge of how each 'era' contributed/led to the next.

Josephine: When I think about a 'big picture' of the past, I imagine a timeline with certain key historic events to be found in it.

Sadhbh: It is a coherent story that flows from the dawn of time to the present day … [It] can show a sequence of significant times in history.

Tom: It is an overall understanding of how we got to this point.

Maud: To ensure that students have a wider understanding of what is and was going on in the world. To help students make connections to different historical events and ensure that their learning is not fragmented.

As already noted, the awareness that a 'big picture' is one that encompasses the broad sweep of the past seems to inform the above responses. However, the role of a 'big picture' in helping students to make connections between events and developments in different times and places is only explicitly expressed in the comments of Richard, Margaret and Maud. In Sadhbh's case, her response to question three includes the following observation:

> **To help students gain a better understanding of the 'big picture' connections must be made between each topic, what has come before that topic and what comes after that topic must be addressed, to allow students place that event or period in a timeline of events, to pinpoint its location in time.**

The third feature was evident in the case of one respondent only, Maud, and was given in response to Question 3 rather than Question 1:

> **When students have a better understanding of how to glean evidence from sources their ability to see the bigger picture improves. Understanding the concept[s] of time, change and continuity also helps in this regard. It lessens the likelihood of a fragmented and disjointed memory of history and allows the students to engage more meaningfully with the bigger picture.**

The extent to which these three features were mentioned in the follow-up interviews with our eight volunteers will be examined in ***4.2***.

Of the thirteen respondents who did not express a clear understanding of the term 'big picture,' there were five whose responses suggested a level of understanding inexpertly expressed or a shortfall in understanding that inhibited clarity of expression. For example, Tadhg's conception is, "not viewing the course as different chapters of different histories but rather how they all linked together." An anonymous respondent seems to edge a little closer in suggesting that a 'big picture' means, "To understand the sequence of large scale events and their influences on one another, rather than studying events and ages in absolute isolation." Ronan's response may be closer still when he says, "I understand the 'big picture' to be an understanding of time, that being the gaps or

intersections between studied areas and the areas outside study." Rory also exhibits a measure of understanding which could be more clearly expressed when he writes,

> **My understanding of the 'big picture' of the past is that a majority of historical events are linked, both to events in the contemporary and in present day. This means the past affects and is consequential to the future.**

More vague and generalised is Justin's response when he suggests that 'big picture' understanding means: "To have a wider view of events and to see their relevance in modern day life and how to learn from them."

Of the eight remaining respondents, most had some conception of the role of a 'big picture' in helping students to understand the wider context of events, but with a narrower focus, sometimes linked to issues of historical causation. In some cases, the view articulated may not have adequately expressed the full range of the student's understanding. The focus on context – without the long-term perspective associated with 'big pictures' – was most evident in the following:

> **Naoise:** My understanding of the 'big picture' is the significant context in which it all comes about.

> **Anon:** To me the 'big picture' is the overview or the real issue being studied, more like the overarching issue rather than a specific focus of examination.

> **Jacinta:** My understanding of a 'big picture' of the past is the inclusion of what else is happening at the time that is being studied.

> **Sadie:** My understanding of the bigger picture of the past is looking at all of the events going on in history around the specific period being examined.

Responses that focused more on issues relating to historical causation were as follows:

> **Ben:** No historical event happens in a vacuum … a man is assassinated in Sarajevo and the entire world is at war. That is my understanding of the 'big picture'.

> **Ultan:** My understanding of the above expression is to take into consideration and be mindful of other events that have led to this event.

> **Fergal:** The 'big picture' could be understanding or knowing about other factors in the lead up or surrounding a particular historical event.

4.1.2 How would you sum up your own 'big picture' of the past?

The second question in our questionnaire invited respondents to tell us about the 'big picture' with which they operated. In the case of most respondents, no outline of a 'big picture' was provided. Some respondents bemoaned the lack of focus on a 'big picture' of the past in their own history education; others admitted that their 'big picture' was, in some ways, fragmented, usually linking

this to the selective and topic-focused nature of history courses followed. A good illustration of this is the following observation from Sadhbh:

> **My own 'big picture' is just like the contents page in a history book; in different sections which appear not to link together.**

One (anonymous) respondent did attempt to sketch a 'big picture' from the dawn of recorded history, but only got as far as the days of the Roman Empire. Whilst not outlining the main features of her own 'big picture', Josephine refers to an influential teacher who sowed the seeds of 'big picture' awareness in the following terms:

> **A teacher I had in third year for the junior cert. had asked us if we understood the timeline of history and none of us knew. He proceeded to draw a timeline on the board and with his help we filled it using the topics we had studied for the junior cert. All of a sudden I finally understood where everything had occurred. Even during 6th year I would draw timelines to help myself understand when events took place.**

While the reference to 'final' understanding may be overstated, the significant impact of the teacher's approach is clear.

Three respondents (Maud, Margaret and Richard) indicate that their motivation and/or opportunity to create a personal 'big picture' arose at third level and not at secondary level. Margaret explains that her motivation was linked to a need to better understand the wider context of topics being studied:

> **When I began studying English and History in college I found I had to go back and view my narrow/focused/specific facts in context in order to then analyse events/eras on a broader scale. One way in which I did this was by making a timeline in my study area which noted eras studied …**

Maud simply states that, "My big picture was established in college rather than school," while Richard explains that,

> **Over the course of my university degree, I have gained an understanding of the past in which events are deeply connected and are studied not in isolation but together.**

Two other respondents (Rory and Rose) indicate that their 'big picture' awareness came after secondary education. Rory writes that, "My only exposure to a 'big picture' in History came though the latter part of my undergrad, and through UCD's PME course", while Rose observes that, "The 'big picture' was potentially pieced together later in life when I took an interest in it …". In the latter case, Rose gives no indication of the 'big picture' that was "potentially pieced together."

Other respondents identify factors that they believe contributed to their 'big picture' awareness. Whilst of some significance, such factors do not necessarily imply the long span of processes and events that one associates with 'big pictures of the past'. For example, Ben mentions three factors viz. stories told by parents and grandparents, historical topics studied in school and historic sites such as Ground Zero and Auschwitz. While the factors named may have contributed to an ability

to see the 'bigger picture' that lies behind or beneath the event or process being studied, it is by no means clear that the apprehension of a 'big picture' as encompassing the broad sweep of the past is evident. Ultan credits his father with helping him to see the 'bigger picture' by emphasising the importance of "trying to understand both sides" and, again, it is unclear if the long span of history is apprehended. Nevertheless, it cannot be gainsaid that the insights shared by Ben and Ultan may help us to understand the range of mental processes by which the emerging sense of a 'big picture' may be encouraged.

4.1.3 What do you think you will need to do to help your students develop a workable 'big picture' of the past?

We next turn our attention to the third question, which invited respondents to identify what they thought they would need to do to help their students achieve learning outcomes relating to the theme of a 'big picture'. Perhaps the most obvious and 'common sense' approach here is classroom use of timelines, and this was mentioned by seven of the nineteen respondents. A good indication of the potential learning impact of timelines is evident in the following observation from Maud:

> **... use of time lines 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 use of visual sources in conjunction with timelines – to help students develop a 'sense of period' and/or to reinforce their disciplinary understanding of 'how we know what we know' – was identified as important by four of the seven who mentioned timelines. (It is appropriate to mention that the use of visual prompts to help students acquire a sense of period had been discussed in methodology lectures attended by the student teachers.)

Some awareness of the importance of helping students to make connections between events and developments in different times and places is evident in a number of responses to Question 3; in six cases, it is clearly stated. The responses of Sadhbh and Maud have already been noted. In line with his response to Question 1, Richard writes:

> **I think that I should present my students not with a disjointed series of events but instead a series of events, demonstrating the connections between them e.g. American Revolution, French Revolution, 1798 revolution.**

Margaret writes about the importance of making links between topics studied and concepts encountered, but adds some interesting observations on the kinds of connections associated with the timeless debate on the nature of change and continuity in history:

> **I also feel that making notes/drawing attention to elements of life that remained the same from one period to the next is equally as important as drawing attention to the changes that took place, as they are the consistencies that link one time to the next, creating a sense of gradual change rather than instant shifts that took place as soon as one century ended & the next began.**

What is interesting here is the emphasis on the gradual nature of (much) change alongside the recognition of 'consistencies that link one time to the next.' This type of understanding of fundamental disciplinary concepts seems to us to be important in the development of more robust 'big pictures of the past'.

4.2 The 'entry' interviews: responses and analysis

As discussed in ***3.5.1***, the interview schedule for interviews with the student teachers mirrored that used in the questionnaire. The three broad areas of focus were:

1. Their understanding of the term 'big picture of the past'
2. What their own 'big picture' looks like
3. The challenge of helping their students to develop stronger 'big pictures' of the past.

Eight of the student teachers who completed the questionnaire took part in the interviews, which were held in December 2019, and were conducted by two of the researchers. The eight were Margaret, Josephine, Sadhbh, Tom, Rory, Jacinta, Rose and Ultan. When Tom withdrew from the project in September 2020, he was replaced by Richard, who was then interviewed by two of the researchers in October 2020: data from the interview with Richard is included in this analysis. Within each area of focus, the interviewers made reference to details of specific questionnaire responses, to seek clarification and/or to allow respondents to elaborate if they wished. The 'wrap up' questions in each area of focus were identical for each interviewee.

4.2.1 Their understanding of the term 'big picture of the past'

In addressing the first broad area of focus – their understanding of the term 'big picture of the past' – we wished to identify any extension in understanding, resulting from further reflection and/or the opportunity to articulate in a person-to-person conversation. In her questionnaire response, Margaret had identified the 'broad sweep' element implicit in the term. Here, she emphasises the need to manage carefully the space dimension:

> **I think if you start too big, it just gets mixed up in their heads, they cannot define what's global, what's regional.**

Instead, she argues for a narrow focus initially, 'and then build it up.' Again, as in her response to Question 3 on the questionnaire, she links 'big picture' understanding with the concept of change when she argues,

> **I think in order for the kids to actually analyse change … they have to know where people came from, where they were and where they were going ….**

Richard has some interesting points to make on the perceived 'linearity' of the past, the mistaken belief, "That it's all progress." As an example, he cites the Roman Empire: "Rome was a city of one million people and the next city that reached a million people was London in the 19th century." As

in his questionnaire responses, he emphasises the inter-connectedness of events in the past and their inter-connectedness with elements of the contemporary world. Describing his own growing understanding of the 'big picture' he says,

> **... it helped you realise that there were aspects of the past that are embedded today and there are aspects of today that are embedded in the past.**

For Richard, as for other interviewees (most explicitly in the case of Margaret), the broad-based type of framework that facilitates making connections only began to take shape at undergraduate level. He cites the eighteenth century revolutionary period and the questions that began to arise for him as he struggled for fuller understanding:

> **Why was this happening in America? Why was this happening in Ireland? You could see that there were connections that you never could see before.**

He also identifies the concept of historical empathy as key:

> **... understanding that while these events don't make sense to us today ... it is being able to make sense of the actions that were taken then because many of the conditions that existed back then can't be understood today.**

As in the case of Margaret, the linking of 'big picture' understanding and disciplinary understanding is significant.

For a number of the interviewees, what emerged as the key element was the need to have a wider context in order to make sense of any historical event. Such contextual understanding was often linked to aspects of historical causation; what was not always clear was if it encompassed a genuine, 'broad sweep' perspective. Ultan makes the point that for

> **almost every event in history, something would have led to that and you can't just look at it as an isolated incident.**

His emphasis on the need to "draw links" brings clearer 'big picture' understanding, perhaps, when he suggests that, in doing so, "you can kind of make a student realise that it is similar and it is all kind of linked." What seems to be in play here is the idea that an activity such as farming, for example, has certain common characteristics that endure over time whilst other characteristics change as new technologies are developed and new forms of land management adopted. Seeing the similarities or continuities can help students to focus more clearly on the changes and the reasons for those changes.

Other phrases used by interviewees to explain their 'big picture' understanding include: "It's to try and interlink between sections" (Ronan); "In a broad sense ... how society is the way it is today ... how we got here ... from politics to social aspects or whatever" (Tom); "You are trying to get a whole picture of what is going on, rather than just snippets of what is happening in the past" (Sadhbh). While some elements of 'big picture' thinking are apprehended, a marked hesitancy to articulate individual understanding in any detail is evident, most markedly in Tom's summation:

> **So just to be aware of all different aspects of history rather than just dates and significant events, I suppose.**

The identification of dates and significant events as underlying elements of 'big picture' understanding is also strongly evident in Josephine's focus on timelines, a focus so concentrated that 'timeline' and 'big picture' almost become synonymous.

4.2.2 What their own 'big picture' looks like

In inviting our interviewees to articulate their own 'big picture', their own conception of the overall shape of the past, what was evident once again, as in the questionnaire responses, was a marked reluctance to offer any type of cohesive framework with discernible stages of development or 'turning points' or other distinctive markers. Indeed, some were quite forthright and, at times, almost apologetic about perceived gaps in their own historical knowledge. Tom is not unique in admitting that,

> **I have more of an understanding of modern history than going way back. That is just my interest, to be honest.**

The conception of 'modern' that applies here appears in many cases to be rooted in the twentieth century. Indeed, Tom says, quite explicitly, "From 1900 to now, I suppose, would be my best understanding of history." This is echoed in Ultan's admission that,

> **I suppose it would be more modern history that would be my main interest … I wouldn't be as aware of the 'big picture' in terms of ancient history, to be honest.**

Sadhbh's perception of her 'big picture' is that "… kind of right to the beginning is a little hazier than, I suppose, later history." Jacinta asserts that her 'big picture' "definitely has gaps in it" and that, "The most recent stuff would be more familiar." In a more downbeat admission, Ronan's assessment of his 'big picture' is, "I would honestly say it would be fairly limited."

Three of the remaining four interviewees appear to have developed their current 'big picture' primarily as students of history at undergraduate level. The exception is Josephine who recalls an incident from sixth year in secondary school, when her history teacher brought the class to the school hall for a 'moments in time' exercise in which students had to make the case for the importance of particular historical events and arrange themselves in chronological order so that a visual timeline was constructed using images provided by the teacher and/or self-generated images, with accompanying date markers. Josephine adds that,

> **… we could walk up and down and he just went around chatting to us about it, and it was really very helpful in understanding the past.**

The impact of this episode on Josephine's understanding and practice is evident in her on-going commitment to the use of timelines in the classroom and her conviction that timelines have a key role to play in developing school students' 'big picture' understanding.

Given the focus in others' responses on timelines (in particular, in discussing the pedagogical challenges associated with 'big picture' learning outcomes), it is interesting to hear Rose bring in the spatial dimension of 'big picture' understanding when she likens her 'big picture' to a globe, with "... lines matching up." Pressed further, Rose elaborates as follows:

> **All the countries in the world and lines connecting each one. So obviously the British Empire going and so on like that. That's the way I would have it in my mind.**

Rose's use of a globe in working with her students on 'big picture' learning outcomes is discussed further in ***4.2.3***. In her description of how her own 'big picture' developed, she emphasises the cumulative effect of studying history over many years and that,

> **... it wasn't until I had learned more about different events that you could see the connection was coming together and what actually had an influence and what didn't ....**

Another significant impact of her undergraduate study of history was that "In school it was very Irish based but now after doing three years in college it's definitely on a wider scale."

Both Margaret and Richard identify influential factors in generating a good level of 'big picture' understanding, whilst acknowledging the key impact of experiences at university. For Margaret, family influences were strong:

> **In terms of my own 'big picture', I was always brought to museums ... my family always did all the tours, we'd go to castles ... My uncle's in the OPW so we always used to do all that stuff and, definitely, seeing it made it a lot more relatable.**

At university, the 'light-bulb moment' happened when she began to see a need – as a student of English Literature as well as History – to understand the historical context in which various literary texts were situated: "So I really started to interlink the two and that's when things started to make sense."

For Richard, some challenging classroom behaviour as a first year student led to his being moved to the front of the classroom and a new lens on learning:

> **I had to pay attention. The first thing I remember studying was the age of exploration and it was at that moment where I realised that 500 years ago people didn't know America existed, that I began to really kind of question everything and then I became interested.**

Although this clearly 'kick-started' Richard's journey as a student of history, his experience of history at both Junior and Leaving Certificate level is that, "It was more a checklist than an overall understanding and development of human history." Of his current 'big picture' of the past, he is of the view that,

> **I think I would be average among my peers having gone through university. It's one of the things I think you develop.**

Assessing his interview responses overall, his developing understanding is often characterised as 'gaps' being 'filled in,' enabling new connections to be made and new insights to be gained.

4.2.3 Challenges helping students develop stronger 'big pictures' of the past

Looming largest here in responses to questions on approaches and resources was the issue of timelines, though the perceptions of these and their role in classroom work on the 'big picture' showed a range of understanding and application. Jacinta mentions the usefulness of timelines and related tasks provided in her classroom textbook. Margaret, on the other hand mentions a classroom timeline that "goes the whole way around the room" and is an on-going project; the timeline expands as new topics are tackled and is a regular point of reference in History classes. Rory argues that timelines work best when they are interactive, so that students are "building a timeline as they are learning." In Margaret's case, the interactivity involves samples of student work being placed beneath the era or event to which they relate on the timeline, " so they can visually see their work connected with where it is on the timeline." Another strategy deployed by Margaret (who is also a teacher of English) is to place titles or visual images of English texts with which students are familiar at appropriate points on the timeline.

Another approach to the use of timelines is described by Richard. This involved providing a partial framework where students were invited to enter details of significant personal and family dates such as the dates of birth of themselves and their parents and were then asked to devise a timeline reaching back from those events to include whatever historical eras and events came to mind. The results were rather sketchy, with the Second World War and the Age of Dinosaurs receiving most mentions. Richard then showed the students a timeline indicating duration, so that students could see the vast expanse of time separating the dinosaur age from the age of world war and "how short our part of this timeline is." In the ensuing discussion, students were appalled to discover the relatively recent origins of human-generated climate change given what they know about its impact on the biosphere.

As mentioned in the previous section, Rose's conception of a 'big picture' is focused on the image of a globe and, in her teaching, she uses the image of a globe in conjunction with any work on timelines – as a sort of symbol of the 'big picture' – so that (although Rose does not state this explicitly) the time and space dimensions of historical events are held before the students. She also links the use of timelines and development of 'big picture' understanding with the issue of historical causation when she emphasises,

> **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?**

The reference to 'event' may be noted here, given the importance, in exploring historical causation of distinguishing between events and processes. The issue of historical causation also arises in Josephine's description of her approach to the use of timelines in the classroom. In line with the findings of other researchers, the use of bands of colour and characteristic images to distinguish between different eras is highlighted by Josephine in her discussion. Rather than research, she

identifies “a website called ‘Twinkle’” as her source for colour-differentiated ‘banding’ of different historical eras, a resource that her students have found helpful as prompts. More proactively, she has built up a portfolio of images relating to each identifiable era studied; these are used as a regular focus for questioning where students are asked, “How did we get this development from here to here?”

The perceived limitations of timelines are addressed in rather different ways by Tom and Margaret. For Tom,

> **I think it’s a very … I don’t want to use the word ‘basic,’ but basic guide to the chronological story of history, really, but there is so much more to it than that.**

Questioned further about other approaches that might be more effective, Tom responds,

> **Well, I am far from an expert now, but just like I was saying with the connections. Like the connections we were talking about being more important than the actual timelines themselves.**

The manner in which timelines may provide a helpful resource for enabling students to make connections more readily would appear to be somewhat elided here. Elsewhere in the interview, Tom admits, “I haven’t actually taught that way yet,” so there may be an element of self-justification in the reluctance to acknowledge the positive role that timelines can play. This impression is, perhaps, supported by Tom’s revelation that, “… when I was in school I would use them all the time.”

While Margaret’s advocacy of the use of timelines in the classroom is unequivocal, she is also conscious of students with additional needs for whom the use of visual prompts, including image-rich timelines, may have limited impact. When asked about resources that might be helpful in ‘big picture’ teaching and learning, she makes the case, therefore, for the use of object-based learning,

> **… because that’s what they do when they go home and everything is tactile, everything is out on the road, they’re doing stuff … so I think that should be reflected, that’s how we’re going to get them, you know.**

Since one of the researchers was involved in the development of a National Museum of Ireland Bronze Age handling box resource, Margaret was asked if this was the kind of resource that she was suggesting might be helpful and she confirmed that this was the case.

One of the merits of objects-based teaching is the manner in which it may be used to inspire and/or provoke questions on the part of students. Two respondents – Richard and Margaret - discuss the role that student questions and/or the dialogue to which they give rise have a key role to play in aiding the development of students’ ‘big pictures’. Richard says, “A good thing I always do as an introduction to my students is I get them to ask questions.” As an example, he mentions how he would question students on the concept of ‘Irishness’:

> **If it were an Irish student, I would ask them would they consider themselves Irish. Why are we talking in English? See what they knew. Get them questioning things.**

The rationale underlying this approach is to encourage students to make connections between historical phenomena that may be distant in time but are better understood if the connections that link them can be seen and understood. (An example would be the Williamite Wars of the seventeenth century and identity-focused politics in contemporary Northern Ireland.)

Margaret explains how she discussed with her class whether they preferred reading from the book or discussing the subject matter, "And they're like, 'oh miss I only understand it when we talk about it'." Often, it appears, the talk focuses on images or video clips which present historical sources. As an example, she mentions the Tara Brooch and continues,

> **... ok, we are the historians, we're after finding this in the field, how do we find out who owned it ... is it your nanny's brooch ... is it your great-grandmother's brooch, how do we know? And then we start chatting. And definitely ... the chatting and pulling the answers out of them is the way to go I think.**

Margaret also makes reference to 'walking debates' where students decide whether they support or oppose the position adopted by an historical character (the example she gives is Brian Boru) and make a case to justify their position based on evidence explored in the classroom. Although unstated here, besides historical evidence, another disciplinary concept being developed in this scenario is historical empathy, another element of the matrix we see as fundamental to good history teaching and promotion of 'big picture' understanding.

Although all nine interviewees professed a commitment to the role of 'big picture' teaching and learning in the classroom, the degree of understanding and conviction varied greatly, as may be evident from some of the testimony already cited. In fairness, some were clearly convinced of the merits of the case but felt constrained by gaps in their own understanding and knowledge and/or their lack of exposure to this area of history teaching and learning in their own educational experience. As Sadhbh notes:

> **Obviously it's so interesting to me because in a way I feel that I am teaching history and I am supposed to know all of this stuff but at the end of the day I don't really know how to go about teaching the Bigger Picture of the past because from my own experience I wasn't taught in that way and from people who are older than me who are teaching history, they weren't taught in that way either.**

For Jacinta, the concept of a 'big picture' was a new and exciting one – prompting her decision to become involved in the project – but it was not one with which she had a degree of familiarity: "I don't think I'd have thought about it beforehand; had this 'big picture' not been talked about." She goes on to admit that "I never actually thought about it as a concept in itself." This lack of familiarity with the concept is also evident in Rory's response when asked about learning outcomes connected to the 'big picture': "... it's something that I kind of struggle with, I will be honest."

It may appear from the foregoing that the three respondents cited in the previous paragraph had little insight into the challenges involved in 'big picture' teaching and learning. However, all three make insightful comments in the course of their interviews. In describing the chronological

approach he follows in the classroom, and how he tries to link new episodes of history to ones previously studied, Rory describes it thus: "So it's kind of making them aware that, I suppose … the best way I could word it is the topics kind of bleed over into each other." So, rather than seeing history as merely a sequential series of events, he wants his students to see that, "There is some sort of an interlink between them …" When asked about the desirability of making reference to the 'big picture' in every lesson, Jacinta suggests,

> **I think maybe what we are talking about is a point here, a point there. So it's not taking up the whole class … but just maybe throwing in, 'This also happened at the time,' so they are thinking, 'Okay, that makes sense now.'**

Sadhbh discusses a large-format timeline prepared by a fellow student teacher in her school in which she saw huge potential and explains,

> **… it was very interesting to see if that was on the wall of somebody's classroom, and you were starting a new topic to say, 'Okay, well, where is that on the timeline here? What happened before that and what is going to follow? So, I definitely think that would be something that I would use for sure when I get the opportunity to have my own classroom …**

The regularity with which teachers should make reference to the 'big picture' in the classroom is an issue addressed by Margaret who sees a role for it in every lesson, contending that, "if you don't bring in the 'big picture', kids aren't going to understand". Recognising the importance of attention to students' prior learning, she adds, "… so you have to kind of go back on what you've already done, or prior knowledge that they already have, in order to edge a bit forward." When asked directly if she is arguing that the 'big picture' should be an element in every lesson, Margaret is forthright in her response:

> **… definitely, even just a little bit, if it comes in even at the start of class when we're kind of doing our starter exercise … or definitely if we're introducing a new piece …**

While Margaret's approach seems the most methodical and regular, there are indications in the case of some of the other respondents that a degree of regularity is important. For example, Rose reports that

> **It is something that I would touch on at the beginning when we start a chapter and at the end, to kind of say, 'Okay, this is everything we have learned. Now, where does it sit?'**

And Josephine explains that,

> **I can't put a timeline up every day, but I do try to put it up on the screen as they are walking into the classroom to remind them of what we are doing and how further along we are going.**

4.3 The 'exit' interviews: responses and analysis

As their Professional Master of Education (PME) course neared its conclusion, we wished to gauge the impact on our seven volunteers of participation in the research project and to discuss their classroom experience of using the experimental framework, 'Our History Scaffold'. Due to the on-going pandemic context, all interviews took place via Zoom. The interview schedule focused on a number of key issues viz.

- how their involvement in the project impacted on their teaching of history over the two years of the PME programme (including, what they think they are doing differently in the history classroom as a result of their involvement in the project), and how it is likely to impact on their teaching going forward.
- their current understanding of what constitutes 'big picture' understanding, and whether their own 'big picture' of the past had developed over the two-year period.
- whether and to what extent their use of the framework has helped them to help their students achieve the junior cycle learning outcomes that relate to 'big picture' understanding (with a particular focus on learning outcomes 1.10 and 1.11).
- the extent to which they consider students' overall understanding of the nature of history as important in developing their 'big picture' understanding.'

The four broad areas identified above provide a helpful basis for the analysis of the responses generated in the course of the interviews. However, the issue that generated the most detailed discussion was their classroom use of the framework and the extent to which that helped students achieve specified learning outcomes; that issue, therefore, will receive more detailed attention in the analysis and discussion.

The seven PME student teachers interviewed were Jacinta, Josephine, Margaret, Richard, Rose, Sadhbh and Ultan.

4.3.1 How their involvement in the research project impacted on their teaching of history over the two years of the PME programme

One clear pattern evident in the responses is greater use of timelines, mentioned explicitly by four of the interviewees: Josephine, Richard, Margaret and Sadhbh. Josephine sets out her position thus:

> **... timelines are a must in my opinion, whereas last year I have to admit that I didn't really use timelines at the beginning of new topics from September ... to the beginning of November and I found that to be a big mistake and it's good to reflect upon that. But I don't start a topic now without going back to that timeline and then we are adding in our events as we continue on the timeline and the girls have a clearer image.**

Richard similarly identifies the use of timelines as one element of his teaching that has been impacted by involvement in the project, noting, "I always kind of start with timelines and the

framework as well …;" elsewhere, Richard notes, "… oftentimes when you give kids a framework, they can figure out things themselves." For Margaret, her involvement in the project

> **kind of opened my eyes in terms of not just teaching history as little segments in time but teaching it as the 'bigger picture' and the importance of the timeline.**

Sadhbh notes that she is "definitely using timelines more" and, on the conceptual side, notes that, for her students, "I suppose time and chronology as well, that has helped them significantly."

Linked with the use of timelines, inevitably, is the use of the framework, to which all seven made reference. While their use of the framework was scrutinised more closely in later questions, the initial questioning yielded some interesting observations on the classroom impact of use of the framework. Josephine, for example, suggests that "… it does help you place things into a filing box." And adds, "… it does help you with structure and organisation, which I think the students – especially in first year now – need more than ever." Ultan talks about "getting the students to think about what time period this actually is and where it fits into the framework": the outcome, he suggests, is that, rather than seeing the phenomena they are studying as isolated events, "… there is that fluidity between the chapters." Sadhbh makes a similar point, drawing on a similar metaphor when she talks approvingly of how the framework groups eras together and concludes "… it's hard to explain, it just did bring a flow." For Jacinta, whose characterisation of her own experience of school history is "that really broken history," the framework is seen as a way of 'filling gaps' and achieving a more rounded understanding.

Since the framework is intended to encourage teachers and students to make connections between disparate historical events, it is unsurprising that a number of respondents talked about their greater propensity to make such connections. Three placed particular emphasis on linking past events to current circumstances. Josephine talks about a lesson on Christopher Columbus and making reference to a video clip of a statue to Columbus being removed as part of a reaction against colonialism; the difference in her practice this year is that she links this to a greater emphasis on interpretations of the past, whereby historical figures may be viewed differently at different times. In Richard's case, the linkage appears to be part of his overall pedagogical approach; as he says, "I would always try to relate what I am learning with my students to the present day." As an example, he mentions farming:

> **So … we are looking at the Neolithic period and we are looking at the importance of farming and why is it important and we relate it to the fact that you are sitting in Dublin and without farming you would probably starve ….**

Part of Margaret's tack in responding to students' questions about why we learn history and why it is important is described as follows:

> **Well, you are sitting there with your iPads in front of you so something big changed from fire. So, having that constant reminder of, 'this is why we are learning history,' things connect all the time. It's not just bam, bam, bam.**

4.3.2 Current 'big picture' understanding

A number of questions posed to the interviewees attempted to identify their current understanding of what the term 'big picture' encompasses, as well as any development that had taken place in their own 'big picture' over the two years of their involvement in the project; also, whether the use of the framework was helpful in this regard. With one exception, there was little hesitation in offering a brief gloss on what 'big picture' denotes; the following gives a flavour of the main points made by the respondents:

> **Josephine:** Well, you are picking out these moments in time that are historically significant … Historically significant moments for the world that had an effect on the world.

> **Margaret:** I suppose we are putting the puzzle together, rather than having all the bits and pieces and just jamming it into however you think it is.

> **Rose:** Connecting the eras and I suppose just getting a sense of the past and a sense of all the time slots that you are studying.

> **Ultan:** So I think that for me it would be that you look at history as a whole rather than individual, isolated incidents. That there is that continuity of change and fluidity between the different eras and events; particularly if you take more isolated and specific events: no event in history is isolated.

> **Sadhbh:** I suppose everything that has happened since the beginning of time and having an awareness and being able to group that time into eras of similarities.

> **Jacinta:** … trying to put events or eras into an order for them to really comprehend it.

In Richard's case, because of the extent to which he responded to other questions, time did not permit the question of what constitutes a 'big picture' to be put directly to him. However, his understanding of the term will be explored in the context of his responses to some of the other questions posed.

What the observations above seem to share is the notion of a pattern or structure that makes the experiences of people in the past more amenable to our students' understanding. Thus, Joseph talks of a focus on "Historically significant moments"; Rose, of "Connecting the eras" and "getting a sense of the past"; Ultan talks of "that continuity of change and fluidity between the different eras and events"; Jacinta, of "trying to put events or eras into an order for them to really comprehend it"; and, in a particularly felicitous phrase, Margaret suggests, "I suppose we are putting the puzzle together rather than having all the bits and pieces …". What comes through in the responses from all seven is that their use of the framework has helped them to see clearer patterns and/or plan more successfully.

In direct response to a question on whether the framework had helped develop their own 'big picture,' the responses would seem to indicate a positive impact. Josephine describes using the

framework ('Our History Scaffold') in planning lessons: "I find it very helpful for myself as a history teacher to put things in a certain place." Richard asserts that,

> **... the framework has definitely helped me to understand what is possible to cover with my students and what isn't, and what to focus on and what not to focus on.**

In a quest that one would hope enables her to see clearer or more meaningful patterns, Margaret says, "I am looking for the connections within the curriculum," and adds,

> **It's a lot better for me as a teacher teaching because I am actually making those connections for myself and for the kids.**

Rose uses a number of interesting metaphors in responding to the question when she says:

> **So, I think this has kind of given me a roadmap in my head ... almost like a mental checklist. It's like a jigsaw now a bit more in my head.**

Ultan admits previous confusion on his part in locating concepts such as 'Ancient Rome' in time and says that,

> **... it is very handy to just be able to give a quick glance at that and say, 'this goes there and that goes there.'**

In Sadhbh's case, what is identified is a significant shift in her own conception of the past":

> **I suppose the big thing for me was those gaps that you would think were there, that there are no gaps. That was the big thing for me, the realisation that everything in the past is history.**

For Jacinta, the images accompanying the framework were an important element; as she remarks, "... maybe that is just me, down to my learning and how I like to learn." In any case, the impact was positive: "

> **... having that image referring back to a timeline kind of made it more significant and you could visualise it in your head.**

Aside from the positive impact of use of the framework on their conception of the past, evidence for any significant development in their personal 'big picture' is thin. Richard's summation may well be characteristic of the group:

> **... my 'big picture' of history hasn't really improved all that much. The framework has helped me teach it though.**

Margaret's observation echoes the observations of others when she says, "My awareness of the 'bigger picture' has grown." For Rose, the change is one of greater clarity: "

> **... it's the common themes and features, ways of life, that are within each era that are kind of clearer to me now, versus when I was ... throwing a dart in the dark a little bit at the beginning.**

At a practical and experiential level, Jacinta's experience is likely to resonate with student teachers more generally:

> **... having to teach something you need to know it yourself. So, having to go back on things that I have learned definitely has helped my 'bigger picture.'**

The questions posed by the interviewers on the curricular usefulness of the framework concerned the extent to which its use in the classroom helped the teachers to help their students achieve the junior cycle learning outcomes that relate to 'big picture' understanding, with a particular focus on learning outcomes 1.10 and 1.11. These outcomes state that students should be able to

> **1.10** develop chronological awareness by creating and maintaining timelines to locate personalities, issues and events in their appropriate historical eras.
>
> **1.11** make connections and comparisons between people and events in different places and eras.[105]

Interviewees were also asked if the use of the framework created any challenges for them; how useful the associated visual images were; the best strategy for using the framework over the course of the school year; whether there are any changes they would recommend in relation to the framework; and what evidence they had that their students' learning had benefitted from the use of the framework.

4.3.3 Role of the framework in helping students achieve junior cycle learning outcomes

Given the reference in questioning by the interviewers to specific learning outcomes, it is unsurprising that much reference is made by respondents to timelines and making connections in the context of their classroom use of the framework. Sometimes, these elements are mentioned together, as when Richard talks about "... getting students to understand that time lines are very important in connecting events ...." In discussing her use of timelines, Sadhbh mentions how she encourages comparisons to the present day and, citing Ancient Rome as an example, describes the students' dawning realisation that, "oh well, these guys went to school, they learnt maths ...." Sadhbh adds:

> **But they realised that there are some connections and there are some differences but the most important thing that one of the students said what they did, I suppose, allow us to develop to where we are today and I was, like, 'Okay, that's brilliant.'**

[105] Department of Education and Skills (2017), *Junior Cycle History*. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills, p.16.

Margaret describes the hours she put into making a timeline that ran around the walls of the classroom and adds,

> **... but it was worth its weight in gold because they could look it up and see what was happening and even what was going to happen next ... So, I definitely think that awareness that it brings to locating eras is really beneficial in the classroom and the, of course, making connections, that kind of happens as well as you progress.**

4.3.4 Whether the use of the framework created any challenges for them

On the issue of whether use of the framework posed any challenges for them, somewhat surprisingly, the pandemic context was mentioned by just one respondent, Sadhbh, who made reference to the challenges in gauging student learning in an online environment. (This relates to a period during which school buildings were closed and lessons took place via Zoom.) Richard identifies the issue of students' lack of substantive knowledge when he observes, "So sometimes it's hard to teach the students the modern examples without the substantive history to back it up ...." On the issue of nomenclature, Margaret mentions the difficulty some students had with terms such as 'framework' and 'scaffold,' adding, "I think the concept of it is difficult for them to understand." She goes on to make the point that the term 'Bigger Picture' "... is what caught their eye," in the sense that it was more meaningful and engaging for them. Rose makes the very practical point that she "did little changes just to suit my group," a timely reminder that any resource needs to be matched - and, if needs be, adapted – to the needs of the class group with which it is being used.

The pandemic context that Sadhbh mentions was also mentioned by two other respondents, Richard and Jacinta, in their responses to other questions. The responses are referred to here, as they are relevant to the discussion on challenges faced by respondents in using the framework in the classroom. Jacinta admits that she did not use the framework during the period of 'lockdown,' when lessons were taking place via Zoom as, "I think everything was very stressful as it was, and I had some kids showing up and some not." She adds that, had lessons proceeded, she would have used the framework more frequently. Richard shows a somewhat different perspective on lockdown:

> **You see lockdown was interesting. Lockdown offered some opportunities as well as challenges.**

While acknowledging that normal 'productivity' was greatly reduced, the upside was, he says, "... I could do a lot of research tasks with the kids at home." Whilst not stated explicitly, what may be in play here is the link between disciplinary understanding (i.e., understanding of the nature of the discipline of history) and 'big picture' understanding, whereby an understanding of the nature of history tends to support the development of the mental constructs that we describe as 'big pictures'; this is a link that Richard elsewhere acknowledges. In suggesting this speculative interpretation, we are not proposing that students' disciplinary understanding will be in any sense 'complete;' but, if disciplinary understanding is completely absent, the extent to which meaningful study of history is involved needs to be questioned.

4.4 Observations by students on related 'big picture' themes

Following on from the four broad questions outlined in ***4.3***, students made several associated observations which are discussed in this section.

4.4.1 How useful the visual images were in developing 'big picture' thinking

The visual images that were used in the framework to identify the different eras (two images per era) were welcomed by all respondents. Josephine found them "very helpful" and observes that, when the images were shown, "… some of the students … their shoulders relaxed," adding that, "… they just kind of sat back and I just felt a bit of tension being released." (Whether the tension may have been created by teacher use of terms such as 'framework' and 'scaffold' – as mentioned by Margaret – is unclear.) Margaret makes the point that the images seemed to play a role in helping "to unlock that bit of prior knowledge" and were "definitely beneficial." Rose notes of the images that, "A few registered obviously with them;" she notes their particular fondness for images of technology. Sadhbh, conscious of the need to return to the images – and the framework which they inhabit – at regular intervals, makes the comment, "Definitely a work in progress, but I think I was happy enough with how they responded …."

4.4.2 The best strategy for using the framework over the course of the school year

When asked about the best strategy for using the framework over the course of the school year, there was some divergence of opinion. A number of respondents indicated that they would use the framework from the beginning of the year (which is in line with what the researchers had recommended, echoing advice given in the Junior Cycle History specification). Josephine says unequivocally,

> **I would jump in straight away because … you have a full year to work on it … and, if they are introduced to something at the very beginning, then you can run with it and I think it will work better …**

Ultan's view is that "To be honest with you, I think the earlier you can introduce it the better …." Margaret, however, has a contrary view:

> **I definitely wouldn't introduce it when we are talking about historians and digging up fields and stuff because that wouldn't be in … context ….**

What Margaret is referring to here reflects the practice of many teachers who start their teaching by looking at the work of the historian and the archaeologist; her argument is that the framework is best introduced when the teacher begins the study of substantive history with the class e.g., an

ancient civilisation such as the Romans. When Margaret says, "I found it beneficial to … teach it rapidly and then return back to it," she is expressing a view that is more widely shared. Sadhbh's approach is a good example of how this 're-visiting' can work in practice:

> **I suppose I didn't make a really formal thing, 'Oh, today, we are going to be looking at the framework, but it was something that if we moved on to a new topic, I would get the framework back up and the images, and say, 'Okay, where do you think this would fit? … Are there any similarities to topics that we covered before?**

4.4.3 Ways in which the framework might be improved

With regard to ways in which the framework might be improved, two suggestions made were, the use of colour bands to distinguish the different eras (proposed by Ultan and Margaret), and the provision of a poster which could be displayed on the classroom wall and used as a teaching aid (proposed by Ultan). Ultan made the point that the technology to display the framework - for example, in a PowerPoint presentation – may not always be available or may be required for other purposes and the convenience of having the framework displayed on a wall-mounted poster would be a great advantage and support for teachers and their students. He was also of the view that using different colour bands to identify the different eras would make a "huge difference." Ultan's suggestion was mentioned to other respondents and was strongly supported. In Margaret's case, the provision of such a resource seemed a natural follow-on from her own approach to construction of a timeline where, as she notes,

> **I used to put all the Irish stuff in green and then I would try to put one era in blue and one in yellow and one in orange, just to give them some context of when one ends and one begins.**

4.4.4 Evidence that their students' learning had benefitted from the use of the framework in lessons

While the overall response of respondents to curricular use of the framework was positive – a factor, perhaps, of the student-teacher relationship between the respondent and two of the researchers – we were eager to try to establish what evidence, if any, the respondents could offer as to ways in which their students' learning benefitted from engagement with the framework. While, overall, evidence was somewhat 'thinner' than we would have wished (possibly due to the limitations on classroom use arising from the pandemic context), some interesting observations were forthcoming. Sadhbh reports that,

> **There were times when there would be that 'Aha' moment where they would think, 'Okay, so that fits in there because of this and they are similar ….'**

This sort of recognition of connections is very much in line with the learning outcomes set down in the junior cycle specification. Margaret talks of how it gave 'weaker' students "some kind of context" and made sense to them; her conclusion is, "It definitely helped the weaker students have some idea of the progression …." Ultan explains how surprised he was at how well students

in the focus group from his class responded to the researchers' questions in the course of the 'exit' interviews. He also reports that, when asked whether they found the framework beneficial or confusing, his students told him that they found it beneficial, and he adds,

> **They were saying that it did help them understand the eras … a bit better and kind of put it in order in their heads that little bit better ….**

For Jacinta, the principal, observable benefit for students was that "… they were able to fill in more gaps by looking at the framework …," and that, "… they were able to talk about the eras a little bit more …." All well and good so far as it goes but, as researchers, we need to acknowledge that the classroom appropriateness and effectiveness of the framework requires further study and research before any conclusive judgement can be made on its viability and wider applicability. Evidence for the impact of use of the framework on first year History students will be explored more fully when we analyse their responses to our questions further on in Chapter 5 of this report.

