

Essay Title: “Find and discuss an example where curriculum (broad definition) has had a socially negative impact (past or present) in Ireland or elsewhere (countries/regions outside of Ireland, past or present)?”

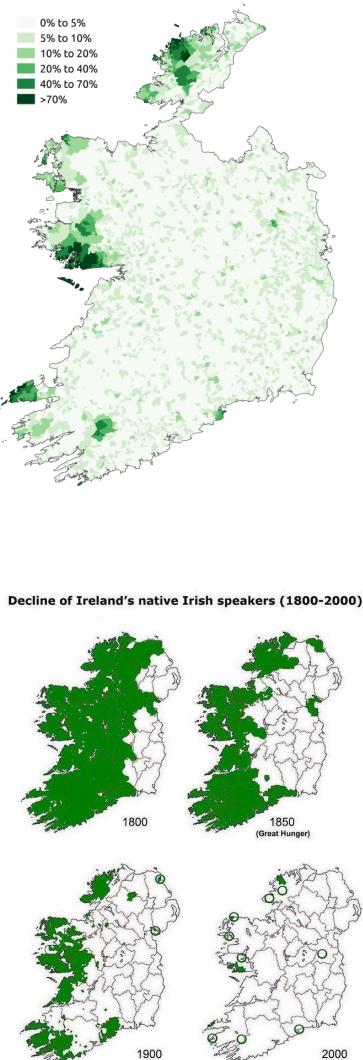
Introduction

Education is often heralded as a cornerstone of societal progress, shaping future generations and fostering social cohesion. However, the structure and content of curricula at secondary or post-primary levels can sometimes have unintended negative consequences, reinforcing societal divisions, perpetuating stereotypes, and fostering cultural disconnection. This essay explores the socially negative impacts of curriculum in Ireland, focusing on historical influences, curricular design, and their enduring effects on Irish society. There are numerous instances, both historical and contemporary, where the Irish curriculum has had these issues. However, for the purpose of this essay, I will focus on the social negative outcomes stemming from how Irish culture, identity, and language have been addressed within the Irish curriculum (mainly secondary but touching on primary) and the lack of emphasis on Irish history in England's curriculum. This will be contrasted with Germany's approach, where students are taught to confront their nation's dark history, fostering awareness and understanding.

Historical Context and Decline in Speaking Irish in the Curriculum

The historical context of education in Ireland is deeply intertwined with colonialism and religious control. During British rule, the education system was designed as a tool of cultural assimilation, aiming to suppress Irish identity and language. The establishment of national schools in the 19th century, while ostensibly created to provide universal education, also served to “diminish the Irish language and cultural practices in favour of English-centric norms” (Coolahan, 1981).

This suppression extended into post-primary education, where curricula marginalized the Irish language and culture. Irish was positioned as a purely academic subject rather than a living cultural practice, limiting its practical application, which is evident in today's society. The attached maps and images demonstrate the detrimental decline of native Irish speakers from the 1800's - 2000. Due to the declining use of Irish in society, students lack the opportunity to practice and are unmotivated to learn. In Caoimhe de Barra's article she explains, “Many would like compulsory Gaeilge taken off the Leaving Cert, but it's a slippery slope,” she adds, “This began with the removal of an Irish language qualification to become a civil servant in 1974 and continued in the 1980s when the hours dedicated to the teaching of Irish in primary schools were slashed.” which further removed the importance of Irish in society.



Student Name: Emma McGettigan

As a result, generations of Irish citizens have struggled to connect with their cultural roots, unmotivated to learn Irish as it is not a necessity for everyday life. A comprehensive 2007 study by Úrás na Gaeltachta found that young people in Gaeltacht areas, despite holding favorable views of the Irish language, “used it significantly less than their elders.” A follow-up report in 2015 predicted that “Irish would die out as a community language in the Gaeltacht within a decade.” These findings underscore the long-term negative impacts of an education system that deprioritizes cultural preservation. Discussions about removing Irish as a mandatory subject could further accelerate the loss of Irish speakers. Caoimhe de Barra asserts that if we remove compulsory Irish from the senior cycle curriculum, “we’re undermining our language and our identity.” She shares her own experience, explaining that as a student who struggled with Irish, she “got a D in ordinary level Irish in the Junior Cert. If I had been allowed to quit Irish at that stage, I certainly would have,” emphasizing the importance of maintaining Irish as a compulsory subject to allow students to mature and later appreciate their cultural heritage.

The residual effects of such policies have created generations of Irish citizens who struggle to connect with their cultural roots due to the lack of Gaeilge spoken within their societies. This is an example of how society can negatively impact the curriculum.

The Absence of Irish History in England’s Curriculum

In contrast an example of how curriculum can negatively impact society can be seen in the English curriculum. This significant negative social impact stems from the omission of Irish history or awareness of English involvement in Ireland within the English curriculum. This gap perpetuates tensions not only between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland but also between Ireland and England as a whole. If future generations of English students were taught about both the positive and negative aspects of their nation’s history, particularly their colonization of Ireland, it could foster a greater sense of empathy and understanding.

The omission of Irish history in English schools represents a missed opportunity to promote social cohesion. According to the 2014 report by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Irish Affairs, the lack of Irish history in the English curriculum contributes to a lack of understanding of Irish issues, which has historically fed into “prejudices and misconceptions” about Ireland (APPG, 2014). The report argues that this gap in education perpetuates divisions and hinders the reconciliation process between Ireland and the United Kingdom. This sentiment is echoed by various academics who point out that British students’ lack of understanding of Irish history exacerbates political and social tensions, particularly in relation to Northern Ireland (Simms, 2008).

