

'Big Picture of the Past' research project: some insights into student thinking on historical 'eras'

'Big Pictures of the Past' is a collaborative project involving researchers and history educators from the School of Education in UCD and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). Acknowledging that acquiring 'big picture' understanding of the past is an integral part of the junior cycle history specification, the project is focused on ascertaining what types of 'big pictures', if any, junior cycle students possess, and how they might be supported to develop more robust 'big picture' understanding. The project also explores the nature and extent of 'big picture' understanding that student teachers possess. Readers may recall previous articles in *Stair* that have drawn attention to this project, which commenced in 2019. It is not proposed to repeat the content of those articles here. Rather, it is intended to introduce and reflect on some findings that are emerging from the research that may be of interest to teachers and might hopefully encourage them to engage with the completed research report which will be launched in the early spring of next year.

The researchers worked with a group of student teachers and a cohort of first year history students taught by them across different settings while on school placements, both in the first and second years of their PME studies. The research methodology will be considered in depth in the final report. Suffice to say here that the nature of 'big picture' thinking was the focus of the research. By this term, we mean the capacity to demonstrate long-term chronological understanding and to make connections between events and developments from different periods of time, or what might be termed the 'broad sweep' of history. The concept of student voice was invoked by the researchers as a key feature of the research approach, recognising the importance of students talking about their experience of learning and teaching in history, and ensuring that their voice has a meaningful impact on how these experiences are shaped.

For the purposes of this short article, intended primarily to give a sense of the research approach and findings, one specific aspect of the research will be considered, with some initial insights shared. As part of the research process, a sample of students from across all the participating schools took part in focus group interviews with the researchers at the beginning of their first year in junior cycle. One aim of the research approach in the focus groups was to elicit student understanding of the concept of historical time. As a means of gauging students' awareness, the question 'What's your understanding of an era?' was posed. It was intended that this question, invoking specifically the notion of an era, might prompt meaningful student responses while also providing a helpful lens to view what kinds of 'big pictures' students possessed. What follows is based on some responses from first year students in focus groups from the cohort of schools that were the subject of study in 2019-20.

In response to the question 'What's your understanding of an era', one student said:

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, echoed in the response of another student who explained, 'In the next era they developed something different.' Another student noted:

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.

One of the more insightful and thoughtful responses came from a student who shared the following reflection:

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 captured well 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 from different students illustrate: 'It makes it easier to distinguish between them'; 'It might be easier to understand in certain pieces'; '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'.

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.' Another students 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.' In the initial focus group exchanges, when students spoke 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 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.'

When students were asked to name particular eras, it became immediately apparent that the eras mentioned most frequently were ones usually studied in the first year of junior cycle courses, such as the Stone Age, the Bronze Age, the Iron Age, the period of Roman imperial dominance, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. There were few references to eras that lie between the Renaissance period and the twentieth century: those mentioned included Victorian and Georgian times; 'British Empire'; (in a musical context), Baroque, Classical, Modern; and the Edo period of Japanese history (1603-1867). Mention of the Edo period, in particular, would suggest that the historical knowledge acquired by 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 one respondent. 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 one respondent 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'.)

What seems clear from nature of the lists of eras identified by the focus groups is that, 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 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. The final report will, in addition to presenting its research findings and conclusions, propose a model of such a framework that should fulfil these objectives.

In conclusion, it is hoped that this 'snapshot' of the much broader and more comprehensive research findings will entice readers to consider the full report when it appears next year, and that it will provoke discussion and debate on how best to support students to acquire 'big picture' understanding and a deeper level of historical consciousness – aspirations which are surely at the heart of good history teaching.