4.4.5 Link(s) between 'big picture' understanding and understanding of the nature of history.

The Department of Education and Skills' specification for Junior Cycle History (2017) makes explicit the link(s) between 'big picture' understanding and understanding of the nature of history in a number of ways. For example, the 'Rationale' asserts: "When we learn about the past, it is important also that we understand the nature of history as a discipline that allows us to make sense of what has happened in our world over time."[106] The learning outcomes that are grouped under the heading, "Acquiring the 'big picture'", form part of Strand One of the specification, 'The nature of history'. In the introduction to Strand One, the two forms of understanding are brought together in the following sentence: "Strand 1 will help students to acquire a 'big picture' of the past and an understanding of the importance of evidence that will enhance their historical consciousness."[107] What we wished to explore with our interviewees was the extent to which they considered understanding of the nature of history to be important in attempting to help students develop more robust 'big pictures' of the past.

In responding to our questions, Josephine says of her students that "… sometimes they believe that a textbook is kind of like a bible." Use of the framework, according to Josephine, has helped the students to look at history differently and she notes of the change that has taken place since the beginning of the school year in September:

> **I think they thought evidence … everything must be right and now they are looking at it differently from a different perspective and I think they are understanding the nature of history and the way it works.**

She also touches on another aspect of the nature of history when she makes the following point:

> **I think they are beginning to understand historical significance as well and I think the Bigger Picture of the past really helped them to understand how to investigate the past.**

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[106] Department of Education and Skills (2017), *Junior Cycle History*. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills, p.4.

[107] Ibid., p. 16.

Of the other respondents – all of whom endorse the importance of the linkage – perhaps the strongest endorsement comes from Margaret who argues: "I think if they don't understand the nature of history, they can't really understand history at all." In developing her argument, she draws on two fundamental second-order or disciplinary concepts in positing the following analogy: "Like if you are not looking at time and change, if they don't understand … it's like going into Maths and not knowing 2+2 is 4, and not knowing the plus and minus or whatever."

Ultan focuses on the concepts of evidence and historical empathy in his response, highlighting the importance of "being able to show them how we know what we know," and helping students "… to place yourself into that context and understand both sides, Jacinta also highlights the importance of historical empathy and how it links to 'big picture' thinking when she says:

> **Being able to put yourself in a situation where you haven't lived in, trying to think back … about other people's thoughts or emotions or what they might have been going through at the time. Being able to connect is really important …**

It is worth repeating here that one of the 'big picture' junior cycle learning outcomes, 1.11, says that students should be able to 'make connections and comparisons between people, issues and events in different places and historical eras.'[108] Like Margaret, Jacinta also highlights the importance of the concepts of time and change when she says:

> **Oh, it's really important for them to understand how history works; the concept of time, I suppose, is huge and we talk about it constantly when we are talking about chronology, and change as well; how things led from one thing to another**

Overall, the subjective impression of the interviewers was that the seven respondents had matured significantly in their understanding of the nature of history over the period of their involvement with the project, a period spanning almost two calendar years. This observation was first made by the researcher who had no involvement in the academic programme being followed by the seven and tallied strongly with the experience of the other two researchers. Allied to this was a greater confidence in their teaching approaches – to which a number of respondents made reference – and a professed commitment to 'big picture' teaching in their future careers. While such commitment can falter in the face of institutional and interpersonal challenges within schools, the sense of fulfilment that all – to varying degrees – had experienced in the course of their collaboration with the project would seem to bode well for their future careers as history teachers.

[108] Department of Education and Skills (2017), *Junior Cycle History*. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills, p.16.

4.5 Conclusions

The conclusions that follow are based on consideration of responses to the questionnaire and to the interviews. (All interviews were face-to-face, except for that with Richard which was conducted via Zoom due to restrictions caused by the COVID-19 lockdown). Questionnaire and interview responses are considered in tandem as the same broad themes – as we have seen – were explored through both media. Our conclusions are set out, therefore, in relation to the three broad themes pursued through the questionnaire and interviews viz.

- Their understanding of the term 'big picture of the past.'
- What their own 'big picture of the past' looks like.
- The challenge of helping their students develop stronger 'big pictures of the past'.

4.5.1 Conclusions based on their understanding of the term 'big picture of the past'

We set out in ***4.1.1*** the three main elements of 'big picture' understanding as we would see it and, subsequently, we sought to identify the extent to which these elements were mentioned in the responses to the questionnaire. As the questionnaire responses were used to guide us in the drafting of the interview schedule, our shared perception of the elements of 'big picture' understanding also informed our approach to the interviews and our analysis of the interview data. It may be helpful to re-state here the three elements in question. To allow for ease of reference, we shall use a short, apposite phrase in discussing the different elements: these phrases are given in square brackets below. The three elements are as follows:

1. Awareness that a 'big picture' is one that encompasses the broad sweep of the past [broad sweep].

2. Awareness that the ability to make connections between events and developments in different times and places is an important dimension of a 'big picture' [making connections].

3. Awareness that a 'big picture' is not developed in a vacuum and is part and parcel of a broader understanding of what the discipline of history entails [disciplinary understanding].

It may be helpful to set out in tabular form the responses relating to their 'big picture' understanding given by the nineteen PME 1 students who completed the questionnaire.

Element identified	Number of respondents	Notes
Broad sweep	6	One (Maud) implicitly
Making connections	4	
Disciplinary understanding	1	The respondent was Maud and the element was identified in responding to Q.3

Table 5: Categorisation of PME students' responses relating to 'big picture' understanding.

Besides the six students referred to above who clearly identified the 'broad sweep' element there were, as previously mentioned, five who had some inkling of the element in question but whose articulation of it lacked clarity and/or showed some shortfall in understanding. The responses of the remaining eight students will be discussed below.

In general, there was little significant variation between questionnaire and interview responses. Some respondents such as Rory and Sadhbh used phraseology that seemed to reflect a 'broad sweep' perspective, although without the clarity and follow-through in their pedagogical practice that is evident in the responses of Richard and Margaret. For others, such as Ultan and Jacinta, understanding seemed constrained within somewhat narrower parameters and expressed itself in emphasis on contextual considerations, including causal factors and wider regional or global dimensions.

Given that the PME 1 students had been introduced to the concept of a 'big picture' prior to the questionnaires being completed, the evidence of the foregoing may suggest that work needs to be done on ensuring that student teachers (and, indeed, teachers of history more widely) have an adequate understanding of a concept with which they are expected to be on familiar terms. It should also be noted that, in the case of the eight volunteers who agreed to be interviewed, that each of these had the opportunity to clarify and/or elaborate on responses given in the questionnaire and, in some cases, reference was made to elements not identified in the questionnaire responses. (The volunteers in question also had the opportunity to reflect on gaps in their understanding in the interval between completion of the questionnaire and the holding of the interviews.) However, the misapprehensions and/or shortcomings in understanding are worthy of close attention.

In the case of the eight students who failed to articulate the 'broad sweep' dimension of 'big picture' understanding, the focus was generally on the context in which historical events occur, including the causal and consequential elements of that context. Clearly, such contextual understanding is fundamentally linked to 'big picture' understanding as well as the specific historical phenomena being investigated and the wider issue of understanding of the discipline of history as a whole. However, if history students in the classroom are to be helped develop more robust 'big pictures' they need the greater long-term focus that the 'broad sweep' element provides.

When we turn to the other two elements of 'big picture' understanding that we have identified, viz. 'making connections' and 'disciplinary understanding,' only four questionnaire respondents explicitly identified the first of these (one of the four in response to a separate question on the questionnaire) and only one identified the second (again, in response to a different question). In respect of the 'making connections' element, awareness had improved by the time of the interviews; the most explicit, 'new' articulation of this appeared in the interview with Rose. Richard and Margaret were strongest on this element and how it is integrated into their everyday teaching, but Josephine's discussion of timeline use also seems to recognise, at least implicitly, the importance of helping students to see connections and make comparisons. The third element – disciplinary understanding – receives a little more attention from interviewees than it did in the

questionnaire responses. Both Margaret and Richard implicitly identify it as intrinsic to 'big picture' understanding, Margaret when she links it to students' ability to analyse change, and Richard when he argues that the development of historical empathy in students is closely allied to their ability to "understand these bigger connections."

4.5.2 Conclusions based on responses relating to what their own 'big picture' of the past looks like

The marked reluctance of respondents to articulate an overarching picture of the broad sweep of the past has already been noted. There is also a striking dichotomy between those who formulated a 'big picture' as a result of a felt need and/or an increasing acquaintance with a range of historical episodes and phenomena and those who express a degree of frustration with the gaps in their knowledge of which they are unaware or regret the manner in which their own education in history failed to equip them with the sort of 'big picture' which they are now expected to help their students acquire.

Also noteworthy is that, when five of the nine respondents admit their knowledge of modern history is stronger than the history of earlier times, the common understanding of 'modern' that emerges is twentieth and twenty-first century history. This raises questions as to whether the history of recent times is unduly privileged over ostensibly less 'relevant' periods of history at school and undergraduate level. It may also present challenges in helping students develop a practical, everyday 'big picture' of the past if the teacher's own historical knowledge is skewed towards the later modern period and lacks an overarching, 'big picture' dimension.

It is clear also that, in the case of those who developed a 'big picture' dimension to their historical understanding, their overall grasp of historical detail and significance was enhanced as a consequence. This is especially evident in the case of Josephine, Richard and Margaret, all of whom experienced 'light bulb' moments when the implications of a 'big picture' perspective brought renewed clarity. It is also evident – though on a lesser scale – in the responses of other respondents such as Ultan, whose 'big picture' understanding lacked the 'broad sweep' dimension but whose understanding was enhanced by the sort of contextual and causal factors that are fundamental considerations in all varieties of sound historical practice.

4.5.3 Conclusions based on their observations regarding the challenge of helping their students develop stronger 'big pictures of the past'

Perhaps the biggest challenge in helping students develop stronger 'big pictures of the past' is ensuring that their teachers have the necessary understanding of the key elements that contribute to such understanding and the pedagogical approaches and resources that are most likely to result in successful endeavour. It should be remembered that three of the nine student teachers who were interviewed evinced a lack of confidence in dealing with the 'big picture' learning outcomes in the classroom. Others had a limited conception of what 'big picture' teaching requires, conscious of the need to help students see the wider context in which events occur, and the wider repercussions that may be entailed, but showing little awareness of the need to help students

build a framework that facilitates the making of connections and the development of a longitudinal perspective. The widespread adoption of an appropriate framework for classroom use would be a useful step in equipping teachers to help their students achieve 'big picture' learning outcomes – but it needs to be preceded by a programme of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) that is focused on developing understanding and that provides teachers with the opportunity to tease out meaning and resolve pedagogic challenges.

One pedagogic strategy for increasing student awareness of the 'bigger picture' that forms the backdrop for all historical phenomena is the use of timelines in the classroom, and this is one with which history teachers are widely familiar. It receives due emphasis in the Junior Cycle History specification where learning outcome 1.10 says that:

Students should be able to

> – demonstrate chronological awareness by creating and maintaining timelines to locate personalities, issues and events in their appropriate historical eras.[109]

It is interesting to note some of the observations made by our respondents regarding their classroom use of timelines. Josephine, as we have seen, tries to have a timeline 'on screen' as students are walking into the room, to create that awareness of "what we are doing and how further along we are going." More proactively, Margaret ensures that samples of student work are placed at appropriate points on a timeline that runs around the classroom wall; the sense of 'ownership' that this engenders cannot be gainsaid, for a resource that acts as a constant point of reference during history lessons.

The Junior Cycle History specification, in its overview,[110] notes that, "A rapidly-taught 'big picture' of the past can be revisited and developed regularly over the three years of students' learning in junior cycle." The only respondent to make explicit reference to the regularity with which a 'big picture' perspective should be invoked is Margaret. When asked if the 'big picture' should be an element in every lesson, she is unequivocal:

> **Yes, definitely … even just a little bit, if it comes in … at the start … when we're doing our starter exercise, or definitely if we're introducing … a new piece …**

Some recognition of the importance of maintaining a 'big picture' perspective would appear to be evident in Josephine's description of the images "from each section" that she keeps in a folder, of which she says,

> **I always go back to them and say, 'How did we get this development from here to here?'**

The relative paucity of reference to the issue elsewhere suggests that the importance of a rapidly-taught 'big picture' and its subsequent 'development – and the pedagogical strategies and resources best suited to support this – need greater emphasis in the professional development of history teachers at pre-service level. It seems reasonable to suggest that many serving teachers may also be in need of similar support.

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[109] Department of Education and Skills (2017), *Junior Cycle History*. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills, p.16.

[110] Ibid., p.12.

4.5.4 Conclusions based on the 'exit' interviews

The evidence above would appear to support the contention that junior cycle learning outcomes 1.10 (with its emphasis on 'creating and maintaining timelines) and 1.11 (with its emphasis on being able to 'make connections and comparisons between people, issues and events in different places and historical eras) have an applicability in the History classroom that is helpful to both teachers and students,[111] and that their effectiveness can be enhanced through creative use of the "Our History Scaffold" framework. As attested above, there is no suggestion that this framework is beyond improvement or indisputably the best approach to take. The merits of synoptic frameworks have been cogently set out by Shemilt and other researchers[112] and the shortcomings of what are sometimes called 'thematic' frameworks, such as our own, have also been noted. In seeking to address the pressing practical need for teachers, the approach we have set out in 'Our History Scaffold' seems to fit well with what teachers need in the classroom. We hope that further deliberation and research will help us and others to identify ways to enrich the learning experience of history students and develop more robust and inclusive frameworks.

[111] Department of Education and Skills (2017), Junior Cycle History. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills, p. 16.

[112] See, for example, D. Shemilt (2000), The Caliph's coin: the currency of narrative frameworks in history teaching, in P.N. Stearns, P. Seixas, & S. Wineburg (eds.) Knowing, teaching and learning history: National and international perspectives, pp. 83-101. New York: New York University Press, and J.E. Carroll (2016), 'Exploring historical frameworks as a curriculum goal: a case study examining students' notions of historical significance when using millennia-wide time scales, in The Curriculum Journal, 2016, Vol. 27. NO. 4, 454-478. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

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Chapter Five

The First Year History Students Speak: Voices and Analysis

5.1 The written task: Introduction

The instrument used to gather data from first-year History students in partner schools was described as a 'written task,' partly to distinguish it from the 'questionnaire' completed by PME student teachers and partly because it was envisaged as a more open and 'inviting' format than the more formal questionnaire. Two sub-tasks were to be completed. The first attempted, through a consciously 'scattergun' approach, to encourage students to identify the 'parts' of history that they remembered best, whether that history was learned in the classroom or through another medium such as television. The second question was more targeted, asking students – based on the history they had learned – to outline the 'big picture' they would give to a visitor from outer space to help her/him understand the world in which we live. It was hoped that the wording of this task would encourage students to attempt to formulate a meaningful overview of human history, one that would, of necessity, be skewed by the students' limited knowledge of history, but which we hoped would give some indication of the students' perception of the nature of history.

In all cases, the written task for First Year History students was administered by the PME student teachers who were our research collaborators. To help the student teachers in administering the task and to seek to encourage good levels of consistency in how it was administered, a briefing session lasting one hour was held in advance and a briefing document was shared, giving step-by-step instructions in overseeing the task. Once the task had been administered, the paperwork that resulted was forwarded to the researchers and transcribed to assist analysis.

In line with the ethical guidelines agreed, the voluntary nature of participation in completing the task was emphasised in all information sheets and consent forms. In the school year 2019–20, the total number of first year History students – from the eight partner schools who completed the task – was 127. Of the eight schools involved, none was fee-paying: four were voluntary secondary schools and three were schools operating under the aegis of a local Education and Training Board (ETB). While all tasks – and subsequent focus-group interviews – were carried out using the English language, the student cohort included some whose normal mode of instruction is through the Irish language. One of the schools receives additional supports under the Department of Education's DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) scheme. While focus-group interviews took place in each of the eight schools prior to the arrival of COVID-19, return visits to the schools to meet with the focus groups again and assess the impact of the classroom use of the framework, 'Our History Scaffold' were not possible due to the government-imposed lockdown.

All of our volunteer, student teacher collaborators were initially interested in repeating the research process in the schools where they undertook teaching practice in the second year of their PME studies, 2020–21. However, two subsequently withdrew, one of whom was replaced by a classmate who had a strong interest in the project from its beginning. Thus, seven schools facilitated our research in the school year 2020–21. The total number of first year History students who completed the task in that school year was 130. Of the seven schools involved in the 2020–21 school year, none was fee-paying: three were voluntary secondary schools, three were schools operating under the aegis of a local Education and Training Board (ETB) and one was an Educate Together school. Two of the schools receive additional supports under the Department of

Education's DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) scheme. Data relating to the task responses for this set of schools are set out in Sections ***5.3*** and ***5.5***.

5.2 Responses to written task, Question 1: School year 2019–20

> **Of the history that you have studied at school or that you learned from other sources, such as family visits or books or television programmes, what parts do you remember best?**

This question evinced a wide range of responses, running all the way from the 'Big Bang' to COVID-19. Most respondents gave some sort of list of events or eras, in no particular order; one student attempted a short chronology of key developments (of a kind provided much more frequently by respondents in addressing Question 2). A minority focused on one specific event or sequence of events: two examples are the respondent who had visited with his family Normandy beaches associated with World War 2, and another who had read a book on the Romanovs and focused her/his attention on Nicholas II's reign. The table below shows the events or eras that were mentioned most frequently.

	World War 2	Ancient Rome	1916 Rising	Middle Ages	Great Famine	Early Christian Ireland [+St Patrick]	The Celts/ Celtic Ireland
School A	12	3	13	5	7	2 + 0	2
School B	13	11	13	11	4	10 + 0	4
School C	1	8	1	7	2	2 + 0	0
School D	12	19	6	15	6	2 + 0	1
School E	2	3	2	2	2	4 + 0	7
School F	13	7	7	6	6	6 + 3	3
School G	11	9	9	5	5	1 + 2	1
School H	11	11	13	8	8	1 + 3	0
Totals	75	71	64	59	40	28 + 8	18

Table 6: Historical eras/events mentioned most frequently by first year respondents, 2019–20 cohort

Of the events and eras identified, three are likely to be encountered in the first year History classroom: Ancient Rome, Early Christian Ireland, and the Middle Ages. Indeed, respondents often made the point that one or more of these was well remembered because it had been a recent, or current, focus of classroom work. In the case of World War 2 and the 1916 Rising, the reasons for their 'memorability' are, perhaps, a little more diverse. One factor appears to be work carried out in primary school, often as project work. Another is the popularity of certain books and films (including books used in classroom teaching in primary school): nine respondents made reference to the novel ***The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*** by John Boyne, which is set in a concentration camp. The impact of films, television documentaries and family visits to places of interest is also evident.

In respect of 1916, a number of references are made to work undertaken in primary school in 2016 as the centenary of the rising was being commemorated. (No reference is made to subsequent events commemorated in the period intervening between 2016 and the setting of the written task in January 2020, events such as the 1918 election, women receiving the vote in parliamentary elections, and the independence struggle of the period 1919 to 1921.)

The impact of feature films and television documentaries on what students tend to remember is worthy of further comment. Eight respondents mentioned films either by title (e.g., ***The Boys in the Striped Pyjamas***) or theme (e.g., 'a film about the Famine'). Films mentioned included the aforementioned, as well as the following: ***Hacksaw Ridge***, ***Dunkirk***, ***Michael Collins*** and ***Gladiator***. (One student mentioned the video game, ***Call of Duty: World War 2.***) While a number of other respondents mentioned 'videos,' 'movies' and/or 'documentaries' in a more vague and understated way, there were fourteen references to the ***Horrible Histories*** series – most of these referring to the video series; it was not always clear which historical phenomena featured in the videos viewed. A number of references were made to the humorous nature of this series, and one respondent observed: "They make it fun and easy to remember." Another respondent applied a more critical lens in noting that, "I know some of it was exaggerated and fake … ."

While the responses to Question 1 helped us to identify some of the elements that make up first year students' mental pictures of the past, our hope was that the responses to Question 2 would give us a much clearer idea of whether the students had any kind of identifiable 'big picture' of the past and, if so, what the contours of that 'big picture' looked like. However, before we consider responses to Question 2, it will be helpful to review the data gathered from student task returns in the school year 2020–21 and the extent to which patterns of response correspond with or diverge from those for the student cohort who completed the task in 2019–20.

5.3 Responses to written task, Question 1: School year 2020–21

Of the history that you have studied at school or that you learned from other sources, such as family visits or books or television programmes, what parts do you remember best?

Once again, as with the cohort who competed the task in the 2019–20 school year, responses ranged widely in terms of both time and geographical space. If there was only one reference on this occasion to the 'Big Bang,' there were a number of Biblical references to Old Testament figures such as Moses and Abraham and even more references to Jesus Christ, reflecting, perhaps, the religious proclivities of some of the student cohort. Recent events featured prominently in certain schools; of seven explicit references to the 'Black Lives Matter' movement, six came from the same school. Other recent developments that were mentioned by one or more respondent included COVID-19, Brexit, 'when same sex marriage was legalised', the Trump versus Biden presidential election and 'forest fires in Australia'. Uniquely, in the case of one school (School O), three of the twelve respondents made reference to LGBTQ+ rights while a fourth made reference to "transgender rights". The nearness of perceived historical events to students' own lives was neatly

encapsulated in the words of one respondent who mentioned, “All of 2020, the virus, climate change, the election”; and the challenge of applying an historical perspective to those events was well captured in another respondent’s remark that, “It’s going to be difficult explaining 2020 to future kids.”

In terms of geographical spread, some indications of the growing multicultural nature of Irish society were evident in the respondent who mentioned “the life of the Queen of Jhansi, British attack on a port in Punjab … the life of Akbar” and other aspects of the history of India, and another who made reference to “A little bit of Filipino history with the colonisers”. The preceding point may also be applicable to the respondent who mentioned the colonisation of Brazil and went on to name “The man who colonised Brazil,” Alvares Cabral. (This is not a name likely to ‘trip off the tongue” of most first year History students.) The international lens available to some of our first year students as they seek to identify historical developments and events is evident in a number of references to phenomena in far-flung and (presumably) unfamiliar places e.g. “Korean women’s rights,” “Japan Fukushima disaster,” “Beirut explosion.” The manner in which an international lens can improve understanding of Irish history is nicely captured in one respondent’s comment: “When I was in Boston I learned that a lot of Irish people went there to get away from the Famine.”

The events or eras that were mentioned most frequently are set out in the following table:

	World War 2	Ancient Rome	World War 1	1916 Rising	Great Famine	Ancient Greece and/or Egypt	Middle Ages
School I	9	18	5	3	3	0	4
School J	20	10	13	9	9	5	6
School K	8	10	1	8	6	1	2
School L	12	4	10	7	5	3	6
School M	20	7	10	10	8	18	7
School N	6	9	3	1	2	1	0
School O	7	4	4	3	0	3	3
Totals	82	62	46	41	33	31	28

Table 7: Historical eras/events mentioned most frequently by first year respondents, 2020–21 cohort.

The table shows some interesting similarities to the data for the cohort of first year students from the 2019–20 school year but, also, some significant differences. Again, the events or eras mentioned most frequently are World War 2 and Ancient Rome. However, the 1916 Rising is fourth most mentioned, supplanted in third position by World War 1. Some comments on the references to World War 1 are apposite. In the case of both cohorts of students, a significant number mentioned both world wars, but with greater attention given to World War 2. In the case of the 2020–21 cohort, a greater number of those who mentioned World War 1 went on to mention aspects such as the Battle of the Somme and trench warfare. Possible reasons for this may

be linked to the fact that a number report doing projects on the war, while the reading of Michael Morpurgo's ***War Horse*** and a visit to Cavan County Museum (and its 'Trench Experience') are also mentioned.

A few comments on other popular categories may be helpful. The number of references to the Great Famine is slightly lower (33 as compared to 40). In relation to ancient civilisations, while Rome remained the second most mentioned event or era overall, there was a significant number of references to other civilisations, almost entirely Greece or Egypt. For this reason, those two civilisations were taken as one unit and the number of mentions counted. In a majority of cases, where one was mentioned, the other was also. Finally, the number of references to the Middle Ages was down significantly, from 59 to 28, and, overall, compared to the 2019–20 cohort, there were fewer references to current or recent classroom work.

Once again, the impact on students of books read, feature films and television series viewed, is evident. In relation to World War 2, there is only one reference to ***The Boy with the Striped Pyjamas***; however, there are 18 references to ***The Diary of Anne Frank***. Another book mentioned (just once) as being read in class is Michael Morpurgo's ***War Horse*** set, as the respondent mentions, in World War 1. There are two references to the Great Famine-themed novel, ***Under the Hawthorn Tree***. While 34 respondents mention films or documentaries as spurring interest in particular historical themes, most of these references are lacking in specificity. Among the films and/or television programmes identified by title are: ***Saving Private Ryan*** and ***The Tattooist of Auschwitz*** (the latter a television series). Eight respondents refer to the 'Horrible Histories' television series. While one respondent states unequivocally that "You learn a lot from it" - and this sentiment is echoed in a number of other comments – the reductionist approach and the premium placed on entertainment values (not always at one with the application of an evidence-based, historical lens) is nicely caught in the comments of one respondent that, "Watching Horrible History (sic) was very funny as they make awkward and violent eras into funny 5 minute clips."

5.4 Responses to written task, Question 2: School year 2019–20

From the history that you have learned, what 'big picture' of the past would you give to a visitor from outer space to help her/him understand the world in which we live?

Our hope was – as mentioned in the final paragraph of ***5.2*** – that responses to Question 2 would give us a clearer idea of whether the students had any kind of identifiable 'big picture' of the past and, if so, what the contours of that 'big picture' looked like. The approach to analysis was influenced by the report on the 'Usable Historical Pasts' (2008) project and its categorisation of student accounts as 'process like' or 'event like'.[113] Initial reflection on the range of responses to the question prompted an analytical framework that posed three questions, as follows:

- How many outlined some sort of coherent, process-focused 'big picture'?
- How many, in total, showed some appreciation of 'history as process'?
- How many evinced an inclination to portray history as 'event'?

To improve clarity and facilitate ease of reference, we refer to the three categories above (respectively) as Category 1, Category 2 and Category 3.

The table that follows gives an overview of how the categories applied to each set of students, as well as the overall figures for each category. Where 'difficult to categorise' responses were reviewed, these are identified and discussed in due course.

School	Outlines some sort of coherent, process-focused 'big picture' Category 1	Shows some appreciation of history as process Category 2	Evinces an inclination to portray history as 'event' Category 3	Difficult to categorise
A	2	2 + 1	14	
B	1	1 + 3	14	
C	1	1 + 5	7	
D	2	2 + 3	16	
E	0	0 + 2	2	
F	2	2 + 5	8	
G	10	10 + 0	5	
H	3	3 + 3	7	3
Totals	21	21 + 22	73	

Table 8: Categorisation of 'big picture' understanding shown by first year respondents, 2019–20

[113] Foster, Stuart et al (2008), Usable Historical Pasts: a study of students' frameworks of the past: Full Research Report, ESRC end of Award Report, RES-000-22-1676. Swindon: ESRC.

5.4.1 Category 1 responses, School year 2019–20

As may be suggested here in our phrasing of the question relating to Category 1, we sought to identify responses that had three interlinked elements viz.

- Some degree of coherence
- Some awareness of history as 'process'
- Some sort of 'big picture' of the past, albeit one constrained by students' limited knowledge and experience of the world

The degree of coherence, the extent of the awareness of history as process, the robustness of such 'big pictures' as could be identified, varied. In some cases, what was primarily a listing of events was elided somewhat by a recognition of processes of change and some attempt at an overview of the human past. It is noteworthy that a number of responses begin with an attempt to render some aspect(s) of the *natural* history of the earth and the greater universe beyond it. The following response is not uncharacteristic of responses at the more robust end of the spectrum. This example comes from School H.

> **At first exactly evolution. No one knows how the world started but they say it started with a big bang, so-called big bang theory. And suddenly a tiny living thing began to evolve. First it lived in the water then it grew legs and climbed out onto the land. Then it grew arms and began to climb. Soon it grew hair and was eating and drinking, living in trees to stay away from predators. It had turned into an ape. It kept on evolving until it turned into a human and, because through the time we were evolving so were our brains, and as we grew more intelligent we learned all sorts of things, how to make fire, which led to cooking food. We learned to live in caves, leading to building houses. We learned to work together as a community, leading to civilization, made money to buy and sell things, making an economy. Decided to make monarchy, an all important leader to make important choices and keep everything under control, and be in charge of what people can do and can't do, making law so that people who do things that are 'wrong' (morally, based on empathy and what gets in the way of society) get punished. Humans went through many phases: caveman, iron age, middle age, modern. We have made inventions, science, structure etc.**

For all of its limitations and omissions, we can identify some significant elements in this respondent's considered response:

- An awareness of human evolution and development over time.
- An attempt to give a (necessarily short) overview of humankind from its origins to 'modern' times.
- Some awareness of how human civilizations developed.
- Some awareness of how at least one form of political control developed.

Another example, scoring a little higher on historical specificity, comes from School F:

> **I would tell them that first there were dinosaurs, but then a meteor killed them, and then humans developed into what we are today, and they used tools made of stone, bronze, iron. / The world was pretty uncertain, different tribes, rulers and monarchies on at once. Then the Romans conquered lots of land and became an empire. They fell after more than a 1,000 years when tribes in Europe made their own countries on Roman land. / In 1 BC Jesus was born and at first the Romans suppressed Christians but then they became Christian themselves. / After that there was the Middle Ages and rich people lived in cold castles and poor people were called peasants. / After that the world went through various times such as the Edwardian and Victorian Ages. Machinery was revolutionised and factories started. The world is still going through major changes such as climate change and Brexit today and who knows what the future will bring.**

The following elements here are worthy of note:

- There is an awareness of 'life on Earth' prior to the origins of humanity.
- There is an awareness of the importance of technology – in this case, tools – to human existence – and some awareness of developments in technology over time.
- There is an awareness – albeit sketchy – of some differences in political arrangements, and how these can change over time. This includes an awareness of how powerful political entities – here, the Roman Empire – can become vulnerable to challenge by smaller political entities, pursuing more localised interests.
- There is an awareness of the fortunes of Christianity within the Roman Empire.
- There is an awareness of 'eras': three are specifically named.
- There is an awareness of the origins of the 'industrial age.'
- There is an awareness of developments in the contemporary world that are likely to loom large in future historical surveys.

The operative word in all of the above is 'awareness': there is no suggestion that the student has detailed or 'deep' knowledge about the developments mentioned, but the overall impression is of a student who has a type of functioning 'big picture' that could become more sophisticated and robust if teaching and learning approaches are available that help the student to reach greater levels of understanding and knowledge. We believe the classroom use of frameworks, such as 'Our History Scaffold', have a role to play in this regard.

5.4.2 Category 2 responses, School year 2019–20

In respect of the second category of response, we wished to identify responses that showed "some awareness of history as 'process'", albeit lacking in any kind of recognisable, overarching 'big picture.' The following example from School H is one that fitted easily into this category:

> **We have to come to a point in history where everything in history is starting to come back at us. Through the years we have used oil and plastic not thinking of the consequences. And now the world is severely damaged. There are different countries that go at war with each other there has already been World War 1 and 2 and now we're praying that World War 3 doesn't happen. We are working on equality and making everyone equal and on the same page.**

In the context of our ambitions to help students develop improved 'big picture' understanding, it may be helpful to consider the following aspects of this young student's response:

- There is an awareness that the actions of people in the past ('history') have consequences for people living today, in this instance detrimental consequences.
- There is an awareness of successive waves of war, including world war, and of the suffering such wars bring.
- There is an awareness that the achievement of equality is a process that attempts to bring about change over time rather than a 'once-off' event or set of isolated events, ("We are working on equality …")

Another example that makes some insightful comments comes from School A:

> **History is the study of the past. It can help us learn from our mistakes. Both world wars were incredibly serious as we lost so many soldiers, civilians, and just simple human beings. In WWII, nearly the entire population of Jews were wiped out. It was a truly horrific period, my French great-grandfathers were scared for life. Prehistory is probably the MOST IMPORTANT topic as it is the basis of life. Evolution is why we are here today. For instance, the house you live in today was probably not built 200 years ago. Our world is constantly changing.**

It is interesting here that the student first reflects briefly on the nature of history and its potential to "help us learn from our mistakes." S/he goes on to mention an historical event that looms large - because of the suffering it caused and because members of the student's own family were caught up in that suffering. It is the concluding sentences that bring in the awareness of history as 'process,' with references to evolution, pre-history and how "Our world is constantly changing."

A third example is discussed here as it might conceivably have been included in Category 1 – containing as it does a 'big picture' of a sort, as well as (arguably) an awareness of history as 'process' – but the degree of coherence is relatively low:

> **If a visitor from outer space came to Earth I would tell them that God created Earth in seven days and created man. Then God flooded Earth but allowed 1 man to survive. God sent his only son to Earth to save us but his son was killed. His son, Jesus, came back and**

saved us. There used to be an ancient civilisation called Rome with many warriors who nearly took over the world but were stopped. They also took over the Egyptians who were one of the greatest civilisations of all time and built massive stone pyramids. Rome's legacy left a country called Italy. France was once ruled by kings but a rebellion happened and freed them. Ireland and America used to be ruled by England but were freed. / There was a massive war called World War 1 that was a big fight between two sides. England, France and America won the war but demanded lots of money from Germany. Germany were unhappy and so led by an insane man called Adolf Hitler they tried to kill everyone but were eventually overpowered. After this half of Germany went to America and half went to Russia. America and Russia had another war called the cold war which ended in a stand off. We have now found out that the Earth is warming up.

In referring above to a "'big picture' of a sort," it must also be acknowledged that there is a degree of randomness about the developments and events identified. The awareness of history as 'process,' nevertheless, is reasonably clear in the following ways:

- There is an awareness of the grand imperial ambitions of ancient Rome and its extensive conquests, including ancient Egypt; and that, "Rome's legacy left a country called Italy."
- There is an awareness – however flimsy – of Britain's colonisation of Ireland and America, and their eventual securing of sovereignty.
- In respect of the world wars, there is a degree of understanding of how the first ended with a settlement that helped to precipitate the second, and how that war in turn was followed by a period of 'cold war.'

The somewhat random nature of specific episodes or developments mentioned tends to be even more pronounced in the third category of response identified, those that "evinced an inclination to portray history as 'event'.

5.4.3 Category 3 responses, School year 2019–20

As seen in Table 8, those students who 'evinced an inclination to portray history as event' constituted a majority of respondents, 73 of the 127 first year History students who completed the task. A common pattern of response here was to give a list of events, often with little or no regard to chronological order, as in the following response from School F:

I'd talk to them about Irish History, World Wars and Donald Trump and probably the Australia Fires or The 1916 Rising. / I'd also tell them about the Roman Empire. / Also things that happened recently in the past like the 9/11 and the Afghanistan and Pakistan War. / Also things like Anne Frank or Nelson Mandela and maybe William Butler Yeats.

Some of the responses – the above being an example – include references to 'up to date' events and/or personalities in the news: in this case, 'the Australia Fires' and 'Donald Trump.' The arbitrary nature of the listing in this category is also evident in the following response from School B, which appears to attempt some sort of chronological frame:

> **Early Earth, Big Bang theory, Wars, Government, Vikings, 1916, Why the 6 counties are with the UK, Irish flag, GAA, LGBTQ.**

Again, the tendency to incorporate very recent 'events' is evident, in this case, with the reference to LGBTQ. The narrow, and rather vague, focus of many responses in this category is evident in the following response from School E:

> **I would tell them about the 20th and 21st century because it would be easier to understand and more important information. / I would tell them about all the wars, people that changed history and I would tell them a bit about history before 1900 if needed.**

The reference here to 'information' is significant; it seems to us that the notion of historical accounts as 'information' often goes hand-in-hand with the notion of history as 'event,' and little or no understanding of the nature of history as a discipline.

5.4.4 Difficult to categorise responses, School year 2019–20

Perhaps inevitably, there were some responses that proved difficult to categorise, including the following example from School H:

> **On earth things will be quite different to space. There were many wars (2 to be exact but there might be a third). And it will only be a few decades before the world implodes from global warming and climate change. Already it's starting to go downhill.**

One issue here is the brief nature of the response; the lack of elucidation leaves 'slim pickings' on which to form a judgement. The wars are mentioned, apparently, as isolated 'events.' The reference to possible future consequences of global warming may be seen as awareness of the ways in which processes of change operate in time. However, it would be pushing it, in our view, to argue that the response shows an awareness of history as process. A similar argument could be made in respect of another example from the same school:

> **The world is destroyed with the usage of fossil fuels. It is gonna run out. There are dictators not as much as there was but still there is. There is still racism and sexism its not fair. People think they run the place everyone's the same I'm afraid buddy our world is a mess. There's loads of nice people but the few idiots destroy it.**

Here, there is some recognition of at least one process of change in time, in the reference to the impact of the use of fossil fuels. However, the observation on dictators does not go beyond a 'then' (undefined) and 'now' perspective, which appears to situate the response in the 'history as event' category. Again, the brief nature of the response and the 'chatty' tone with which it concludes leaves one guessing as to the nature of the perception of history that underlies it.

5.5 Responses to written task, Question 2: School year 2020–21

Once again, as in the 2019–20 school year, we hoped that responses to Question 2 would give us a clearer idea of whether the students had any kind of identifiable 'big picture' of the past and, if so, what the contours of that 'big picture' looked like. The same analytical framework was adopted, posing three questions as follows:

- How many outlined some sort of coherent, process-focused 'big picture'?
- How many, in total, showed some appreciation of 'history as process'?
- How many evinced an inclination to portray history as 'event'?

To improve clarity and facilitate ease of reference, we again refer to the three categories above (respectively) as Category 1, Category 2 and Category 3.

For our student teacher volunteers who administered the task on our behalf, the pandemic context presented some challenges e.g., a reluctance to gather data in paper format and reliance, in most cases, on digital media. The wearing of masks by students adversely affected the quality of communication in some classrooms. Despite the challenges that existed, the student task was attempted by a minimum of twelve students in each of the seven schools and the overall number who completed the task in this school year was 130 first year History students. The table that follows gives an overview of how the categories applied to each set of students, as well as the overall figures for each category. One 'difficult to categorise' response was reviewed: this is identified and discussed in due course.

School	Outlines some sort of coherent, process-focused 'big picture' Category 1	Shows some appreciation of history as process Category 2	Evinces an inclination to portray history as 'event' Category 3	Difficult to categorise
I	1 (comes closest)	1 + 3	18	
J	1	1 + 1	18	
K	0	0 + 1	14	
L	3	3 + 1	14	1
M	7	7 + 6	11	
N	0	0 + 2	14	
O	0	0 + 0	12	
Totals	12	12 + 14	101	

Table 9: Categorisation of 'big picture' understanding shown by first year respondents, 2020–21

What is immediately striking here is the lower numbers of students outlining 'some sort of coherent, process-focused 'big picture';' besides these, the number showing 'some appreciation of history as process' is also lower. It is also noteworthy that in three of the seven schools (Schools K, N and O), there are no students who fit into that first category while, in a fourth school (School

I) there is just one response adjudged 'close' to fulfilling the criteria for that category. Of the twelve responses placed in Category 1, seven come from the one school (School M). In the case of School O, none of the twelve responses fit into either Category 1 or Category 2: all are Category 3 responses.

5.5.1 Category 1 responses, School year 2020–21

It may be helpful to start with the response from School I adjudged close to fulfilling the criteria for Category 1:

> **I would probably tell them, "At the start of humanity, we were a different animal; we then grew over the years and became humans. That's evolution. We have evolved over millions of years and everything on earth has been upgrading and evolving. There were a lot of wars in all the different countries and advancements everywhere. You might want to look into Ancient Rome, Greece, World War 1 and 2, the history of countries around the world and Martin Luther King."**

The weak degree of coherence here is not helped by the somewhat arbitrary nature of the list in the final sentence. And yet, there is an attempt, however flawed, to see history 'whole.' The extent to which some students incorporate a pre-human, natural history perspective into their 'big picture' of the past in evident in this example from School J:

> **My understanding of the picture of the past is … So everything used to be lots of tiny minute cells when the Earth actually came into existence, which may have been from half of the moon being smashed into Earth, or something? But then those cells started forming groups, and these groups became bodies over time, which then became dinosaurs, but then the dinosaurs were wiped out because? they were too big so the smaller species survived because when a meteorite (big lump of rock) hit the Earth the dinosaurs had bigger bodies & when gas flooded across the earth the monkeys & things could find shelter from it, maybe? So then a branch of monkeys formed into humans etc, and then a bit later after humans had experimented with caves and tools & things they became more modern and start entertaining each other with fights to the death and things and invent travel and then they take over the world, and eat a lot of garbage and form cults that like taking over other cults to become bigger cults, like the Romans and Greeks, & then eventually they make governments and buffets and live in boxes with lots of other boxes inside and windows and things. And they make systems to do things etc.**

While this student begins her/his account with a reference to the concept of a 'big picture,' the student's response is certainly at the less robust end of the spectrum of responses in this category. There are obvious inaccuracies, and the sense of hesitancy is underscored by the student's own use of a series of question marks that indicate uncertainty. Given the lack of specific historical 'pointers,' it may legitimately be questioned whether this constitutes a *bona fide* 'big picture' at all. However, it does have a relatively clear perception of history as process and some degree of coherence: moving

from the origins of Earth to the evolution of humans, from cave-dwellers to explorers and invaders, from toolmakers to inventors of 'systems to do things.' A student with this (admittedly weak) skeleton of understanding will likely engage more readily with historical frameworks than students who have difficulty seeing beyond the unbridged islands of 'history as event.'