In a similar vein, the Royal Irish Academy’s 2015 review on education found that “over 70% of British students surveyed were unaware of the history of the Irish Famine and its devastating impact” (Royal Irish Academy, 2015). The Irish Famine, one of the most significant events in Irish history, is notably absent from the core history curriculum in England, leading to widespread ignorance among young people about the scale of suffering and the role that British policies played in exacerbating the crisis. This is troubling because the Famine remains a central issue in the collective memory of both Ireland and the Irish diaspora.

Student Name: Emma McGettigan

Further compounding this issue is the fact that many English textbooks fail to adequately address Ireland's colonization and its long-lasting impact on Irish society. A 2016 study by the History Curriculum Review Group noted that "less than 5% of the GCSE history syllabus in England includes any mention of Ireland post-1800" (HCRG, 2016). This lack of inclusion diminishes the importance of understanding the historical context of the relationship between Britain and Ireland. Without a comprehensive education on Irish history, English students may not fully grasp the complexities of modern-day relations between the two nations, nor appreciate the roots of political conflicts, such as the Troubles in Northern Ireland.

A broader understanding of Irish history, particularly in relation to British colonialism, could serve as a means of fostering reconciliation. In this regard, research by British academic Professor John Bew suggests that "educating students about Ireland's history of colonization and the role of Britain in the partition of Ireland would likely help to create a more empathetic understanding among young British people" (Bew, 2019). A more comprehensive approach would also counter the historical narrative that often paints the British Empire in a purely positive light, allowing for a more balanced and nuanced perspective of British-Irish relations.

Moreover, as Professor David McKittrick, an expert on Northern Irish history, argues, "the failure of the English education system to properly engage with Ireland's history leaves British students ill-prepared to understand the underlying causes of the conflict in Northern Ireland" (McKittrick, 2011). Understanding the shared history of Britain and Ireland is crucial in addressing contemporary issues, particularly as the United Kingdom navigates post-Brexit relations with the Republic of Ireland. Teaching English involvement in Irish history in schools across England could help create a more informed and empathetic citizenry, fostering stronger, more cohesive relations between the two nations.

Curriculum Content

Similarly, flaws in the representation of Irish history and culture can also be seen in the Irish curriculum itself. A striking example is found in the 2024 Social Political Health Education Junior Cycle book, where a problematic excerpt states, "We get told off if we mix with people that have a different religion to us as they would be a bad influence on us." This sweeping generalization is paired with an illustration of four red-haired Irish individuals, further reinforcing narrow and reductive stereotypes about Irish identity. The accompanying image depicts a traditional Irish family, with children in Irish dancing attire and references to Gaelic sports and music presenting a skewed and damaging portrayal of Irishness that young students can identify with. This depiction inadequately represents the richness of Irish culture, Gaelic



Student Name: Emma McGettigan

sports, which were formalized in 1884 as part of the Gaelic Revival, to continue and saviour Irish culture during the late 1800's. Yet these depictions fail to reflect the depth of these traditions and as Tipperary TD Mr. McGrath stated the textbook is "disturbing", "wrong" and "It risks shaping young minds with a biased agenda" alienating young Irish citizens and encouraging them to feel ashamed of their heritage. Such representations risk perpetuating stereotypes and fail to embrace the dynamic and diverse aspects of Irish culture. Ironically, this occurs in material content that seeks to promote equality and cultural awareness titled "All Different, All Equal".

Conclusion

The role of education in shaping societal values and cultural identity cannot be overstated. However, when curricula fail to reflect the complexity and richness of a nation's heritage or worse, perpetuate stereotypes and omissions they risk causing profound social harm. In Ireland, the historical suppression of the Irish language and culture, alongside reductive portrayals of Irish identity in modern educational materials, has fostered a sense of disconnection and potential shame among younger generations. Similarly, the absence of English involvement in Irish history in England's curriculum represents a missed opportunity for fostering empathy and understanding between nations. Addressing these gaps is essential for building a more inclusive, informed, and cohesive society.

Bibliography

- APPG on Irish Affairs. (2014). Report on Irish History in the English Curriculum. All-Party Parliamentary Group on Irish Affairs.
- Bew, J. (2019). The Role of History Education in Anglo-Irish Relations. British Academic Press.
- Coolahan, J. (1981). Irish Education: History and Structure. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration.
- de Barra, C. (2020). Why Irish Should Remain a Compulsory Subject in Schools. The Journal.ie.
- History Curriculum Review Group. (2016). An Analysis of GCSE History Syllabuses in England. Department for Education.
- McKittrick, D. (2011). History, Memory, and the Troubles. Oxford University Press.
- Royal Irish Academy. (2015). Understanding the Irish Famine: British and Irish Perspectives. Royal Irish Academy Press.
- Simms, K. (2008). Anglo-Irish Relations and Historical Awareness. *Journal of Modern History*, 80(3), 450–472.
- Úras na Gaeltachta. (2007). A Study on Irish Language Use Among Young People in Gaeltacht Areas.
- Úras na Gaeltachta. (2015). Irish Language Usage Projections and Challenges.