A better 'fit' for the criteria set out in Category 1 is the following example from School M:

> **The first dominating species on Earth were the dinosaurs. They were all different sizes and shapes. After millions of years a meteor hit and wiped out the whole species. After that, the Earth became frozen, that was called the Ice Age. Once the ice started to thaw new life forms were born, soon enough the apes were born, which over time evolved and became cavemen. After many years of development, the cavemen discovered farming and started building civilisations. The human race kept on evolving, there were many wars and conflicts and the islands and countries were taken by humans and then stolen again. The humans then created the law, which would help keep the world safe and would protect from wars. After a couple more wars and new discoveries, such as electricity, we evolved and evolved and those events landed us here.**

Compared with some of the examples reviewed in ***5.4.1***, there is a lack of specificity here and a vagueness that leaves one unsure as to the extent of the student's historical knowledge. Once again, the natural history of Earth is invoked, with references to the dinosaur age and the Ice Age, leading up to the evolution of humankind. The elements that prompt us to place this response in Category 1 are as follows:

- The student's 'big picture' perspective is shaped by a focus on evolution and development and an awareness, therefore, of history as process -rather than a series of apparently unlinked, discrete events.
- Though light on detail, the span of the student's vision runs from 'The first dominating species on Earth' to the here and now ('… those events landed us here.')
- Though light on detail, the response does identify a number of significant 'markers in the history of humanity: cave-dwelling, the invention of farming, the 'building' of civilisations, war and conquest as a regular feature of human history, the development of frameworks to avoid war and, finally, 'new discoveries such as electricity.'

One respondent from School L chose to present her/his response as a sort of timeline, with significant developments inked in at intervals. In the transcript that follows the discrete developments noted are separated by a 'slash' ['/'] symbol:

> **The world was created / A meteorite hit the Earth and wiped out all the dinosaurs / Humans evolved from apes / Stone Age (when humans started making tools) / Bronze Age (when humans first used bronze to make tools and jewellery) / People started sailing to different places. / The first farmers arrived in Ireland. / Vikings came to Ireland and settled there. / Britain took over Ireland + a lot of other countries. / WW1 / WW2 / Donald Trump is elected / Coronavirus / Joe Biden wins next election / Now.**

At one level, this might be read as a litany of discrete events. However, it seems to us that the sense of history as process is embedded in some of the language used e.g., 'when humans started making tools;' 'when humans first used bronze … …;' 'People started sailing to different places.' In each case, what is indicated seems to be the beginning of a process rather than an isolated, significant event.

Given the focus on political history that tends to pervade public discussion of the discipline, it is interesting to see an example such as the following, from School M, where the focus is more on everyday life and the factors that bring about change in it:

> **We used to look and act very different. We looked more like apes and we didn't have fancy houses and schools etc. Over time we discovered fire, clothes out of leather, different ways of getting food and so on. We discovered farming, fishing, cooking and building houses. We made tools out of natural materials like wood, stone, bronze, iron etc. Houses in the past were made out of wood, stone, hay. We discovered more land, and different cultures. More recently, when our grandparents were alive, they didn't have things like electricity, electronics, aeroplanes, cars etc. Our parents might not have had phones when they were children.**

The perspective of the respondent here calls to mind Lee's (1992), argument that, 'The reason for teaching history is not that it changes society, but that it changes *pupils*; it changes what they see in the world and how they see it.'[114] The respondent's sense of identification with the past is evident in the use, from the outset, of the first person plural: 'We used to look and act very different.' That sense of identification is strengthened by the respondent's awareness of life being different for parents and grandparents who came to adulthood in time when much of the technology in use today was not yet available (or, if available, not as widely available as today). While there is little enough in the way of substantive knowledge, the respondent does seem to have a 'feel' for the way history operates as a discipline in her/his remark that, 'Our parents might not have had phones when they were children': the demeanour suggested is an unwillingness to make definitive statements in the absence of corroborative evidence. While the 'big picture' delineated is sketchy, it does identify a number of significant markers of human development over time e.g. the process of evolution; the discovery of fire; the discovery of farming; the use, over time, of a range of materials to make tools; the discovery of other lands and encounters with other cultures; the multiplicity of developments in technology in more recent times. There is a good basis here, it seems to us, for productive work on developing 'big picture' understanding – and, indeed, wider disciplinary understanding - and, once again, we would argue that frameworks such as 'Our History Scaffold' have a role to play in helping teachers to meet their students' needs in improving their understanding of the past and the discipline which seeks to make it comprehensible.

[114] P.J. Lee (1992), 'History in schools: aims, purposes and approaches. A reply to John White.' In P.J. Lee, J. Slater, P. Walsh and J. White, *The Aims of School History*: *The National Curriculum and Beyond*, London: Tufnell Press, p.23.

5.5.2 Category 2 responses, School year 2020–21

In turning, once again, to Category 2 responses, we focus on responses which appear to have an understanding of history as 'process' but lack any kind of coherent, overarching 'big picture'. The following example comes from School J:

> **My understanding of the bigger picture of the past is people don't always get along with other people. They have disputes, disagreements, they're racist, and a lot of the time arguments like these end in violence. / Historians use sources and evidence to find out what happened. They also document information in chronological order, so this information isn't lost. / Teachers teach history in school so children know what has happened, know what the world has been through, so children can carry this information around with them. / Another thing history gives us insights into are issues like climate change, they see what we did wrong. / If I had to explain this to an alien, I would start at the start, how humans evolved and came to be. How they advanced. What they did wrong and what they did right. / Don't let history repeat. Some bad things happened, so let's learn from our mistakes.**

Here, the respondent begins by identifying a pattern found in historical accounts: '… people don't always get along with other people.' The evidential basis of the discipline of history is acknowledged, albeit at a very basic level. In offering a rationale for the teaching of history in schools, the respondent suggests that it enables children to 'know what the world has been through.' There is even the seed of a 'big picture' in the observation that, 'If I had to explain this to an alien, I would start at the start, how humans evolved and came to be.' Although no coherent, overarching 'big picture' emerges, the perception of 'history as process' rather than 'history as event,' and of the practice of history as a process of investigation, is reasonably clear.

Some responses in this category attempted to provide a more detailed outline of significant developments, but these attempts were frequently compromised by the random nature of developments discussed and the levels of inaccuracy displayed in rendering details. The following example comes from School L:

> **Hundreds of years ago the Roman Empire ruled a lot of the world. Eventually their empire grew less powerful. Kings & queens ruled lands or countries and they were completely in charge. They grew kind of greedy and wanted to take over other countries. They thought that the best way to achieve that goal was to go to war (2 or more countries/groups try to kill each other). The English became more greedy than most and conquered loads of countries including, Ireland, America & France. All three of these counties fought back and eventually they all got freedom. England still controls some other countries to this day. There have been 2 world wars (a lot of death in those two wars). I don't know much about either but I know World War II started because of the assassination of Franz Ferdinand. One of the main people in World War II was a man Adolf Hitler, he's kind of evil & no one really likes him. He was very racist. Oh and around 2000 years ago a man called 'Jesus' supposedly was born**

without consummation and was the son of God (God is the lad who created the world) he told everyone some stuff about God & everyone fell at his feet. Bonkers if you ask me. And people still believe him.

Beginning with the Roman Empire, this response moves on to 'English' colonial conquests and aspects of its legacy and then, the World Wars, followed by – almost as an afterthought – the birth of Jesus. Its random nature is akin to many Category 3 responses. However, the awareness of change (and continuity) over time which characterises many Category 2 responses is evident in references such as the following: '… Eventually their Empire grew less powerful …'; '… All three of these countries fought back and eventually they all got freedom …'; 'England still controls some other countries to this day.' Thus, layered over a somewhat random identification of significant developments or events is an awareness that processes of change cause new states of affairs to develop and that existing states of affairs have their roots in the actions of people in the past.

This final, brief example from School M is conspicuously lacking in historical detail, but it does have the notion of history as a continuum that seeks to identify 'the most important things in the past that make us who we are today ….'

I will show them a timeline and will mostly show them the most important things in the past that make us who we are today like how the Earth was formed the first inhabitants and how we evolved from monkeys to humans and how technology was made and changed throughout the years. And how we plan on moving on.

The reference to the use of a timeline to help give an overview of human history is also worthy of note, given the role that timelines play in developing students' concept of time and, specifically, their understanding of sequence and duration. Once again, the student's vision of history encompasses natural history ('… how the Earth was formed …' and '… how we evolved from monkeys to humans …'), providing a wider frame for understanding the past than many of our frameworks offer. In concluding with a look to the future ('… how we plan on moving on …'), there is a reminder for us as researchers of what the development of our students' 'big pictures' is intended to achieve. As the Junior Cycle specification in History (2017) explains:

Studying history develops our historical consciousness, enabling us to orient ourselves in time and to place our experiences in a broader framework of human experience. Being historically conscious transforms the way that we perceive the world and our place in it, and informs how we see the future development of the world.[115]

5.5.3 Category 3 responses, School year 2020–21

As seen in Table 9, those students who 'evinced an inclination to portray history as event' once again constituted a majority of respondents. However, this time the majority was greater: 101 of the 130 first year History students in seven schools who completed the task, as compared with 73 from 127 in eight schools in the 2019–20 school year. Again, a common pattern of response was to

[115] Department of Education and Skills (2017), *Junior Cycle History*. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills, p.4.

give a list of events with little or no regard to chronological order, as in the following brief response from School L:

> **WW1 / WW2 / Martin Luther King / The Cold War / The story of Christ / The Famine / man on the Moon / Ice Age / Spanish Flu / Ancient Greece / The Normans / The Syrian flu.**

Given the frequency of their appearance in responses to Question 1, it is hardly surprising that references to World War 2 and Ancient Rome occur frequently in Category 3 responses. In the following response from School I, the student's enthusiasm is evident, but the subjectivity and randomness of the references are reasonably typical of responses in this category.

> **I would tell them: The world is a lovely place but there has been a lot of wars in the past. There once was a war and we call it WW2 which stands for (world war 2) it was the Second World War but for me it was the most fascinating it started off with a man called Adolf Hitler he hated Jews and put them into concentration camps he eventually took over Germany and Poland then France . Then Britain and America and a lot of other countries made a group to defeat them. It took several years but they eventually beat Adolf Hitler . Three Men all travelled to the moon !! We have created great technology! In Ancient Rome women didn't have as many rights as men and women would marry at a very young age!**

The randomness and lack of any semblance of an overall 'frame' for the events mentioned strike one repeatedly. The following example comes from School N:

> **If a visitor from space came to earth, I would tell him about ancient Rome, WW1 & 2, the moon landing, the big bang, the dinosaurs, the Irish war of Independence and the Irish civil war. I would also tell them about evolution and early humans.**

The student enumerates what comes to mind and there is no 'filter' to give shape to what is listed. In the case of School O, where all twelve responses fit into Category 3, one respondent does provide some sort of organising principle in that the events listed are set down in order of chronology:

> **Ancient Egypt / Middle Ages / Victorian Era / WW1, WW2 / Moon landing**

Given the brief, formulaic nature of all the responses from this school (all were set down in 'bullet point format,' with no elucidation of points listed), it may be that a deeper, unarticulated understanding underlies this sparse litany – but that possibility must remain in the realm of conjecture in the absence of corroborative evidence.

5.5.4 Difficult to categorise responses, School year 2020–21

In the one 'difficult to categorise' response encountered in our 2020–21 engagement with schools, it was difficult to know if the student was sharing a private joke or if s/he was responding in kind to the 'alien' element of the question: the tone of the concluding sentence (below) suggests the former:

> **But now the rock and burger people don't like the book people and they start not fighting and the burger people win and then there's coronavirus, which you are now dying from because you don't have an immune system.**

While some awareness of processes of change underlies the response, the focus is more on the 'fantastical' than the historical; the nature of the student's historical understanding remains elusive.

5.6 Summary and conclusions

The student task generated a valuable bank of data offering, as we have seen, many insights into the historical knowledge and understanding of a broad range of first year History students from a total of fifteen schools. Our purpose here is to highlight some of the main findings that may help to direct our efforts to improve our students' 'big picture' understanding. We begin by looking back at the responses to Question 1, ***Of the history that you have studied at school or that you learned from other sources, such as family visits or books or television programmes, what parts do you remember best?*** Our review includes a consideration of responses from the 2019–20 and 2020 cohorts of students.

5.6.1 Question 1: 'parts' of history most frequently mentioned

The events or eras most frequently mentioned by the 2019–20 cohort of 127 students were as follows (number of mentions in brackets):

World War 2 **(75)**, Ancient Rome **(71)**, 1916 Easter Rising **(64)**.

The events or eras most frequently mentioned by the 2020-2021 cohort of 130 students were as follows (number of mentions in brackets):

World War 2 **(82)**, Ancient Rome **(62)**, World War 1 **(46)**.

In the case of both cohorts of students, World War 2 and Ancient Rome were most frequently mentioned. The 1916 Easter Rising, third most mentioned in 2019–20, was fourth in 2020–21 with 41 mentions.

5.6.2 Question 1: references to 'engines of memorability'

Reference to work carried out in the first term of first year was occasionally mentioned (less so in the case of the 2020–21 cohort). Besides that, the other factors mentioned include work done in primary school (often, projects), books read (usually in school), family visits to places of interest and viewing of films and TV programmes.

With regard to work carried out in the first term, it should be mentioned that a majority, if not all, of the students would have studied Ancient Rome during this time. (Some would also have studied Ancient Rome in primary school.) Books read that were mentioned by name include, in the 2019–20 cohort, ***The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*** (nine mentions); in the 2020–21 cohort, ***The Diary of Anne Frank*** (eighteen mentions), ***Under the Hawthorn Tree*** (two mentions) and ***War Horse*** (one mention). Mention of the first two books here may be reflective of, or a factor in, the high levels of interest in World War 2. A similar point may be made in respect of films mentioned by title, which include: (2019–20) ***Hackshaw Ridge***, ***Dunkirk***, ***Michael Collins*** and ***Gladiator***; (2020–21) ***Saving Private Ryan***. Also mentioned were: (2019–20) a video game, **Call of Duty: World War 2**; and (2020–21) a television series, ***The Tattooist of Auschwitz***.

The popular television series, ***Horrible Histories***, was also mentioned: fourteen mentions in 2019–20 and eight in 2020–21. Invariably, the respondent did not indicate the subject matter of the programmes viewed. The two sides of attraction and need for a critical lens in viewing such programmes are well captured in the comments of two students from the 2019–20 cohort: 'They make it fun and easy to remember'; 'I know some of it was exaggerated and fake.'

It is clear that visits to places of historical interest, including museums, have helped some students develop an interest in particular areas of history. Most of the visits mentioned are family ones, some are unspecified and a few mention school visits specifically. Among venues mentioned are: Trinity College, to see the Book of Kells, the 'Museum' to see the 1916 exhibition; Kilmainham Gaol; the Imperial War Museum in London; and the Normandy beaches associated with the D-Day landings of 1944. There are two mentions of visits to Cavan County Museum, to see the 'World War 1 Trench Experience'. Mention is also made of parents and grandparents who had a strong interest in particular historical episodes and encouraged the student's interest.

Given that our first year students had only recently moved on from primary school, it is interesting that Becher and Glaser (2018) identify a similar range of extra-curricular influences on German children's understanding of history in a study of elementary schoolchildren's 'information mediators', as they are called:

> **The range of 'information mediators' includes relatives (parents, grandparents and siblings, for example), diverse media such as television and radio programmes, and the internet, CDs and books. In addition, the children interviewed cited a third category, specific extra-curricular activities that enabled them to obtain information about history (theatre visits, holidays, visits to theme parks, games with friends and so on).**[116]

The broader context here serves as a useful reminder that, 'Children do not only experience history in a school context,'[117] and that one of the history teacher's key tasks is to identify what students know – which may include some misconceptions – and to build on their existing knowledge, working to correct misconceptions, as required.

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[116] Andrea Becher and Eva Glaser (2018), 'HisDeKo: A study about the historical thinking of primary school children' in History Education Research Journal, 15-2, pp. 264-275. London: UCL Press, p.270.

[117] Ibid, p.270

5.6.3 Question 1: linking the disparate

Beyond the events and eras identified in ***5.6.1***, is a somewhat disparate list of eras and events mentioned in responses to Question 1. The most frequently mentioned range from Ancient Egypt and Greece through Celtic Ireland, Early Christian Ireland and the Middle Ages to the Great Famine of the 1840s in Ireland; but there is a wide range of others, including: 'pre-history, human evolution'; Stone Age farmers; the Aztecs; 'Columbus discovered America; the Renaissance; the French Revolution; the Russian Revolution; the first man on the Moon; the 'Troubles'; the Good Friday Agreement. The eclectic nature of some students' responses is evident in comments such as: 'I remember all the history about my grandad's farm and the area surrounding it;' and 'I'm interested in Japanese folklore and history especially of the Heian period.' If students are to be enabled to see far-flung and disparate 'pieces' of history as elements in and contributions to an ever-changing continuum of human development – sometimes progressive, sometimes regressive – we believe their capacity to build up 'big pictures' of the past must be strengthened, and that the use of frameworks in the classroom has an important role to play in promoting that capacity.

5.6.4 Question 2: categorisation applied

To recap, responses were divided into three categories, as follows:

- How many outlined some sort of coherent, process-focused 'big picture'? **(Category 1)**
- How many, in total, showed some appreciation of 'history as process'? **(Category 2)**
- How many evinced an inclination to portray history as 'event'? **(Category 3)**

While some responses proved difficult to categorise – and these are discussed above – most responses fell easily into particular categories, as follows:

Category 1	2019–20: 21	2020–21: 12
Category 2	2019–20: 43	2020–21: 26
Category 3	2019–20: 73	2020–21: 101

It should be noted – taking into account the wording of the analytical frame – that the totals for Category 2 include the totals for Category 1 in both instances.

With both cohorts of students, the numbers tending to view history as 'event' were in a clear majority. For such students to attain stipulated learning outcomes in junior cycle History, they need to be empowered to view the past with an eye to processes at work and states of affairs that change (sometimes slowly, sometimes abruptly), and to view the history work they do as a process of investigation of evidence and the gradual acquisition of meaningful knowledge rather than the endless gathering of shards of so-called facts without a clear understanding of context or how the status of fact is conferred.

For the significant minority who have an understanding of some of the processes at work in history and, in some cases, some understanding of the bases on which historical accounts are constructed, there is a good foundation on which to build towards more robust 'big pictures', a supportive contextual frame for future assimilation of growing historical knowledge and an analytical 'toolkit' that enables future citizens to sort the genuinely historical from the selectively propagandistic and the reductively entertaining.

5.7 The 'entry' interviews, 2019–20: responses and analysis

The pre-COVID focus group interviews provided an opportunity to meet with some of the first year History students face-to-face and to develop our understanding of how they viewed history and the past. In all cases, students came from the classes that had completed the student task and, so, had already engaged with some of the issues that we wished to discuss with them face-to-face. Focus groups were typically ten in number; a number of factors – including absenteeism and last-minute withdrawal – caused a shortfall of one or two in a small number of cases. All interviews were conducted by two of the researchers and our PME student collaborators – their class teachers – sat in on the interviews. Where possible, seats were arranged in a circle or ellipse, with the researchers sitting opposite each other and students sitting to right and left of a researcher. This was done to mitigate the impact of the invisible 'wall' that often separates young people and their adult questioners. To minimise disruption to school timetables, the encounters took place during regular class periods, usually forty minutes in duration, and typically lasted for thirty to forty minutes.

To help the students settle and relax initially, following introductions (our names and theirs) we spoke with them about their experience of History as a school subject and what they liked or did not like about it. There followed an 'ice-breaking' exercise which also served to offer insights into the students' perceptions of who (at an individual level) stands out as significant in looking back over the past. The question posed was, 'Who do you think are the most significant people in history in the last 2,000 years or so?' Students were given one minute to jot down names and four minutes to discuss each other's choices in pairs. Feedback was then taken and discussed for the next five minutes or so. Besides historical significance, the other disciplinary or 'second order' concepts that we explored with the students were historical time, historical evidence and historical change. Given the crucial role that understanding of each of these concepts plays in developing more robust 'big picture' understanding and, indeed, historical understanding more generally, it seemed to us that exploring students' understanding around these concepts would help advance the key objectives of our research. Overall, our conversation with the students was steered by the following interview schedule, with some reference to relevant responses drawn from the completed student tasks:

Questions posed	Concept explored
Who do you think are the most significant people in the last 2,000 years or so? Talk to us about the reasons why you have chosen those particular people. Can you identify any links between the people you have named?	Historical significance
The people you identify are from different eras. What's your understanding of an 'era'?	Historical time
Why is history important? What is history anyway?	History/historical evidence
Can you talk to us about important changes that have happened in the last 100 years or so, and why these changes happened? In what ways do these changes still matter – or do they still matter?	Historical change

Table 10: Interview Schedule for focus-group interviews, 2019–20

In analysing the responses made by the students, we examine, in turn, the discussions that took place around each of the questions and historical concepts set out in Table 10.

For the school year 2020–21, the key point that colours all of the data analysed is the medium of communication: all focus group interaction with students took place remotely using the Zoom platform. COVID-19 restrictions made it impossible for us, as researchers, to visit the schools and meet the students face-to-face. Furthermore, social distancing and mask-wearing requirements in the classroom made communication more challenging: students' responses often had to be repeated by the teacher who, acting as intermediary, played a vital role in enabling the sessions to take place at all. Sitting in classrooms during the previous school year, engaging in face-to-face conversations with students, it was easier to 'break the ice' and to develop a rapport with the student group. While the technology used made it possible for the encounters to happen, it presented obstacles too, in that it was harder to monitor the overall reactions of students – to 'read the room,' as it were – and to identify students who might need a little coaxing or encouragement to express their thoughts. Technological hitches occurred sporadically and ate into available time.

As a consequence of the foregoing, the data gathered are a little 'thinner' than those from the 2019–20 school year. There was less time to develop and/or probe answers. However, the data gathered is far from negligible, especially following on from the valuable data gathered in 2019–20. Having this additional dataset enabled us to explore similarities in responses and concurrence of thought on the key historical concepts, as well as providing an opportunity to detect any differences in perspective or any new insights. The interview schedule used was the same as the previous year and, again, revolved around the four key concepts of historical significance, historical time, historical evidence and historical change. As before, questions testing conceptual understanding approached the core issues obliquely i.e., rather than asking students directly to explain the concept in question, we posed questions that sought to 'tie' the concept to their own experience and knowledge. Thus, we asked questions such as the following: Who do you think are the most significant people of the last 2,000 years or so? Why are these people seen as significant? Can you see what the people you identified have in common? The people you have identified come from different periods of time or eras: what is your understanding of an era? While not as free-flowing as the face-to-face encounters of the previous year, the conversations that ensued did add to our understanding of what first years students think about the past and the school subject that seeks to make sense of it for students.

5.7.1 Responses to the question, 'who do you think are the most significant people in the last 2,000 years or so?, School year 2019–20

It must be stressed at the outset that the concept of historical significance per se was not discussed with the students. Rather, as explained above, they were asked to identify figures who seemed to them historically significant and why they considered them significant. The concept seemed to us a useful lens though which to identify students' ideas about the past.

There was a degree of congruence across the eight schools – in that certain historical figures were frequently mentioned – but also variation in that all eight groups mentioned individuals who were not mentioned in any of the other seven schools. The table that follows shows the historical figures who were mentioned by at least two of the focus groups:

Historical figure	Number of focus groups	Historical figure	Number of focus groups
Adolf Hitler	7	Nelson Mandela	3
Michael Collins	6	Donald Trump	3
Albert Einstein	5	Daniel O'Connell	2
Julius Caesar	5	Eamon de Valera	2
Henry VIII	4	St Patrick	2
Martin Luther King	4	Stalin	2
Leonardo da Vinci	4	Malala [Yousafzai]	2
Jesus Christ	4	Archduke Franz Ferdinand	2
Anne Frank	3	Cleopatra	2
Pádraig Pearse	3	Isaac Newton	2
Rosa Parks	3	William the Conqueror	2
Barack Obama	3	Mozart	2

Table 11: Frequency of mention of historical figures in focus group interviews, 2019–20

Given the frequency with which World War II was mentioned by students completing the Student Task (see ***5.2*** and ***5.3***), it is, perhaps, not surprising that Hitler was mentioned more frequently than any other historical figure. The only Irish person represented in the top eight – mentioned by six of the eight focus groups – was Michael Collins, whose already high profile has arguably been raised higher by events associated with the Decade of Centenaries. Less predictable, perhaps, are the next two figures in the list, Albert Einstein and Julius Caesar, a twentieth-century scientist and an ancient Roman leader and writer. The cluster that follows – mentioned by four of the eight focus groups – groups together Henry VIII, Martin Luther King, Leonardo da Vinci and Jesus Christ. It is only when one moves down to the cluster of figures that were mentioned by just three of the focus groups that the first female figures are to be found: Anne Frank and Rosa Parks account for two of the six names in this category. Just one of the names in this cluster is Irish, Pádraig Pearse; two are living figures, Barack Obama and Donald Trump; and three are associated with the advancement of Black rights - Parks, Obama and Nelson Mandela. Of the remaining ten historical figures – who were mentioned by just two of the eight focus groups – six are political figures; three are Irish (if one includes St Patrick); two are female; one is a composer, another a scientist; and one is a living person. Given the inclusion of three living persons in the clusters discussed in this paragraph, one is struck once again at the way in which some students see historical significance emerging from contemporary interactions and conflict.

Those historical figures (57) who were mentioned by only one of the focus groups were as follows:

Hans Christian Andersen, Neil Armstrong, King Arthur, Beethoven, Alexander Graham Bell, St Brigid, the Buddha, King Charles I, [Winston] Churchill, Christopher Columbus, the Count (?), Donal Óg Cusack, Princess Diana, Amelia Earhart, Thomas Edison, Queen Elizabeth, Colonel Thomas Ferebee, Galileo, Gandhi, Jim Gavin, Gütenberg, Stephen Hawking, King Lear, King Henry II, Michael D. Higgins, James Joyce, Genghis Khan, Lenin, Queen Maeve, Mao, George Marshall, Freddie Mercury, Michelangelo, Muhammad, Elon Musk, Mussolini, Napoleon, Florence Nightingale, Michelle Obama, Grace O'Malley, Pablo Picasso, Pol Pot, Gavrilo Princip, Grigori Rasputin, Mary Robinson, Shakespeare, Strongbow, Tesla, Greta Thunberg, the captain of the Titanic, Tutenkhamun, the Tsars, Leon Varadkar, Queen Victoria, Vivaldi, George Washington, the Wright brothers.

Clearly, in the list above, there are individuals who are identified but not named (e.g., 'the captain of the Titanic' and 'the Tsars') and others who inhabit a mythical rather than an historical space ('King Lear;' 'Queen Maeve'.) Politicians and hereditary rulers feature prominently, accounting for twenty-six or so of those named (the precise number depending on how one categorises figures such as King Arthur). However, the arts are also well-represented with four writers, three composers, two painters and one pop star. Science and technology account for a further seven of those named, and there are two sportsmen in the list. The gender breakdown is forty-six male and eleven female. Among the surprising inclusions in this list (at least to the researchers) are Colonel Thomas Ferebee (one of those involved in dropping the atomic bomb on Hiroshima in 1945) and Gavrilo Princip (who assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife, Sophie, in Sarajevo in June 1914). Nine of those named are Irish. Finally, eight of those listed are still living, five of whom are male and three female.

The gender breakdown here is not unusual. In a Swedish study of Grade 5, eleven-year old pupils, which explored pupils' perceptions of historical significance, Bergman (2020) reports that, 'when the students talk about past events they only mention males.' The reasons offered for this – based on the data generated by the study – are that,

> **…. The students mainly understand history as political history, and also as male history. It is the public events that the students consider important.**

Given the frequency with which World War II was mentioned by students completing the student task, and the fact that Hitler was identified as 'significant' by focus groups more frequently than any other individual figure, it is, perhaps, not surprising to discover that the Swedish study found that, 'The students singled out the bloody and the dramatic as especially interesting to study.'

5.7.2 Responses to the invitation, 'talk to us about the reasons why you have chosen those particular people' and the question, 'can you identify any links between the people you have named?', School year 2019–20

There was a good degree of variation here, in that individual students within a focus group were often happy to talk about the reasons why they had nominated certain people and/or the links they could identify between their nominated person or persons and others who were mentioned. However, what emerged from all groups – though more pronounced in some groups than others – was the perception that the people mentioned were 'leaders' in some shape or form and, more often than not, political leaders. One of the more inclusive, all-encompassing responses came from School A, where one student said, 'Because they have done something that stands out and it will be recognised,' a comment that can be read negatively (as in the case of those seen as mass murderers) or positively (as in the case of many artists and scientists).

More typical were those responses that made specific reference to political leaders (or 'persons of power' as one School E respondent styled them) and their perceived significance, expressed succinctly in one response from School F, 'Because they are in charge.' The propensity of certain political leaders to engage in war prompted a number of observations, such as : 'Because they start most of the fights' (School E); 'Most of mine were leaders who killed a lot of people' (School H); 'leaders … in massive countries that were responsible for a lot of wars' (School D); '… you hear about them all the time … news and war' (School B). It seemed self-evident to many of the respondents that leaders would be remembered over time because, as one student from School A expressed it, '… most people would know about them or have heard of them.' Other reasons suggested as to why political leaders are remembered – and seen as significant – included: '… they can give speeches that can be remembered over time' (School B); 'They can change the country' (School E); and "Because they're kind of most important and the people who stand out the most because they have such a high status in history.' (School H) The last-cited comment may give history educationalists pause for thought: is the 'high status in history' accorded to political leaders inevitable and unproblematic, or does it require interrogation and deliberation?

Occasionally, attempts were made to classify political leaders or to contrast their *modus operandi*. In the mind of one student (in School E), 'Napoleon, Henry VIII and Adolf Hitler were all dictators.' While it would have been useful to explore the reasons for the inclusion of Henry VIII in this trio, this was not possible given the time constraints. Hitler featured again in another exchange, this time in School G, where one respondent compared and contrasted his aspirations and approach with those of the nineteenth century Irish champion of Catholic Emancipation and Repeal of the Act of Union, Daniel O'Connell. In proposing that, 'Adolf Hitler was trying to get Germany out of the situation they were in and so was Daniel O'Connell,' the student went on to argue that 'He tried to do it peacefully and get home rule for Ireland while Hitler was more violent.' The problematic nature of dictatorial rule and its manipulation of the historical record seems to be implicit in the observations of a respondent from School F who argued that:

> **It could be biased because sometimes they did what they wanted. Because they wanted it to reflect them.**

Given the preponderance of men among the political leaders identified by the focus groups, the low number of women identified became a focus of discussion, as part of the flow of conversation in some cases and as a result of prompts from one of the researchers in other cases. As one respondent in School F noted, in respect of the gender imbalance, 'A lot of them are men, because men had jobs and stuff,' adding, 'Women didn't have much power.' A respondent from School G was a little more specific in locating this phenomenon in time: 'Women didn't have as many rights up to less than a hundred years ago.' Applying a somewhat wider perspective and making a point that still remains 'live' for historiography, a respondent in School D argued that 'Women aren't credited enough for what they did in history.' In some cases, the women named by respondents were identified because they were seen as contributing to growing awareness of, and securing of, women's rights, as in this response in School A:

> **I chose a lot of women because, one hundred years ago, women didn't have as much rights as they do now and that nearly all of the names that were called out helped to get women's rights.**

(Of the names identified, this applies most obviously to Mary Robinson, and one could make a case for Rosa Parks and Michelle Obama; however, Grace O'Malley, Queen Elizabeth I and Queen Victoria hardly qualify. The inclusion of Malala Yousafzai is a reminder that the securing of women's rights is a work in progress.)

Despite the strong emphasis on political leadership, other forms of leadership were also recognised. Indeed, in respect of Malala Yousafzai, one respondent made the observation that people like her were not really political leaders but 'kind of leaders of ideas or something'. In the realm of religious leadership, one respondent from School H, who had identified Jesus, Muhammad and the Buddha as significant figures, made the observation that, 'I mentioned three religious leaders and religion has had a very big impact on the world.' In the same school, another respondent, borrowing from currently fashionable usage, argued that 'A lot of people were big influencers as well and kind of stood out because of things that they did.' The three examples given in this case were, in order, Amelia Earhart, Albert Einstein (who 'stood out more because of his intelligence') and Freddie Mercury (lead singer of the band ***Queen***). The student's line of argument in relation to Amelia Earhart is interesting as it sketches out the means by which historical significance is sometimes achieved:

> **She had a big impact because she was the first female to fly across the Atlantic, I think it was … but she was never seen again. So that also creates a bit of mystery and a bit of depth to it, so that means she could be more noticeable.**

Of the non-political leaders or 'influencers,' most attention focused on scientists and inventors, with occasional references to artists, musicians and sportspeople. Invited to make connections between figures mentioned, a respondent in School B noted that, 'Isaac Newton created the laws of gravity and Albert Einstein created the Theory of Relativity.' (While one could question the student's use of the word 'created' in relation to Newton, the ability to link two gigantic figures across time in this way deserves acknowledgement.) In School C, where the significant figures identified included Newton and Einstein, as well as Leonardo, Galileo and Gütenberg, one respondent noted that "… a couple of them were great inventors or geniuses of their time ….'

Elsewhere, in School G, two other figures linked across time were Nicola Tesla and Elon Musk: as one student put it, 'Elon Musk uses the electricity that Tesla developed to power his cars.' In School D, one respondent noted that, 'Alexander Graham Bell and Thomas Edison and da Vinci were all inventors that made a lot of stuff that revolutionised the present day.' (The inclusion of da Vinci may be due to his reputation as putative designer of a potential 'flying machine.') Da Vinci was also linked to Michelangelo by a respondent in School C who noted that both were artists and both Renaissance figures. In relation to sport, the tendency to see history as incorporating the recent past, noted elsewhere, was again evident in the linking of Donal Óg Cusack and Jim Gavin by a student in School B, who argued that 'both changed the way a sport was played.' While it would be interesting here to invite the student to develop the case for the proposition, the fact of the student positing such an argument opens potentially fruitful ground for further exploration of the concept of 'significance.'

Given the strong focus on 'leadership' and its perceived linkage with the concept of 'historical significance,' it was refreshing to hear one student – in School F – make the case for 'ordinary' people:

> **Because we are working and helping the country with money. Then, also, people are part of revolutions.'**

On the latter point, one is reminded of such seminal historical works as Rudé's ***The Crowd in the French Revolution***:[118] the student certainly had a point. While there was little focus overall on whether 'ordinary people' are significant in history and, if so, why that might be the case, one respondent in School G offered an explanation as to why ordinary people tend to get overlooked and why the focus tends to be on leaders: '… everyone knows who they are, whereas you don't really know who your average soldier is.' (The latter point underlines the significance of the ***My Adopted Soldier*** project, which involved a student in each of the thirty-two counties 'adopting' – for research purposes – a soldier from the county who was killed in World War I.)

5.7.3 Discussions around the concepts of historical eras and historical time, School year 2019–20

As was the case with the concept of historical significance, we did not engage students in discussion of the concept of historical time. We did observe, however, that the figures they identified came from different 'eras,' and we initiated discussion on their understanding of what constitutes an era. Again, we saw a focus on 'eras' as providing a helpful lens to gauge their ideas on the past and, specifically in this case, to give us further insights into the kind of 'big picture' with which they operated.

[118] George Rudé (1959), *The Crowd in the French Revolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

5.7.4 Responses to the question, 'what's your understanding of an era?' School year 2019–20

The responses to this question were generally less fluent and developed than the discussions that focused on 'significance.' For example, one student from School A tried to explain it in the following way:

> **So an era sort of starts when something becomes popular in that time. Like the Victorian era. They were inspired by Queen Victoria and when she died it sort of ended.**

What seems implicit here is the notion of differences between eras, expressed succinctly by the respondent in School B who explained, 'In the next era they developed something different.' This notion was carried further, with more in the way of explanation, in the case of a student from School C who said:

> **Eras are like different time periods. Like, the Roman Empire was an era, and then it goes through the ages … and there was … different people and buildings and wars and ways of living.**

In the case of School D, an association was immediately made with the students' study of Music, as one respondent said, 'When we were doing Music, we learned about the eras of music.' Arising from this observation, the eras that were mentioned were (in the order in which they were mentioned, students seeming unsure as to which was the correct order), 'Baroque, Renaissance, Classical, Modern.' The identification of these eras in the context of the history of music serves as a useful reminder that nomenclature applied to one area of human activity (including artistic activity) does not always correlate directly to other areas of activity, and that this can create confusion and uncertainty for students.

One of the more insightful and thoughtful responses came from a student in School C who shared the following reflection with us:

> **I was actually thinking about that recently. Like no-one ever thinks that they are in dark ages or the Middle Ages or whatever, because, every single time period, everyone thinks they are in the best time period so far. Whereas, in the future, we could be named anything.**

This was in response to a question as to whether the people who lived in particular eras used the terms that we use to describe those periods of time. The tendency, which many history teachers encounter, for some students to look down on people of the past as inferior to 'the way we do things' is well-captured here. When questioned as to why historians use names to distinguish between different periods of time, students were generally clear that this was to make the past easier to discuss and understand, as the following observations illustrate: 'It makes it easier to distinguish between them' (School F); 'It might be easier to understand in certain pieces' (School H); 'It's kind of like a map where it's broken into different sections so you can look at it closer and it kind of makes it easier' (School C).

Other issues raised by respondents around the identification of eras include the manner in which political change can come to define an era e.g. 'When a different group of leaders come. Sometimes that can define a time period.' (School H) Another made reference to the usefulness of focussing on eras when we are exploring broad patterns and developments: 'They can be very broad periods, instead of pinpointing exactly when something happens.' (School C) In the initial exchanges, when we spoke with the students about whether they liked or disliked History (as a school subject) and what they liked or disliked about it, difficulty in remembering dates was often mentioned, and one respondent in School C brought up the idea of an era as something to which it was easier to 'latch on': '… because then you have got … a sort of brief description, you kind of know what is going on in that era.' Clearly, this has implications for classroom teaching around the concept of time and will be considered further in the conclusion to this section of the report.

5.7.5 Eras identified by focus group respondents, School year 2019–20

The table that follows shows the eras identified by the different schools. The eras are listed in the order in which they were mentioned by individuals within the different focus groups. In a couple of cases, the direct words of a respondent are quoted and these will be the subject of further comment below.

The 'outlier' in the table that follows is School C, where the space for 'Eras named' is left blank. This is not due to an oversight but, rather, reflects the fact that no actual eras were named in the course of the conversation with the focus group in question. This should not be taken as an indication of a lack of familiarity with eras named by focus groups in other schools; rather, it reflects the lively, and often insightful, conversation that took place around the concept of 'era' itself and whether the names used to identify eras were used by people who lived through the period in question or whether the terms have been 'invented' by historians in the course of their research and writing.

School	Eras Named
School A	The Middle Ages; The Stone Age; Biblical times; the Bronze Age; Victorian times; Georgian.
School B	The Renaissance; Ancient Greek; Roman Empire and British Empire. Medieval; Stone Age, Bronze Age and Iron Age. Neolithic.
School C	
School D	[Music] Baroque, Renaissance, Classical, Modern. Stone Age, Bronze Age, Iron Age. Medieval times.
School E	The dinosaur age; 1916, World War I; Medieval times; Stone Age, Bronze Age, Iron Age; Roman Empire; Mongolian Empire.
School F	Stone Age, Bronze Age, Iron Age; Middle Ages; Renaissance; 'Is there a Romans' Age?'
School G	The Modern Age; Generation Z; The Age of Information. The Iron Age; the Bronze Age; the Dark Age; the Middle Ages.
School H	'In Japan there was the Edo period.' Medieval times; the Romans; Stone Age. World War I and II.

Table 12: Historical eras identified by focus group respondents, 2019–20

What is immediately apparent here is that the eras mentioned most frequently by respondents are ones usually studied in the first year of junior cycle courses viz. the Stone Age, the Bronze Age, the Iron Age, the period of Roman imperial dominance, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. (Of course, not all of these are mentioned by all of the focus groups.) It is worth noting that uncertainty as to whether the period of Roman dominance constituted an 'era' prompted one respondent in School F to ask, 'Is there a Romans' Age'? A respondent from School E reaches back to the pre-human period of natural history in referring to the 'dinosaur age.' There are few references to eras that lie between the Renaissance period and the twentieth century: those mentioned are, from School A, Victorian and Georgian times; from School B, 'British Empire;' from School C (in a musical context), Baroque, Classical, Modern; and, from School H, the Edo period of Japanese history (1603–1867). Mention of the Edo period, in particular, would suggest that the historical knowledge acquired by our students is not confined to eras and geographical spaces encompassed by the history curriculum in schools; that students' natural curiosity sparks interest in finding out more about topics of interest, through reading, viewing of documentaries, online investigation, or by other means. The issue of whether a period of dominance by an empire constitutes an era arises again in respect of the Mongolian Empire, suggested by a respondent in School E. Conflating the term 'period' with 'era' is, perhaps, not uncommon, but how helpful is it to equate the terms 'era' and 'generation,' a question prompted by the reference, from a respondent in School G to 'Generation Z'? Are the characteristics that define an era on a wider scale than those that define a generation? (Most history teachers, we believe, would answer 'yes.') Some of the issues these questions raised will be re-visited in the 'Conclusions' section of this chapter.

What seems clear from the disparate, sometimes eclectic, nature of the lists of eras identified by the eight focus groups is that there is a sense of chronology that is relatively weak in overall structural terms and in terms of connecting strands that might give it a sense of coherence. While the students' 'big pictures' are not negligible (and, in general, we believe that there is much there that provides a useful foundation on which to build), they are not robust and, we believe, would benefit from a more explicit focus on chronological understanding that includes regular use of a framework, so that students develop an improved understanding – as they study a range of historical episodes and processes – of 'what fits in where'. This would help to ensure not only that students are looking at phenomena studied in context but, also, that they are enabled to make connections - between events and processes across time, often long periods of time – that enrich understanding and deepen knowledge. These are matters that will be re-visited in the 'Conclusions' section.

5.7.6 Discussions around the concepts of history and historical evidence, School year 2019–20

The data presented here were mainly generated through questions asking students whether and why history is important and what history is anyway. Data was also drawn from our initial exchanges with the students when we asked if they liked or disliked history as a school subject and what they liked or disliked about it. These questions were intended as 'ice-melting' and 'getting to know you' in nature and, in our experience, did encourage students to 'open up' and begin to share their thoughts. They also served a useful purpose in giving us insights into the students' perceptions of History as a school subject and, occasionally, their thoughts as to why knowledge of history is life-enhancing.

5.7.7 Responses to the questions, 'do you like or dislike history as a school subject, and what do you like or dislike about it?', School year 2019–20

In responding to these questions, the students identified what they saw as positives and negatives in the experience of learning history in school, including approaches to teaching and learning. Some also looked beyond the classroom to consider the value of history in a more holistic, quasi-philosophical way. If it seems a little fanciful to ascribe an almost philosophical quality to the musings of some of these first-year students, then we would suggest that the thoughtful contributions of some of our respondents deserve careful reading and consideration and that we, as teachers, have much to learn from their words of reflection.

Beginning with responses which made specific reference to classroom work and in-school experience, a number of respondents in School A made clear their preference for project work and classroom 'activities' ('drama and acting things out' being one of those mentioned) and, as one respondent said, 'Not just writing stuff in our copies.' When pressed as to the preference for projects, one respondent noted that, '… a lot of the time, you would bring it home' and that one of the advantages of this was that '… you have the internet, you have books. You have a lot more things to research.' There is an echo of this view in the response of a student from School D who revealed that: "I like history, but I prefer to find out myself. It feels more of a task when you have to do it.'

In identifying what they liked about school history, two contrasting areas of interest emerged, one broad and wide-ranging, the other more narrowly-focused. The more wide-ranging one related to human activities in the past and was often mentioned in a generalised and non-specific way e.g. 'I like learning about the way that people lived a long time ago and how different people were treated like slaves, and rich people' (School F); 'I like learning about how other people lived, how they lived long ago.' (School G) A welcome readiness to understand the people of the past on their own terms and not adopt a 'superior' attitude is evident in the response from a student in School C who said:

> **I like the way it's just learning about how people dealt with things, without our sort of modern technology, in the past. Just to show that it is possible to live without all of our fancy items. But I just find it interesting to learn how people adapted and evolved.**

Another response worthy of close examination is that of a respondent in School H who said:

> **I like history because we learn about stuff that happened in the past, and it's easier to learn about the future as well. So that you can learn from mistakes that we made a really long time ago. So that we won't make them in the future.**

This response is particularly noteworthy in light of the History specification's focus on how the study of history develops our historical consciousness' 'enabling us to orient ourselves in time and to place our experiences in a broader framework of human experience.' [JC specification, Rationale, p.4] The student can see how 'stuff that happened in the past' can play a vital part in informing decision-making in the future. Building on this sort of understanding through the use of 'a broader framework of human experience' is a fundamental objective of all 'big picture' teaching, including the use of the framework, 'Our History Scaffold.'

The more narrowly-focused area of interest identified by a number of respondents in these opening conversations was notable. The responses in question were clear and unequivocal and succinct: 'I like battles' (School C); 'I like the war side of history' (School D); 'I like learning about the world wars and what happened around them' (School G). On a similar note, in which the martial dimension seemed evident, the reason one respondent from School E gave for liking the study of History at school was, 'You get to learn about the Vikings.' The interest expressed in military history is hardly surprising, given the responses in the student task to the question concerning the parts of history that students remembered best, where World War 2 was most frequently mentioned. What may be surprising is that this area of interest did not feature more strongly in responses. However, it must be remembered that the dynamic of a 'student task' exercise, where students write out their responses individually, is different to that of a focus group (consisting of, perhaps, half the class that completed the task), where the direction of the conversation is being steered by the interviewers and students have the opportunity to react to what classmates or interviewers are saying.

We have already drawn on the words of two students (from Schools C and H) who brought a wonderfully reflective element to their consideration of why they liked history. A respondent from School B highlighted the interpretive function of history as a scholarly and educational pursuit in suggesting that, 'It kind of shapes how we understand the past events, and technology now, and other things like culture.' The use of the word 'shapes' is interesting here in that the statement could also be made in respect of the exercise of propaganda. Clearly, however, the kind of 'shaping' that results from learning history is different in character from the kind of shaping that results from propagandistic intent, at least in countries that adhere to democratic and inclusive values. As the student recognises, the 'shaping' function in our history classrooms is intended to assist understanding. The shaping function in the exercise of propaganda is intended to assist indoctrination. The student's recognition of the role that history plays also encompasses its role in helping us to understand the technological complexity of the world in which we live and the cultural milieu in which we live our daily lives.

In identifying what they did not like about school history, there was a remarkable unanimity across seven of the eight schools in focusing on the element of memorisation required (or perceived as being required), with a particular emphasis on the memorisation of dates. Respondents expressed themselves in the following ways: 'Remembering things … and chronological order. Like when the events happen … and there are so many historical events' (School A); 'A lot of detail'; 'Because there are so many key words that we have to learn' (School B); 'All the names and remembering every single name and every single person who lived in history is kind of hard'; 'I think I find it hard to remember dates when things happen' (School C); 'Remembering dates for tests. Dates just go out of my head. I know what happened but I don't know when it happened.' (School D); 'Definitely remembering the dates!' (School E); 'Like having to remember sources and all is really boring' (School G); It's hard to remember different details … dates ….' (School H). In the case of School G, the student was apparently referring to definitions of the different kinds of historical sources. In School F – where no reference was made to difficulties of memorisation – the question as to what the students disliked prompted the response that, 'It's just certain words that are difficult. Especially in Irish.' The context here is that the school teaches all subjects through the medium

of the Irish language and, since textbooks are only available in English, the teachers and their students have an additional challenge in translating terms that are little used outside of the History classroom.

The students' focus on the challenges of memorisation may reflect what has sometimes been seen as an excessive emphasis on memorisation in the state examinations. One would hope that the introduction of other modes of assessment (through the Leaving Certificate Documents-based Study and Research Study and the Junior Cycle Classroom-based Assessments) will help to alleviate this challenge over time. Within the confines of the formal examinations in History, the use of questions that require analysis of sources has the potential to ease the pressures created by excessive focus on tests of memory – if teachers in their classroom tests give due attention to development of analytical skills. One of the issues here is that tests of memory are easier to administer and mark; but their educational value is limited. If we seriously believe that analytical skills are an intrinsic element of what our History course are setting out to achieve, then, it seems to us, that we need to take these skills more seriously, at every level of the education system, including teacher CPD and State Examination Commission (SEC) procedures.

5.7.8 Responses to the questions, 'is history important? why? what is history anyway?', School year 2019–20

The importance of history seemed to be taken as a given: nobody argued against its importance. A number of themes emerged clearly in discussion of the importance of history. The two dominant themes were: the role history plays in helping us understand the world we live in, and the claim that knowledge of mistakes made in the past can help us avoid making such mistakes in the present and in the future. The following is a representative selection of responses: 'We can learn what people did to make the world like we live in today and how we got to where we are today' (School B); 'I think it's important because … it's good to be able to know how we got here' (School C); 'So we understand how we got to this point' (School G);'So we understand what happened in the past … so that we can avoid maybe repeating the past' (School H); 'If people made mistakes in the past we would know not to make them again' (School B); 'So we learn not to make the same mistakes again' (School G). Some responses were a little more directive and specific. For example, one student from School B highlighted the centrality of the concept of change to historical study: 'So we can see how people lived in the past. To see how much has changed.' Another respondent from the same school – on the question of why history is important - suggested: "So that we can survive longer … so that we can find out more about diseases and how they affected us.' In a world of on-going conflict and recurrent war, it was chastening to hear one respondent from School C argue that 'It helps us learn from mistakes we have made in the past, things like world wars. It helps us to learn that we need to be a bit more cautious.' Perhaps we need to 'learn better'? Another respondent from the same school re-affirmed the value of understanding: 'It's good to know because, say a conflict happened in a certain country, if you studied the past in that country, you would know what was leading up to that conflict.'

When we moved on to discuss 'What is history anyway?' a majority identified it as study of the past, as the following responses attest: 'It's a study of the past from what we know today' (School A); 'The study of the past' (School B); 'It's a study of the people in the past and how people reacted to things

in the past' (School C); 'History is the study of the past' (School D); 'It's the study of the past' (School G). In the case of School E, while no respondent explicitly stated that it was study of the past, one respondent did answer 'Research.' In apposition to these responses that focused on the activity of studying history, a number of respondents made reference to other meanings that attach to the word, specifically past events themselves or the surviving relics or records of these events, as follows: 'Everything that has happened before' (School D); 'Everything that happened in the past' (School E); 'What came before us' (School F); 'Different events that happened in the past' (School F); 'Something that happened not now' (School H); 'It's the documented records of the past' (School D); 'The legacy of things that are left … maybe like the Colosseum' (School F). The reference here to 'documented records of the past' is an indication of how the issue of sources and the concept of evidence arose as a matter of course in some focus group discussions. In other cases, it took a little probing on our part to get students to articulate what they understood about 'how we know what we know.' Levels of understanding did not appear to vary substantially across the eight schools.

In identifying types of source and evidence that enable us to learn about the lives of people in the past, it was noteworthy that archaeological evidence loomed large in the consciousness of many of the students, as the following responses exemplify: '… artefacts that have been left behind and we have discovered and studied them, and we can see what they did back then' (School A); 'They excavate a site and look for things that people used back in the day' (School B); 'Research of objects and things they left behind, and archaeology' (School C); 'There are accidental finds' (School D); 'They find weapons and stuff when they're diggin'' (School E); 'Castles' (School E); 'Archaeologists tend to dig up some building and ruins of the past, and then you can use carbon dating to see how old they are' (School F); 'People's bones and teeth can show the diets they had' School F); 'Drawings in caves (School G); 'Carvings' (School G); 'Artefacts' (School G); 'By finding artefacts …' (School H); 'Sometimes, there are pieces missing, so you put them together' (School H). It appears that the concreteness and material nature of the evidence in these cases makes it easier for the students to comprehend and to integrate into their understanding of how knowledge of the past is constructed. In some cases, where a source such as the Book of Kells is identified (as was the case in School H), it was unclear whether its status as an artefact or as a written source was uppermost in the student's mind.

In a wider, research context, it is noteworthy that Becher and Glaser (2018), reporting on an important study in some German elementary schools, found that, in the case of six to eight year old pupils, 'the discovery of artefacts is recognized as an important part of historical research', that excavations and finds play an important role in how we find out about the past. The notion that history is based on things found later was a 'pattern of interpretation … found in almost all of the students interviewed.' On interviewing older pupils in the third and fourth grades, the researchers found that 'there seems to be no progress in this aspect of their historical understanding.' Some individual students were able to identify other sources of evidence such as oral transmission, textual sources and photographs and this is also true of our first year History respondents.

Beyond the archaeological, an understanding of how personal testimony contributes to building up the historical record was evident in a number of responses in the focus groups. The following example from School F was one of the clearer responses: 'Sometimes there are certain books that

people have written, like the Anne Frank book, and there are bits of it and she is telling you what happened.' Another example, from School B, focused on the value of interviewing grandparents:

> **They could tell us what life was like when they were growing up. They can speak more freely to you, you have known them your whole life and you are more comfortable speaking to them than a teacher.**

The putative value of interviewing grandparents was also mentioned by respondents in Schools E and F. The term 'eyewitness' was used by a respondent in School D who, drawing on contemporary scenarios, gave the example of 'a terrorist attack, and there was an eyewitness, and then you can record them in an interview.'

Allied to the notion of personal testimony, there was also an awareness among some respondents that record-keeping contributes to later historical understanding and account-construction. We referred above to the respondent in School D who described history as 'the documented records of the past.' A respondent in School C explained how we learn about history, 'From records people have took. Even if they are in ancient Egyptian ….' Many respondents mentioned types of record that historians use; however, time did not permit any probing of the extent to which respondents understood the sometimes-problematic nature of records and the ways in which they are used by historians. Amongst the types of historical records mentioned were: '… a book or newspaper or something like a letter or poster or anything like that' (School B); 'Recorded interviews' (School C); "Birth certificate' (School E)' 'A census' (School E); 'A will' (School F), 'Interviews or newspaper articles' (School G). An acknowledgement that not everything gets recorded came from a respondent in School D who noted that, 'Things don't necessarily have to be documented and written down; they could be oral history ….' When pressed on the significance of 'evidence' and its importance in history, insofar as we got direct responses these tended to equate historical evidence with judicial evidence; the notion of evidence as 'proof', as these few responses illustrate, was never far from the surface: 'Evidence … to prove things from that time' (School F); 'To show that stuff happened' (School G); 'That it can prove what has happened' (School H). Since an understanding of how history operates as a discipline is crucial to the development of robust 'big pictures' of the past, this will be the subject of further comment in the concluding section of this chapter.

5.7.9 Discussions around the concept of historical change, School year 2019–20

In this case, the data presented here were mainly generated through questions inviting students to talk to us about important changes that had happened in the last one hundred years or so, why these changes happened, and whether these changes still matter in the present day. Initial answers were sometimes monosyllabic and generalised (e.g., 'war'), but follow-up questions generally helped to clarify what the student had in mind. Awareness of change as process was evident in some responses but not in others; in some cases, significant events were identified as changes (e.g., '1916 Rising'), shorn of context that would enable clearer identification of the change envisaged and the consequences of that change. These and related issues will be discussed in the analysis that follows.

5.7.10 Responses to the question, 'can you talk to us about important changes that happened in the last 100 years or so (and why they happened)?', School year 2019–20

Responses ranged widely, not always constrained within the 'last 100 years or so' parameter. Thus, one respondent in School A remarked, 'I know it's a long time ago, but when we were fish and then we evolved into humans,' whilst another, from School F, made reference to the Stone Age invention of fire and the wheel.' At the other end of the chronological spectrum, respondents in four of the schools (Schools B, D, F and G) made reference to 'Brexit'/Britain leaving the EU. A majority of responses fell into one of four categories: the securing of rights by people previously denied these; technological developments; the securing of Irish independence; and war and its consequences. The latter two categories received less detailed comment than the first two.

It is noteworthy that campaigning for rights and/or the securing of rights featured in responses in all eight schools. The main elements of the relevant responses are set out in Table 13:

School	Changes Identified
School A	'A lot of people would have protested for rights. Like Rosa Parks protested for black rights.' Women's rights: 'Like the right to vote and … women used to stay at home and mind the kids but now they are … out working.'
School B	Getting people's rights
School C	'Like rights and equality for different people, like for women, and for people who don't have as much money has changed massively over the past 100 years for the better.' Black people's rights: 'Like in the United States, there was a lot of slavery.' [Mentioned] South Africa, Nelson Mandela, Rosa Parks.
School D	Black and white people getting equal rights; The gender gap that is slowly closing; Suffragettes: 'They dressed up as men and committed crimes because they weren't getting equal rights.'
School E	Sexual equality Women's rights Women's roles
School F	'… the acceptance of all races … black rights …'. Human rights; Women's rights.
School G	Women getting the vote 'Women's rights … and jobs.'
School H	'Women got rights.' 'Rights for black people.'

Table 13: Historical changes identified by focus group, 2019–20

As is evident from a glance at the table, the two main areas of focus here are black rights and women's rights. In two schools (School A and School C), specific reference was made to the role played by Rosa Parks in the struggle for black rights in the USA, with a respondent in School C also mentioning the role of Nelson Mandela in South Africa. In respect of women's rights, the right to vote and women's work roles were the main areas of focus. The role of the suffragettes in securing the right of women to vote was mentioned by a respondent in School D, while a respondent in School F noted the impact of World War I, where women's employment in munitions factories and other posts previously reserved for men helped to bolster support for women's suffrage. In at least three of the schools (Schools E, G and H), there was an awareness of the marriage bar, whereby women who married had to step down from jobs in the civil and public service. The students were generally unequivocal in responding that the changes mentioned still matter today because, as one respondent in School H argued, '… some women are still fighting for rights … like in Afghanistan,' and, as a respondent in School C noted, 'They aren't perfect, but they still changed.' The slow, piecemeal and somewhat attritional nature of campaigns for social justice is well captured here.

Some other, significant matters of consequence in relation to the roles of women are also mentioned. (At least one of these applies equally to men.) One is the issue of education. As one respondent in School H noted: 'Girls and boys go to school now, girls don't have to get married very young.' A reference to sexual equality in School E focused on another dimension of gender roles relating to interpersonal sexual relations, as the student argued: 'Men and women are equal now, so you can be attracted to men or women or both.' (This was the only reference to the possibility of non-binary relationships in the course of the eight focus group meetings.) Finally, the need for on-going change to bring about a more equal society was firmly in the mind of the respondent from School E who, conscious of the gender pay gap that still exists today in many work environments, argued that: 'Women still get paid only 75% of what men get paid for jobs.'

Of the technological changes mentioned, most attention focused on computers and the internet. As a respondent from School C explained,

> **A lot of things wouldn't have really happened without computers. Your phone now can get data so quickly. We have evolved so much from the first ever computer which was about, I think, the size of this room.**

On the impact of the internet, another respondent from the same school remarked, 'That has changed the lives of a lot of people' and spoke about the ease with which an historical figure such as Rosa Parks can be studied 'without having to go … to the back of the library to find a book about her.' Ease of access to world news and ease of communication were mentioned by a respondent in School E who observed, 'You can just text people instead of sending them letters, and find out what's happening around the world.' Another respondent from the same school mentioned the popularity of the computer applications Snapchat and Instagram. A sense of wonderment at the rapid advance of innovation in this area seems implicit in the response of the School B respondent who said, 'You can get watches where you are able to call people on them and you are able to text people on them.'

Other technological developments were noted as follows: invention of the car (School A); electronic machines, transport, weapons (School B); play stations, cinema, TV (School C); nuclear weapons

(School D); electric cars (School E); electricity (School F); the Industrial Revolution (School G). A School H respondent drew attention to the implications for the environment of certain technological developments in identifying 'global warming' as a significant change over recent decades. Global warming was also mentioned by respondents in Schools B, F and G.

In relation to the securing of Irish independence, respondents in three schools (School B, School C and School D) made reference to the 1916 Rising, albeit only one of these (in School C) explicitly connected it with the independence struggle. When asked why the 1916 Rising was significant in relation to change, the student in question began as follows: 'Because it made Ireland … it helped Ireland to become an independent country.' The student went on to explain the slight hesitancy evident here by adding:

> **Let's say it made Ireland a different country. But then I remembered there was a lot more following on in the following years.**

A respondent in just one school – School G – made reference to the decade of centenaries which has received a good deal of attention in various media over the past ten years. Another respondent had given as an example of change countries winning their independence and, when asked for an example, had mentioned Lithuania. When one of the interviewers asked for another example, the following was the response:

> **Ireland, of course. And, of course, there's a decade of commemorations taking place at the moment to commemorate lots of events around independence.**

Given that this is the only reference – across the eight schools – to current commemorative events, it is worth noting that Learning Outcome 1.3 of the Junior Cycle History specification proposes that students should be able to

> **Appreciate their cultural inheritance through … discussing why historical personalities, events and issues are commemorated.**

School D was the school where most attention was focused on war as a nexus of change. When pressed as to the type of change that wars have caused, reference was generally made to casualties; as a School D respondent noted, 'World War 2 was one of the biggest losses of life.' A respondent in School F, who also noted the high casualty rates in both World Wars, made the link with jobs for women in munitions factories and how it boosted the case for women's suffrage, as already noted above. A rare instance of the theme of 'war' being linked with issues around Irish independence occurred in School A, where a respondent elaborated on the identification of 'wars' as significant change by adding, 'England took some of our country and now we don't have the North of Ireland.' Otherwise, most observations made by respondents related to the world wars. In discussing big changes brought about by World War 2, a respondent from School F mentioned '… the invention of the atomic bomb, because whenever we have wars now we could ruin the planet.' In the case of School D, student interest in World War 2 expressed itself in some detailed analysis of the German campaign in Russia, of which the following is an excerpt:

> **… he thought he could do it in no time so he didn't give his soldiers winter clothes and so they punched so far into Russian territory that they couldn't get back to the base**

> **camps and they didn't have any kind of heavy warm jackets to keep them warm and stop them freezing and the tank oil was turning to jelly …**

The student's well-argued contention was that this changed the course of the war, and resulted in Germany coming under pressure from both west and east. The manner in which the war prompted the formation of the European Union and the United Nations to work towards more peaceful futures was mentioned by other respondents in School D.

5.7.11 Responses to the question, 'in what way do these changes still matter, or do they still matter?', School year 2019–20

We have already mentioned – in relation to advancement in the securing of rights previously denied – that students were generally unequivocal in responding that the changes in question still matter today. This was also their stated position in relation to other changes discussed. For example, a respondent in School A argued that,

> **If those changes didn't happen in the past, the world would be a lot different today. If we didn't invent the common car we wouldn't have Teslas today.**

There is a recognition here that technological innovation today does not exist in some sort of ahistorical vacuum but is built on the technological achievements of people who have gone before us. In the case of School E, where the main focus had been on social change, and where the immediate response to the question was that the changes do still matter, the interviewer's question as to why this was so met with the following evidently heartfelt response: 'Because if it wasn't for those changes, God knows where we'd be now.' The implicit assumption in this response (and implicit also in other responses already cited) that the present is a better time to live in than the past appears to sit comfortably with the conviction that the recorded past is a useful primer to guide orientation in time and, specifically, planning for the future. As one respondent in School H noted, when asked to explain the importance of learning about different kinds of historical change in the classroom: 'So we don't do careless things in the future.' And in contrast to Francis Fukuyama, whose 1992 book ***The End of History and the Last Man***[119] suggested that a developmental end-point had been reached with the triumph and anticipated universalisation of Western liberal democracy, another respondent in School H, in a discussion on whether rights – once secured – are guaranteed to endure, succinctly responded: 'No. Nothing is permanent.'

[119] Francis Fukuyama (1992), *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Free Press.

5.8 The 'entry' interviews, 2020–21: responses and analysis

In a similar manner to the 2019–20 cohort, the concepts of historical significance, historical time, historical evidence and historical change were explored indirectly with the 2020–21 cohort of students through open questioning.

5.8.1 Responses to the question, 'who do you think are the most significant people in the last 2,000 years or so?' School year 2020–21

There was a degree of congruence across the seven schools – in that certain historical figures were frequently mentioned – but also variation in that all seven groups mentioned individuals who were not mentioned in any of the other six schools. The table below shows the historical figures who were mentioned by at least two of the focus groups:

Historical figure	Number of focus groups	Historical figure	Number of focus groups
Adolf Hitler	7	Greta Thunberg	3
Martin Luther King	6	George Washington	3
Julius Caesar	6	Napoleon	3
Joseph Stalin	4	Nelson Mandela	3
Jesus Christ	4	Abraham Lincoln	2
Rosa Parks	4	Leonardo da Vinci	2
Donald Trump	4	William Shakespeare	2
Anne Frank	3	Barack Obama	2
Christopher Columbus	3	Albert Einstein	2

Table 14: Frequency of mention of historical figures in focus group interviews, 2020–21

Given the frequency with which World War II was mentioned by students completing the written task (see ***5.2*** and ***5.3***), it is, perhaps not surprising that, once again, Hitler is mentioned more frequently than any other historical figure: indeed, he was mentioned by all seven focus groups. On this occasion, no Irish person features in the table i.e. there is no Irish historical figure that was mentioned by more than one of the seven focus groups. Mentioned by all bar one of the focus groups, Martin Luther King and Julius Caesar are not the most obvious 'bedfellows,' but both clearly have profiles that engage the interest of curious twelve and thirteen year olds. The group mentioned by four of the seven focus groups includes another black rights' leader, Rosa Parks; another leader possibly included because of his association with World War 2; and the unlikely pairing of Jesus Christ and Donald Trump. Much in the news at the time the interviews took place, the inclusion of Trump may reflect the penetration of media (including social media) coverage of political developments into the lives of young people and, perhaps, even a perception of witnessing 'history in the making.' Besides Rosa Parks, the only other females mentioned are Anne Frank and Greta Thunberg, both mentioned by three of the groups. Three political leaders account for all bar one of the remaining figures mentioned by three of the groups. Of the five figures identified by two of the groups, two were American presidents while the other three were a

very famous artist, a very famous writer and a very famous scientist. As with the data reviewed from 2019–20, given the inclusion of three living persons in the clusters discussed in this paragraph, it is worth noting once again the way in which some students see historical significance emerging from contemporary interactions and conflict.

Those historical figures (41) who were mentioned by only one of the focus groups were as follows:

Akbar, Mohammad Ali, Neil Armstrong, Alexander Graham Bell, Joe Biden, Osama Bin Laden, Eva Braun, Cleopatra, Michael Collins, James Connolly, Oliver Cromwell, Eamon de Valera, Princess Diana, Amelia Earhart, George Floyd, Steve Jobs, Roy Keane, Helen Keller, Abraham Lincoln, King Henry VIII, Michael D. Higgins, John F. Kennedy, Maximillian Kolbe, Martin Luther, Malala, Karl Marx, Michelangelo, Marilyn Monroe, St Patrick, Pádraig Pearse, the Queen, FDR, Teddy Roosevelt, Spartacus, Nicolas Tesla, Harriet Tubman, King Tut, Queen Victoria, William the Conqueror, the Wright Brothers, Mark Zuckerberg.

As in the corresponding list from 2019–20, politicians and political activists and hereditary rulers or their family members feature prominently, accounting for over twenty of those named (the precise number depending on how one categorises figures such as the rebel leader Spartacus and the British royal, Princess Diana). If we interpret the broad area of science and technology to include innovation in the development and use of new technology, that accounts for a further seven (Armstrong, Graham Bell, Earhart, Jobs, Tesla, the Wright brothers and Zuckerberg). Only one sportsman is named. The gender breakdown is thirty-one male and ten female. Among the surprising inclusions in this list (at least to the researchers) are Akbar (a sixteenth-century Moghul emperor in India) and Harriet Tubman (the abolitionist and former slave who also campaigned for women's suffrage). The inclusion of Akbar is, perhaps, a reflection of the changing ethnic profile in Irish classrooms. Seven of those named are Irish. Finally, five of those listed are still living, three of whom are male and two female.

5.8.2 Responses to the invitation, 'talk to us about the reasons why you have chosen those particular people' and the question, 'can you identify any links between the people you have named?' School year 2020–21

Once again – and perhaps to a greater extent than the 2019–20 cohort – there was a range of responses, albeit generally indicating that the people mentioned had leadership roles or had a big impact on the world. Typical was the response from a student in School I who said - in respect of Obama, Lincoln, Trump and Hitler – 'They were all leaders of their countries.' When questioned as to why there tends to be such a focus on leaders, a respondent in School K replied, 'Because they have a big impact on the world.' The notion of 'impact' featured strongly and was not confined to those who were leaders in the political sphere. A respondent in School M – in respect of a list of significant people which included Hitler, Columbus and Tesla - noted that, 'They had a big impact on the world, some negative and some positive.' When pressed as to which ones had a positive impact, the names mentioned were Obama, Washington and Jesus.

Allied to the notion of 'impact,' many respondents made reference to people whom they saw as agents of change. In seeking to encapsulate the significance of people in a disparate list which included Jesus Christ, Adolf Hitler, Albert Einstein and Julius Caesar, a respondent in School M suggested, 'Because they're people who have changed the world. The world wouldn't be the same without them if they hadn't existed.' While not specifying the people the speaker had in mind, a respondent in School I suggested they were important because, 'They targeted women's rights and changed how everyone saw those people.' Less approvingly, a respondent in School K noted of Hitler that, 'He brought massive change to Germany.' In the course of further discussion, other respondents from the same school argued that 'Some of them brought laws that shouldn't have been enforced' – Hitler and Stalin had just been mentioned – and, specifically in respect of Hitler, 'He brought in a lot of laws against Jews.'

A frequently mentioned connecting strand was the pursuit – and, sometimes, achievement – of human rights. In most cases, this related to named individuals. In School J, one respondent connected Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela because. '... both fought for equality.' In School K, a respondent who named Harriet Tubman said, 'I think she was important because she fought for black people's rights.' In School L, the case for nominating Rosa Parks was that 'She fought against racism.' A School N respondent who named Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks, suggested that 'They both shaped human rights.' Pondering a list that included Rosa Parks, Joe Biden, Malala Yousafzai, Martin Luther King, Greta Thunberg and George Floyd, a respondent in School O noted, 'A lot of them stand for human rights and equality.' In considering the preponderance of men in the list of significant figures, a respondent in School J applied an element of historical perspective in reflecting, 'In a lot of history, males had more rights than women, so it was a lot easier for them.' A similar perspective is evident in the response of a student in School L who said:

> **I guess up until the last couple of hundred years people think that only men are capable of ruling, and that up until recently there weren't many females who had done the same amount of things as the men had.**

The attention given to figures associated with the struggle for human rights may reflect the impact of initiatives at primary school level such as the 'Learn Together Ethical Education Curriculum' – developed by the Educate Together school movement – which focuses attention on these issues.

A good example of the way in which interest in World War 2 shaped many responses arose in School J where, in respect of Winston Churchill, Adolf Hitler, Eva Braun and Maximilian Kolbe, one respondent noted:

> **They all did things in World War 2, I guess. Eva Braun and Adolf Hitler were husband and wife, and Adolf Hitler led Germany into World War 2, and Maximilian Kolbe was taken into Auschwitz, the concentration camp.**

Picking up on the names just mentioned and the majority of other figures identified, another respondent in the same school observed, "A lot of them are European names … English names.' Although she was only named once, the case for Queen Victoria's inclusion was firmly made by a respondent in School L:

> **I got her because she did a lot for Britain, and Britain could rule other countries. Her rule was one of the most important times in Britain and she was respected.**

As one of the few non-European figures identified, the case for Akbar, on grounds of political power, was also firmly stated, but clear-sighted:

> **So, I picked him because he is one of the most important people in Indian history. He was a king and he ruled most of India, and he did plan to rule more of the place but he could not.**

An interesting perspective was displayed by the respondent in School N who observed: 'A lot of people that were mentioned would want to prove people wrong and they succeeded in doing that.' When asked who this might apply to, Christopher Columbus and Spartacus were the two mentioned. It might be a fruitful exercise to apply the observation to others mentioned by the group, such as Rosa Parks, Albert Einstein and Alexander Graham Bell. Indeed, the observation might also illuminate our assessment of contemporary figures named by the group, such as Greta Thunberg and Donald Trump, of whom another School N respondent said, 'I think they are both fighting against each other,' another reminder of how the issue of conflict appears to engage the attention and interest of our student groups. As before, the identification of contemporary figures is an indication of how many students' perception of history 'segues' into the present, as students witness what many see as 'history in the making.'

5.8.3 Discussions around the concepts of historical eras and historical time, School year 2020–21

Again, as in 2019–20, we made the observation that the figures they identified came from different 'eras', and we initiated discussion on their understanding of what constitutes an era. As previously explained, we saw a focus on 'eras' as providing a helpful lens to gauge their ideas on the past and, specifically, their conceptions of time. Engaging with the students remotely via Zoom, and with their classroom teacher as intermediary, there was less opportunity to probe responses than had been the case the previous year. Nevertheless, some helpful data was gathered.

5.8.4 Responses to the question, 'what's your understanding of an era?', School year 2020–21

Once again, as with the 2019–20 cohort (see ***5.7.3*** and ***5.7.4***), students did not find it easy to explain 'era'. Perhaps the most lucid response came from a respondent in School J who explained:

> **It is a time when things were done in a certain way and certain people were in power, and over time they evolved and had better methods of doing things.**

What is interesting about this response is that there is an implicit awareness of change from one era to another as process. In other cases, the perception of change, and indeed history, as event, is apparent, as in this example from School I:

> **Whenever there is a time when something is happening or until that thing went away, like the Renaissance. It was a big part, and then something else happened.**

From the same school, another respondent suggested: 'The next stage begins when something new or important is discovered.'

When questioned as to whether people of the time used the names that we use to describe their eras or whether the names are ones that we use for our own purposes, students invariably responded that the terms are 'ours' not 'theirs;' as a student in School N responded, 'I think that would be the term that we would use today.' A respondent in School O proposed a rationale:

> **I think we use them today to divide them into different groups. So they are easier to remember.**

Suggesting a broadly similar rationale, a School N respondent explained the periodisation of the past as follows:

> **So they all just don't blend into one story. And you don't get them mixed up. You have all these different chapters in history.**

An issue that the latter response raises is the extent to which student perception of periods or eras is influenced by the manner in which historical data is ordered and 'packaged' in textbooks. We shall return to this issue presently but, first, we need to outline the eras identified by the seven focus groups.

5.8.5 Eras identified by focus group respondents, School year 2020–21

The table that follows shows the eras identified by the seven schools. Once again, the eras are listed in the order in which they were mentioned by individuals within the different focus groups. In a couple of cases, the direct words of a respondent are quoted.

School	Eras Named
School I	The Renaissance; The Stone Age; the Bronze Age; the Jurassic period.
School J	The Victorian period; the Georgian era; the Renaissance;
School K	Ancient Rome; early Christian Ireland; the Victorian era.
School L	The Iron Age; the Stone Age.
School M	'World War 2 and the Irish Famine'; Ancient Egypt; Medieval times; 'The Iron Age, Bronze Age and Stone Age'; Neolithic (period).
School N	The Easter Rising, World War 2 (as initiators of periods of change); the Renaissance; the Viking age; Ancient Rome; the Stone Age; the Victorian era.
School O	Medieval times; the Stone Age; the Ice Age.

Table 15: Historical eras identified by focus group respondents, 2020–21

Again, as in the case of the 2019–20 cohort, it is noteworthy that the eras mentioned most frequently by respondents are ones usually studied in the first year of junior cycle courses viz. the Stone Age, the Bronze Age, the Iron Age, Ancient Rome, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. (Once again, of course, not all of these are mentioned by all of the focus groups.) The somewhat surprising inclusion of the Easter Rising and World War 2 is made more explicable by the response to a follow-up question which characterised these events as initiators of periods of change. On this occasion, we have two respondents – from Schools I and O respectively - reaching back to the pre-human period of natural history as they made reference, respectively, to the Jurassic period and the Ice Age. The only references to eras that lie between the Renaissance period and the twentieth century are fleeting references to the Georgian 'era' (School J) and the Victorian period (Schools J and N).

While the circumstances in which data was collected were far from ideal, the evidence provided would tend to support the conclusion reached in respect of the 2019–20 cohort that 'there is a sense of chronology that is relatively weak in overall structural terms and in terms of connecting strands that might give it a sense of coherence'. (See ***5.7.5***.) There is awareness of a set of historical periods but the chronological placement of these seems blurry and inchoate, and there is no evidence for any notion of an overarching 'long arc of development.' This further strengthens our conviction that the students would benefit from a more explicit focus on chronological understanding that includes regular use of a framework. This matter will be re-visited in the 'Conclusions' section.

5.8.6 Discussions around the concepts of history and historical evidence, School year 2020–21

Unlike our pre- COVID exchanges with students, there was no opportunity for preliminary, 'ice-breaking' questions as to whether they liked history and what they liked or disliked about it. Technological challenges and constraints required a more focused concentration on our interview schedule: the data examined here, therefore, was generated by questions as to what exactly history is and what it is based on i.e. 'How do we know what life was like in the past?' Thus, the focus on historical evidence tended to come earlier than in the 2019–20 interviews.

5.8.7 Responses to the questions, 'why is history important? what is history anyway?, School year 2020–21

Again, the importance of history seemed to be taken as a given. On this occasion, the dominant themes were, first, the role history plays in helping us understand the past and the different ways in which people lived their lives and, second, the claim that knowledge of mistakes made in the past can help us avoid making such mistakes in the present and the future. The following response from a student in School J would seem to combine the two themes:

> **I think that people study the past so they can learn how things worked and what people did and what they did that worked and how they got into disputes for wars, so we can evolve from it.**

The following is a representative selection of responses that expressed the first theme, that history helps us understand people of the past: 'History helps us know what happened in the past and how people lived in the past' (School L); 'It would matter so we could see how they lived. Like what weapons they would use, what tools they would use, their houses or their food that they would eat' (School N); 'Going back in time and seeing what life back then was like' (School O). Another respondent from School O succinctly encapsulates the second theme of learning lessons from the past, as follows:

> **Well, history is important because it means we can look back at what happened before and also note the mistakes that we have done and not do them again.**

The hint of orientation here is also captured in the observations of a third respondent from the same school who links past, present and future in the following way:

> **Like centuries from today they are going to know about us as history, and then it is good to know about your past because then you can find stuff about your relatives.**

On the issue of what history is, responses were straightforward and 'in unison' in identifying it as study of the past. While this was explicitly stated by respondents in Schools I, J, and K, it was also implicit in responses in each of the other schools. (The response from School O on learning lessons from the past, cited above, would be one example of this.) As to what the subject matter of that study might be, the number of references to social history (evident in many of the responses cited above) is noteworthy. Indeed, in conversation with the School I focus group, when the question of whether history is about powerful people only or about all kinds of people from the past, the response was unequivocal: 'It's about all types of people in the past.'

5.8.8 Responses to the questions, 'how do we know about history? what is our knowledge based on? School year 2020–21

In responding to these questions, the first response in four of the seven groups was 'artefacts.' We have already noted, in respect of the 2019–20 cohort, that archaeological evidence seemed to loom large in their consciousness and that seems to be true of the 2020–21 group also. Moving from the concrete nature of artefacts to the more abstract notion of 'evidence' can be challenging for some, and it usually took a little probing on our part before a word for the various types of sources, and their use in answering historical questions, was uncovered. On the other hand, an immediate response to the questions from a student in School K was, 'There is evidence of it.' The immediate impact of artefacts – and indeed the appeal of object-based learning – is well-captured in the observations of a respondent from School J: 'They are objects that we can hold, for example, a World War 1 helmet.' Archaeological evidence was also adduced in discussions on how we know about ancient Rome, where a School J student suggested, 'The buildings, the Colosseum,' and a School I respondent mentioned Pompeii as another valuable source.

Otherwise, most responses fall into the category of testimony-based history i.e. we know about particular events because people involved, or witnesses, have left behind accounts or have passed on accounts by word of mouth. The following response from a student in School O is an example:

> **Written things like diaries give us a real insight into what other people's lives were like, for instance, Anne Frank.**

The happenstance of 'finding' records such as this is often a feature of students' understanding of history as testimony, as in this example from School J: 'We find diaries or books that were written.' This perspective on evidence would also seem to be implicit in the following responses: 'People writing it down' (School I); 'Stories about it were passed on through generations' (School L); 'Autobiographies' (School M); 'Newspapers' (School N). If a hint of criticism is detected here in our observations about student understanding of evidence, that is not our intention. Indeed, understanding that personal testimony is one element that can contribute to formulating historical accounts and developing historical understanding is a necessary stage in any person's developing understanding of historical evidence. What we want our students to be able to see is that historians also draw on documents that were never intended as records of events to which they refer but which, nevertheless, can reveal much about the time(s) in which they were produced, documents such as parliamentary bills, advertising posters, wills and train timetables. The more clearly such an understanding of historical evidence is grasped by students, the greater the prospects, we believe, of meaningful and coherent 'big pictures' being constructed – through the regular classroom use and development of an appropriate historical framework.

5.8.9 Discussions around the concept of historical change, School year 2020–21

On this occasion, the data presented were mainly generated through questions inviting students to talk to us about important changes that had happened in the last one hundred years or so and, insofar as time allowed, whether these changes still matter in the present day. Despite the constraints imposed by the need to operate remotely, via Zoom, students engaged well with the questions. Indeed, there were fewer initial monosyllabic answers requiring probing than in 2019–20, as students were often eager to explain the rationale for their choice. In the case of School O, the first response was from a student who had a good deal to say about issues relating to racism and LGBTQ+ rights. Awareness of change as process was certainly evident in many responses and will be the subject of comment in the course of the following analysis.

5.8.10 Responses to the question, 'can you talk to us about important changes that happened in the last 100 years or so?' School year 2020–21

On this occasion all responses, bar one, were within the 'last 100 years or so' parameter. (The exception was the respondent from School J who mentioned 'The meteorite that killed all the dinosaurs.') A number of references were made to the present day, including references to the pandemic and recognition of transexual rights. It is noteworthy that, again, as in 2019–20, a majority of responses fell into one of four categories: the securing of rights by people previously denied these; technological developments; the securing of Irish independence; and war and its consequences. The latter two categories received fewer mentions than the first two.

On this occasion, campaigning for human rights and/or the securing of such rights featured in responses in six of the seven schools. (The exception was School J, where there was a focus on securing rights of national sovereignty.) The main elements of the relevant responses are set out in Table 16.

School	Changes Identified
School I	Advancements in technology (including, 'Most people have phones now.') Women's rights Transport: cars, aircraft How we handle pandemics
School J	1916 rising and aftermath: '… a few years after they did get their own country.' 'The meteorite that killed all the dinosaurs.' Atomic bombs, '… when everyone learnt what they could do and why they couldn't use them.' Chernobyl and its consequences Changes caused by world wars (specifically, decline in prevalence of monarchies)
School K	Technology Global warming Modern medicine: 'Vaccines and eradicating some diseases entirely.' Google Machinery: 'Like cranes and stuff … trains and planes ….' People who have gained rights previously denied them: black people, women
School L	Medicine Rights and equality issues (including, Black Lives Matter, gay marriage) Technology (including, laptop and Zoom) COVID-19
School M	Sexual equality: 'People have been more accepting of the trans community ….' Women's rights and black rights Technology (e.g. computers, smartphones); transport (cars, trains, planes, buses)
School N	Women's rights and black rights 1916 Rising 'An important one to Ireland … when it gained its independence …'. Architecture 'Being able to draw on laptops now …' 'The height of buildings.' Transport: trains, cars. Social media: 'Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, all of those.'
School O	Improvements in equality agenda: black rights, LGBTQ+ rights Mobile phones Volcano measurement technology Medical research: … more scientific research being done on stuff like cancer ….'

Table 16: Historical changes identified by focus group, 2020–21

As a glance at the table may suggest, the biggest emphasis on this occasion was on 'technology.' (Medical research is included here as specific reference was made to technology in that context.) In School I, reactions to the current pandemic were contrasted with past occurrences such as the 1918 'Spanish flu' and, in particular the 'Black Death' where 'They didn't have the technology and didn't know how to handle it so a lot of people died during that pandemic.' The obverse side of technological development was highlighted in School J, where reference was made to the use of atomic bombs in World War 2, 'when everyone learnt what they could do and why they couldn't use them', and also to

the 1986 Chernobyl disaster: 'When Chernobyl blew up, we saw what radiation did to the area.' A more neutral and undeveloped set of references to technology is made in respect of improvements in transport, simply listing significant developments without further comment, in the following schools: School I (cars, aircraft); School K (trains, planes); School M (cars, trains, planes, buses); School N (trains, cars).

Besides the pandemic reference in School I cited in the previous paragraph, in three other schools (Schools K, L and O), attention was given to medical research and the benefits it has brought. In School K, reference was made to 'Vaccines and eradicating some diseases entirely.' A similar response in School L mentioned that 'Scientists have developed an understanding of what medicines to give people, and to make medicines.' A respondent in School O linked past, present and future in reflecting on the greater amount of medical research being conducted today into cancer and observing, 'I think technology definitely has a role to play in that;' and looking towards the future:

> **I think in years to come there will be a cure for these sort of diseases and people will look back at that and be thankful for the technology we have now.**

Computer technology also featured strongly, across six of the seven schools, with a wide range of aspects covered. In School I, the focus was on mobile phones and the assertion that 'Most people have phones now.' A point made by a School K respondent raises questions about the role of memorisation in school courses:

> **Because usually you would have to learn in school and then try to remember it, but now that Google is here you just need to research it and then Google will try and give you the best answer it can.**

One of the questions this response raises is whether there is – in history education and history examinations – an overemphasis on memorisation and an inadequate focus on development of students' understanding of what history is, what its operating principles are, and what its accounts are based on. This is an issue to which we shall return in the conclusion to this report. In School L, the impact of developments in computer technology on our daily lives was noted by one respondent, '… especially now with laptops and Zoom and smart phones.'

Smart phones were also mentioned by one School M respondent while another observed, '… the world is advancing and using AI and all of that.' The prevalence of social media was mentioned by one School N respondent:

> **I think most people nowadays use social media … Where people a hundred years ago wouldn't have known what it is, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, all of those.**

Another respondent in the same school mentioned the use of iPads in schools as an example of how widespread computer technology is and, '… it means that we can talk to people all around the world.' Finally, in School O, besides mobile phones and medical research, improvements in volcano measurement technology were noted, improvements that are partly attributable to computer technology, including global positioning system (GPS) devices.

Again, as in 2019–20, in mentioning the securing of rights by groups who were previously targets of discrimination, women's rights and black rights featured strongly, but the emphasis on LGBTQ+ rights was greater than in 2019–20, with issues identified by respondents in Schools L, M and O. In School L, 'the legalisation of gay marriage' was singled out as a significant event. A School M respondent made a broader point when he identified 'Sexuality' as an area of significant change and added, 'People have been more accepting of people of the trans community and of the LGBTQ community.' Another respondent from the same school proposed a moral framework for this direction of change in noting that, '… it is a lot more humane to have everyone equal and no one above anyone else.' There are echoes of this in the response of a student from School O who, in the course of a fairly lengthy contribution which also referenced black rights, made the following observations:

> **I think a lot of change is about how people were treated and now that is … getting a bit better, I might say … … I think equality like LGBTQ+ rights is very important … it is symbolising change and how we are actually doing something about it and making the world a better world for everyone.**

Reinforcing the impression that such views are not roseate depictions of a near-perfect present, another respondent in the same school added, 'There are more rights still to be won.'

Given the increased focus on LGBTQ+ rights, it may be worth mentioning that June 2021 saw the launch of a new resource for upper primary classes, *Unveiling Our Past: The struggle for LGBT+ rights in Ireland*, supported by the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO). While this post-dates our interviews with students, it does reflect the increasing focus on rights issues in upper primary education.

Reference was made to advancement in women's rights in five of the seven schools (Schools, I, K, M, N, O). In School I, besides women's suffrage, women's right to education was mentioned, and another respondent noted that '… in recent times, in a couple of different countries, women have been allowed to start driving' (an apparent reference to a change introduced in Saudi Arabia in June 2018). In response to a question on whether women now have equal rights, one respondent's perception was that 'In most countries they do and in some countries they don't.' While women's suffrage was mentioned in each of the other four schools, a respondent in School O also mentioned women's work:

> **… a few years back, women were not allowed to vote in elections or have proper jobs. And now that has changed a lot because, back then they weren't allowed to have certain types of jobs but now they can do lots of jobs, for example, like being an astronaut, and being in the fire rescue teams as well.**

While black rights were also mentioned in five of the seven schools (Schools K, L, M, N, O), most mentions were brief and no names of rights' champions were included. The only named person was George Floyd, of whom a School O respondent remarked: 'I think people like him really raise awareness about the fact that people are still being treated badly.' Reflecting what he knew about the history of racism, a School L respondent opined that 'It has gone up and down during the years.' In this school reference was also made to the 'Black Lives Matter' movement. In School M, the helpfulness of looking

at the wider, contextual framework in which advancement of rights happened was noted by a respondent who said:

> **You have a better idea of how people gained the rights and the timeline of it. So, different events throughout the journey to get the rights. A conscious understanding of it.**

(The understanding of change as process is evident here, even if depicted as a string of 'different events.' It is the interlinking of these events that implies a process of development.) A School N respondent explained segregation, and the impetus towards desegregation in the following terms:

> **In the 1800s or 1900s, black and white people would get separated a lot. So over time more black people and African-American people would be politicians to overcome this.**

The School O respondent who mentioned the George Floyd case reinforced the contemporary resonance and on-going relevance of historical racism in positing the following case: 'There is still a lot of race issues and a lot happened back in the summer of this year.' (The reference here is to the summer of 2020.)

On this occasion, just two of the seven schools made reference to a change relating to the pursuit of Irish sovereignty: in both cases, the 1916 Rising was the chosen 'change'. There was an interesting contrast here in the two responses, in that one was narrowly event-focused (and inaccurate) while the other showed some awareness of process and was closer to the historical reality. In School N, a student responded to the question on change as follows: 'An important one to Ireland was the 1916 Rising when it gained its independence from England.' A School J respondent also mentioned the 1916 Rising, but set down the change associated with it in the following terms:

> **... it didn't really resolve anything, but lots of Irish people went out and fought for something they believed in because they wanted their own separate country, and then, a few years after, they did get their own country.**

The second response has a more nuanced understanding than the first, one that could be enhanced by greater understanding of the contextual and causative factors that played a part in the independence process, understanding that may come with further study of history and historical procedures.

Changes occasioned by, or associated with, war were mentioned by students in three of the schools (Schools I, J and N) albeit, in two of the three cases, in a very generalised, non-specific way. A respondent in School I made the claim that, 'Because of the wars and things, it helps us learn from mistakes in the past.' Reference was made to the 'Spanish flu' of 1918 but no link to the war was made. In School N, World Wars 1 and 2 were seen as significant drivers of change in that 'they were made into lots of movies and documentaries.' A number of respondents in School J were a little more specific in associating global conflict with change. One respondent noted, in respect of World War 1, 'Well, it kind of stopped the amount of monarchies in Europe.' Another noted the impact of the use of H-bombs in World War 2 in arguing thus:

> **I would say when the bombs were dropped on Japan, when everyone learnt what they would do and why they couldn't use them.**

A significant 'big picture' element here was that the student who made reference to the decline of monarchies linked the notion of monarchy back to the Middle Ages in asserting, '… it has been that way since the medieval times' and, that it 'ended that era'. Although there is no recognition of changes to the nature of monarchy associated with developments such as the Enlightenment and the Napoleonic wars, the manner in which the student connects far-flung developments is one element of the associative thinking that we are seeking to develop in our junior cycle History students.

5.8.11 Responses to the question, 'in what way do these changes still matter, or do they still matter?' School year 2020–21

Due to the constraints associated with remote technology, less time was devoted to this question than in 2019–20, with most attention focusing on changes that the students considered important and why they considered these important. Indeed, it was not always possible to pose this question directly, although the general discussion gave some insights into students' views on the matter. In many cases, students mentioned current technology and issues, sometimes linking these to, or contrasting these with, previous developments and, in doing so, implicitly addressed the question.

We have already mentioned the School I respondent who spoke of how wars can help us to learn from the mistakes in the past. (That such learning cannot be taken for granted is evidenced by the war occasioned by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a war still raging as this report was being written.) Other responses to the question focused on how our current situation benefits from past developments. A School K respondent remarked that developments in medicine over the past one hundred years or so have 'helped us to live longer,' a sentiment echoed by the School O respondent who spoke of how modern developments in medicine make likely the future discovery of cures for many diseases. Another School K respondent, reflecting on the struggle for human rights over the past century, argued that the changes that have happened still matter 'Because everyone should be treated equally.' A School L respondent identified technology as the biggest, single area of change in that 'it has a big impact on our life now that we didn't have a hundred years ago.' In a discussion on social media, a School N respondent made the case for the significance of earlier pioneers as change agents:

> **I would say the people who were brave enough to make inventions such as the phone, computer. Stuff like that that we still use today.**

In School O, reference was made to both the equality agenda and the contemporary relevance of developments in technology. Optimism that we are 'making the world a better place for everyone' was balanced by the realistic conviction that 'There are more rights still to be won.' In nominating the mobile phone as one of the most important technological inventions of the past century, one respondent made the case as follows:

> **Because they used to have the telephone where you would have to swirl the thing to get a number. But now they have mobile phones.**

And technology was very much in the mind of the School O respondent who extolled the merits of current medical research, anticipated further progress in the future and concluded, '… people will look back on that and be thankful for the technology we have now.'

5.9 Concluding observations on 'entry interviews'

Beginning with the 2019–20 cohort, as discussed in Section *5.7*, we chose to focus our discussion on the concepts of historical significance, historical time, historical evidence and historical change in the hope that it would give us insights into students' overall sense of the past. The discussions on significance showed that many students had a reasonably clear perception of the links between political power and perceived significance, and the consequent focus in much historical discourse on the deeds of 'great men;' the relative paucity of women in the ranks of those identified by the students as 'significant' was also noted and, in some cases, deplored. Beyond the political, however, some students were able to identify people (both male and female, but with greater representation of males) who were leaders in other fields of endeavour, such as 'ideas,' science and the arts. The role of historians in determining significance is implicit in the words of the student who observed: 'Women aren't credited enough for what they did in history.'

In exploring the concept of historical time with students (with discussion focused primarily on the phenomenon of 'eras' in history), we were focused on matters that form the 'beating heart' of the research study in which we are engaged. One issue that emerged in discussion was the way in which nomenclature can be confusing for students, especially where that relating to one area of human activity (e.g. painting and other forms of art) may not correlate directly to another form of human activity, such as music, and have no obvious significance in the context of political, economic, scientific and technological developments. (The term 'classical' would be one example.) The fact that nomenclature is typically applied 'after the event' – and usually by historians – was also noted. As one respondent noted, 'no-one ever thinks they're in dark ages.' The nomenclature most familiar to the students appeared to be that encountered in Junior Cycle History e.g. terms such as 'early Christian Ireland,' 'the Middle Ages,' 'the Renaissance'. Inevitably, gaps exist, since no history curriculum can cover the full expanse of human history. Thus, awareness of such key historical time periods as the Carolingian period, the age of absolutism, the Enlightenment and the Napoleonic period is generally scant. The use of frameworks such as 'Our History Scaffold' would not give students a detailed knowledge of time periods currently neglected, but we believe it would help students to 'join the dots' more effectively in giving a greater awareness of the wider context to what is being studied in the classroom.

Another issue that emerged from discussion was the distaste that many have for being required to learn off dates. The concept of an era was seen by many of the students as a useful counterpoint to this. One respondent explained why it was easier to latch on to: '… because then you have got … a sort of brief description, you kind of know what is going on in that era.' While there is a danger here in being overly-simplistic about what is 'going on' in an era, the history of historiography suggests that the benefits of such categorisation far outweigh the potential pitfalls. In a classroom context, it supports the case for 'era-focused' and 'era-contextualised' teaching, such as that which is guided by use of a framework, with its associated timelines, charts and visualisation. This is not to suggest that significant dates should be ignored: indeed, an important purpose of a timeline is to focus attention on significant dates. However, the evidence we are interpreting suggests there is little to be gained from requiring students to learn off dates as an isolated exercise. Here, as elsewhere in the study of history, context, in a sense, is all.

In relation to the concept of time, therefore, it is worth repeating that the nature of the lists of eras identified by the different groups would tend to support the thesis that the sense of chronology of a majority of the students interviewed is relatively weak in overall structural terms and in terms of connecting strands that might give it a sense of coherence. Given the experience of the student teachers as reported in Chapter 4, this is hardly surprising since, despite the widespread use of timelines in teaching history, the use of overarching frameworks that span a wide expanse of the past is not widespread. Notwithstanding that, it is clear that some students do have some sort of overarching picture of the past, albeit one that has significant gaps and omissions, a picture that can be significantly advanced by building on students' existing knowledge. Indeed, we believe that the chronological understanding of all our students can be enhanced through regular classroom use of a framework that enables students to see the wider context of phenomena studied and to make connections across time that facilitate, for example, clearer understanding of processes of 'continuity' and change.

Our discussion of historical evidence with the students developed from a series of questions on what constitutes 'history' and why it is important. (As already noted, there seemed to be a fairly general acceptance that it was important.) The focus on evidence was generally the last element in the wider discussion on history and its importance, and time for elaboration of points made was relatively limited. Nevertheless, it seemed clear to us that students' understanding of historical evidence and how it underpins the writing of historical accounts was less than robust. Students seemed most sure of their ground when referring to archaeological evidence, perhaps because of its concrete nature. A notion of testimony was also evident in some of the exchanges, with references to Anne Frank and interviews with grandparents and others. However, the notion that we can draw evidence by inference from documents that are not records, that were not created as records of something that happened, was less evident. Few went beyond the statement of the respondent in School G who described history as 'The study of the past … from sources.' As already discussed, when pressed on the meaning and importance of historical evidence, there was a tendency to suggest that it was important because it *proved* something. The notion that historians interrogating evidence might vary in their interpretations or that historical knowledge is *provisional* – as the Leaving Certificate History syllabus explicitly states – was nowhere evident, nor is this surprising, given the age profile of the students concerned. However, it does raise questions as to the manner in which historical evidence is dealt with in the classroom and whether adequate attention is given to developing students' understanding of historical evidence over the course of junior cycle. It seems to us that this is an area that requires greater emphasis in history teachers' initial education and, also, their continuing professional development.

In discussing with students their choice of significant changes over the last one hundred years or so, it was striking that more attention was paid to social and technological change than political. Thus, there was less focus on the 1916 Rising and the world wars than elsewhere in our encounters with the students – although both did feature in the discussions – and considerably greater focus on the securing of human and civil rights and advances in technology, particularly computer technology. It was also striking that students effortlessly linked past changes to life as it is lived today, whether invoking the deity ('Because if it wasn't for those changes, God knows where we'd be now': School E respondent) or contextualising the latest technology ('If we didn't

invent the common car, we wouldn't have Teslas today': School A respondent). It was noteworthy too that students did not see struggles for rights as being confined to the past but could link past struggles with challenges in the present. One of the most profound responses came from the student who responded to a question on whether rights, once won, are secure for all time by answering, 'No. Nothing's permanent.'

As was the case in 2019–20, the interview schedule for the 2020–21 cohort was framed around four fundamental historical concepts: historical significance, historical time, historical evidence and historical change (see ***5.8***). The discussions on significance again provided evidence that many students had a reasonably clear perception of the links between political power and perceived significance, and the consequent focus in much historical discourse on the deeds of 'great men;' the relative paucity of women in the ranks of those identified by the students as 'significant' was again noted. What are we to make of the fact that Adolf Hitler was mentioned in all seven schools and that no Irish person was named in more than one of the seven schools?

Noting that the figures mentioned came from different 'eras' in history was our 'way in' to discussion focused on matters relating to historical time. Eras identified were mostly ones that feature in junior cycle history and, based on analysis of responses received, most students seemed to understand that the naming of eras was generally a retrospective arrangement to facilitate the 'management' of the past for study and learning purposes. While able to identify a scattering of eras (and the specific eras named varied from focus group to focus group), there were understandable gaps in the students' awareness of eras and little evidence of any overarching 'picture of the past' that would facilitate orientation in time and the ability to make connections between disparate periods. The purpose of frameworks such as 'Our History Scaffold' is to help give students such a 'picture of the past,' one that can be strengthened and adjusted as students' historical knowledge and understanding develops. We believe such frameworks have an important role to play in helping students achieve the 'big picture' learning outcomes (1.9, 1.10, 1.11) of the junior cycle History specification.

Given the 'distancing' effect of communication with the students via Zoom, our questions, and the responses of the students, tended to become more pointed, and this was certainly the case when it came to exploring what history is and 'how we know what we know.' Thus, in responding to the question, 'What is history anyway?' the most common response was that it was study of the past. It was interesting, in discussion of the importance of history, to hear students acknowledge the role that history plays in helping us understand people, as well as the oft-repeated claim that we can learn lessons from the actions of people in the past. Students' understanding of evidence is one area where we believe work needs to be done, to build on the understanding many students already have that the testimony of participants in, and observers of, historic events is a valuable source of evidence. That such evidence needs to be subjected to critical analysis, and that non-testamentary documents such as army service records and advertising posters can also be powerful sources of historical evidence, are amongst the understandings that we think students need to acquire if their grasp of the nature of history is to be strengthened and enriched.

Again, as with the 2019–20 cohort of students, in discussing significant changes over the last one hundred years or so, it was striking that more attention was paid to technological and social changes than to political ones. The focus on technological changes is, perhaps, not surprising, given the speed with which new developments in technology – and, in particular, computer technology – impinge on the lives of many young people. The current COVID context may also help to explain the highlighting of medical research by some respondents. In respect of developments in human rights legislation, while both black rights and LBGTQ+ rights are again mentioned, it is the latter that generated more comment on this occasion, possibly a reflection of the growing emphasis on LGBTQ+ issues in upper primary classes, an emphasis highlighted by the launch in June 2021 of the teaching and learning resource ***Unveiling Our Past: The struggle for LGBT+ rights in Ireland***. The limited attention paid to political change, and the greater focus on world war and its consequences than on Irish independence, were mildly surprising, but are best understood, perhaps, as peripheral to the concerns of twelve- and thirteen-year-olds when they are asked to reflect on the theme of 'change,' in this case change over the past hundred years or so. That said, it should not be deduced from this that the young people in question are apolitical or apathetic about politics. The line between rights activism and political involvement is a thin one: indeed, rights activism is in itself a form of political activity. The orientating function of history is nicely captured in the remark of the School O respondent who, reflecting on historical injustices and present-day manifestations of injustice, looked towards the future in observing, 'There are more rights still to be won.'

5.10 'Exit interviews': responses and analysis: 2020–21

Given that we had been unable to conduct 'exit' interviews with the 2019–20 cohort of students due to restrictions associated with the pandemic, we greatly welcomed the opportunity to talk with the focus groups of first year students from the second cohort towards the end of their school year, in May 2021. However, as with the focus group interview earlier in the school year, the COVID-19 context made it impossible for us to visit schools and meet the focus groups in person; once again, all interaction with the groups of students took place remotely. The challenges occasioned by social distancing and mask-wearing requirements were similar to those faced earlier in the school year when we had our initial meeting with each focus group: in particular, difficulties in hearing student responses, which often required requests for students to repeat what they had said or the teacher *in situ* acting as an intermediary to relay the student's words to us. Despite all the difficulties faced, we did gain some valuable insights into the extent to which student understanding of history had developed over the course of the school year and some sense of how the students reacted to the use of the framework, 'Our History Scaffold.'

Another difficulty that we had to contend with on this occasion was the disruption to normal school schedules caused by a range of end-of-year activities associated with the month of May in Irish second-level schools. Foremost among these were the in-house exams – or end-of-year tests – the timing of which varied from school to school. Others included field trips and end of year concerts and social events in which our student teacher collaborators were often involved. Nevertheless, we manged to find an appropriate time slot to have our focus group interview in the case of six of the seven schools. In the case of the seventh (School I), our student teacher

collaborator posed the questions and sent us on a transcript of the student responses. The data gathered was a helpful addition to the databank of responses to our interview schedule of questions.

5.10.1 The interview schedule of questions

The schedule of questions for the 'exit' interviews was not finalised until shortly before the focus group interviews took place in May 2021. While the wording of the first five questions attempts to 'mirror' processes highlighted in the framework, there is no certainty that responses reflect the impact of the use of the framework, since students may well have acquired some of their articulated knowledge as part of their study of history at primary level. A more rigorous and prolonged study of student interaction with the framework would be needed before the practical effectiveness of the framework as a support to learners could be more confidently gauged. Nevertheless, we see the data gathered as of interest and importance, offering some insights into the framework's impact and the reactions of some learners.

The interview schedule of questions may be found in Appendix F. The seven 'headline' questions were as follows:

- What can you tell us about the first humans to live on the island of Ireland?
- Why do some historians describe farming as the most important invention in history?
- Do you have any idea what the word 'civilisation' means?
- Why has religion been important in the history of Ireland?
- When has technology changed human history?
- Have you found the history framework 'Our History Scaffold' helpful?
- Do you think your understanding of the overall shape of the past – from the Stone Age to the Space Age – has improved this year?

We hoped that the first five questions would help to focus attention on some points of development in the history of humankind and give us some sense of the students' developing 'architecture' of the past. The sixth and seventh questions focused more directly on the impact – if any – of the use of the framework and how the students reflected on their own understanding and vision of the past. In the event, the degree of engagement by the students generally was as good as we could have wished for – in the difficult circumstances – and, possibly, even better. Our analysis of student responses will follow the threads of conversation question by question and will finish with some concluding observations on the students' responses.

5.10.2 Responses to the question, 'what can you tell us about the first humans to live on the island of Ireland?'

The most common response here was that the people were 'hunter-gatherers': this was the initial response in three schools (Schools L, M and O). Although the initial respondent in Schools I and K mentioned farming, subsequent contributors made reference to 'hunter gatherers (School I) and 'hunting' (School K). In School N, respondents identified in succession, 'monks,' 'Celts' and 'Stonemen': only when pressed on how the *very first* people got food was the response forthcoming that, 'They hunted animals.'

5.10.3 Responses to the question, 'do we know this as a fact or is this the knowledge we have based on the evidence available to us?'

Because of the COVID constraints under which we operated, it was not always possible to pose this question; nevertheless, it did allow for some interesting observations to be expressed. In discussing whether our knowledge of these earliest people is fixed or whether it may change in the future, a School L respondent argued that,

> **I think it can change. Say we found some artefacts that showed us that they were ahead of their time.**

This was echoed by the School M respondent who noted that, 'More evidence could be found in a few years.'

The challenge of learning about the lives of the earliest Irish people was discussed by the School N respondent who noted that:

> **We can only see the things that were made of stone. It would be hard to see what clothes they wore.**

Notwithstanding the reservation expressed above, a School O respondent suggested that one source of evidence for the lives of Stone Age hunter-gatherers was 'things they wore,' one item in a list that also mentioned 'artefacts … and skeletons.' Most pertinent here are the observations of the School L and M respondents cited above concerning the provisional nature of our historical knowledge.

5.10.4 Responses to the question, 'why do some historians describe farming as the most important invention in history?'

One of the more astute and 'punchy' responses came from a School L respondent who argued, 'Because it is still used today. So obviously it works.' Besides the persistence of farming as a mode of obtaining food, the other main point made by respondents was that it enabled the development of towns, a development expressed by a School M respondent in the following terms:

> **I guess that enabled them to create towns and villages because they wouldn't have to wander around looking for their food. They just had a supply of it right there that enabled them to settle down in a certain area of land.**

This links well with the next question on the development of civilisations and shows the capacity of students to make connections that help them make greater sense of historical growth and change.

5.10.5 Responses to the question, 'given that we still have farming today, is it still the same or has it changed over time?'

Insofar as we got responses to this question, most made reference to present-day farming and how it differs from that practised by the first farmers. The following description from a School O respondent is reasonably typical:

> **So they didn't have tractors and they had to do it all by hand. [Today] They have got machines that can help and make the process faster and easier and then, they have different types of fertilisers to help the crops grow faster.**

There were no references to intermediate changes such as those wrought by the feudal system or the new machines and other innovations of the eighteenth-century Agricultural Revolution, nor did the limited time and COVID constraints under which we laboured allow us to probe the extent to which the students may have had knowledge of these and other significant developments in the development of farming.

5.10.6 Responses to the question, "any idea what the word 'civilisation' means?"

Two of the more considered responses, from School I, placed a strong emphasis on cultural identity, the second identifying also (albeit weakly) the legal framework that underpins a civilisation:

1. Civilisation means a population of people living in a certain country that has specific traditions and things that were important to them.

2. Civilisation is a human society who have their own languages, culture, laws, and their own way of living their life.

Some sort of legal framework may have been in the mind of the School M respondent who suggested that 'It's lots of people – civilians – in one area and they are in unison (emphasis added).' A School N respondent sought to bring the word back to its material basics: 'Civilisation means like a city. Like a town where people lived … with shops and roads and houses.' It was clear from responses that the entity which the word 'civilisation' most frequently evoked was Ancient Rome. This is hardly surprising given that most junior cycle History students study Ancient Rome in first year and many have encountered some aspects of life in Ancient Rome in the course of their primary school studies. The ability to make connections across time was evident in the response from a School O respondent who made the following points:

> **We studied the Ancient Romans. So they were smarter people and they invented many things that we have today. And so they were one of the foundations for humanity nowadays, and they created stuff that we have now.**

Despite the lack of specificity here, there is an underlying awareness of 'what the Romans did for us' but, also, an awareness that they were just 'one of the foundations for humanity nowadays,' that there are other historical phenomena that influence the ways we live today. One of these other phenomena is explored in the discussion of the responses to the next question.

5.10.7 Responses to the question, 'why has religion (especially Christianity) been important in the history of Ireland and of Europe?'

Many respondents mentioned monasteries. The following response from a student in School I reflects on the knock-on effect of the establishment of monasteries:

> **When people came to Ireland and spread Christianity and that made monasteries which were then invaded by Vikings, and they began to live here. If monasteries weren't there, Vikings might not have come to Ireland and all the other things in the history of Ireland might not have happened.**

The focus here on how one development can set off a chain of reactions is untypical of the generality of responses which referred to either the binding force of religious belief or the landscape features and cultural artefacts left behind by the builders of monasteries. Thus, another School I respondent argued that 'I think Christianity is important because it brought people together to appreciate what they all believe in,' while a School J respondent offered the following suggestion: 'They might have left artefacts such as bibles and maybe if there are ruins of monasteries still around.' Another School J respondent made reference to the Book of Kells as a significant cultural legacy.

Other references to the binding or uniting force of religion include the following: 'It gives a group of people someone to worship' (School K); 'Religion would have brought communities together and it would have given people a sense of security' (School L); 'Religion can be good in some ways for a sense of community' (School O). While not, strictly speaking, identifying the unifying power of religious belief, the following response seems to sit easily with the three just cited: 'Well, it helped people to find a meaning in life, I guess.' (School M). The smaller number of references to landscape features and cultural artefacts left behind by the builders of monasteries include the following: [At Glendalough] 'I know there is a round tower' (School J)'; 'The Book of Kells. It's a manuscript. It's all written by hand' (School J); 'A manuscript was basically a book written by hand … the Book of Kells.' (School N): 'So they had different churches designed differently.' (School O)

The most sustained argument for the importance of religion came from a respondent in School O; however, this was through a general philosophical lens rather than an historical one. It began as follows:

> **I think religion is really important because, really, when you pass away you have no real idea without religion and religion is a kind of foundation that you have and it's a sense of faith, as a lot of people put it. It's your last hope in a sense.**

While it does not offer any sense of historical perspective, it could be argued that it portrays (unintentionally) the religious mindset that sustained many Irish people of the past through times of hardship and suffering.

Despite a couple of references to other religions – 'Human sacrifice [The Aztecs] (School M); 'Mosques' (School N) – the overwhelming emphasis was on Christianity and its products or productions (from church buildings to illuminated manuscripts). The only two individuals

mentioned by name in the course of the discussion were Jesus Christ and St Patrick. While never explicitly stated, the overall perspective was generally either neutral or positive. In only one case (in School M) was there an implicitly critical perspective which focused on the past, political power of the church, in a somewhat overstated fashion:

> **So, at one point, the Church ruled everything and everyone … the schools would be controlled by the Church, and all of the towns.**

In discussing the impact of religion, another School M respondent mentioned the Crusades and 'the way great division happened' in Europe due to the Reformation, but these were mentioned in a relatively neutral, 'matter-of-fact' manner.

5.10.8 Responses to the question, when has technology changed human history?'

What is most striking here is that a majority of respondents associated the word 'technology' with relatively modern – in some cases, quite recent – developments in mechanical and, especially, electronic technology. The following response from a School I respondent is reasonably typical:

> **We could do so many different things. Like instead of posting letters we could now send emails, and now we can FaceTime people on our phones from all over the world and, during COVID we had to rely on technology to work and to learn.**

The last point here finds an echo in the response of a School M student, the only respondent to mention laptops specifically: 'And with laptops, for example, we use them in class'. A School N respondent tried to apply a little historical perspective in looking back at recent decades:

> **Probably in the '80s when the computer was really big. How they communicated to each other through email. Then, the phone was in the mid-'90s, they used that a lot and that was how they communicated through technology.**

The mobile phone was also mentioned by respondents in Schools I, K and O, who emphasised its ability to help people connect. Casting the historical net back a little further, one School M respondent made the point that 'It brought us to space,' while another added, 'And it also brought us bombs and stuff.'

Nineteenth and early twentieth century inventions also earned a mention: these included the car and the telephone. A School O respondent made the following argument:

> **I think cars were a big invention as it was a new way of transport and it was a much easier way of transport. Because, back in the day … horses pulled their load … And so I think cars is a really big invention.**

A School I respondent linked the invention of the car with other technological developments and, specifically, the telephone: the fact that the chronology (in terms of sequence) is somewhat askew here does not invalidate the overall point being made:

> **It might have started to change human history when people made cars, which furthered people to create more things like the telephone and what not.**

Another School I respondent set out the case for the significance of the invention of the telephone as follows:

> **1876 when the first telephone was invented. This changed human history a lot since they discovered a way to communicate over a device and not talk to someone socially.**

The telephone was also mentioned by a respondent in School L. Given the ubiquitous manner in which the word 'device' is used today to denote electronic devices it is interesting to see the clear-sightedness with which the student uses the word to describe a significant piece of technology from an earlier era.

Despite the majority focus on recent technological developments, a significant minority did identify a range of ways in which technology changed human history over time. It may be helpful to set these out in tabular form:

Technology identified	Schools mentioning this	Student observations
Invention of wheel	School N	'When the wheel was invented, people could bring materials around easier …'
Printing press	Schools J, K, L, M, O	'Books didn't have to be written by hand and they could make more copies.' (School J) 'It made it easier to spread around the Bible and other books.' (School K) 'Well, before they had to write by hand and it was really tedious … but with the printing press it could be done very quickly.' (School M) 'It allowed people to write books and manuscripts to be mass-produced.' (School O)
Navigational equipment	School M	'I guess the Age of Exploration. A lot of technology changes came with that for navigation ….'
Renaissance surgery (Ambroise Paré?)	School L	'The Renaissance – people starting surgeries.'
The newspaper	School N	'Newspapers were invented so then you would hear about the news that was going on. You didn't necessarily have any other means to hear about it.'
Electricity generation	School J	'Electricity, the late 1900s I think it was. The Industrial Revolution. It could turn motors and power machines.'
19th century inventions not previously mentioned: camera, light bulb	School L	'The camera.' 'The light bulb'
The tank	School K	'Technology in the world war. The tank.'
Social media	School I	'I think recently it has changed human history because nearly everyone does everything on technology now, like with social media, nearly everyone one is on it and it's all anyone does.'

Table 17: When technology changed human history, as identified by focus groups, 2020–21

Of the technological developments set out in the table, the only one identified in more than one of the seven schools was the printing press, mentioned in five of the schools. This may be explained by the fact that one of the Junior Cycle History learning outcomes usually encountered in first year relates to 'changes in the fields of the arts and science' during the Renaissance period. While each of the other developments was mentioned by only one respondent, together they comprise a sort of outline framework of technological change over time, the sort of 'sense-making' guide that students need if they are to combine the disparate episodes and eras they study in the classroom into some sort of coherent whole.

5.10.9 Responses to the question, "have you found the history framework, 'Our History Scaffold' helpful?"

This section incorporates responses to the follow-up questions: How have you found the framework helpful? Do you know what a timeline is? Do you find timelines helpful?

The comments made by students were universally positive. Much reference was made to timelines and their usefulness in setting out chronological order. (As indicated above, two of our 'follow on' questions made reference to timelines.) The manner in which a framework facilitates making connections between different eras of the past was also a matter of comment. A number of references were also made to the visual element of 'Our History Scaffold': in such cases, the visuals were found to be a helpful aid to learning and remembering.

In School I, four respondents spoke approvingly of timelines while a fifth said simply – in respect of the visual element of the 'Our History Scaffold' materials – 'The pictures help me.' One of the more interesting responses was the following, thoughtful response:

> **It was helpful because everything sort of connects to one another, like a religion or language or culture could be from one era and go into another era. I do find timelines helpful because, when I'm learning about historical events it can get confusing when you don't know which event came first and you can get mixed up until it doesn't make sense.**

There is some evidence that the student has begun to understand how connections pervade across time, how institutions originating in one era remain influential in eras that follow, and how seeing development in its correct chronological sequence is one way of bringing clarity to the history one is studying.

Responses in Schools J and K, at least initially, showed a degree of uncertainty as to the meaning of the question or how to respond to it. A School J respondent answered thus:

> **I am not quite sure if it's really what you mean, but something like learning things in chronological order can be almost easier to learn.**

Despite the uncertainty, it would appear that the chronological sensitivity of this student has been engaged. A School K respondent struggled to articulate the benefits of using the framework, saying, 'It's difficult to explain but it was easy to look back on …. multiple things in the past.' Again,

despite the uncertainty, a positive view of the use of the framework emerges: it appears that the framework enables the student to hold in her/his mind 'multiple things in the past,' a necessary stage in the development of a robust 'big picture.'

In School L, attention focused on the value of being able to make connections between developments in different eras; as one respondent said, 'I suppose like the invention of the wheel helped us build cars and motorbikes and bicycles.' Another respondent passed the following verdict on the use of the framework:

> **It helps us to better understand history and what changes led to a different change and what developments led to different developments, and us improving our understanding of the world and how it works.**

The use of visuals to identify different eras in the framework teaching and learning materials was also a matter of comment. As one respondent expressed it:

> **You could think back to the picture and you might remember the picture and maybe if you connect the picture and what it is, you could think of it better and it might help.**

Despite the level of vagueness here, the benefit of linking units of learning to visual prompts emerges reasonably clearly: it is a benefit that is fundamental to our vision of how frameworks should be used in the history classroom.

What was interesting about the School M responses was that the students described exercises undertaken in class, set by their history teacher (who was one of our seven collaborators). The first exercise described was one where the teacher sought to identify the kinds of 'big picture' of the past that students had, by inviting the students to devise the following:

> **A timeline of what we thought history was. So, big events in human history and guess their chronological order.**

The starting point here was to be the 'Big Bang.' It was clear from conversation with the teacher that this exercise was set to identify students' existing knowledge and understanding ***prior to*** the initial use of the framework. From our perspective, this sort of exercise accords very well with the How People Learn[120] (HPL) principle that 'Student preconceptions matter,' a principle that needs, in our view, to underlie all good teaching in history. Another exercise involved devising a short, personal history as a means of developing understanding of chronology and its role in helping us to understand the global picture:

> **We did one ourselves, from when we were born, understanding the order in which things happened. It helped us to see the history of the world.**

[120] Bransford, J. D., Brown, A. L. and Cocking, R. (eds.) (2000) *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*. US National Research Council. Washington DC: National Academies Press.

While the second sentence here may appear a *non sequitur* to some and the purpose of the exercise may not be immediately clear, there is little doubt that here, as elsewhere in the teaching of history, moving outwards from the local and the familiar (including the familial) can be a powerful way of building up by degrees a meaningful and wide-encompassing bigger picture of the past.

In Schools N and O, the focus was on making connections and the merits of timelines, respectively. A School O respondent adjudged timelines to be 'really helpful' because 'it's easier to remember things.' For one School N respondent, the value of the framework was that 'It all links in together. It shows how everything happened.' A classmate gave a specific example in suggesting 'It's just like understanding how we went from Rome to monks, how everything connects together.' Certainly, the emphasis here on transitions and (at least, implicitly) how a variety of factors connects one era to another is a vital element of 'big picture' understanding. An interesting observation was made by another School N respondent who said:

I think it made it better because we are more likely to question 'Why did they do this?' or 'How did they make this?'

If, as many of us believe, curiosity in students is at the root of all 'active' learning, then this is, perhaps, another reason why the use of a framework such as "Our History Scaffold' makes good classroom sense. In a study in a Portuguese primary school, involving students from age six to age nine, Solé (2019) found that,[121]

> **The concepts of historical time, especially chronology, duration and assimilation of conventional systems of dating, are developed by applying a bespoke curriculum that systematically and consistently uses active learning methods.**

We believe that, in a similar manner, 'Our History Scaffold' can act as a fulcrum around which our students' conceptual understanding is developed through an on-going commitment to active learning methods and development of disciplinary understanding.

5.10.10 Responses to the question, 'do you think your understanding of the overall shape of the past – from the Stone Age to the Space Age – has improved this year?'

It has to be admitted that a majority of responses appeared to fall outside the context of the 'Our History Scaffold' framework and its classroom use. All respondents indicated that the understanding referred to had improved, but a majority attributed the improvement to the more detailed coverage of historical phenomena and/or to the way in which developments and events were explored in chronological order. For example, a School O respondent offered the following perspective:

> **Yeah, I think we have because [in primary school] they wouldn't have gone into as much detail. Like, now in first year they give you more details. … We might have studied the same thing in primary school but I definitely know a lot more about the subject.**

[121] Glória Solé (2019), 'Children's understanding of time: a study in a primary history classroom', in *History Education Research Journal*, 16 (1), 158-173. London: UCL Press.

On the issue of chronological order, one respondent in School M mentioned 'the order that we learnt it' as a factor in improving learning, while a classmate offered the following specific example:

> **First, we did the Stone Age, then the Bronze Age and it's not like you are going from the Stone Age to the Romans and back to the Bronze Age.**

Where explicit reference was made to 'big picture' teaching or use of the framework, the potential benefits of the approach emerged strongly. A very good example is the following from a School L respondent:

> **It's just remembering things so we can fill in between the gaps of history that we know. Say we knew about a certain war but we didn't know what came in between that war and something else, it is helping us to create a mental timeline so that we can connect it and put all the pieces together and just be able to understand and how it happened.**

While the student may somewhat 'oversell' the potential of the framework to 'put all the pieces together,' there is, nevertheless, a clear perception of the benefits of deploying this approach in the History classroom. Elsewhere, the only respondent to make explicit reference to the term 'big picture' was a School N respondent who said:

> **I think it helps because it is helping our perspective on how everything fits together in the 'big picture' of the past.**

The use of the plural pronoun ('our') here would appear to be vindicated by the words of another School N student who responded simply: 'We all agree it's better.'

In the case of a School I respondent who makes reference to understanding change and big turning points in history, it may be the framework that is being referenced, although this is not altogether clear. The student's response is as follows:

> **I do think my understanding of important change in history has improved this year because when information is told to you and you just remember it for a while you will start to understand it and sometimes you might be able to relate [it] to some people or a person during a big turning point in history and you could have a clearer understanding of it.**

What the student appears to be saying is that as knowledge is built up in the memory, it helps if there is a reference point to which it can be linked, such as 'some people or a person during a big turning point in history.' In any event, the student's use of the word 'relate' highlights the importance of making connections if historical knowledge and understanding are to be advanced and move beyond mere accumulation of so-called 'facts.'

5.11 Concluding observations

The challenging COVID-19 context in which we conducted our research was explained in ***3.3***. Meeting focus groups of first year students online via the Zoom platform is not the most congenial to high levels of engagement. It helped that we had met the students earlier in the school year. It also helped that our student teacher research collaborators were utterly committed to the project and made every effort to facilitate the engagements with their first year students. Given the challenging circumstances, we were very pleased with the levels of engagement achieved and with the quality of the data gathered.

In ***5.7***, we set out the interview schedule of questions and explained how our analysis would follow the threads of conversation with the students generated by our questions. We also explained how the first five questions were designed in the hope that we would get from the responses some sense of the students' developing 'architecture' of the past, and that the sixth and seventh questions were intended to elicit some feedback on the use of the framework and the extent to which their 'big picture' of the past had developed over the course of the year, their first year at second-level. The analysis that follows will highlight some key points made by the students and their significance and their relevance to our research aims and interests.

In focusing initially on the first humans to live on the island of Ireland and what we know about them, the most interesting responses came to the follow-up question, 'Do we know this as a fact or is this the knowledge we have based on the evidence available to us?' A number of students – admittedly, a small number – recognised that our knowledge could change if more evidence were discovered. We see this kind of response as significant because it displays a level of understanding of how history works that we need to build on as teachers if we are to help our students realise the full benefits of an education in history.

Our discussion as to why some historians regard farming as one of the most important inventions in the history of humankind showed a capacity on the part of some students to adopt overarching, long-term perspectives on historical matters e.g. 'Because it is still used today. So obviously it works.' Besides this awareness of how an ages-old invention is so significant as it is still used today, there was also the awareness that the invention of farming and the settlement that it encouraged made possible the development of towns. The element of causal understanding and ability to link different historical developments in meaningful ways are important factors in the development of more robust 'big pictures' that we are eager to encourage.

When questioned on their understanding of what the word 'civilisation' means, the students were readily able to identify some of the key features that characterise civilisations. Of especial interest here was the ability to link Roman civilisation to the present and, in doing so, acknowledging that Roman civilisation was just 'one of the foundations for humanity nowadays.' Implicit in this comment is the realisation that 'humanity nowadays' owes its existence and its nature to a number of different strands. While the student may not be able to identify all of the strands that historians consider important, the awareness that there are different strands there to be explored is the sort of awareness that we believe 'big picture' teaching needs to nourish.

In discussing the importance of religion in the history of Ireland and of Europe, for the purposes of our research perhaps the most interesting response was the one that was least typical. This was the one that argued how the coming of Christianity to Ireland led to the establishment of monasteries which prompted Viking raids and settlement and all the developments that followed from that, and that if Christianity had not come to Ireland, its subsequent history might have been very different. What is interesting here is that the student is taking a long-term historical perspective and considering the long-term – and, often, unforeseen – effects that shifts in cultural practices can ultimately trigger.

In posing the question, 'When has technology changed human history?,' we were aware of the propensity of students to associate the word 'technology' with modern, and usually, fairly recent, technological developments. However, through our interaction with the students, we wished to encourage a broader understanding of what the term encompasses. Undoubtedly, most attention focused on computerised technologies and their impact, but, across the seven schools, a range of earlier technological developments was identified and, in some cases, their significance was assessed, as Table 17 shows. What the table also shows is a nascent framework that could provide the basis for a more comprehensive and focused overview of human technological developments, and one that builds on the knowledge and understanding that students currently possess.

When it came to discussing the framework with students, it was clear in some instances that the reference to 'Our History Scaffold' went over the heads of some students as the teacher had not necessarily used that title in deploying the framework. It was also clear students' comments on the use of the framework were universally positive. This is hardly surprising, given that we had spoken to the students previously about the plan to have their teacher use the framework with them in the classroom: the context made it unlikely, perhaps, that students would be overly critical of the resource and its classroom use. That said, some of the observations made by the students suggest a keen degree of engagement with the framework and insight into its potential to boost their learning. The value of the visual elements was well attested as was the manner in which the framework enabled students to contemplate 'multiple things' in the past all at once, making connections and seeing how strands of influence can extend from one era into subsequent ones. There was sufficient evidence in the data analysed to reinforce our conviction that the use of frameworks has much to contribute to the classroom teaching of history in our schools.

Much of the commentary in the previous paragraph applies equally well to our final discussion as to whether the students' understanding of the overall shape of the past had improved over the course of the school year. The students who talk about the framework's ability to 'fill in between the gaps of history' and help 'our perspective on how everything fits together in the 'big picture' of the past' may have a somewhat roseate vision of the 'big picture' that the framework may help them acquire, but they are clear about the benefits they experience in being exposed to 'big picture' teaching, the 'mental timeline' they are building up (as one describes it) that helps them to 'connect … and put all the pieces together'. Again, while 'all' may be overstating the case, the perception of a 'mental timeline' that helps student connect different points in time is an important step on the path to developing more robust 'big pictures.'

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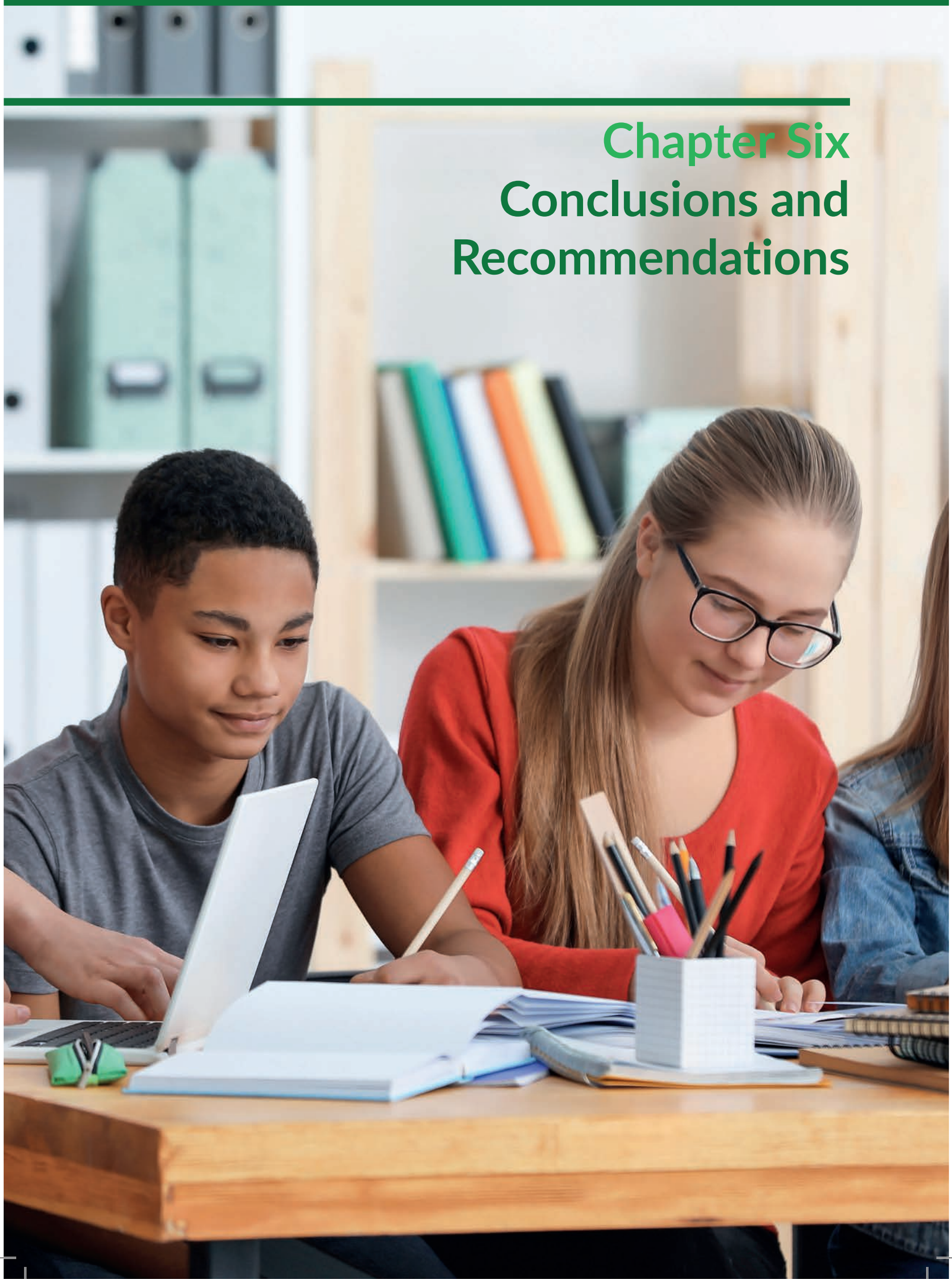
Chapter Six
Conclusions and Recommendations



6.1 Implications of our research for the initial teacher education of second-level history teachers

As set out in ***4.1*** and ***4.2***, the responses to the questionnaire completed by PME 1 History Methods students and the 'follow-on' interviews conducted with eight of those students addressed the same broad themes. These themes were:

- Their understanding of the term 'big picture of the past.'
- What their own 'big picture of the past' looks like.
- The challenge of helping their students develop stronger 'big pictures of the past.'

Based on the data gathered, we are strongly of the view that there is a need to ensure that student teachers have an adequate understanding of a concept ('big picture') which underpins a number of learning outcomes that they are required to help students achieve through their classroom work. Since experienced teachers may have had little engagement with the concept previously, it may also be prudent to address their needs in CPD courses. The data in question will be re-visited in sections ***6.3.4*** and ***6.5.7***.

The data analysed in ***4.3*** were generated through a series of interviews with the seven Professional Master of Education (PME) students who were our research collaborators in Year 2 of the project, 2020-2021. We refer to this set of interviews which took place in May 2021 as 'exit' interviews to distinguish them from the earlier interviews which took place in the early stages of the project – in September 2019, which we refer to as 'entry' interviews. The interviews took place following a period of time during which the student teachers used the framework, 'Our History Scaffold' with a first year History class that they were teaching. Overall, their experience of using the framework – limited as it may have been – provides sufficient evidence, in our view, to support wider use of the framework within our schools, at least on a trial basis. The data in question will be reviewed in ***6.3***.

6.2 Review of data from PME students' questionnaires and 'entry' interviews and recommendations

As set out in ***4.1.1***, the following are what we see as the essential elements of 'big picture' understanding:

1. Awareness that a 'big picture' is one that encompasses the broad sweep of the past.
2. Awareness that the ability to make connections between events and developments in different times and places is an important dimension of a 'big picture'.
3. Awareness that a 'big picture' is not developed in a vacuum and is part and parcel of a broader understanding of what the discipline of history entails.

For the sake of brevity, we refer to these as the 'broad sweep' element, the 'making connections' element and the 'disciplinary understanding' element. Our thinking on these matters is influenced by our reading of the authorities discussed in Chapter 2, refracted through the prism of our own experience. Identification of the three elements also provided a helpful frame with which to analyse the questionnaire and interview data.

6.2.1 Review of data on PME students' 'big picture' understanding

To begin with, it must be acknowledged that people in general – and history teachers in particular – are likely to have a degree of familiarity with the term 'big picture' and some understanding of what it entails. However, if students are to develop the ability to orient themselves in time it is difficult to see how this can be achieved without progress in respect of the three elements identified in ***6.2***. For some of our respondents, it seemed that 'big picture' was equated with 'wider context,' something which is obviously an important building block in the development of one's 'big picture;' what was missing from these responses was any recognition of the 'broad sweep' element. It is also significant that respondents who appeared to lack awareness of the 'broad sweep' element appeared to lack awareness of the other two elements too: the 'making connections' element and the 'disciplinary understanding' element. Given that Learning Outcome 1.11 of the Junior Cycle History specification requires that students should be able to 'Make comparisons and connections between people, issues and events in different places and historical eras,' it is recommended that this element receive due attention at initial teacher education and continuing professional development levels. Of particular concern in the questionnaire data was that only one respondent identified the 'disciplinary understanding' element as important to 'big picture' understanding; although it did feature in discussions with two interviewees, the fact that it did not appear to register with the majority of respondents to both questionnaire and interview questions would tend to suggest that much work needs to be done in increasing young history teachers' disciplinary awareness.

6.2.2 Review of data on what PME students' own 'big picture' looks like

What was most striking here was the general reluctance of respondents to articulate an overarching 'big picture' of their own. A number were quite frank in admitting 'gaps' in their 'big picture' of the past. Some acknowledged a leaning towards 'modern history' – which, following questioning, often turned out to be history of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Clearly, there is work to be done if young teachers such as these are to be equipped to deal with the challenges of twenty-first century history teaching. For those who had acquired a 'big picture' dimension to their historical understanding, the benefits were clear from their responses – an enhancement of their overall grasp of historical detail and significance. For at least three of our eight interviewees, there was a 'light bulb' moment (see ***4.2.2***), when the implications of a 'big picture' perspective brought renewed clarity and an enhanced enjoyment of their historical studies. We all need to do what we can to ensure that a greater number of young and experienced teachers experience such moments.

6.2.3 Review of data on PME students' observations regarding the challenge of helping their students develop stronger 'big pictures' of the past

We noted in ***4.2.3*** that, in the case of three of the interviewees, the students' observations indicated a lack of confidence in their ability to deal effectively with 'big picture' learning outcomes in the classroom. Others were more confident but had a limited conception of what 'big picture' teaching requires: conscious of the need to help students see the wider context in which specific events occur but showing little awareness of the need to provide a 'broad sweep' perspective that facilitates the making of connections and the development of a longitudinal awareness.

Undoubtedly, the more insightful observations related to the use of timelines and, in particular, the type of timeline running around the classroom wall, with samples of student work displayed at appropriate points, described by one of our interviewees. This visual display of a communally-shared 'big picture' in development is a good model of the type of classroom work that needs to be carried out more widely if students' potentialities are to be realised in a manner that the specification seeks to foster. It was noteworthy that the young teacher who described this timeline was the only respondent to make explicit reference to the regularity with which a 'big picture' perspective needs to be invoked: her contention was that it should be an element in every lesson, 'even just a little bit.' Some implications of these findings are addressed in the recommendations that follow.

6.3 Review of data from PME students' 'exit' interviews and recommendations

As explained in ***6.1***, our focus here is on data generated through a series of interviews in May 2021 with our seven PME student collaborators, following their use of the framework, 'Our History Scaffold', in the school year 2020–21. (In most cases, use of the framework took place between January and May 2021.) The key issues on which the interviews focused were:

- The impact on their teaching of involvement in the research project.
- Their current 'big picture' understanding.
- The curricular usefulness of the framework.
- Their view of the link between 'big picture' understanding and understanding of the nature of history.

As explained in ***4.4.4***, the issue that received most attention was their classroom use of the framework. Indeed, it would be fair to say that classroom use of the framework was the fulcrum around which discussion of each of the issues above revolved and this will be reflected in the reviews that follow.

6.3.1 Review of data on the impact of involvement in the research project on their teaching

It was interesting to see greater classroom use of timelines feature here alongside their pioneering use of the framework, as the contextual overview that timelines typically provide is an important element in building up the type of chronological awareness and understanding that frameworks are designed to support. The range of observations made by our interviewees on the framework and its classroom impact indicate, we would suggest, the enormously positive impact that frameworks can have in the classroom: '… it does help you place things into a filing box'; 'it's hard to explain, it just did bring a flow'; 'there is that fluidity between the chapters'; 'it does help you with structure and organisation, which I think the students – especially in first year now – need more than ever'. Also noteworthy here was the improved propensity of our interviewees to make connections in their teaching between past and present or between different episodes of past history where certain linkages could be made.

6.3.2 Review of data on their current 'big picture' understanding

What the interviewees' responses had in common – as noted in ***4.3.2*** – was the notion of a pattern or structure that makes the experiences of people in the past more amenable to their students' understanding. This did not necessarily mean that their own personal 'big picture' had improved (although the sense one got from most was that the experience of teaching periods which had not featured in their undergraduate courses had helped them to 'flesh out' their overarching image of the hazy, insubstantial past). As one interviewee noted:

> **… my 'big picture' of history hasn't really improved all that much. The framework has helped me to teach it though.**

This was the dominant theme: that acquaintance with the framework and use of the framework had helped them at a practical level in the classroom, that it had given them what one interviewee referred to as 'a roadmap in my head … almost like a mental checklist.' One potential risk is that the framework in use becomes fossilised and unchanging, a handy reference point accepted and used uncritically. In our interactions with our PME student collaborators – our interviewees in this phase of the research - we were always at pains to emphasise the tentative and imperfect nature of the framework and the need for it to be used in a consciously critical context: this approach would need to inform any use of this or other frameworks in teacher education courses.

6.3.3 Review of data on the curricular usefulness of the framework

The series of questions posed to the interviewees here yielded much interesting data. For example, in discussing learning outcomes 1.10 and 1.11 which relate to 'creating and maintaining timelines' and 'making connections and comparisons between people and events in different places and eras,' respectively, one interviewee excitedly described a first year student's 'light bulb' moment:

> **… the most important thing that one of the students said [was], 'What they did, I suppose, allowed us to develop to where we are today,' and I was, like, 'Ok, that's brilliant!**

In discussing challenges associated with use of the framework, one issue that emerged was the use of nomenclature: some first year students apparently had an issue with nomenclature, in particular, with the concept of a 'framework.' For these students, the terms 'big picture' or 'bigger picture' were more meaningful and engaging. This is hardly surprising but serves as a useful reminder for teacher educators that teachers need to consider the vocabulary they use in the classroom – not just in respect of the 'big picture' but more generally – and that it is judicious use of frameworks rather than their designation that is most likely to inform students thinking and understanding.

The manner in which the framework has two 'identifying' images for each era was also welcomed; these were good, as one interviewee pointed out, 'to unlock that bit of prior knowledge.' It was interesting to read of students' shoulders relaxing on seeing the images associated with each era, a reminder of the important role played by visual prompts in aiding memorisation and helping to establish patterns of thought in the mind. That there was some variation in the manner in which the framework was used with their students by the different interviewees is hardly surprising, as there is rarely, if ever, one best way in which a resource can be used. While the consensus would

be that it should be used early and regularly, the argument that it should be linked in with the teaching of substantive history is self-evidently compelling: no framework should ever be 'taught' in the abstract but, rather, as an aid to help contextualise and draw connections between the different eras and themes that the students in question (here, junior cycle students) are studying.

With regard to evidence that the junior cycle students had benefitted from the use of the framework, it was good to hear one interviewee describe what she referred to as 'that Aha moment' (***4.4.4***), when students saw patterns or identified connections they had not previously noticed – as a result of use of the framework – and another reporting that 'weaker students' found the framework helpful because it gave them 'some kind of context'. In another case, where our interviewee had asked his class their views on the framework, the consensus was that it helped them understand better the eras they were studying: it 'put it in order in their heads that little bit better.' Further research would be required to establish how these early, apparent benefits can be solidified and built on, and to identify potential short-falls associated with the framework as it stands and how its strengths might be enhanced – or how a better path forward in this area might be forged.

6.3.4 Review of data on their views of the link between 'big picture' understanding and understanding of the nature of history

As explained in Chapter1, the Junior Cycle specification for History makes explicit the link(s) between 'big picture' understanding and understanding of the nature of history, for example, in its Rationale on page 4, where it asserts: "When we learn about the past, it is important also that we understand the nature of history as a discipline that allows us to make sense of what has happened in our world over time.' The importance of this understanding was acknowledged by our interviewees; the disciplinary concepts mentioned in their responses ranged from historical evidence to historical significance, time, change and historical empathy. The analogy with Mathematics drawn by one interviewee bears repeating:

> **... if you are not looking at time and change, if they don't understand, it's like going into Maths and not knowing 2 + 2 is four, and not knowing the plus and minus ...**

While the case may be somewhat over-stated, given the philosophical and conceptual challenges associated with the concept of time, the heart-felt and deeply reflective conviction that history is not history unless it includes an understanding of the nature of the discipline is a value that we as educationalists would heartily endorse. Also striking was the interviewee who spoke about the concepts of evidence ('being able to show them how we know what we know') and historical empathy ('... to place yourself in that context and understand both sides ...'): the clear elucidation of both concepts demonstrating the kind of understanding that we seek to encourage. One of the challenges to be overcome in seeking to develop students' disciplinary understanding is nicely captured in the observation, 'sometimes they believe that a textbook is like a bible.' In this case, our interviewee noted that use of the framework had encouraged the students to look at history differently, and she concludes:

> **I think they are beginning to understand historical significance as well and I think the Bigger Picture of the past really helped them to understand how to investigate the past.**

If the use of the framework can help other students to develop their disciplinary understanding in these kinds of ways, then it will have served a very useful purpose indeed.

6.3.5 Recommendations for initial teacher education (including implications for teacher CPD)

What are the implications of our findings for the initial teacher education of second-level history teachers?

As noted in ***4.1.1***, the fact that only one of nineteen respondents to the questionnaire mentioned the role of the 'disciplinary understanding' element in developing 'big picture' understanding is a matter of some concern. Strand 1 of the Junior Cycle History specification is entitled, 'The nature of history', and the associated learning outcomes require a knowledge and understanding of what history is and how it works. In order to achieve this understanding, students need opportunities to talk and think about the concepts that together help to make history the discipline that it is. (This does not necessarily require a focus on the name given to the concept. In the case of historical empathy, for example, what is important is that students engage with the reasons why people acted as they did, in the context of the times in which they lived. While the teacher should be familiar with the concept by name, and what it denotes, familiarity with the name of the concept is not essential in the case of the student.) A perusal of Strand 1 of the specification reveals a host of key concepts embedded in the learning outcomes, including the following: historical evidence (***1.4, 1.5, 1.6, 1.7, 1.8***), historical empathy (***1.1***), historical significance (***1.3, 1.7, 1.9***), historical time (***1.4, 1.10***) and historical change (***1.4, 1.5, 1.11***). If junior cycle students are to be afforded the opportunity to talk about the matters encompassed by these concepts, this is best done, not in the abstract, but through subtle and considered intertwining with the subject matter contained in the Strand 2 and Strand 3 learning outcomes. If junior cycle History teachers are to be in a position to facilitate such conversations, then it is important that modelling and practice opportunities are carefully built into their initial education programmes, so that the competence and confidence of young teachers can be developed in tandem.

One thing our research showed very clearly was that the majority of our student teacher respondents lacked a robust, 'broad sweep' 'big picture' of the past. This was most evident in the marked reluctance to articulate their own 'big picture' and the admissions, by a number, of the gaps in their 'big picture.' The apparent emphasis in their studies on the 'modern' period in history – which some seemed to equate with the 20th / 21st centuries – would also appear to present challenges, since the junior cycle courses that they are required to teach span a long period of time, and the 'big picture' learning outcomes require a perspective on the past that is overarching and connective. The challenges created by the apparent 'narrowness' of senior cycle and undergraduate studies is examined here. It suffices to say that we believe the data presented underline the case for incorporating a 'big picture' dimension in the initial teacher education of history teachers as a matter of urgency. The quickest way to achieve this, we believe, would be through the adoption of the framework set out in this report, but, in both the medium term and long term, there is a need to review frameworks in use and seek to learn lessons from their classroom application, and to make improvements or construct preferred alternatives.

The adoption and continuing use of frameworks would help to address the challenges faced by junior cycle teachers as they wrestle with the requirement of the junior cycle History specification. Our data show the great work being done in history classrooms through the use of timelines, and it is important to build on this. It is probably fair to say that most timelines currently used in classrooms have a contextual purpose, which may encompass a series of developments covering anything from twenty years to many hundreds. What 'big picture' teaching requires is adding another layer to this that constantly keeps a sharp eye on the long arc of human development, and where the topic currently under investigation fits into this timeframe. Lessons learned from the experience of using the framework, 'Our History Scaffold,' with first year History students, are reviewed in ***6.5***.

The seven young student teachers who began the process of using the framework in a first year History classroom, in the school year 2020-2021, were all of the view that the use of the framework had had a positive effect on their classroom practice and on the students' learning. More specifically, as suggested in ***4.5.4***, our findings would appear to support the contention that junior cycle History learning outcomes 1.10 (with its emphasis on 'creating and maintaining timelines') and 1.11 (with its emphasis on being able to 'make connections and comparisons between people, issues and events in different places historical eras') have an applicability in the History classroom that is helpful to both teachers and students, and that their effectiveness can be enhanced through creative use of an appropriate framework, such as, we would argue, the 'Our History Scaffold' framework. We have already argued that this needs to be reflected in initial teacher education programmes, where practice and modelling opportunities are available. While our research was confined to first year History classes, clearly, if the framework is to aid students' educational growth, it should be used throughout the junior cycle. Given the challenging nature of the concept of 'time,' and the evidence that it is one of the last concepts in which students are likely to gain a reasonable level of competency, the case for using a framework beyond junior cycle – at senior cycle and at primary level, for instance – would appear to be a strong one.

As mentioned in ***6.3.2***, there is a danger that formulaic, uncritical use of the framework – indeed, any framework designed for a like purpose – can be self-defeating: users must be aware that the device they are using is flawed and imperfect, despite its many apparent strengths. It is, as its figurative name suggests, a sort of temporary scaffold that is helpful in building up one's 'big picture' – but it makes no claim to completeness and all-encompassing inclusivity: these are aspirations that are worthy of pursuit but difficult in attainment. Therefore, student teachers need to have that critical awareness, and to bring it into play in their classroom use of the framework.

Some useful guidance for those in initial teacher education may be drawn from the research findings. First, there is a need to be careful with nomenclature: as mentioned in ***6.3.3***, the word' framework' lacked clarity for some students, to whom the term 'big picture' was more immediate and meaningful. What the framework is called is of less consequence than the purposes for which it is used. These would include: to give the students a 'structure' for seeing developments in human history over long periods of time; to enable them to make connections between developments in different time periods; to get some appreciation of the different rates at which change can occur. Second, the visual images associated with the framework's ten eras have an important role to play in developing 'big picture' understanding. This would include their use as prompts to 'unlock' students' prior knowledge (while always conscious of the possibility that students' pre-conceptions may be misconceptions). Sense of

period, as Ian Dawson has argued, usually 'begins with visual images of individuals, clothing, homes or events an introductory mental package to which a label such as 'Tudor' can be attached.'[122] The idea is that once such a 'mental package' becomes established, further details (accretive and expansionary) can be added as the student's historical understanding grows. Third, there is no one, best way in which the framework can be used. What seems to be important is to use it in tandem with the substantive subject matter, as a device to help place these on a sort of time continuum, so that issues such as sequence and duration can be more readily addressed. Regular use is important, so that it becomes a sort of 'second nature' to know where eras such as the Middle Ages appear on the time spectrum and to grasp some of what preceded and succeeded this immensely important era in human history.

It was striking to us as researchers that the student teachers' awareness of the link between 'big picture' understanding and understanding of the nature of history (whereby understanding of one tends to enhance understanding of the other) was considerably strengthened in the period between the 'entry' and 'exit' interviews. During this period, they attended lectures given by two of the researchers. Our data would suggest that students entering the Professional Master of Education (PME) programme do not necessarily have the disciplinary understanding required to teach courses based on the junior cycle specification nor can we take for granted that their own 'big picture' of the past is comprehensive and robust. This may cause problems when they attempt to teach a course that spans long periods of time, from early Christian Ireland to the Computer Age, and prompt an over-reliance on the textbook that, when used in an uncritical manner, may be at odds with the aim of developing students' understanding of the nature of history. Thus, it seems to us essential that, as well as promoting the use of frameworks in the classroom, initial teacher education courses need to place due emphasis on ensuring that student teachers' understanding of the nature of the discipline is up to the challenge of making Strand 1 of the specification a dynamic force in the classroom. This requires an informed familiarity with the concepts that underpin the discipline of history, including those key concepts which have been a key feature of our research design and analytical apparatus: historical evidence, historical time, historical change, historical empathy and historical significance. Student teachers also need to be advised that none of these should be taught in a vacuum, but should be 'knitted' through the substantive history taught in ways that advance the knowledge of both the historical events and personalities studied and the conceptual apparatus that enables us to make sense of the (often limited) knowledge available to us.

[122] Ian Dawson (2004), Time for chronology? Ideas for developing chronological understanding, in *Teaching History*, no.117, pp.14–24, London: The Historical Association, p.16.

6.4 Implications of our research for the learning and teaching of Junior Cycle History (including a focus on implications for teacher CPD)

In considering the implications of our research for the learning and teaching of Junior Cycle History, we review here the data gathered from first year History students in a range of schools, eight schools in the school year 2019–2020 and another seven schools in the school year 2020–2021. A considerable volume of data has been analysed, consisting of student responses to the student task and student responses to the questions posed at focus group interviews. As explained in ***3.3***, it was not possible to proceed with the planned 'exit' interviews in the school year 2019-20, due to restrictions associated with the global pandemic. Therefore, the focus group interviews conducted in 2019–20 were 'entry' interviews only, whilst those that took place in 2020–21 were both 'entry' and 'exit'. The table below shows the number of student tasks completed, the number of focus group interviews and the timeframe for these.

Timeframe	Mode of research	Numbers
January 2020	Student task	127 students (8 schools)
February 2020	Focus group interviews ('entry' interviews)	8 focus groups (8 schools) (8–10 students per school)
October 2020	Student task	130 students (7 schools)
December 2020	Focus group interviews ('entry' interviews)	7 focus groups (7 schools) (8–10 students per school)
May 2021	Focus group interviews ('exit' interviews)	7 focus groups (7 schools) (8–10 students per school)

Table 18: Numbers of student tasks completed, focus group interviews + timeframe.

Given the sheer volume of responses, and the many interesting issues to which the data give rise, the student task data will be reviewed first, in isolation, followed by the data from the 'entry' focus group interviews with students and, finally, the data from the 'exit' focus group interviews. Where applicable, student task data and focus group data from the two school years will be reviewed in tandem, for purposes of comparison and contrast and to enhance the quality of the analysis.

6.4.1 Review of data from written task, Question 1 on the 'parts' of history they remember best

This review follows on from, and seeks to build on, the summary and conclusions offered in ***5.2*** and ***5.3***. As highlighted in ***5.6.1***, the 'parts' of history remembered best by both cohorts of students (the 2019–20 cohort and the 2020–21 cohort) were 'World War 2' and 'Ancient Rome'. As discussed in ***5.2*** and ***5.3***, a range of factors may be adduced to account for the first of these, in particular. These would include school or family visits to places associated with or commemorating World

War 2, film and TV programmes viewed, books read and videogames played. In the case of Ancient Rome, the fact that it is the ancient civilisation most widely taught in junior cycle classrooms – and usually in the first term of first year – and that most students appear to study it in primary school also, may be a factor in its memorability. However, it is worth noting the less predictable 'parts' of history mentioned by some respondents, for example, in the 2019–20 cohort, the Romanovs – mentioned by a respondent who had read a book on that doomed dynasty – or, in the case of the 2020–21 cohort, the life of the Queen of Jhansi and the man who colonised Brazil, Alvares Cabral. If one connects together the disparate personalities, events and eras mentioned by the students, a wide historical canvas emerges – albeit, one characterised by a certain formlessness and confused mass, and with obvious gaps and omissions. Nevertheless, the wide historical canvas is there to some degree and in some form and, as teachers, we need to establish what our students know and build from there, helping to correct misconceptions, where necessary, but building on student knowledge and understanding, rather than assuming a blank canvas on the part of the students.

6.4.2 Review of data on written task, Question 2 on the 'big picture' of the past that they would give to a visitor from outer space

As explained in ***5.4***, our analysis of student responses was influenced by the report on the 'Usable Historical Pasts' (2008) project and its categorisation of student accounts as 'process like' or 'event like'. Our analytical framework sought to identify:

- How many outlined some sort of coherent, process-focused 'big picture'? **(Category 1)**
- How many, in total, showed some appreciation of 'history as process'? **(Category 2)**
- How many evinced an inclination to portray history as event? **(Category 3)**

As our data show, those who saw history as 'event' were in the majority (73 of 127 in 2019–20; 101 of 130 in 2020–21) while the numbers who fitted into Category 1 were in the minority (21 of 127 in 2019–20; 12 of 130 in 2020–21). Both sets of students, as well as those in an intermediary position, require our support. To echo the argument made in ***5.6.4***, those students who have an event-based understanding of how history is constituted need to be empowered to view the past with an eye to processes at work and states of affairs that change, and to view the history work they do as a process of investigation of evidence and the gradual acquisition of meaningful knowledge. For the significant minority who have an understanding of some of the processes at work in history, and have some sort of working 'big picture' – no matter how flawed – there is a solid foundation on which to build, towards more robust 'big pictures' and more lasting and more coherent historical knowledge.

6.4.3 Review of data from 'entry' interviews on discussions around the concept of significance

This review follows on from, and seeks to build on, the summary and conclusions offered in ***5.9***. As noted in ***5.9***, many students had a reasonably clear perception of the links between political power and perceived significance, and the consequent focus in much historical discourse on the deeds of 'great men' or, more accurately, 'men who made a big impact', Adolf Hitler being the most mentioned by both cohorts of students when they were asked to identify the most significant historical figures of the last 2,000 years or so. The relative paucity of women mentioned was

noted and generally ascribed to their lack of political power throughout much of history; here and elsewhere, a strong awareness of on-going struggles to vindicate the rights of women was evident. A surprisingly wide range of historical personalities was identified as 'significant': of the 2019–20 cohort, 57 were identified by just one of the focus groups and, of the 2020–21 cohort, 41 were so identified. (See lists of personalities in ***5.7.1*** and ***5.8.1***) It should be noted here that 'significance' is a concept which features strongly in Strand 1 of the Junior Cycle specification. This is for good reason, in our view: it is difficult to see how a genuine historical understanding or robust 'big picture' of the past can be developed without understanding why some people, issues and events receive more attention from historians than others. The Strand 1 learning outcomes where historical significance receives specific mention are as follows:

Students should be able to

1.3 appreciate their cultural inheritance though recognising historically significant places and buildings and discussing why historical personalities, events and issues are commemorated

1.7 develop historical judgements based on evidence about personalities, issues and events in the past, showing awareness of historical significance

1.9 demonstrate awareness of the significance of the history of Ireland and of Europe and the wider world across various dimensions, including political, social, economic, religious, cultural and scientific dimensions [123]

What may need to be explored more fully in initial teacher education and through history teacher CPD is how the above learning outcomes can be integrated into the teaching of substantive history as set out in the Strand 2 and Strand 3 learning outcomes, and whether perceptions of significance are fixed or relative. Who determines what historical events or personalities should be commemorated? On what basis? These are questions that can generate the kinds of conversations that we, as history teachers, need to be having with our students.

6.4.4 Review of data on discussions around the concepts of historical eras and historical time

This review follows on from, and seeks to build on, the summary and conclusions offered in ***5.9***. One issue that emerged from the discussion was that nomenclature can be confusing for students, as a label such as 'Renaissance' may be applied to one area of Europe (e.g. the Italian states) at one specific period of time, whilst not applying to many other parts of Europe or, at any rate, not until a later time period. The somewhat 'fluid' nature of the labels we attach to periods of historical time is a matter we need to discuss with students – as well as the reasons why such labels are applied in the first place. Inevitably, some labels are likely to be unfamiliar to students, in particular those relating to periods or eras not necessarily covered in the classroom, such as the 'Age of Absolutism' and the 'Enlightenment.' It is here that the use of a framework can be helpful. Whilst not providing students with a detailed knowledge of the periods in question, it can give a sufficient sense of

[123] Department of Education and Skills (2017) *Junior Cycle History*. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills, p.16.

'what is going on' during these periods to give students insights into the context in which major turning points occur. The nature of the lists of eras identified by the different focus groups – across both cohorts of students – would tend to support the thesis, that the sense of chronology of a majority of the students interviewed is relatively weak in overall structural terms and in terms of connecting strands that might give it a sense of coherence. These are the identified needs that the use of frameworks is designed to address. In discussing with the 2019–20 cohort the distaste for 'learning off' dates that some expressed, the concept of an 'era' – as reported in ***5.2*** – was seen by many as a useful counterpoint to this; another significant 'plus' in the case for the use of frameworks on a regular basis in the classroom.

6.4.5 Review of data on discussions around the concepts of history and historical evidence

This review follows on from, and seeks to build on, the summary and conclusions offered in ***5.9***. One of the most conclusive findings – with both cohorts of students – was that understanding of historical evidence and how it underpins the writing of historical accounts was less than robust. Students seemed most sure of their ground when referring to archaeological evidence, which can be seen and (sometimes) touched and drawn and questioned; other forms of evidence seemed more elusive or entirely absent from their grasp of the concept. References to Anne Frank and to interviews with grandparents in some focus group exchanges suggested some appreciation of a notion of testimony: that we can draw evidence from what we are told by people who lived through certain historical events. However, the notion that we can draw evidence by inference from documents that are not records, that were not created as records of something that happened, was not clearly evident in the student views articulated in our presence and was difficult to infer from any of the comments made. While this may not be altogether surprising given the age profile of the students, it does raise questions about the manner in which the concept of historical evidence is dealt with in the classroom (and we are talking about historical evidence, not evidence in a more general sense). Are we making adequate distinctions between the different kinds of historical evidence: the material evidence, the objects, the historical sites and various other types of archaeological evidence? the personal testimonies, eyewitness accounts, diary entries and other forms of testimony? the more elusive forms of evidence that we infer from what Peter Lee[124] refers to as the 'relics' of the past, that includes documents, images and paintings that were not created to inform us about the details of life in the past but that, having survived – sometimes accidentally, sometimes because they have been carefully retained due to their perceived importance – are available to help us answer questions about the human past in all its wonderful variety? Our data would suggest that this is an aspect of junior cycle history teaching that would benefit from a renewed focus, both in initial teacher education and, also, in CPD workshops and seminars. It would be helpful, for example to look at possible models of progression in students' understanding of evidence; one useful approach might be to take the three kinds of evidence outlined above and to use these as a basic model of progression in students' understanding of evidence. Table 19 shows how this might work in practice.

[124] Peter J. Lee (2005), 'Putting Principles into Practice: Understanding History.' In M. Suzanne Donovan and John D. Bransford, *How Students Learn: History in the Classroom*, Washington DC: The National Academies Press, p.58.

Level of student understanding	Statement of student ability
Understanding how evidence may be drawn by inference from 'relics' of the past such as official records	I understand how we can learn about the past by asking questions of other types of documents that have survived, such as old maps, election posters and census returns.
Understanding contribution of personal testimony	I understand how we can learn about the past from documents that people wrote at the time or in later years describing what they experienced or saw.
Understanding contribution of archaeological evidence	I understand how we can learn about the past from archaeological evidence that has survived.

Table 19: Possible model of progression in students' understanding of evidence

Some of the key issues associated with the challenge of assessing progression in historical understanding are discussed in ***2.6***.

6.4.6 Review of data on discussions around the concept of historical change

This review follows on from, and seeks to build on, the summary and conclusions offered in ***5.9***. As previously noted, what was striking here was the strong attention paid to social and technological matters, whereas political matters received much less attention here than elsewhere in our discussions. This would appear to be due – at least in part – to the nature of the question asked. When asked to identify the most significant changes of the last one hundred years or so, it is not unduly surprising that most students opted for changes that have some resonance in their daily lives, from the smartphone to issues of gender identity and racial equality. Indeed, the tendency to link the present with changes that occurred in the past was evident throughout, in observations from the 2019-2020 cohort such as: 'If we didn't invent the common car, we wouldn't have Teslas today'; 'Because if it wasn't for those changes, God knows where we'd be'. As noted in ***5.8.10***, one respondent managed, astutely, to link past, present and future, in discussing COVID-19 and advancements in medical research, and concluding:

> **I think in years to come there will be a cure for these sort of diseases and people will look back at that and be grateful for the technology we have now.**

While the data reviewed here suggests good understanding of many aspects of historical change, we believe that improvement is possible, both at the micro level (through greater use of the enquiry approach in dealing with specific episodes or case studies) and at the macro level (through use of the framework to assist understanding of long-term change, patterns of change and the persistence of certain forms of life and economic activity).

6.5 Review of data from focus group 'exit' interviews in 2020–21 school year and reflections thereon

As explained in ***3.3***, we had been unable to conduct focus-group 'exit' interviews with the 2019–20 cohort of first year students due to restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the interviews which took place in May 2021 offered the only opportunity available to us to gauge student reaction to use of the framework in the classroom. While our preference would have been to engage directly with the students in a face-to-face setting, that was not possible due to on-going restrictions and the encounters took place via the Zoom platform. Despite the less than ideal conditions, we believe that some valuable insights were gained and our aim of gauging the potential classroom effectiveness of the framework was significantly advanced. Further targeted research would be required to gain a fuller, more rounded picture of student interaction with the framework and the extent to which its use made a difference to students' own 'big pictures' of the past.

6.5.1 Review of data on discussions about the first humans to live on the island of Ireland

Our first five questions, including this one, were designed to help give us some sense of the impact, if any, of the use of the 'Our History Scaffold' framework in the classroom. The questions attempted, in a somewhat oblique (but we hoped, engaging) manner, to assess students' interaction with and understanding of key developments in human history that were highlighted in the framework. The final two questions and, in particular, the penultimate question, attempted to make these assessments in a more direct manner.

The review set out here follows on from, and seeks to build on, the summary and conclusions offered in ***5.11***. In many cases, it took further probing on our part before accurate identification of the first Irish people was achieved. However, some of the most interesting observations came in the responses to the 'follow-up' question, 'Do we know this as a fact or is this the knowledge we have based on the evidence available to us?' Admittedly, this was somewhat of a leading question, prompting acknowledgement of the latter observation – but that does not invalidate the responses of those students (a minority, it is true) who recognised that our knowledge could change if more evidence were discovered. It certainly serves as a useful reminder of the provisional nature of historical knowledge and of the pivotal role that evidence plays in all historical discourse – including that which takes place in the Junior Cycle History classroom.

6.5.2 Review of data on discussions about why some historians view farming as one of the most important inventions in the history of humankind

As noted in ***5.10.4***, some students showed themselves capable of adopting overarching, long-term perspectives on historical matters such as the significance of the invention (and endurance) of farming. Others showed good awareness of causal factors and ability to link historical developments in identifying the settlement that farming encouraged and the consequential link to the development of towns. These are important constituents of 'big picture' thinking and help to point the way forward as we seek to identify ways of helping our students to achieve the learning outcomes that will advance their learning and help them to live more meaningful lives.

6.5.3 Review of data on discussions about the concept of 'a civilisation'

Some of the features of a civilisation came readily enough from most of the focus groups e.g. the sense of an ordered society with rules and regulations, the idea of shared traditions and means of cultural expression, the building of cities and, within those cities, streets. Since the study of an ancient civilisation forms part of the course of study for first year History students, most focus groups, in discussing the features of a civilisation had in mind Ancient Rome – by far the most popular ancient civilisation studied in our schools. The concentration on Rome may help to cloud the important contribution to 'how we live our lives today' of other ancient civilisations, and the use of a framework such as 'Our History Scaffold' can help to redress the balance by creating, at a minimum, an awareness of other civilisations and, perhaps, some understanding of ways in which they influenced those who came after them – right down to the present day.

6.5.4 Review of data on discussions about the importance of religion in the history of Ireland and of Europe

The monasteries of early Christian Ireland were often mentioned here – as students had made a study of these in their first year History classes – and perhaps the most provocative response came from the student who argued that the coming of Christianity led to the building of monasteries, which led to raids by Vikings who eventually settled here, and all the bitter wars of contention that followed. As pointed out in ***5.10.7***, it was interesting that the student was applying a long-term perspective and considering the long-term effects that shifts in cultural practices can ultimately trigger. This is a form of thinking that accords very well with the longitudinal approach that 'big picture' teaching seeks to encourage.

6.5.5 Review of data on discussions about when technology has changed human history

It was, perhaps, inevitable that students would associate the word 'technology' with present day developments in smartphones and other computerised technologies. However, as set out in Table 17, across the seven schools, a range of ways in which technology changed human lives over time was identified. Taken together, they provide an outline framework of technological change over time: as we say in ***5.10.8***, 'the sort of sense-making guide that students need if they are to combine the disparate episodes and eras they study in the classroom into some sort of coherent whole.' Once again, of course, this is 'big picture' thinking in action, a way of encouraging students to look at developments longitudinally and notice how many innovations build on pre-existing technologies: as the student cited in ***5.7.11*** remarked: 'If we didn't invent the common car, we wouldn't have Teslas today.'

6.5.6 Review of data on discussions on the use of the framework in the classroom

As noted in ***6.3.3***, students were not necessarily familiar with the nomenclature here – specifically, references to 'framework' and 'Our History Scaffold' – but they were clear enough about the 'bigger picture' approach that had been taken in the classroom. Given that the students were aware that we, the researchers, had developed the 'Our History Scaffold' resource, we need to

acknowledge the possibility that they did not wish to disappoint us, by making negative comments. However, as set out in ***5.10.9***, the response to the 'bigger picture' approach was universally positive, and many of the comments made by the students showed a keen sense of engagement with the resource and the approach that it exemplifies. Admittedly, the positive picture that emerges is based on the experience of using the approach over a number of months in seven schools; further research might track its use over a longer period of time and in a greater number of schools. Nevertheless, our findings seem to us to justify the wider promulgation of the approach and the associated resources until such time as better models are developed at either local, regional or national level.

6.5.7 Review of data on discussions about whether students' understanding of the overall shape of the past has improved over the course of the year

As discussed in ***5.10.10***, all respondents indicated that their understanding had improved, but a majority of the students' comments fell outside the context of use of the framework. Instead, students tended to say that their understanding had improved because of the more detailed coverage and because of the chronological approach adopted. Where explicit reference was made to 'big picture' teaching, again, students' comments were universally positive. As we concluded in ***5.11***, the perception of a mental timeline that helps students connect different points in time is an important step on the path to developing more robust 'big pictures'. The words 'step' and 'path' are important here: more robust 'big pictures' are not developed overnight, but require constant reinforcement and 'refreshing' by the teacher. We also need on-going debate on the types of framework that best fit our purposes and best support the history student in the classroom. In the meantime, we need regular appraisal of the classroom effectiveness of the 'Our History Scaffold,' preferably in a wide range of schools across the system.

6.5.8 Recommendations for the learning and teaching of Junior Cycle History (including implications for teacher CPD)

Based on the student task responses, our findings suggest that a significant minority of our students have an understanding of some of the processes at work in history. There is a need to identify such students and to seek to build on whatever elements of solid foundation they exemplify. These are students who need their existing understanding validated, so that they have the confidence to move on to deeper levels of understanding, with the help and support of their teacher. As ever, questioning is key in order to identify students' prior learning, as well as any existing misconceptions they may have. Treating these students as a 'clean slate' on which to impose pre-determined learning intentions can be counter-productive, if the students feel that their intelligence is being insulted, as can the use of textbooks that favour dogmatic assertions of so-called 'fact', with no acknowledgement of the provisional nature of historical knowledge (recognised explicitly in the Leaving Certificate History syllabus, page 8) and the need to link historical statements to the evidence that underpins them. What these students need, therefore, is recognition and acknowledgement of their existing knowledge and understanding, along with appropriate challenges to ensure their learning continues on an upward curve.

For the majority group of students who tend to view history as 'event' and have a poor grasp of the processes that are at play throughout the historical calendar – including processes of change that move at different speeds in different contexts – a radical shift in understanding is required if they are to be in a position to attain stipulated learning outcomes in Junior Cycle History, in particular those outcomes that form Strand 1, 'The Nature of History'. As argued in ***5.6.4***, they need to be empowered to view the past with an eye to processes at work and states of affairs that change. In other words, they need to be helped to understand the nature of change, that it is not an isolated event that just 'happens,' but a process that permeates life past and present, with a dynamic that operates within specific contexts, some of which (such as the development of the feudal system) result in significant changes in states of affairs. Some processes of change can be better understood if looked at through a long-term lens and, here, a framework such as 'Our History Scaffold' may help students to see those patterns more clearly.

Another concept requiring special attention is mentioned several times in the learning outcomes that form Strand 1 of the Junior Cycle specification: the concept of 'evidence'. Students need to be helped view the history work they do as a process of investigation of evidence and the gradual acquisition of meaningful knowledge. This requires that Strand 1 learning outcomes, such as those relating to evidence (e.g. 1.4, 1.5, 1.6, 1.7, 1.8), are addressed in tandem with the learning outcomes from the substantive strands, Strands 2 and 3. Thus, in investigating the lives of people in an ancient civilisation, the constant refrain needs to be 'How do we know what we know?' Meaningful historical knowledge needs to be built on solid evidential foundations. What do we mean by 'meaningful historical knowledge'? We mean knowledge that includes an awareness and some understanding of the range of evidence on which it based; which is understood, whether at a basic or at an advanced level, by the student who wishes to advance her/his understanding; and which answers to a felt need of the student whose curiosity has been aroused by the teacher's carefully designed enquiry or other pedagogical trigger. The concept of evidence must not be treated as an 'add-on' to work on the subject matter; rather, it must become one of the 'lenses' through which that subject matter is constantly appraised and questioned. This seems to us an important focus for history teacher CPD: How do we embed a focus on the concept of historical evidence in our everyday classwork? What kinds of activities do students need to engage in if the evidential basis of historical discourse – and genuine historical writing of any kind – is to be understood? How do we measure progression in students' understanding of historical evidence as a concept? Addressing these issues in a sustained manner would contribute greatly, we believe, to the required 'radical shift in understanding' mentioned in the previous paragraph.

Based on our focus group 'entry' interviews, our findings suggest a good level of awareness among first year History students as to why certain people from the past are deemed significant. That said, if one considers the wide range of individuals who were mentioned by just one focus group (57 in 2019–20 and 41 in 2020–21), there is obviously scope for discussion with students as to why certain individuals may be deemed significant by one person but not by another. Moving beyond the realms of subjectivity, who, in society, plays the major role in determining the historical status of particular individuals? This is a discussion worth having with students. Also, if one considers carefully the learning outcomes (1.3, 1.7, 1.9) – as cited in ***6.4.3*** - that require a degree of familiarity with the concept, we cannot presume that students will understand why significance

is attached to particular buildings and places, so this is another conversation we need to have with our students; not in a generalised, context-free way, but in the course of teaching the substantive history that is identified in the Strands 2 and 3 learning outcomes. We believe that initial teacher education courses and history teacher CPD have an important role to play in supporting teachers who need guidance in initiating such conversations.

The nomenclature around timing conventions in history can sometimes be confusing for students and an undue focus on dates is annoying for many students. The imprecision and awkwardness of some dating conventions needs to be acknowledged – where that is appropriate – but, on the other hand, the important role these conventions play in helping us to manage our discussions about a very messy and impossible-to-reclaim past also require explanation and emphasis. 'Our History Scaffold' offers a basic model – a 'framework,' indeed – to help students develop a more informed sense of what the past looks like, not for its own sake but to help students' grasp of chronology (in terms of both duration and sequence) as they study various episodes of history in their Junior Cycle History classrooms. We recommend the use of frameworks in initial teacher education courses for history teachers and CPD courses, also, and are happy to share our own working model for this and other educational purposes.

As argued in ***6.4.5***, our findings suggest that first year students' grasp of the concept of historical evidence is less than robust. Consequently, we also mentioned some ways in which shortcomings can be addressed. One way is to make, 'How do we know what we know?' a constant refrain in the history classroom, so that students are constantly reminded of the need to have some awareness of the evidential foundations of our historical knowledge. In this way, evidence can become a 'lens' that is used to appraise and question the historical accounts encountered. There is also a need for teachers to be in a position to assess their students' levels of understanding of what constitutes 'evidence.' Models of progression, such as the basic one outlined in ***2.6***, can be helpful in this regard, and need wider dissemination across the system, a role that initial teacher education courses and continuing professional development courses are well placed to fulfil.

Our findings indicate a good level of understanding of many aspects of historical change. Yet, as discussed in ***5.6.4***, the majority had a tendency to view change as 'event' and need to be empowered to view the past with an eye to processes at work and states of affairs that change. They need to be helped to understand the nature of change, that it is not an isolated event that just 'happens,' but a process that permeates life past and present, with a dynamic that operates within specific contexts, some of which result in significant changes in states of affairs. To improve student understanding, we believe, requires attention at the micro level as well as at the macro level, as suggested in ***6.4.6***. At the micro level, students need to explore the causal factors that combine to bring about change, as well as the ways in which the effects of change work their way through social or political or economic or cultural systems. The enquiry-focused approach is an established pedagogic practice that can be helpful in this regard, with lots of exemplars available for Leaving Certificate History teachers and students. There is scope for work at junior cycle level to help promote this approach. Because some processes of change can be better understood if looked at through a long-term lens, a framework such as 'Our History Scaffold' may help students to see patterns of change more clearly: one more argument for the use of frameworks in the Junior Cycle History classroom and as a focus of attention in education courses for history teachers.

Based on our focus group 'exit' interviews, our findings suggest that most students' understanding of historical evidence is strongest when the focus is on material evidence, less assured when personal testimony is being questioned, and weakest in the case of surviving documents from the past that were not created as eye-witness or participant records of something that was happening, but served a functional purpose at the time of their creation – from train timetables to workhouse punishment books to election posters and party election programmes. Students need to be helped to see the distinctions between material evidence, personal testimony, incidental materials such as advertising posters that happen to survive and other sources of evidence. Students also need to understand that historical knowledge is not something that is fixed and unchanging but may be changed if new evidence is discovered, a point acknowledged by the two focus groups cited in ***5.10.3***. Indeed, it is important to note that the point is enshrined in one of the Junior Cycle History specification's learning outcomes, albeit the reference is to 'historical judgements' rather than 'historical knowledge.' The learning outcome reads as follows:

Students should be able to

> **1.5** investigate the job of the historian, including how s/he finds and uses evidence to form historical judgements which may be revised and reinterpreted in the light of new evidence[125]

The potential to realise the objective set out here is evident in the responses of the two focus groups mentioned above. This is the potential we need to utilise and feed if we are to help our students recognise and achieve an informed understanding of 'The nature of history,' including its 'big picture' dimension.

6.6 Questions and considerations for the wider teaching of history at primary and tertiary levels

None of the researchers has experience of teaching history at primary school level. Two of us have experience of teaching a 'History Methods' module of the Professional Master of Education (PME) programme in UCD, on a part-time basis; none has experience of teaching history as an academic subject to undergraduate or postgraduate students. For all three of us, the main focus of our careers has been on the teaching of history at second level. Therefore, we do not presume to speak authoritatively about the teaching of history at primary and tertiary levels. However, we believe the findings of our research and the tentative recommendations we make in this chapter deserve careful consideration by those who teach history to our young children and to our young adults. As teachers of history at second level, we have done our best to build on the work done at primary level to instil an understanding of history in the twelve and thirteen-year-olds who enter our first year classrooms; and to develop our students' historical understanding and knowledge for the benefit of all, including those who may go on to study the subject at third level. We see history education as a continuum which needs to build on students' existing knowledge and understanding – correcting misunderstanding, where appropriate – and leading on to continuing growth in understanding and deepening knowledge.

[125] Department of Education and Skills (2017), *Junior Cycle History*. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills, p.16.

In seeking to highlight data that may be of interest to third-level teachers of history, it seems to us that the most relevant dataset is that relating to the PME student teachers set out in Chapter 4 of this report. For teachers of history at primary level, it is likely that the dataset relating to first year, second-level students set out in Chapter 5 may be of greater interest. Therefore, in the remainder of ***6.6***, we focus on data relating to the PME student teachers; in ***6.7*** we focus on data relating to the first year, second-level students.

6.6.1 Review of relevant data from PME questionnaires

What does it mean to have a 'big picture' of the past? This is a question to which we gave renewed consideration as we worked on the preparation of the questionnaire for the PME Year 1 Student History teachers. It seemed to us – as explained in ***4.1.1*** – that there were three main elements that we would expect to see in any person's robust 'big picture' of the past viz.

1. The 'broad sweep element: awareness that a 'big picture' is one that encompasses the broad sweep of the past.

2. The 'making connections' element: awareness that the ability to make connections between events and developments in different times and places is an important dimension of a 'big picture.'

3. The 'disciplinary understanding' element: awareness that a 'big picture' is not developed in a vacuum and is part and parcel of a broader understanding of what the discipline of history entails.

The question asked on the questionnaire – in a context where the junior cycle History specification requires teachers to help students develop more robust 'big pictures' – was: What is your understanding of the expression 'big picture of the past'? The filling in of the questionnaire was a completely voluntary undertaking on the part of the students involved and nineteen of the PME 1 class opted to cooperate. Only six of the students make a clear reference to the 'broad sweep' dimension, four make reference to the 'making connections' element, and just one mentions the 'disciplinary understanding' element. While these tabulated figures do not tell the whole story, and there are many nuances that emerge from the analysis in ***4.1.1***, nevertheless, there seems to us to be sufficient evidence here to suggest that graduates emerging from a BA programme in history do not necessarily have a useable framework that would enable them to place the different historical topics they study in a chronological context that makes sense and that facilitates orientation in time and the making of connections between developments in different period of time. Would the use of such a framework help to enhance the historical consciousness and understanding of history undergraduates? We respectfully suggest it would, or that, at the very least, it merits serious consideration.

As discussed in ***4.1.2***, when invited to outline their own 'big picture' on the questionnaire, few respondents did so, and some took the opportunity to criticise aspects of their own experience of history education. Some regretted the lack of focus on 'big picture' thinking in their own history education, while others admitted their 'big picture' was fragmented, blaming the 'bitty' nature of their historical studies. In fairness, others explained how their 'big picture' sensibilities developed as undergraduates, either as a result of the course being followed or, in one case, as the result of a personal need to better understand the wider context of topics studied. Nevertheless, again, and more strongly here, perhaps, the data would seem to bolster the case for the use of a framework approach throughout a student's history education.

In responding to Question 3 on the questionnaire, 'What do you think you will need to do to help your students develop a workable 'big picture' of the past'?, seven of the nineteen respondents mentioned the use of timelines. (See ***4.1.3***.) We welcome the current use of timelines at various levels of history education and see it as an integral element in the effort to help students develop more robust 'big pictures.' Of the seven respondents who mentioned timelines, four went on to identify as important the use of visual sources in conjunction with the timelines, to help students develop a 'sense of period' and/or to reinforce their disciplinary understanding of 'how we know what we know.' This is a practice we highly commend and see as desirable at all levels of the history education system.

6.6.2 Review of relevant data from PME 'entry' interviews

As noted in ***4.2***, the interviews covered the same broad areas as the questionnaire and sought to identify any development of understanding that had taken place since completion of the questionnaire or could be articulated more readily in a person-to-person conversation. In total, nine PME student teachers took part in the interviews. For some of the interviewees, the broad-based type of framework that facilitates making connections between people and events in different historical eras only ***began*** to take shape at undergraduate level. For others, the term 'big picture' tended to be equated with the term 'wider context,' and the notion of a 'broad sweep' understanding encompassing the broad range of human history was absent. We look forward to the day when students making the transition from history at second level to history at third level have a more fully-formed 'big picture' than at present, and hope that colleagues at third level will see the case to embrace and build on the 'big picture' approach.

The reluctance to articulate a personal 'big picture' that was evident in the questionnaire responses was also a feature of the interview responses. As mentioned in ***4.2.2***, some were almost apologetic about perceived gaps in their historical knowledge, usually identifying the 'modern' period as that with which they were most familiar; in at least some cases, the 'modern' period appeared to be equated with the twentieth century. The overwhelming popularity of later modern options at Leaving Certificate and undergraduate levels seems to us to raise issues around the perception of history and, more fundamentally, the perception of the past, among those who choose to study history beyond junior cycle. While no student of history can be expert and knowledgeable in all historical eras, is there not a need for some kind of broad understanding of how human history 'played out,' at least over the last two millennia or so? Are current arrangements adequate to equip students with such an understanding? The uptake of History at Leaving Certificate level and its popularity as an undergraduate option are closely linked and anything that may ease the transition from one sphere of activity to the other seems to us to be worthy of consideration. Perhaps there is a need to give closer consideration all round to the transitions from one level of history education to the next, to ensure that the activity taking place is evidentially-based history and not some fossilised, pseudo-factual version thereof. In this regard, it was good to hear one of the respondents discuss the role of evidence in her classroom, when asked about the challenge of helping her students develop stronger 'big pictures' of the past.

6.6.3 Review of relevant data from PME 'exit' interviews

As set out in ***4.3***, the purpose of the 'exit' interviews with the seven PME 2 students who collaborated in our research undertaking was to gauge the impact of that involvement and to discuss their classroom use of the 'Our History Scaffold'. Due to the COVID context, all interviews took place remotely, using the Zoom platform. The four issues on which the interviews focused were:

- How involvement in the project impacted on their teaching.
- Their current 'big picture' and the extent to which it had changed.
- The curricular usefulness of the framework as a classroom resource.
- Their view of the link that we see between 'big picture' understanding and understanding of the nature of history.

While, inevitably, there were areas of overlap between the issues listed, the issue that attracted most detailed discussion was classroom use of the framework.

With regard to how their involvement in the project affected their teaching, all made positive comments, with most making specific reference to the framework and its impact on themselves and on their students: 'it does help you place things into a filing box;' 'it does help you with structure and organisation;' 'there is that fluidity;' it did bring a flow.' For at least one respondent, the framework was very helpful at 'filling gaps.' Given that all seven respondents were history graduates, one cannot but wonder at the potential benefits if student teachers such as this were to be introduced to 'Our History Scaffold' - or some alternative, but carefully considered, framework – at an earlier point in their history education and, preferably, reinforced and expanded at each successive stage.

On the issue of whether their own 'big picture' had developed, evidence in the data was 'thin;' however, their understanding of what constituted a 'big picture' was certainly more assured. What comes through in the responses is that their use of the framework has enabled them to see clearer patterns and plan more successfully: as one respondent noted, the framework had given her 'a roadmap in my head, almost like a mental checklist.' For a respondent who had previously struggled to locate Ancient Rome in time, the framework was a 'stay' against confusion. While it is welcome for us to see our own imperfect framework bring about such benefits in classroom use, we would dearly like to see more widespread adoption of a framework approach and the deployment of a system-wide strategy to helping students' developing conception of time through a graduated and structured plan of action.

The benefits accruing from classroom use of the framework are well-attested, and some of these may be of particular interest to our third-level colleagues in history departments who 'inherit' students that complete our Leaving Certificate History courses. For example, the greater use of timelines, in tandem with the framework, and the manner in which it facilitated – indeed, encouraged – making connections between developments and events in different periods of time appears to have facilitated a type of pattern recognition that can be elided when historical topics are studied in discrete blocks without an overarching framework to provide a wider and associative context.

The 'Aha moment' syndrome mentioned in ***4.4.4*** is surely one that is welcomed by all teachers of history at whatever level. The popularity of the images (two per era) that form part of the 'Our History Scaffold' resource is also worthy of note: in particular, the manner in which images can

play a part in helping to unlock 'prior knowledge.' The importance of identifying students' existing knowledge is worthy of emphasis here: as the ***How People Learn*** (1999) and ***How Students Learn*** (2005) studies demonstrate, it may be key as to whether students learn effectively or not. Is this a principle that informs the teaching of our third-level colleagues? It seems to us a principle that has an application at all levels of the education system.

In discussing with the seven student teachers their current view of the link between 'big picture' understanding and understanding of the nature of history, it was clear that all seven saw the benefits to their students of emphasising that important linkage. A developing understanding of historical significance, change, time, empathy and evidence were all mentioned, and the highlighting of these concepts in the junior cycle specification would appear to be a factor in what our respondents saw as a greater all-round emphasis on the nature of history amongst their first-year students than they had experienced in their own schooling. Indeed, the data suggest that highlighting the role of 'big picture' thinking in promoting understanding of the nature of history tends to bring the understanding of these other important concepts into play in ways that enrich their overall historical understanding. One would hope that the greater understanding reported would inform classroom discussions at Leaving Certificate level and, beyond that, at university level for those who go on to study history as undergraduates. Enhanced channels of communication between university history departments and teachers of history at second level might help to ensure that such greater understanding reaps benefits for all concerned – and, in particular, the students who give us all our *raison d'être*.

6.7 Review of relevant data gathered from first year history students

As set out in ***3.5.2***, the focus group interviews were completed by a total of 127 first year History students in the 2019–20 school year and 130 students in the 2020–21 school year. While the first task sought to identify the 'parts' of history that students tended to remember best, the second attempted in a more focused way to identify the nature of the students' 'big picture' of the past – based on the history they had learned to date. In reviewing the data here, particular reference will be made to the 'Summary and Conclusions' section of Chapter 5.

As noted in ***5.2*** and ***5.3***, across the two years that this exercise was conducted – in a total of fifteen schools - the historical phenomena identified by students as those they remember best are World War 2 (157 mentions) and Ancient Rome (133 mentions). In 2019–20, the third most mentioned was the 1916 Rising (64 mentions); in 2020–21, it was the fourth most mentioned (41 mentions). In 2020, World War 1 was the third most mentioned (46 mentions). Beyond the events and eras highlighted here, a wide-ranging, somewhat disparate set of other events and eras was identified by respondents. A number of issues arise that may be of interest to our colleagues at primary level.

First, it behoves us all to consider why World War 2 and Ancient Rome are the two historical phenomena that appear to register most strongly with our first year students. In attempting to

establish what we called the 'engines of memorability' in ***5.6.2*** - i.e. the factors that contributed to making these phenomena memorable for students - work done in primary school was frequently mentioned (and much of this related to project work), along with books read, visits to places of interest (often, family visits) and viewing of film and television programmes. The range of other topics mentioned by students show that there is a level of interest in a wide range of historical eras.

A second issue that arises is the question of what can be done to link in some way, or to some degree, the disparate items identified by respondents: these ranged from Ancient Egypt and Ancient Greece through Stone Age farmers and 'Celtic' Ireland to the Russian Revolution, the first man on the Moon and the Northern Ireland 'Troubles.' Also included were 'niche' topics – possibly linked to ethnic origins or connections - such as, from Indian history, 'the life of the Queen of Jhansi' and, from Japanese history, 'Japanese folklore and history, especially of the Heian period.' As argued in ***5.6.3***, we need to help students to see 'far-flung and disparate pieces of history as elements in and contributions to an ever-changing continuum of human development.' As for how to achieve this, it seems to us that frameworks of the past, designed to build some impression of what the English National Curriculum refers to as the 'long arc of development,' have a vital role to play. We would welcome dialogue on this issue with colleagues working in primary education, to discuss, for example, whether 'Our History Scaffold' – or some version or variation thereof – would assist the learning of pupils studying history at primary level.

As discussed in ***5.4*** and ***5.5***, the second task asked students – based on the history they had learned – to outline the 'big picture' they would give to a visitor from outer space to help her/him understand the world in which we live. It was hoped that the wording of the task would encourage students to attempt to formulate a meaningful overview of human history, one that would be skewed by the students' limited knowledge, but which we hoped would give a good indication of the nature of the 'big picture' with which they operated. In our analysis of the responses, as explained in ***5.4***, we were heavily influenced by the approach to analysis followed in the report on the 'Usable Historical Pasts' project and its categorisation of student accounts as 'process like' or 'event like.' From the 2019–20 cohort of students, our analysis identified a total of 43 students who showed *some* understanding of history as process, while 73 were more inclined to view history as 'event' (or, perhaps, more accurately, as a series of discrete events, with no connections identified). For the 2020–21 cohort, the relevant figures were 26 and 101. Thus, across the two cohorts of students taken in tandem, 69 students appeared to have some understanding of history as process while 174 appeared to lack that understanding. The challenge that arises here is how to improve student understanding of key processes at work in different historical periods. We believe frameworks such as 'Our History Scaffold' have a role to play here.

One of the key features of 'Our History Scaffold' is that it places an emphasis on the dynamic nature of history and the processes that drive development. Thus, the title accorded to each of the ten eras represented in the framework makes reference to significant developments or processes of change e.g. 'Early hunters and farmers invent tools and weapons;' 'Explorers and reformers bring change;' 'Industrialisation and democracy advance;' 'Television and computers change how we communicate.' The framework encourages students to make connections between different eras, including ones that are distant in time. Thus, the manner in which early farmers invented tools

to work the land can be linked to the impact on farming of advances in mechanisation, from the agricultural and industrial innovations of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the present day. If this kind of linkage were to begin at primary level, through use of an appropriate framework and, possibly, an adapted version of 'Our History Scaffold,' we believe the benefits would be immense for all concerned, including the pupils who must always be our prime consideration.

6.7.1 Review of relevant data from 'entry' interviews with first year history students

For both the 2019–20 and 2020–21 cohorts of students, the focus group 'entry' interviews were steered by an interview schedule (See Appendix D) that revolved around four key historical concepts viz. historical significance, historical time, historical evidence and historical change. In considering insights from the data that may be of interest to primary level colleagues, we pay particular attention to the 'Concluding observations' made in ***5.9***.

In exploring the concept of historical significance with the students, by asking them to name the people they regarded as most significant or important from the last two thousand years or so, it was noteworthy that – beyond the expected plethora of male political leaders – a wide range of significant 'others' was identified, from Cleopatra and Rosa Parks to Anne Frank and Malala Yousafzai. Also significant is that, with both cohorts of students (2019–20 and 2020–21), a large number of figures seen as significant was identified by just one focus group: the number for 2019–20 was 57; that for 2020–21 was 41. While the lists of those mentioned only once contain some lesser-known historical figures (e.g., 2019–20: Colonel Thomas Ferebee, George Marshall, Gavrilo Princip; 2020–21: Akbar, Maximillian Kolbe, Harriet Tubman), in some cases, better -known figures feature. For example, Michael Collins who was mentioned by six focus groups of the 2019–20 cohort was mentioned by only one focus group of the 2020–21 cohort. When we focus on the figures mentioned just once, the variety is striking e.g., 2019-2020: Hans Christian Andersen, King Charles I, Pol Pot, Mary Robinson; 2020–21: Eva Braun, Teddy Roosevelt, Spartacus, Nicolas Tesla. How can we help our pupils or students make better sense of what may seem to some an unconnected muddle of context-free figures whose achievements are not, apparently, sufficient to guarantee 'across the board' recognition? Our answer would be – based very much on the data we have encountered, but buoyed also by our own experience at classroom level – that our pupils and students need to be helped to see patterns and to make connections, and that frameworks such as 'Our History Scaffold' – adapted appropriately if used at primary level – have an important role to play in achieving this shared objective.

In exploring the concept of historical time with students, many issues arose that fall markedly within the realm of the research in which we are engaged. One was the issue of nomenclature as a cause of confusion for students. In some respects this problem may be intractable, as the same term may denote different periods of time when applied to different areas of human activity e.g. music, art, architecture, where the term 'classical' has a meaning that is determined by the context in which it is applied. That, of course, is why consideration of context is always of critical importance in historical endeavours. At the classroom level, one of the ways in which wider context can be explored is through the use of a framework as a sort of 'positional' or navigating device to

help students see the general sequencing that historians deploy in their work. Frameworks can also be useful in addressing another concern voiced by some of our respondents, a distaste for 'learning off'' dates. It was noteworthy that many of our respondents seemed to prefer the idea of focusing on 'eras;' in the words of one (as cited in ***5.7.4***), 'because then you have got a sort of brief description, you kind of know what is going on in that era.' As might be expected, respondents' awareness of different eras varied greatly, and there were identifiable gaps where particular eras did not feature in primary level or junior cycle history courses. Students' ability to formulate some sort of coherent 'big picture' – albeit one characterised by the sort of gaps just mentioned - was more evident in the case of the 2019–20 cohort; one possible reason for this is that the focus group interviews with those students were face-to-face rather than online (using the Zoom platform.) The receptivity of some students, at least, to the notion of eras offers a 'way in' for the use of frameworks such as 'Our History Scaffold,' which focuses on ten identified historical eras. While time is a challenging concept for all students of history, it seems to us to be worth exploring whether the benefits enjoyed by first year junior cycle students through the use of the framework can be replicated at primary level, and whether an adapted version of 'Our History Scaffold' would fit the purpose, or whether another framework approach may be more fruitful.

In exploring the issue of historical evidence with students, it was clear that many students had a limited understanding of what constitutes historical evidence and the manner in which historical accounts are based on evidence. This is hardly surprising given the age profile of the students, but we believe a sharper focus on evidence in the classroom can bring many students to a greater understanding of the concept and its pivotal role in researching and writing history. The better they understand how history works, the better they can understand the constructed nature of a 'big picture' and how scaffolding such as 'Our History Scaffold' can help to bring their own 'big picture' a step (or, indeed, many steps) further. The students we met had a keener understanding of archaeological evidence than other types of evidence: this is to be expected since material evidence in concrete form can be seen and touched and appraised in ways that are more direct and visceral than other types of evidence. There is much to be gained, we believe, from using archaeological evidence with pupils and young students as a way of refining their understanding of how such evidence helps to make history possible. Once such understanding has become well-established, a next stage might be to work on the understanding of testimony that some of our respondents exemplified and that may very well be present in the understanding of some, at least, of the senior pupils at primary level. On the issue of whether their pupils are capable of understanding how evidence can be drawn by inference from documents such as train timetables and old newspaper advertisements, we would defer to our primary level colleagues.

In exploring the issue of historical change with the students, through a focus on their choice of significant changes over the last one hundred years or so, what was immediately striking was the students' propensity to focus on changes that resonated in some way with their daily lives or with the lives of friends and others (as refracted, in some cases, presumably through mass media and social media). Therefore, there was greater concentration on social and technological changes than there was on political ones. Some respondents showed great facility in linking past changes to present-day phenomena, such as the invention of the motor car and the growing popularity of the electric car today. An ability to link past and future was also evident in responses on

why it is important to learn about different kinds of changes in the classroom: 'So we don't do careless things in the future.' This is an example of the sort of orientation that we seek to develop through work on the 'big picture': encouraging students to make connections between events and developments in different time periods, including connections to the world we live in today – and how that world might develop into the future. The potential for such work at primary level is clear, building on current good practice in innovative and exciting ways. We look forward to dialogue on these matters at some future date.

6.7.2 Review of relevant data from 'exit' interviews with first year history students

Since we had been unable to hold 'exit' interviews with the 2019–20 cohort of first year History students due to pandemic restrictions, we greatly welcomed the opportunity to speak with the 2020–21 cohort towards the end of their school year in May 2021. Due to the on-going COVID context, all the interviews took place via Zoom. As explained, the interview schedule was designed to focus attention on some points of development in the history of humankind and to give us some sense of the students' developing 'architecture' of the past. The final two questions were designed to elicit some feedback on the classroom use of the framework and the extent to which their own 'big picture' had developed over the course of the year. In considering insights from the data that may be of interest to primary level colleagues, we pay particular attention to the 'Concluding observations' made in ***5.11***.

In asking a series of questions that focussed on developments that feature in the framework, some interesting observations were made by the students, some showing a level of understanding that suggests they possess some elements of the disciplinary understanding and ability to take a long-term perspective that we see as vital to robust 'big picture' thinking. For example, in discussing the first inhabitants of Ireland, when asked, 'Do we know this as a fact or is this the knowledge we have based on the evidence available to us?' some students recognised that our knowledge could change if new evidence were discovered. In discussing the reasons why farming might be seen as one of the most important inventions in history, of those responses which showed an ability to take a long-term perspective, perhaps the most perceptive and succinct was: 'Because it is still used today. So obviously it works.' These and other such responses suggest that some, at least, of our students are well-primed to benefit from teaching that helps to provide wider perspectives and that sets a premium on disciplinary understanding (i.e., how history works as a discipline). Can these benefits be extended to a greater number of pupils and students at primary and secondary levels? We believe that the answer is 'yes,' and that the means to achieve this include wider use of framework-based approaches.

In posing a question on how technology changed human history, our expectation was that modern computer technology would feature heavily, and it did. However, over the course of the focus group interviews in the seven schools, a broad selection of examples was adduced, from the invention of the wheel and, later, the printing press to electricity, the tank and social media. The developments identified constitute 'a sort of outline framework of technological change over time,' one that can be extended and built on to help pupils' and students' 'big picture' grow. A framework

such as this can also be integrated into a wider, more extensive framework such as 'Our History Scaffold,' so that the opportunities to see patterns and make connections can be multiplied and developed. This may serve to prompt the question, 'How did our 2020–21 cohort of students respond to the use of the framework in their History classroom?'

When it came to discussing the framework, 'Our History Scaffold,' with students, the visual element of the framework was well attested, as an aid and prompt to the memory. If this framework or another with a similar purpose were to be introduced at primary level, there may be a case for foregrounding the visual element and gradually introducing the explanatory and contextual elements, highlighting the evidential underlay on which our understanding is built. The evidence – limited but significant, it seems to us – that the framework was helpful to students in enabling them to contemplate 'multiple things' in the past at once, making connections and seeing how strands of influence can extend from one era into subsequent ones, is another significant finding in our view. The 2011 report *History for All*[126] – a report on pupils' understanding of historical issues at primary level - found that 'Some pupils found it difficult to place the historical episodes they had studied within any coherent long-term narrative' and that one of the consequences of this was 'they found it difficult to link developments together'. If this finding is reflected in the daily realities of life in Irish primary classrooms then the framework approach offers a way ahead, a possibility of developing some form of 'coherent 'long-term narrative' and a means of facilitating pupils 'to link developments together.'

As reported in ***5.10.10***, our final discussion focused on whether students' understanding of the overall shape of the past had improved over the course of the school year. Insofar as students talked about the framework, in responding to the question, their enthusiasm was unbounded as they spoke of its ability to 'fill in between the gaps of history', and of the 'mental timeline' they are building up that helps them 'connect … and put all the pieces together'. The basis for the exuberance evident here may be seen as overstated, but we see it as a positive indication of the potential for engagement in learning that a framework can generate. The comments cited here serve as a useful prompt to us as researchers and designers of the 'Our History Scaffold' scaffold to remind us that no framework can help to put 'all the pieces together'; that a framework is not some idealised 'big picture' to which all are expected to aspire but, rather, a device to help leaners navigate their way through historical time, in ways that meet their current needs and likely future requirements. The most useful frameworks, it seems to us, would be ones that are compatible across the different levels of history education, and whose use begin in the primary schools. We would welcome discussions with primary colleagues as to whether these aspirations are realistic and the means by which meaningful plans for their realisation might be advanced.

[126] Ofsted (2011), *History for all: History in English schools 2007/10*, p.4. Report currently available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/413714/History_for_all.pdf.

6.8 Summary of conclusions and recommendations relating to the initial education and continuing professional development of teachers

Since the first stages of our research focused on student history teachers in the first year of their Professional Master of Education (PME) programme, our main conclusions and recommendations from this element of our research (discussed in Chapter 4 of this report) relate to initial history teacher education. However, where deemed appropriate, we have identified what we see as implications for the continuing professional development of teachers and have made recommendations accordingly.

(i) The concept of a 'big picture' is a significant feature in the Junior Cycle History specification of 2018. Our study suggests that it may be unsafe to assume that incoming student history teachers will have a clear understanding of the term. We recommend that exploration of student teachers' understanding of the concept receive due emphasis in all initial history teacher education courses.

(ii) Given the extent of the emphasis on disciplinary understanding of history (i.e., the manner in which history functions as a discipline) in the Junior Cycle History specification, articulation of disciplinary understanding was somewhat muted. (In the specification, 'The nature of history' is one of three interconnected strands and is intended to 'frame' the manner in which the other two, contextual strands are to be taught.) We recommend that appropriate attention be given to the disciplinary understanding of history in initial teacher education programmes and in the continuing professional development of teachers.

(iii) A reluctance on the part of some respondents to articulate the 'big picture' of the past with which they themselves operate is likely to be linked to a knowledge base that is skewed towards the 'later modern,' and a number of responses appeared to equate 'later modern' with twentieth-century history. Admitted gaps in knowledge of certain historical periods can create challenges in the classroom, where assisting students in 'Acquiring the big picture' is a requirement. This is not an issue that can be readily resolved at the level of teacher education courses - whether initial or continuing development. In order to help address the issue, the classroom use of frameworks such as 'Our History Scaffold' is recommended. It is our view that their use should not be confined to junior cycle, but that consideration should be given to their use at all levels, from primary school to undergraduate level.

(iv) For those who articulated a 'big picture' dimension to their historical understanding, it seemed to us that their overall grasp of historical detail and significance was enhanced as a result. We believe the benefits of such understanding can be extended more widely through the use of frameworks. It is crucial, however, in our view, to monitor the use of specific frameworks and to develop further our understanding of which frameworks work best in particular educational settings. We recommend that frameworks such as 'Our History Scaffold' be subjected to rigorous scrutiny and that other approaches to formulating frameworks be explored and reported, so that evidence-based decisions can be made about their potential classroom effectiveness.

(v) Although the Junior Cycle History specification recommends that a 'big picture' of the past be taught rapidly at the beginning of the course of study and revisited regularly over the three years of junior cycle, only one respondent made reference to the need for regular 'revisiting'. The paucity of reference to the issue suggests that it requires greater emphasis in initial teacher education courses. We recommend that it should be a focus of continuing professional development courses also. Such courses might look at the importance of a rapidly-taught 'big picture' and its subsequent development – and the pedagogical strategies and resources best suited to support this.

(vi) The exit interviews furnished less evidence that we would have wished for effective use of the experimental framework in the classroom, possibly due to limitations on its classroom use occasioned by the pandemic. Such evidence as we found was supportive of classroom use of the framework. Further deliberation and research are recommended, with a view to the development of more robust and inclusive frameworks.

6.9 Summary of conclusions and recommendations relating to the education of Junior Cycle History students

Our conclusions in this section are based on student tasks completed in eight schools in the school year 2019–20 and a further seven schools in the 2020–21 school year, as well as the focus-group interviews conducted in the same fifteen schools. In the 2019–20 school year, 'entry' focus-group interviews only were held; planned 'exit' interviews had to be abandoned due to pandemic restrictions. In the 2020–21 school year, both 'entry' and 'exit' focus-group interviews took place; in this school year, all interviews were conducted using the Zoom platform.

(i) The first student task sought to identify the 'parts of history' that students remembered best. In both years, the two most frequently mentioned were World War II and ancient Rome. Less obvious choices included 'Japanese folklore and history, especially of the Heian period.'

The second task sought to identify the sort of 'big picture of the past' with which the student operated, the degree of coherence and whether the perception showed any awareness of 'history as process.' In both years, the number tending to view history as 'event' were in a clear majority; the minority who showed awareness of some of the processes at work in the historic past sometimes showed a quite nuanced understanding of how history works as a discipline.

If the significant minority identified in our research is to become a majority over time - and if that minority is to be empowered to grow in its understanding and knowledge – then, we believe, decisive action is required. We recommend that students be provided with a contextual frame into which their growing knowledge can be assimilated, so that connections can be made more readily and more meaningfully. We also recommend that students be further empowered through the conscious promotion of an analytical 'toolkit' that, as we said in ***5.6.4***, will enable students 'to sort the genuinely historical from the selectively

propagandistic and the reductively entertaining.' The analytical understanding to which we refer would require conscious, planned efforts to improve student understanding of such basic historical concepts as historical evidence, historical time, historical empathy, historical change and historical significance.

(ii) In the 2019–20 focus-group interviews, which were held face-to-face immediately before pandemic restrictions were imposed, the richness of insight to be gained from listening carefully to students' voices became evident. Given our research focus, of particular interest were observations made in respect of nomenclature used in certain dating conventions and a perceived emphasis on the importance of dates in the study of history.

Another, more strongly expressed, difficulty was the distaste that many had for being required to 'learn off' dates. That many preferred the looser concept of an 'era' to the narrowness and specificity of a succession of dates became evident as our research progressed. Given that the experimental framework is based on an enumeration of ten eras, this may be seen as strengthening the case for use of the framework.

Otherwise, perhaps, the most striking finding is the limited understanding of historical evidence evinced by the students. Most sure of their ground when discussing archaeological evidence, a notion of testimony was evident in some exchanges; but the notion that we can draw evidence by inference from documents that were not created as records was less evident. This is hardly surprising, but it does point up the need for adequate attention to be given to developing students' understanding of historical evidence over the course of junior cycle. This would be in line with the emphasis given to historical evidence in Strand 1 of the History specification, where the element, 'Working with evidence' encompasses four learning outcomes: 1.5, 1.6, 1.7 and 1.8. It is difficult to see how these learning outcomes could be realised without growth in students' understanding of what constitutes historical evidence. (A useful starting point might seek to clarify for students the essential difference between 'source' and 'evidence.') We recommend that greater attention be given to these matters in history teachers' initial education and continuing professional development courses.

(iii) In the case of the 2020–21 'entry' interviews, conducted via the Zoom platform, discussion of significant people from the past was driven forward by ***our*** observation that the figures identified came from different historical eras. Invited to name historical eras, responses often reflected eras mentioned in the Junior Cycle History specification, with a smaller number of references to other eras. There was little evidence of an overarching 'big picture' that would facilitate orientation in time and help students make connections between developments in the different eras. This is an area that needs to be addressed in history teacher education courses.

Understanding of historical evidence on this occasion was similar to that articulated by the 2019–20 cohort, in that some understanding was displayed of the role played by the personal testimony of participants in and observers of historical events, but with little if any awareness of how other types of surviving records and ephemeral material – such as advertising bills – can yield valuable evidence when interrogated by historians. We recommend that initial history

teacher education courses review their current practice to ensure that due emphasis is placed on the following two facets of evidential understanding:

1. That the evidence of participants and observers needs to be subjected to critical analysis, including an awareness that different observers and participants may view the same events differently, and

2. That non-testamentary records such as business records and the records of parliamentary proceedings can be powerful sources of evidence when subjected to interrogation by historians.

(iv) The 2020–21 'exit' interviews were important to us as they provided our only opportunity to assess the views of students on use of the framework in their classrooms. Since it had not been possible in the previous school year to meet the focus group a second time due to Covid restrictions, the 'exit' interviews gave us an opportunity to continue and to build on the conversations begun in our first visit. Despite the need to conduct the interviews via Zoom, the quality of insights gained through listening to students' voices vindicated our determination to create meaningful encounters that would further our own understanding on the issues that had inspired our research.

Across a range of questions designed to aid our understanding of students' developing 'architecture' of the past and their current understanding of how history works, it was clear that some of the students had an understanding that would provide a solid basis for development of the sort of 'big picture' understanding with which our research was primarily concerned. For example, in respect of the first people to live on the island of Ireland and what we know about them, some students – a small number – recognised our knowledge could change if new evidence were discovered. This 'sliver' of understanding of the nature of historical knowledge and the role of evidence in its creation provides a basis on which to build more mature disciplinary understanding, an important dimension of 'big picture' understanding.

Other insights from students were more fully articulated. In discussing the significance of the invention of farming, one student responded: 'Because it is still used today. So obviously it works.' We see that linkage between the distant past and the present as significant. Others made the link between the invention of farming, people settling down and the development of cities. When we moved on to discussing 'civilisations' and what this term denoted, students readily identified key features and, in respect of Roman civilisation, one respondent noted that it was just 'one of the foundations for humanity nowadays.' We see the singular as important here with the implication that there are other 'foundations' for humanity today. Some responses were counter-intuitive, as in the discussion on the importance of religion in Irish history, where one respondent argued that the arrival of Christianity led to the establishment of monasteries which led to Viking attacks and, ultimately, settlement, changing the history of Ireland 'forever.' What is at issue here, it seems to us, is not the sophistication of the argument but the ability to apply a long-term perspective to discrete historical phenomena and to make linkages that have some level of validity.

Sometimes, even before we addressed use of the framework directly, there were responses that exemplified the opportunities that ordinary classrooms provide for developing 'big picture' understanding. In discussing how technology has changed human history, while most attention focused on more recent technological innovations, a wide range of significant technological inventions from across the centuries was identified. In drawing up Table 17, it was clear to us that what we had was a nascent framework – generated by student responses across seven schools – that could provide the basis for a more comprehensive overview of human technological developments. What is of greatest importance here is that the raw material for a prototype framework came from the students themselves, a reminder of the importance of identifying existing student knowledge and seeking to build on that, helping to correct misconceptions where appropriate.

Student reaction to the use of the framework and the focus on 'big picture' understanding was universally positive. We acknowledge that this may be partly due to contextual factors, including our previous meeting with the students and the arrangement to return to discuss the use of the framework. Given that their teacher was present in the room where the Zoom call was received, it may be supposed that a critical reaction was unlikely. Notwithstanding that, some interesting observations were made by students, such as the manner in which the framework helped them 'to fill in between the gaps of history.' Another spoke of building up a 'mental timeline' that helps them to 'connect … and put all the pieces together.' Certainly, the evidence we drew from these encounters bolstered our view that 'big picture' teaching has the capacity to significantly enhance students' experience of studying history.

Our final recommendation, therefore, is repeating a message we have articulated throughout, that the use of frameworks to assist students in developing more robust 'big pictures' requires planned and meaningful attention in initial history teacher education courses and in continuing professional development programmes for teachers. We also recommend that serious consideration be given at primary school level and at undergraduate level to adopting a 'big picture' approach and that students of history have an accessible and increasingly sophisticated framework available to them when attempting to orient themselves in time. The experimental framework that we have developed may be open to criticism on a number of levels but, at the very least, can hopefully operate as a useful starting point for discussions on how to help students 'think longitudinally.' We look forward to those discussions.

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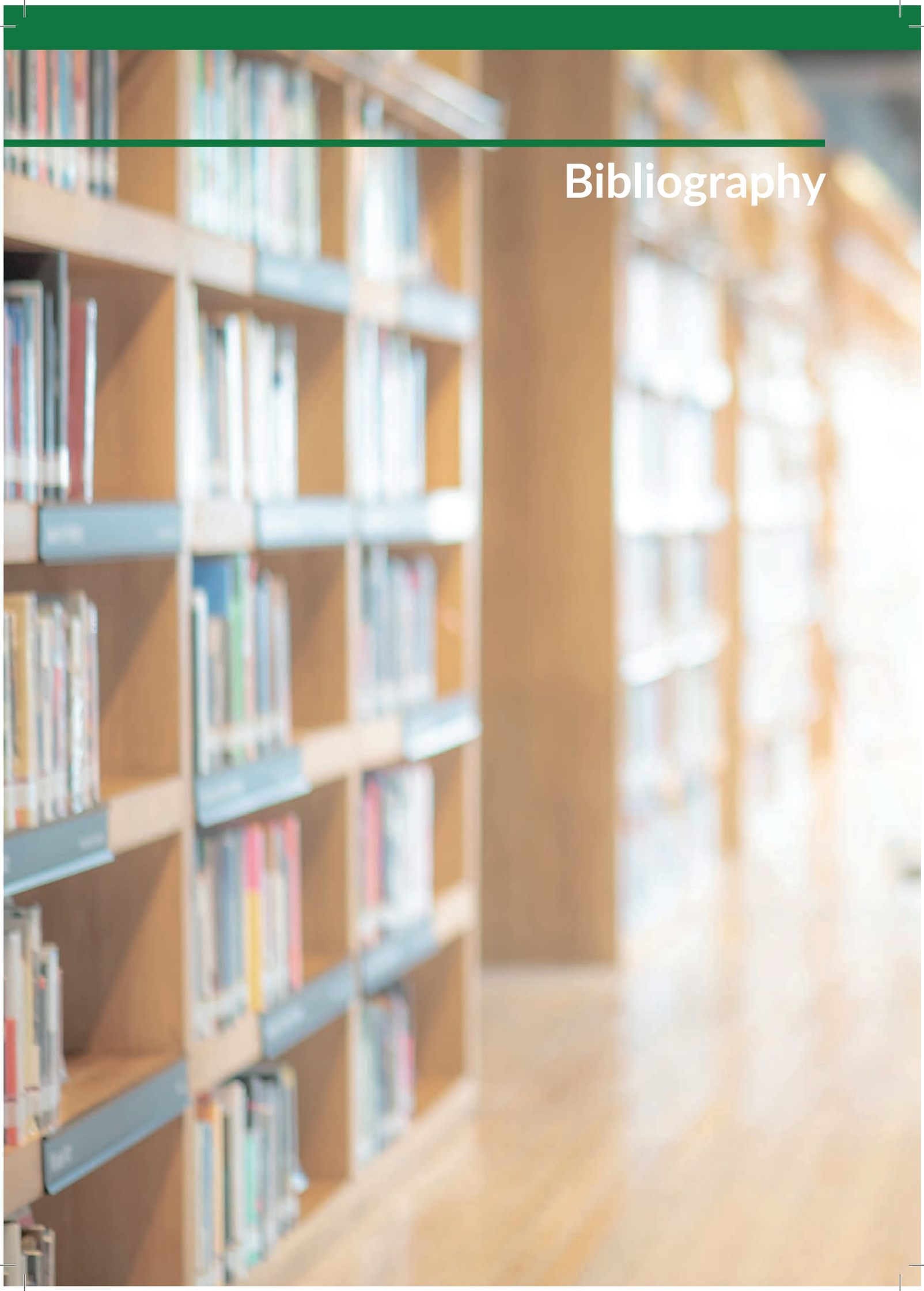

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Appendices

Appendix A

Big pictures of the past: questionnaire for PME students

1. A number of learning outcomes in the junior cycle History specification require the teacher **to help students acquire a 'big picture' of the past**. What is your understanding of the expression **'big picture of the past'**?

2. In a paragraph of 10 or 12 sentences, how would you sum up **your own** 'big picture' of the past?

3. **What do you think you will need to do** to help your students develop a workable 'big picture' of the past, that is to say, a big picture that helps students make more sense of what they learn in the History classroom?

Appendix B

PME students:
Targeted interview questions

The eight students for interview

Sadhbh	**Jacinta**	**Ultan**	**Josephine**
Rory	**Rose**	**Tom**	**Margaret**

Notes:

1. Targeted questions for the eight are in normal font below. The three overarching or governing themes are in italicised headings as per the schedule drafted in the submission to the ethics committee. The italicised questions that accompany the targeted questions below are also in italics and are intended to allow for comparisons to be drawn between students' responses.

2. All eight names are pseudonyms.

1. Sadhbh

Your understanding of the term 'big picture of the past'

- In your questionnaire responses, you explained the 'big picture' as "a coherent story that flows from the dawn of time to present day" Can you talk to us about what you mean by 'coherent' in this context? Do you think most people have such a 'big picture'? Insofar as people have such a 'big picture', do you think such pictures resemble each other or show significant differences?
- What is your understanding of the reasons why the new junior cycle specification for History contains a number of learning outcomes related to the 'big picture'?

What your own 'big picture' looks like

- You talk also about gaps in your own 'big picture'. Can you talk to us about why you think such gaps are there, given that you have (presumably) studied history for a good number of years?
- What learning experiences (in the classroom or elsewhere) do you think contributed to the 'big picture' that you have described?
- Do you think the 'big picture' described is likely to be different from that of friends and acquaintances?

Helping your students to develop stronger 'big pictures' of the past

- In your response to the third question on the questionnaire, you mention the importance of students understanding context, being able to see what's going on elsewhere in the world at the same time as an episode they are studying, being able to make connections between episodes at different times and in different places. You also mention use of time lines. Can you talk to us about how time lines can be used to help students, understand context and make connections?
- What other kinds of teaching approaches do you think work best in helping students to improve their 'big picture' of the past?
- What kinds of resources do you think would be most helpful in helping students to improve their 'big picture' of the past?

2. Rory

Your understanding of the term 'big picture of the past'

- In your questionnaire responses, you talked about the 'big picture' as "an understanding of time, that being the gaps or intersections between studied areas and the areas outside study?" Can you talk to us a little more about this understanding that you have?
- What is your understanding of the reasons why the new junior cycle specification for History contains a number of learning outcomes related to the 'big picture'?

What your own 'big picture' looks like

- In relation to gaps in your own 'big picture' you say, "Within my own education, the focus was generally around topics/areas of study and less about what I'd describe as 'History as a whole'." Do you think that applies generally, or is fairly widespread or unique to yourself?
- What learning experiences (in the classroom or elsewhere) do you think contributed to the 'big picture' that you have described?

Helping your students to develop stronger 'big pictures' of the past

- In your response to the third question on the questionnaire, you mention a need to develop your own understanding of the concept of a 'big picture' of the past. Would you say your understanding has developed since you filled in the questionnaire? What sort of help do you think you and/or your students might need in relation to 'big picture' understanding?
- What other kinds of teaching approaches do you think work best in helping students to improve their 'big picture' of the past?
- What kinds of resources do you think would be most helpful in helping students to improve their 'big picture' of the past?

3. Jacinta

Your understanding of the term 'big picture of the past'

- Can you talk to us about your understanding of this term?
- In your questionnaire responses, you say, "A bigger picture should be included in every class [so as students have a better understanding of the time being covered]. Do you think that's feasible?
- What is your understanding of the reasons why the new junior cycle specification for History contains a number of learning outcomes related to the 'big picture'?

What your own 'big picture' looks like

- You also say, "When I studied history in school I don't remember being taught the 'bigger picture'." What sort of 'big picture' of the past would you say you ended up with as a consequence of this?
- What learning experiences (in the classroom or elsewhere) do you think contributed to the 'big picture' that you have described?
- Do you think the 'big picture' described is likely to be different from that of friends and acquaintances?

Helping your students to develop stronger 'big pictures' of the past

- In your response to the third question, you say, "This could mean at the start of every chapter include some information about how it links to the previous chapter e.g. the medieval times are linked closely with the age of exploration." Do you think that is enough to give students a 'big picture', or is something else required?
- What other kinds of teaching approaches do you think work best in helping students to improve their 'big picture' of the past?
- What kinds of resources do you think would be most helpful in helping students to improve their 'big picture' of the past?

4. Rose

Your understanding of the term 'big picture of the past'

- In your questionnaire responses, in giving your understanding of the 'big picture', you talked about the importance of understanding "what influenced what and connections." Can you talk to us a little more about what you had in mind here?
- What is your understanding of the reasons why the new junior cycle specification for History contains a number of learning outcomes related to the 'big picture'?

What your own 'big picture' looks like

- In relation to your own 'big picture', you said that, "The 'big picture' was potentially pieced together later in life when I took an interest in it rather than in first year. The connection of events, civilizations, wars, religions etc., what influenced what and what resulted in a direct impact." Could you give us some idea of the 'big picture' that emerged for you from this process?
- What learning experiences (in the classroom or elsewhere) do you think contributed to the 'big picture' that you have described?
- Do you think the 'big picture' described is likely to be different from that of friends and acquaintances?

Helping your students to develop stronger 'big pictures' of the past

- You mention your classroom use of timelines: "I think time and chronology is very important- to continuously make them aware – to situate these events that they study within a period of history, i.e., prehistory etc. but also for them to focus on and understand what came before and after that event/ period. Normally I fill the event/s in on a timeline in class to allow them to do it themselves." How helpful do you think timelines are in helping students develop a meaningful 'big picture'? Are there any other strategies that would help?
  ["Another thing I think I will need to do is highlight an idea of a broader impact." Perhaps elaborate?]
- What other kinds of teaching approaches do you think work best in helping students to improve their 'big picture' of the past?
- What kinds of resources do you think would be most helpful in helping students to improve their 'big picture' of the past?

5. Ultan

Your understanding of the term 'big picture of the past'

- In your questionnaire responses, in giving your understanding of the 'big picture', you say, "My understanding of the above expression is to take into consideration and be mindful of other events that may have led to this event. "Can you talk to us a little bit more about what you had in mind here?
- What is your understanding of the reasons why the new junior cycle specification for History contains a number of learning outcomes related to the 'big picture'?

What your own 'big picture' looks like

- In relation to your own 'big picture', you say that "In fifth year I got a new teacher who was very much focused on ensuring that his higher level students focused on a bigger picture and not isolated events or misconceptions." Can you talk to us about the sort of bigger picture of the past that you developed as a consequence of this?
- What learning experiences (in the classroom or elsewhere) do you think contributed to the 'big picture' that you have described?
- Do you think the 'big picture' described is likely to be different from that of friends and acquaintances?

Helping your students to develop stronger 'big pictures' of the past

- You say "One way of achieving this [making History appealing] is presenting a bigger picture to students and showing them how it [history] is intertwined. " In practical, classroom terms, can you talk to us about some of the ways in which this might be achieved?
- What other kinds of teaching approaches do you think work best in helping students to improve their 'big picture' of the past?
- What kinds of resources do you think would be most helpful in helping students to improve their 'big picture' of the past?

6. Tom

Your understanding of the term 'big picture of the past'

- In your questionnaire responses, in giving your understanding of the 'big picture', you say, "It is an overall understanding of how we got to this point…." By 'we' here, do you mean humankind/ we, the Irish? Do you mean in a political sense? a technological sense? In socio-economic terms?
- What is your understanding of the reasons why the new junior cycle specification for History contains a number of learning outcomes related to the 'big picture'?

What your own 'big picture' looks like

- You go on to say, "In my own words, [a] 'big picture' of the past has to do with circumstances worldwide." Can you give us an idea of the kind of global 'big picture' of the past that you yourself have?
- What learning experiences (in the classroom or elsewhere) do you think contributed to the 'big picture' that you have described?
- Do you think the 'big picture' described is likely to be different from that of friends and acquaintances?

Helping your students to develop stronger 'big pictures' of the past

- In discussing how students can be helped develop a 'big picture', you say, "In order to develop the 'big picture' of the past, students will need to understand different societies. For example, how the Romans spread Christianity throughput the world. Students would need to understand religion in Rome before Christianity and how/why it found its place in Roman society first. Then, we can move to how Christianity was spread all over the world." Does this mean that junior cycle students have to be taught a lot of content in order to develop a good 'big picture' of the past?
- What other kinds of teaching approaches do you think work best in helping students to improve their 'big picture' of the past?
- What kinds of resources do you think would be most helpful in helping students to improve their 'big picture' of the past?

7. Josephine

Your understanding of the term 'big picture of the past'

- In your questionnaire responses, in giving your understanding of the 'big picture', you say, "When I think about a 'big picture' of the past I imagine a timeline with certain key historic events to be found in it." Can you talk to us about how we determine those" key historic events"? e.g. Is it on the basis of political significance? Impact on culture and society?
- What is your understanding of the reasons why the new junior cycle specification for History contains a number of learning outcomes related to the 'big picture'?

What your own 'big picture' looks like

- You recount an interesting episode from your own school days when you say, "A teacher I had in third year for the junior cert had asked us if we understood the timeline of history and none of us knew. He proceeded to draw a timeline on the board and with his help we filled it using the topics we had covered for the junior cert. " To what extent has this influenced your own practice in the classroom? Are timelines the answer or part of the answer to the challenge of helping students acquire a 'big picture'?
- What other learning experiences (in the classroom or elsewhere) do you think contributed to the 'big picture' that you have described?
- Do you think the 'big picture' described is likely to be different from that of friends and acquaintances?

Helping your students to develop stronger 'big pictures' of the past

- In responding to the third question on the questionnaire, you say, "Before Christmas, I intend to print out a format of a timeline along with pictures from different topics we have studied and they will have to attempt to put the pictures in the correct order on the timeline." Can you talk to us about why you think the use of visuals is helpful here?
- What other kinds of teaching approaches do you think work best in helping students to improve their 'big picture' of the past?
- What kinds of resources do you think would be most helpful in helping students to improve their 'big picture' of the past?

8. Margaret

Your understanding of the term 'big picture of the past'

- In your questionnaire responses, in giving your understanding of the 'big picture', you say," A 'big picture of the past' is an understanding of the chronological progression throughout time, specifically with the knowledge of how each 'era' contributed/led to the next e.g. how the pagan 'Celts' period steadily progressed to 'Early Christian Ire[land]' while elements still remained." Can you talk to us about the scale that you consider necessary for a 'big picture'? e.g. Is it global? Regional? National? Does it need to include every era of recorded history?
- What is your understanding of the reasons why the new junior cycle specification for History contains a number of learning outcomes related to the 'big picture'?

What your own 'big picture' looks like

- You say that when you started studying English and History in college, "I found I had to go back and view my narrow/focused/specific facts in context, in order to then analyse events/eras on a broader scale. One way in which I did this was by making a timeline in my study area which noted eras studied, events, and publishing dates of novels/poems in order to fully grasp the content of the societies being discussed." Can you talk to us about the kind of 'big picture' of the past that you developed as a consequence of this? How helpful was the practice of linking your studies in English and History by including dates of novels and poems in your timeline?
- What other learning experiences (in the classroom or elsewhere) do you think contributed to the 'big picture' that you have described?
- Do you think the 'big picture' described is likely to be different from that of friends and acquaintances?

Helping your students to develop stronger 'big pictures' of the past

- You make a number of suggestions for helping students develop a workable 'big picture' of the past. One is, ", a timeline that visually shows the chronological progression through eras/events." Can you talk to us about what such a timeline looks like? e.g. Are images used? Is there an attempt to represent duration of eras? You also talk about, "making notes/drawing attention to elements of life that remained the same from one period to the next is equally as important as drawing attention to the changes that took place, as they are the consistencies that link one time to the next, creating a sense of gradual change rather than instant shifts that took place as soon as one century ended & the next began." Can you talk to us about how this approach works with students?
- What other kinds of teaching approaches do you think work best in helping students to improve their 'big picture' of the past?
- What kinds of resources do you think would be most helpful in helping students to improve their 'big picture' of the past?

Appendix C

Big pictures: written task for first year History students

1. Of the history that you have studied at school or that you learned from other sources, such as family visits or books or televisions programmes, what parts do you remember best?

2. From the history that you have learned, what 'big picture' of the past would you give to a visitor from outer space to help her/him understand the world in which we live?

Appendix D

Interview schedule for focus group 'entry' interviews with school students

The responses to the written task will help to shape the format of the interviews. Questions that may be asked include:

Ice-breaking and initial enquiry exercise:

Think/pair/share exercise

One minute to jot down names; four minutes in pairs to discuss each other's choice; then, feedback (5 minutes)

- Who do you think are the most significant people in history in the last 2,000 years or so? **[SIGNIFICANCE]**
  - Talk to us about the reasons why you have chosen these particular people.
  - Can you identify any links between the people you have named?
- The people you identify are from different eras. What's your understanding of an 'era'? **[TIME]**
- Why is history important? What exactly is history anyway? **[EVIDENCE]**
- Can you talk to us about important changes that have happened in the past and why these changes happened? (Some of you in the written task mention _____, for example.)
  - In what ways do these changes still matter (or do they still matter)? **[CHANGE]**

Appendix E

‘Big pictures of the past’ research project: briefing materials – Document 1

Researchers: **John Dredge, Ruth Ferris (UCD School of Education); Ger O’Sullivan (NCCA)**

Introducing the Framework: ‘Our History Scaffold’

Terminology

Big picture A type of mental construct that enables students of history to place the historical phenomena they study in a temporal and disciplinary context that aids historical understanding and facilitates orientation in time, linking past and present in ways that strengthen the ability to prepare for the future.

Frameworks These are devices used to equip students to order and make connections between different historical phenomena studied so that their historical understanding is strengthened and their ability to orient themselves in time is improved. Frameworks are the means by which more robust ‘big pictures’ are developed in the minds of students. Insofar as these frameworks appear to help students to achieve the desired purposes, we refer to them as ‘usable historical frameworks’.

Rationale for proposed model

Of all posited frameworks familiar to us, the de Rooy Commission framework from The Netherlands, 2001, seems most ‘user-friendly’ and ‘connectable’ to the junior cycle specification. Our proposed model uses the de Rooy model as a starting point but re-words it in ways that facilitate greater emphasis on process and making inter-connections. The framework comprises ten eras and is provisionally entitled ‘OUR HISTORY SCAFFOLD’:

- Early hunters and farmers invent tools and weapons
- Early civilisations develop alphabets, cities and politics
- Europe becomes Christian; Europe becomes feudal: early monks and knights
- Later middle ages/Renaissance: Cities grow and states multiply
- Discoverers and reformers bring change (mostly 16th century)
- Kings consolidate power (mostly 17th century)
- Revolutionaries challenge kings (mostly 18th century)
- Mechanisation and democracy advance (19th century)

- World wars change the face of the Earth (first half of 20th century)
- Television and computers change how we communicate (second half of 20th century)

We believe that the proposed framework satisfies most of the criteria set down by Lee (2004) in a seminal paper and widely accepted by researchers and commentators in this area:

- Any framework must be taught within a metahistorical framework.
- A framework must be an overview, composed of revisited patterns, not a mere outline story. It must be something that can be taught rapidly.
- The subject should be human history – should be thematic, following themes through long spans of time.
- A framework should be a progressive structure that can be built on and expanded as new knowledge is acquired.
- Frameworks must be open, capable of being modified, tested, improved.

Reference:

Peter Lee (2004), Walking backwards into tomorrow: historical consciousness and understanding history, International Journal of Historical Learning, Teaching and Research 4 (1).

How the proposed model fits with learning outcomes from the junior cycle specification

We are satisfied that the proposed model is a good 'fit' for the Strand 2 and Strand 3 learning outcomes.

Strand 1 learning outcomes are crucial to the success or otherwise of the proposed model, since disciplinary understanding needs to underpin any work on 'acquiring a big picture.

Linkage with Strand 2/ Irish history elements of junior cycle specification?

- [Early hunters and farmers invent tools and weapons: 1.6, archaeology]
- Early civilisations develop alphabets, cities and politics: no
- Europe becomes Christian; Europe becomes feudal: early monks and knights: 2.1, 2.6, 2.13
- Later middle ages/Renaissance: Cities grow and states multiply: 2.1
- Discoverers and reformers bring change 2.1 (plantation)
- Kings consolidate power: 2.1
- Revolutionaries challenge kings: 2.3, 2.13
- Mechanisation and democracy advance: 2.2
- World Wars change the face of the Earth: 2.4, 2.8, 2.9
- Television and computers change how we communicate: 2.5, 2.9, 2.12

Linkage with Strand 3/ history of Europe and the wider world elements of junior cycle specification?

- [Early hunters/farmers invent tools and weapons: 1.6, archaeology]
- Early civilisations develop alphabets, cities and politics: 3.1, 3.11
- Europe becomes Christian; Europe becomes feudal: early monks and knights: 3.6, 3.8
- Later middle ages/Renaissance: Cities grow and states multiply: 3.6, 3.7
- Discoverers and reformers: bring change: 3.2, 3.7, 3.8, 3.11
- Kings consolidate power: 3.2, 3.8
- Revolutionaries challenge kings: 3.3,
- Mechanisation and democracy advance: 3.3. (consequences), 3.11
- World Wars change the face of the Earth: 3.4, 3.9, 3.10, 3.11
- Television and computers change how we communicate: 3.11, 3.13

Inter-connectability and linkage with the present

It seems to us that there is a good degree of 'inter-connectability' between the different eras identified. For example, the first era refers to early hunters and farmers. Both hunting and farming are still used today as ways of obtaining food. The mechanisation referred to in the eighth era brought about big changes in how farmers operate, and the process of mechanisation has developed further over time.

We believe the proposed model can help to establish potential linkages with the present. For example, computers are changing how we communicate today, but the historical past has seen many changes in means of communication such as those brought about by the invention of the alphabet, the invention of the printing press and the beginning of a postal service.

Using images to support 'OUR HISTORY SCAFFOLD'

To support students in building up their history scaffolding/working model of the past, the use of images to help students identify and recall the different eras is recommended. This approach is supported by literature on the development of students' understanding of chronology and 'sense of period.' The following set of images is envisaged as forming a shared iconography in the initial stages of the use of the framework:

Early hunters and farmers ….	Mesolithic hunter	Neolithic farming tool
Early civilisations … …	Greek alphabet letters	ancient Athens
Europe becomes Christian/feudal	Monastery	Manor or knight
Cities grow, states multiply	Renaissance Florence	Map of later med./Ren. Eur.
Discoverers and reformers	Columbus lands	Martin Luther burns bull
Kings consolidate power	Louis XIV	William of Orange
Revolutionaries challenge kings	George Washington	The guillotine
Mechanisation and democracy	Factory machinery	O'Connell, MP
World Wars	Trench image	Atom bomb image
Television and computers	Telstar	The world-wide web

See Appendix 1 for some images that may be usable.

Getting the process underway with students

We are recommending that teachers consider the use of the 'History of the World in 7 minutes' video with students to show the immensity and complexity of the past, before introducing the proposed framework as a working model to start highlighting significant developments over time and giving students a 'scaffold' (NOT a 'cage') on which to locate the different people and events studied in the classroom.

The video is available at the following locations:

https://whfua.history.ucla.edu/movies/flash_large.php

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4pnmZalx9YY

Teacher preparation

In order to get the process underway with students, it will be necessary for teachers to have a good grasp of the significant features of the different eras identified. Exhaustive knowledge of each era is neither feasible nor required. Some notes on each era are provided in Appendix 2, which also contains suggestions for questions and strategies to prompt student thinking. (These questions, in some cases, may pre-empt questions that students themselves raise.)

Appendix 1

Images for consideration (all public domain)

https://www.flickr.com/photos/vintage_illustration/29510262138

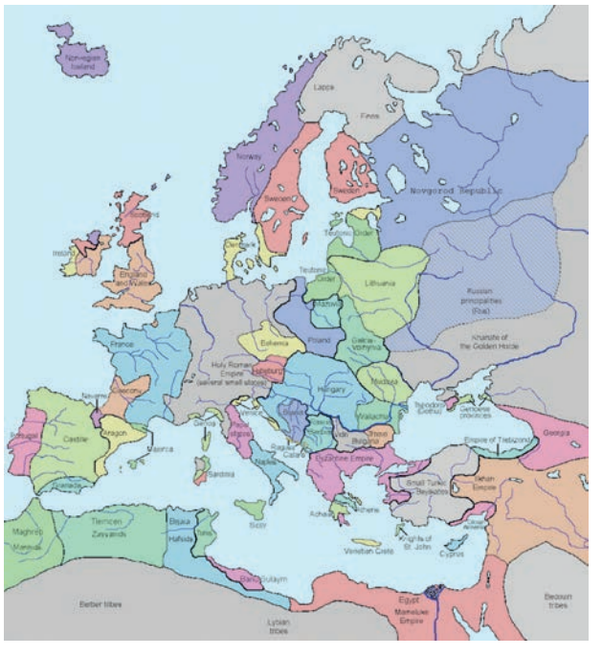
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Neolithic_cultivation_tool_reconstitution_Bali.jpg

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Delta_uc_lc.svg

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient_Greek_temple#/media/File:Attica_06-13_Athens_50_View_from_Philopappos_-_Acropolis_Hill.jpg

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Glendalough_monastery.jpg

https://tr.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dosya:Bayeux_Tapestry_scene57_Harold_death.jpg



https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:EuropeMap1328.png

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f7/The_dome_of_Florence_Cathedral.jpg

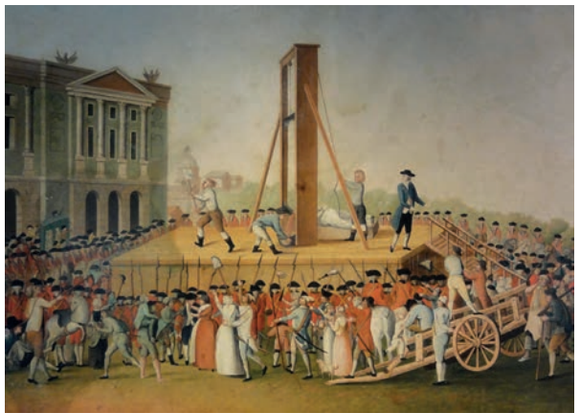
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Columbus_landing_on_Hispaniola.JPG

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Karl_Aspelin-Luther_uppbränner_den_påfliga_bullan.jpg

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hyacinthe_Rigaud_-_Louis_XIV,_roi_de_France_(1638–1715)_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:William_of_Orange,_and_Mary,_his_English_wife_are_presented_Wellcome_V0048279.jpg

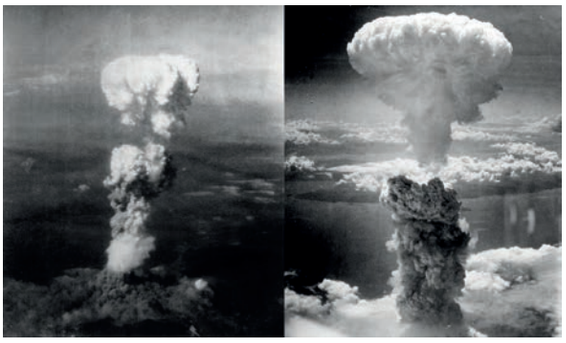
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:George_Washington_After_the_Battle_of_Princeton_-_Charles_Willson_Peale_-_Cleveland_Museum_of_Art_(29746887513).jpg



https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Exécution_de_Marie_Antoinette_le_16_octobre_1793.jpg

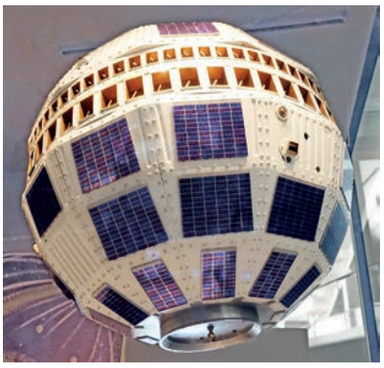
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Powerloom_weaving_in_1835.jpg

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Daniel_O%27Connell,_refusing_ot_take_oath_of_supremacy.jpg



https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Atomic_bombing_of_Japan.jpg

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:German_trenches_on_the_aisne.jpg



https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Telstar_satellite.jpg

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:World_Wide_Web_logo.png

Appendix 2

Our History Scaffold

Era	Key points	Key questions
Early hunters and farmers invent tools and weapons	• All early humans hunted. • First farming societies were in Middle East (in 'Fertile Crescent') from around 8,000 BC. • Farming spread to other parts of the world over a long period of time. • Farming led to many technological and social changes.	• Why did early hunters invent spears? (See image.) • Why has farming been described as the first great change in human history? • Look at the image of the 'cultivation tool.' What do you think it was used for? How was it made? Do you think it was made by the person who used it?
Early civilisations develop alphabets, cities and politics	• Features of civilisations: cities, laws, governments, public buildings • Earliest: Sumerian, c.3,500 BC (Also, earliest writing system, which was pictographic.) • Beginnings of democracy in ancient Athens c.500 BC. (In same century, beginnings of Greek science and theatre.) • Classical civilisation of 5th and 4th century BC one of most inventive & influential in world history (Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Hippocrates, Herodotus) • Rise of Rome, 3rd century BC	• How many of these ancient civilisations have you heard of: Sumerian/Egyptian/ Greek/Roman? • Why did civilisations need writing/ alphabets? • See image of letters. Do you recognise the alphabet these letters come from? • Do you recognise the ancient city in the second image? What political idea began in that city that is still important today?
Europe becomes Christian; Europe becomes feudal: early monks and knights	• 4th century AD, Emperor Constantine supported spread of Christianity. (Later, in 391, became official religion, under Theodosius I) • 5th century: Christianity spread to Ireland. • Feudal arrangements originated in Carolingian Europe, (Charlemagne, emperor 800), and spread to much of Europe. • Features of feudalism: heavy cavalry, vassals and fiefs, castles, chivalry.	• Look at the image of Glendalough. What are some of the ways in which the landscape changed when Ireland became Christian? • Do you know of any other sites like this? • Look at the Bayeux Tapestry image. The type of men you see brought feudal arrangements to Britain and Ireland: what can you tell me about them? • Do any traces of feudal arrangements remain in the landscape today?

Era	Key points	Key questions
Later middle ages/ Renaissance: Cities grow and states multiply	• Frequent wars led to frequent border changes. • Fall of Byzantine Empire and resulting instability created new states. • Increasing trade and development of banking led to growth of cities. • Competition between Italian city states acted as spur to artists and architects.	• Look at the map of Europe in 1328. Which of the following no longer exist today as empires or independent states? Byzantine Empire, Holy Roman Empire, Bohemia, Poland, Aragon, Venice, France. Of the ones that do still exist, are their borders the same or different? • Can you name any famous Renaissance artists or architects? • Look at the image of Florence cathedral. Do you know why it's famous and much visited?
Discoverers and reformers bring change	• 1492: European discovery of Americas by Columbus is one of the major turning points in world history. • Spanish and Portuguese and, later, others such as the English and the Dutch, became wealthy from new trade and overseas possessions. • The setting up of Reformed Churches following the ideas of Martin Luther and others led to division in Europe.	• What do you know about the voyage Columbus made in 1492? • Look at the image of Columbus landing (on what was given the name 'San Salvador'). Is the depiction of the native people realistic or imagined, would you say? • Which European countries introduced their language to Cuba? Brazil? Argentina? • Look at the image of Martin Luther burning the papal bull. What sort of person was Martin Luther? What sort of thing was the papal bull? • Can you name one country that became Protestant at the time of the Reformation and one country (other than Ireland) that remained (mainly) Catholic?
Kings consolidate power	• Louis XIV of France is seen as the epitome of an 'absolute' monarch. • William of Orange was a Dutch prince (whose mother was English royalty) and he became king of Great Britain in 1688 with the support of the English parliament. • In 17th-18th century Europe, most rulers were absolute monarchs.	• Look at the image of Louis XIV. What details suggest wealth and power? • This man had a huge palace built just outside of Paris. Do you know its name? • Look at the image of William of Orange and his wife, Mary. Is there any detail that suggests they were joint monarchs? • Why is William important in Irish history?

Era	Key points	Key questions
Revolutionaries challenge kings	• The American Revolution led by George Washington and others ended British rule in New England and adjoining colonies. • Rule of Louis XVI in France was challenged by the Estates General and, subsequently, by the National Convention which ordered his execution. • Modern idea of 'republic' originated with these revolutions.	• Look at the image of George Washington. How is he portrayed? • How is George Washington remembered in the USA today? • Look at the image of the execution of Marie Antoinette. Do you know why she was executed? • How were she and Louis executed? • Can you make any connection between the French Revolution and Ireland?
Mechanisation and democracy and advance	• Beginning in Britain, the Industrial Revolution saw a new source of power (steam engine) and other new machinery • Bigger machines were housed in factories and cities grew. • People campaigned for the right to vote. • Parliament passed reform acts, increasing the numbers who were allowed to vote.	• Look at the image of a 19th century factory. What sort of machinery is in use? What sort of power made such machines work? What sort of fuel did those machines use? • Why did new factories cause cities to grow? • Look at the image of Daniel O'Connell. By refusing to take the Oath of Supremacy, he helped to win the right for what sort of people to vote in elections? How is he remembered in Ireland today? • In the UK, what group of people only got the right to vote in elections for parliament in 1918?
World Wars change the face of the Earth	• World War I (1914–18) led to the collapse of empires, new countries on the map, 20 million dead, changed roles for women and more. • Fascism and communism clashed between the wars; both clashed with democracy. • World War II (1939–45) led to mass destruction due to bombing, 60 million dead, mass genocide (the Holocaust), collapse of Third Reich, bigger role for USA in Europe, the beginning of the nuclear age, and more.	• Look at the image of World War I trenches. Why did they fight like that? Do any of these trenches survive today? • Can you name three empires that collapsed as a result of World War I? • Can you name one fascist country and one communist country that came into conflict with one another in Europe of the 1930s/1940s? • Look at the image of the atomic bombing of Japan. Who dropped the bombs? What cities were bombed? How did these bombings change the world?

Era	Key points	Key questions
Televisions and computers change how we communicate	• BBC began television transmission in 1936; (R)TÉ at end of 1961. • 1962: Telstar (USA), 1st communications satellite; 1989: Sky began first satellite TV service. • 1969: computers used to guide Apollo 11 to Moon landing. • 1971: 1st microprocessor ('computer on a chip') made by Intel. • 1989: Tim Berners-Lee invented the World Wide Web.	• What do you know about the ways in which television changed the lives of people? • Look at the image of Telstar. Why are satellites such as this sometimes said to have made the world smaller? • What do you know about computers of the 1940s/50s/60s? • Why is the silicon chip important in the history of the computer? • Can you name some of the ways in the World Wide Web has changed people's lives?

'Big pictures of the past' research project: briefing material – Document 2

Researchers: **John Dredge, Ruth Ferris (UCD School of Education); Ger O'Sullivan (NCCA)**

Introducing the idea of 'Big Pictures' in history to first year students: briefing for teachers

1. To introduce the lesson, and using the accompanying presentation, pose the question: *When we talk about our 'big picture' of the past, what does that mean to you?* Allow students to discuss and share their ideas. Then ask students, in pairs/groups, to note on placemats the most significant people that they know about in the history of the last 2000 years or so (like the exercise done by focus groups of students during school visits by the research team.

2. When students have completed the task, get a sense of the types of people that they have come up with and follow up with questions to generate further discussion, such as:

   - *Why did you pick this person? Why do you think this person is significant?*
   - *Is there anything that some/many of the people chosen have in common?*
   - *Can you identify patterns in what the people you have chosen did that makes them stand out?*

3. The suggestions that students come up with might allow for an initial exploration of the vastness and diversity of the past in terms of time, space and themes to which the figures chosen relate; follow-up questions might include:

   - *Which figures chosen are from Ireland? Which are from Europe or the wider world? What parts?*
   - *Which figures are from the recent past? Which are from the more distant past?*
   - *Can you say how many years/ centuries cover the range of people you have chosen?*

4. This should lead to an opportunity to look at the challenges historians face in trying to make sense of such a vast period of time across a vast space. In leading this discussion, students might brainstorm the idea of eras and come up with examples of eras they have heard of, e.g Stone Age, Dark Ages, Medieval times, Victorian times etc.

5. Show the History of the World in Seven Minutes video from World History For Us All: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yqc9zX04DXs. Invite students to comment on it. Tease out their understanding of the challenges in making sense of a vast range of time and space.

6. Introduce to students the framework, 'Our History Scaffold',[127] and take them through each era one by one, by referring to the slides in the associated presentation. Try to elicit from students what they might know already about each era, no matter how tenuous their understanding may be. Explore each image/ icon and discuss with students why each was chosen. Draw on the 'key points' and 'key questions' provided, as appropriate.

7. Introduce the concept of an historical framework as a way in which we can try to make some sense of the past by linking all these eras together.[128] Extend students' thinking further by asking them to explore reasons for the use of the term 'scaffold' and to speculate on how future historians might view the present.

[127] See document, *Introducing the framework: 'Our History Scaffold'*, pages 15–18. In drawing on key points and key questions, it will be prudent in most cases to draw on only one or two in the initial teaching of the framework.

[128] See document, *Introducing the framework: 'Our History Scaffold'*, page 1, for gloss on 'Frameworks'.

Appendix F

Interview schedule for focus group 'exit' interviews with school students

The purpose of the questions is to get some sense of the impact – if any – of classroom use of 'Our History Scaffold' in helping students to develop a more comprehensible and coherent overview of the broad outline of human history, albeit one which has an inbuilt bias towards events and processes that impacted on Ireland and the broader British and European contexts which influenced developments in Ireland.

We need to be conscious of other means – e.g., greater use of timelines – that teachers may have deployed in attempting to improve students' 'big picture' understanding, so our questions will need to try to tease this out.

Some of the students we are dealing with – as is evident from responses to the student task and focus group interview questions – already had/have some sort of overarching picture of the human past. Our task, in these cases, is to explore whether use of the framework has enabled them to develop improved understanding of significant patterns (both long-term and short-term) and significant 'turning points' in human history.

Keeping the above points in mind, the following are questions we might consider asking:

- We want to focus today on human history (so, no dinosaurs), so – what can you tell us about the first humans to live on the island of Ireland?
    - Do we know this as a fact or is this the knowledge we have based on the evidence available to us?
- Some historians describe farming as the most important invention in the history of humankind. Why do you think that is?
    - Given that we still have farming today, is it still the same (as in the Stone Age) or has it changed in some ways over time?
- Any idea what the word 'civilization' means?
    - How was human life in an ancient civilization different to what had gone before?
    - Do we still live in similar ways or in very different ways?
- Why has religion (especially Christianity) been important in the history of Ireland and of Europe?
- Humans invent technology. WHEN has technology changed human history?
- We'd like to talk to you now, about the history framework or scaffold that your teacher has been using with you in some of your history classes.
    - Have you found it helpful?
    - How have you found it helpful?
    - Do you know what a timeline is?
    - Do you find timelines helpful?

- Do you think your understanding of the shape of the past from the Stone Age on (the big changes in history, the big turning points) … do you think that understanding has improved this year?
  - Why?
  - Please explain.

Appendix G

Interview schedule for exit interviews with PME students, 24 May 2021

The purpose of the questions is to get some sense of how involvement in the project has impacted on the understanding and classroom pedagogy of the seven PME students.

We need to try to establish whether their understanding of the relevant JC learning outcomes, and how these are best pursued in the classroom, has improved over the past two years.

We might also seek to determine the extent to which their own 'big picture' of the past has expanded over the two years and the role, if any, that 'Our History Scaffold' has played in this.

Keeping the above points in mind, the following are questions we might consider asking:

- Can you talk to us, first of all, in a general way, about how you think involvement in the project has impacted on your teaching of history over the past two years?
- To what extent, if any, has your own 'big picture' changed during this time?
  - Do you think using 'Our History Scaffold' has helped to develop your own 'big picture' of the past? [If so] How?
- What would you say you do differently in the classroom as a result of your involvement in the project?
- Can you talk to us about any of the learning outcomes relating to 'big picture' thinking and whether the framework has helped in achieving these outcomes?
  - Do you think there are any particular challenges associated with the use of the framework in the classroom?
  - Do you have any ideas about whether or how the framework might be improved?
- Can you talk to us about the ways in which you have used the framework in the classroom?
  - How successful has this been in helping to improve students' understanding?
  - Are there any other approaches that you have used to help your students' understanding of the overall shape of history? If so, perhaps you could talk to us about these?
- Would it be possible for you to give us some concluding thoughts on how useful a 'big picture' approach is in the History classroom in the History classroom?
  - And how it might influence your pedagogy in the classroom in the future?

Interviewees:

Sadhbh
Richard
Jacinta
Rose
Ultan
Josephine
Margaret

UCD School of Education

NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment