

**An Exploration of Sensitive Issues in History Teaching at
Secondary School Level in England and Northern Ireland**

1991 – 2001

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Abstract

My thesis explores the teaching of sensitive issues in history at secondary school level in Mid-Ulster in Northern Ireland and Oxford in England between 1991 and 2001. The research is intended to compare the responses of teachers and students, over time and place, to emotionally-charged topics. Questions are asked about the nature of sensitivity and the impact of factors external to the classroom on inter-personal relations during history lessons. Consideration is given to the possible connections between political change and increased sensitivity in the classroom. The teachers' and students' preconceptions, their opinion of the role of history and the stated teaching strategies are compared. There is a literature review of the theory and purpose of history teaching as well as on curriculum development and related disciplines. Although the conceptual framework is primarily anchored in the study of history, it draws on insights from a range of other subject areas. The dominant stance taken is that of a reflective history teacher: questions asked and interpretations of evidence are overtly guided by personal experience. Data is also drawn from a wide range of documents, surveys and semi-structured interviews. This combination of teacher self-reflection, archival material and empirical fieldwork, while essentially qualitative, is also underpinned by quantitative analysis of questionnaires distributed to students in both Northern Ireland and Oxford in the years 1991, 1996 and 2001. The findings indicate the following: the importance of formal history lessons; a growing awareness of sensitive issues in the classroom; an apparent discrepancy between some of the teachers' and students' views; and the way regional variations are becoming less marked over time.

Acknowledgements

I have been greatly helped by many people at different stages of my work. The teaching staff, librarians, technicians and students at the Institute of Education, London gave me invaluable advice and support.

I am indebted to Dr Maria Segala, Oxford University who guided me through statistical analysis and to the many teachers, students and academics I interviewed or surveyed. They gave their time generously and provided crucial information.

I especially acknowledge the hard work done by Professor Susan Hallam who read and commented on my drafts. She has been an inspirational, patient and wise supervisor.

At all stages and in all ways I have been supported and encouraged by my husband Kenneth Lovesy.

I thank them all sincerely and acknowledge that the limitations are mine alone.

Declaration and Word Count

I hereby declare that, except where explicit attribution is made, the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own.

Word count (exclusive of appendices, list of reference and bibliography): 94,337 words

Signature

Mary Margaret Kathleen Conway

Introduction

(i) Purpose and Target Audience

My research is designed to stimulate discussion and generate ideas for teachers, academics and educationalists. It is a testimony to the presence of a professional culture which promotes the exploration of research and the changes to practice as promoted by the outlook of the National Teachers' Research Panel (NTRP), an organisation which aims to include the teachers' voice in policy-making through classroom-based research. My chief consideration is to provide those interested in history education and history teachers in particular, with greater understanding of the advantages as well as the drawbacks of teaching sensitive issues in history. I hope that we will all learn from each other's experience and expertise. I propose that my findings are transferable, if not generalisable, in that they will resonate with teachers' experience and beliefs. I explore the issue of sensitivity because it has impinged greatly on my own experience and I intend to make an original contribution to historical and educational knowledge. The findings may have implications for community relations.

(ii) The Research Design

Theoretical and practical considerations determine the research questions and guide the research design. I draw on my experience as a history teacher in Northern Ireland and Oxford and focus predominately on other history teachers and their students in these regions. Embedded in my approach is the stance of the reflective practitioner: I have tried to follow Phillips' dictat that 'teachers should become E and R', that is, effective and reflective (Phillips, 2002, p. 3). Evans identifies the analytical researcher as one who is constantly 'Striving for improvement by a process involving evaluative reflection' (Evans, 2002, p.19). Reflecting critically on my teaching provides a catalyst for analysing and developing both qualitative and quantitative material. My conclusions are made after triangulating the documentary evidence with the teachers' oral testimony and the students' views taken from surveys. I make connections between time, 1991 to 1996 to

2001, and place, Oxford and Northern Ireland, to illuminate the problems of defining sensitivity in history teaching.

The issues raised are period and culture specific. Questions asked and responses made may change over time and place: the teaching of Irish history in Northern Ireland was a burning issue in 1991 but not in Oxford where the amount of British history being taught was then contentious. By 2001 teachers in both regions were more concerned about the subject's position in the curriculum. It is important to evaluate my research against the backdrop of violent sectarian/racial clashes and seminal upheavals in history teaching in Northern Ireland and England. My questions reflect the political problems of the time. In the early 1990's there was the thorny issue of making the teaching of Irish history compulsory. Many in the higher echelons of educational policy-making were determined to grasp the nettle and force teachers in all secondary schools in the province to teach even the most contentious periods throughout all the key stages. Similarly, the teaching of British history in England was sensitive because of the felt need to accommodate an increasingly multi-cultural population.

I have been influenced by the multi-cultural conception of Banks and by further practical classroom advice on how to approach sensitive issues in the classroom (McCully, 2002, 2005, 2006, 2007; Kitson and McCully, 2005; Barton and McCully, 2002; Barton and Levstik, 2004, 2008). This research deepened my understanding of how sensitive issues such as Irish history have been approached by practitioners and students. School history has been acclaimed to be the bearer of the great tradition and national heritage. As Samuel remarks:

If there is a single issue which has made history seem more relevant, and more contentious, in recent years it is the emergence of the national question as a storm-centre of British politics (Samuel, 1998, p. 30).

Samuel enumerates factors that have made any 'Anglo-centric view of the national past quite untenable' such as New Commonwealth immigration and settlement, the 'Civil War in Ulster', the recrudescence of Celtic separatism and Britain's involvement in the European Community. The weight given by students to school history is questioned in

my thesis and conclusions are reached that are similar to those agreed by Kitson and McCully who acknowledged that:

Students valued school history and consciously and explicitly expected it to provide a more balanced alternative to community influences. Particularly they sought formal study that related directly to an increased understanding of contemporary issues (Kitson and McCully, 2005, p. 6).

Sensitivity in the classroom is inextricably tied to the aims and values of education. The premise that history teachers have to think reflectively about what they are doing and why they are doing it has been at the heart of the debate over the aims of history teaching (Lee et al., 1992). They question whether history is simply a way of acquiring rational knowledge and understanding of the past or whether the aims of teaching it must also take into account 'the cultivation of those personal qualities in students, like self-knowledge, self-determination and concern for the well being of others, which fit them to be citizens of a liberal-democratic society' (White, 1992, p. 57).

Much has been published on the various confrontations among politicians, ideological 'experts', professional academics, practising teachers and the general public. Historians like Shemilt have been ambiguous about the role played by history teaching in influencing human self-knowledge and behaviour. Nearly always when a list of aims for school history is specified the self-improvement or community improvement aspect is placed at the end as a sort of afterthought or embarrassingly tentative acknowledgement. The advent of promoting citizenship in the curriculum has raised the profile of the moral stance, making it a more explicit aim. Teaching History for 'the Common Good' (Levstik and Barton, 2008) remains a more contentious contender for history's purpose in schools but the notion of history teaching that makes you good as well as makes you think is in the ascendancy.

(iii) Key Research Questions

My research questions have arisen out of my experience of living and teaching in Oxford and Northern Ireland, where I had to confront situations in the classroom which required delicate handling. Out of my initial concerns about classroom issues grew other questions

about the nature of sensitivity in history teaching. I consider the main turning points at the macro level and identify elements of continuity and change in classroom practice.

My approach also gives primacy to the social environment from which the documentary evidence, interviews and surveys were drawn and my interpretation relies heavily on grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Kelly's personal constructs theory (Kelly, 1955) has informed my understanding about how we each construct our own personal ways of seeing the world (our personal construct system); he maintains that this system defines the understanding by which we live. This dichotomy between what is reported by teachers in the different regions which reflects the quality of the interactions between people and groups is most commonly referenced in the contact hypothesis illustrated by Allport (1954), Hewstone and Brown (1986) and Pettigrew (1982). This psychological perspective is associated with social identity theory (SIT).

I consider how history teaching has the potential to become sensitive amid fears that, as an agent of change, history must be 'in the right hands' and presented in a manner 'appropriate to the dominant ideology' (Althusser, 1971, p. 89). Bourdieu also considers that the education structure and the pedagogical processes embodied within it operate to ensure the reproduction of existing social categories, classes or groups (Bourdieu, 1984). Questions are raised about the extent to which schools are part of society's problem rather than part of the solution: that, at best, teachers are the '... naïve bearers of a sectarian culture looking for ways of contributing to its future development' (Reynolds and Skilbeck, 1976). I will discuss the role of the history teacher and the ways in which s/he can or ought to be divorced from political divisions.

Criticisms are made about teachers who become involved in controversial issues: it is feared that they will lose credibility as educationalists and become 'social engineers'. In this view history as a discipline will be undermined through loss of independence; its scientific objectivity will disappear and all hope of faithfully recreating the past will be lost (Beattie and the Centre for Policy Studies, 1987; Oakeshott, 1962; Reynolds and Skilbeck, 1976). How can one reconcile the pursuit of truth with the process of

socialisation? It appears that there is a stark choice between saving the integrity of the subject and saving society from disintegration. Are history teachers to be scholars or social workers? Are history teachers allowed to make value judgements? Above all, is it not possible to find a more nuanced way forward?

Finally, can studying history improve community relations? Will history have any impact on deeply entrenched views or is it an ineffective irrelevance rather than a valuable weapon of socialisation? Once these questions about the transformative and instrumental purpose of history are raised (Barton and Levstik, 2004; Low-Beer and Blyth, 1983; Stearns, Seixas and Wineburg, 2000), their inextricable links with ethics and values in education become obvious (Haydon, 2006; Midgley, 1991; Montgomery and Smith, 1997; Pring, 2000; Simon, 1985; Warnock, 1988; Wilson, 2000). Answers to all questions must take into account the emotive as well as intellectual forces at work. For this reason:

History is an often unsettling and sometimes uncomfortable subject. It is controversial and often very sensitive. There is some consensus about its importance in the school curriculum but much less agreement about what it is for (Slater, 1989, p. 89).

The notion of personal and collective identity is closely connected to a feeling of empathy which we have seen is a controversial skill in history education. However, I prefer to situate my work in the less contentious concept of emotional history for what is certain is that there are issues about the past that can make us feel uncomfortable in the present.

The above theoretical background I combined with initial data collection to identify three overarching questions in my thesis.

Key Questions

1. Who or what defines sensitive issues in history teaching?
2. How are they perceived by history teachers and their students?
3. What causes sensitive issues to change over time and place?

(iv) The Structure of the Thesis

Firstly, in the introduction the research questions together with the design, audience and structure of the thesis are explained. Then, in chapter one the inspiration, autobiographical details and the research journey are outlined. The rationale behind the comparative study of Mid-Ulster and Oxford is also discussed. In chapter two sensitive issues are explored within the international, national and political contexts; the changing role of the teacher in two regions in the United Kingdom is also examined. This is followed in chapter three by a review of the literature relating to philosophical, psychological, sociological and educational disciplines which identify theoretical perspectives of the concept of 'sensitive history'. Chapter four explains the research methods and methodology. In chapters five six and seven the data collected in 1991, 1996 and 2001 is detailed. Finally, chapter eight discusses the theoretical and empirical issues raised in the thesis.

Chapter One

Inspiration and Research Journey

(i) Inspiration

This thesis was inspired by the work of three men who are now dead, only one of whom I ever met.

In 1993, I wrote to Professor Cathcart at Queen's University, Belfast, in the hope that, despite his busy schedule, he would find time to meet me. He never did. For a number of pressing reasons he put off writing to me or meeting me. When a letter eventually came it was accompanied by a copy of a published version of a lecture with which he thought I may not be familiar. I was. Indeed, it had been this very paper which initially drew my attention to his engagement with Irish history. His paper, 'Teaching Irish History', was first given as a public lecture during the Wiles Week 1978, a teachers' conference held annually at Queen's University Belfast, sponsored by the Wiles Charitable Trust; this paper was to form a significant contribution to the on-going debate about the persistent role of popular history and the potential role of academic history in the crisis of the modern Irish period. The content drew more heavily on his experience as a pupil and teacher than as a professional historian. I was particularly interested in this comment:

The teaching of history in Ireland has for long been a matter of political consequences. It has presumed to be a means of inculcating political attitudes in the young. Its effectiveness in that function has seldom been questioned (Cathcart, 1978, p. 4).

Professor Cathcart professed interest in my M.Ed. dissertation, 'Teaching Controversial Issues'. He described the area of study as 'a fairly well-ploughed field' but hoped that I might achieve more than 'reworking the surface'. He confided that he had been contemplating a book on a similar topic for some time. It would be a venture in which he was to be joined by a couple of other writers who shared his interest. However, he lamented, as he had contracts for three other books, it seemed unlikely that this project

would even get to the planning stage. I doubt that it ever did. Professor Cathcart died a few months after writing me this letter dated 17th February, 1994.

In this thesis I will try to take the advice he gave in his letter to me and avoid merely reworking the surface of a fairly well ploughed field, but rather endeavour to ‘discover the geological forces at work’. Much in the way of theoretical and empirical research into the effectiveness of teaching Irish history has been done since Cathcart wrote the text of his public lecture. Not all of it, or indeed necessarily the most incisive, has been undertaken by historians. Dealing with sensitive issues has been explored by others such as psychologists, politicians, anthropologists and educationalists.

In 1986, while teaching in Northern Ireland, I took a school party to Corrymeela, a non-sectarian Christian community committed to peace, reconciliation and healing of social strife internationally. It was here I met Dr. Frank Wright for the first time. His plan was to promote tolerance and the making of real relationships of trust which he explored in his writing on understanding conflict and finding ways out of it:

Acceptance comes out of meetings where we both feel secure and able to trust. In such meetings together we hear what it feels like to be the other and we accept each other with our differences and we change in ways we probably cannot anticipate. We hear one another telling about each other’s experiences and we are not distracted by a clash of opinion (Wright, 1991, p. 6).

Frank Wright emphasised the need to concentrate carefully, to listen and hear what others were saying rather than to assume that we know the ideas of those with diametrically opposed opinions; he suggested moving away from our entrenched positions by looking for new ways of meeting with others, although he found it essential to emphasise that there ‘are no magical ways of overcoming national divisions through educational systems’ but added that there were ‘productive ways of managing group distrust and finding ways to understand through reflection’ (Wright, 1991, p. 8).

Furthermore, he commented on other troubled areas such as Cyprus to indicate how an approach to community relations can be developed through learning from the mistakes

made by others. He also drew my attention to the fact that it is quite possible to stand in front of a class with wonderfully impartial words and to teach ineffectively. He stated in my interview with him on 9 November, 1994, that:

The content of what is formally taught is much less important than the spirit in which it is taught.

I never met Jack Magee, the author of *Ferment and Change* (Magee, 1962) which provided my introduction to Irish history in the classroom. As a twelve year old I found the text as exciting as any novel and marvelled at the exploits of the Kildares, the O'Neills and the O'Donnells. Yet such a narrative and the non-evidence-based approach to history learning has apparently not stood the test of time and has been superseded by recent source-based textbooks. However, Magee's seminal paper, 'The teaching of Irish history in Irish schools' Magee (1971) has won more lasting approval. This landmark study stresses that attitudes are caught, not taught. His concluding paragraph emphasises that 'Many of the facts learned in the history lessons at school will in time be forgotten, but attitudes, enthusiasms and prejudices will remain' (Magee, 1971, p. 8).

My work will focus on the particular difficulties encountered in teaching Irish history in Northern Ireland at a time of great political, social, economic and educational change and will compare it with the experience of those in Oxford schools. It is hoped that, instead of merely reworking the surface, Professor Cathcart's advice to discover the geological forces at work will be followed and that the spirit of Jack Magee and Frank Wright will reside in the attitudes presented.

(ii) The Theoretical Stance of the Reflective Practitioner

I begin with the story of my own interest in the questions I am asking and researching. Then I move towards the mapping of my developing sense of the impact of these questions alongside the history of more public kinds of attention to them. This becomes a way of not only personalizing the questions I am addressing but of setting my

life and educational history within wider contexts than my own. Schön (1987) presents such reflectivity as a multi-purpose improvement tool.

I am conscious of the role played by reflecting on 'my story' in the conceptual framework and approach. Certainly the theoretical discourse is linked with the personal dimension because I give explicit recognition to what Etaut (1994) identifies as the impact of the research on intentions, processes and outcomes: 'learning depends on what is perceived, itself dependent on perceptual/cognitive frameworks and expectations and on time devoted to reflection, making sense and linking specific experiences with other personal knowledge' (p.135).

My way of approaching the minefield of sensitivity in the classroom is to take the position of a reflective practitioner. The concept of being a reflective practitioner in education can be traced to Dewey (1933) who contrasted routine action with reflective action. He saw it as involving a willingness to engage in constant self-appraisal and development. Among other things it implies flexibility, rigorous analysis and social awareness. In the literature there are different uses of reflexivity or reflection which involve operating on at least two levels in research work and emphasizing how one thinks about thinking. This draws attention to the multifaceted relationship between processes of knowledge production and the various contexts of such processes together with the involvement of the knowledge producer.

The importance of self-awareness, political/cultural consciousness and ownership of one's perspective is seen as being a 'Deconstructive exercise for locating the intersections of author, other, text and world and for penetrating the representational exercise itself' (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000, p. 37). Reflective research is seen to have two basic characteristics, careful interpretation and reflection, with reflection defined as 'Interpreting one's own interpretations, looking at one's own perspectives from other perspectives, and turning a self-critical eye onto one's own authority as interpreter and author'.

(iii) The Perceived Problem that stimulated the Research: My Story

As far as I know I am the only Catholic history teacher to have taught Irish history at the height of the 'Troubles' in an exclusively Protestant school situated in an area deeply divided along sectarian lines. I taught there for fifteen years, from 1974 to 1989, during a period in which it had been the scene of some of the worst violence in the so-called Troubles. The facts about how I came to be in the school, my relationship with pupils and colleagues and the way in which I tackled teaching the highly contentious subject of Irish history help to illuminate many of the difficulties facing teachers in this situation.

A fuller picture of the position of Irish history teaching in the province can be completed only after many more teachers come forward and divulge information relating to their own particular situation. Instead of aiming to complete the jigsaw here, I am offering only a small piece, which ultimately, I hope, will be slotted into a much larger framework. Currently I am detailing my own experience to provide a rationale for my research project.

People in Northern Ireland possess an inbuilt caution against 'declaring their hand'; in liberal circles it is thought to be embarrassingly superfluous and in routine social intercourse, if not actually dangerous, then certainly inadvisable'. They might hold it against 'us'. By opening up my teaching career experiences to general scrutiny I am breaking the time-honoured Ulster tradition of polite, silent evasion in matters religious and political.

I was brought up Catholic, in comfortable material surroundings, attended a convent selective school as a boarder, and shortly after the outbreak of the Troubles, went to London where I acquired a degree and a teaching diploma. Then, for fifteen years, I taught in a state selective school ('state' being synonymous with 'Protestant'). During this time, I was the sole representative of my background in the school. What appears to be more remarkable is that I taught English and history, including Irish history.

The fact that it seems remarkable has been a constant source of irritation to me. I had to affect indifference to such remarks as 'How did you get in there?', 'Do they ever say anything to you?' and 'Of course you don't teach Irish history!'. In the first instance, when I applied for the job, I was naively confident enough to presume that I had as good a chance as anyone else to be appointed: my non-sectarian family background and four years' study in England at a crucial time (politically and personally) had cushioned me against any sense of insecurity or inferiority. I can honestly state that during my entire teaching experience in a Protestant school, no pupil ever verbally or physically attacked me because of my religion.

It never occurred to me to play to the gallery or act out any charade for acceptance. Through not anticipating hostility I received none: one position reinforced the other. I was shocked by and took umbrage at tactless remarks about my 'peculiar position in that school'. I felt entirely comfortable there, but how could I communicate this succinctly and honestly to the sceptic?

In retrospect, it appears significant that I had no preconceived ideas of what a Protestant school would be like. Fresh from a non-denominational further educational background, I saw no insuperable barrier to my total integration into the school. If there were raised eyebrows and whispered innuendoes, I certainly did not see or hear them. My great strength was, therefore, youthful optimism, coupled with sublime ignorance of prejudice in operation. I had never been exposed to it previously, and, consequently, did not expect to find it. It is possible that because of my naiveté and frankness, I was then a more constructive instrument in promoting 'mutual understanding' than later in my career when I was initiated into the esoteric world of sectarian consciousness. Living in Northern Ireland bred cynicism and self-consciousness as much as it developed insight and understanding.

Regarding teaching, I had no inhibitions about confronting contentious issues and adapted an interactive style which encouraged the pupils to voice opinions on any subject, assured that they would be respected. Contrary to the general public's

expectation, I, a Catholic teacher, knew very little Irish history before teaching in a Protestant school. Ironically, I developed my interest and expertise in this subject area as a result of teaching there.

There were occasions when my ignorance of Protestant fundamentalist thinking almost certainly caused offence. I was made aware of it when teaching an A Level history class about how scientific discoveries, such as evolution, helped change the way human beings viewed the world. One of my remarks was as follows: 'Now, girls, incredible as this may seem to us living at the end of the twentieth century, there really were people who once believed that the Bible should be taken literally, and that Adam and Eve were real people'. A girl at the front interrupted me, 'But, Miss, don't you know that some people still think that, sure, most of the ones in this class still do!'

One of the many entrenched prejudices still current in Northern Ireland is the extent to which the other side has its own version of history. During the first weeks of my career teaching in a Protestant school, we digressed in class into discussing the then novel idea of integrated education. I was amused when one girl remarked candidly: 'But Miss, we couldn't have Catholic teachers here – they have their own Bible and ideas on history – they couldn't teach us right the way you do'. I replied, 'I don't think that is right, Ruth, I have taught in a Catholic school and I have taught in the same way as I teach you'. Ruth probably didn't believe me and she must have been very embarrassed when she learnt that I was one of 'them'.

Whilst I felt entirely comfortable teaching in the school, my unique position did not go unnoticed. I remember one of my colleagues telling me how she reprimanded a pupil for making derogatory remarks about Catholics. Apparently, she reminded the girl that 'Miss Conway is a Catholic!' and got the reply, 'Oh, but she is different!' At the time, I resented being overtly ghettoised, albeit in the cause of mutual understanding, and contended that I was different only in that they knew me!

Yet, undeniably, I was different. As time passed, I increasingly became conscious that I was one of the few Catholics that some pupils were likely to encounter. With this awareness came the realisation that how I taught, and, as importantly, behaved, might affect their estimation of Catholics in general. I hasten to add that this role assumption matured slowly, at least on a conscious level. It probably coincided with, and was symptomatic of, succumbing to the process of 'Ulsterisation', the disease of religious tribalism contaminating our society. It is ironical that much as I genuinely abhorred bigotry, and wished to actively promote tolerance, I could not inoculate myself against the polluted atmosphere of suspicion and caution.

Gradually, I was initiated into the tribal rite of 'acute observation'. Differences, which I had previously failed to observe or ignored, began to occupy a central part in my thinking; with that came knowledge of what to say, when to say it and to whom it should be said. At this stage, I longed for my former state of innocence where I could honestly state that I did not think about a person's religious background. But the impulse to know, categorise and surmise was overpowering. Instead of surmounting the religious divide, I became a part of it and can only offer in mitigation the fact that, except for a sojourn across the water, I was Northern Irish born and bred!

I have never felt ambiguous about my identity, which is unequivocally Irish and Catholic. I have acquired some insight into the fears and aspirations of Ulster Protestants, not only because I have worked with and taught them, but also because I developed a fascination for the history and psychology behind our Troubles. As a historian, I try to promote empathy: as a concerned human being, I started to practise it. My academic understanding of the Ulster Problem has been deepened through research into the political history of my locality for an M.A. dissertation on the politics of Cookstown, my home town, during partition, but my real insight comes from being an integral part of the problem.

Arguably, it was during my early teaching career that I was most effective in promoting better community relations. The girls obviously made allowances for my blunders,

excusing them on the grounds that I could not be expected to know better. They tolerated my 'peculiarities' and we had a relaxed, open relationship. I had no doubt that even when I was not positively liked, I was respected, and any reservations about me sprang from my defects as a teacher and not from my Catholicism.

In the latter part of my teaching career in Northern Ireland, the move to politicise History gradually gained momentum. It was consolidated by a number of government directives to promote Cultural Awareness and Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU.). This process coincided with the amalgamation of the girls' selective school in which I had taught for 12 years with a neighbouring boys' selective school (I moved there in 1986). On a personal level, the two initiatives were directly related. With my heightened awareness of sectarianism, I had presumed that this school would present me with problems of that nature. It is a sad indictment of my environment, and me, that I had lost my youthful optimism and had become corrupted by suspicion. Yes, I could teach successfully in one Protestant school, but I no longer felt I could cope in them all.

Whilst I was wrong about the exact complexion of the problem, the sectarian tinge shone through, albeit in a different guise from the one that I had anticipated. The problem essentially was that my Catholicism had been discovered and exploited. I was no longer merely Miss Conway, teacher of history and English, but a Catholic teacher who could be paraded in the grand charade of building bridges. I became perceived as a link between the two cultures, or as one of my more cynical colleagues put it, 'a token Taig' (Catholic) who was sent to Corrymeela or who spearheaded the 'Studying Our Past' competition which the Churches Central Committee for Community work annually organised as a means of encouraging a balanced grasp of controversial events in Irish History and their significance.

Education for Mutual Understanding and Cultural Heritage were cross curricular themes to be taught across the curriculum. They were introduced by the Common Curriculum in 1989. In 1991 I believed that crusading ventures were counter-productive, that I was a more valuable asset to community relations when no one drew attention to my

background. It then embarrassed me. I believed in 1991 that government initiatives would have made my pupils and colleagues feel uncomfortable and that it would have disastrous consequences province-wide for the teaching of Irish history. Then, I was convinced that when history syllabuses were constructed primarily to dispel myths about the past they were liable merely to substitute one form of mythology for another. It was proposed, for example, that instead of dwelling exclusively on the agricultural or industrial past, children would be told that it is not true that all Protestants are derived from Scottish or English settlers or Catholics from pure Celts. What were they to be told? Scholarship (I then thought) appeared to be incidental; what mattered was that the 'facts' were to be carefully manipulated to facilitate a faddish political ideology. We, the history teachers, in this fit of present-mindedness were being asked to pre-judge the past: instead of permitting the voices of the past to speak freely, we had to determine which sounds should filter through.

It appeared to me, in 1991, that when history was tailored to suit social needs, it lost objectivity and genuine scholarship. I thought that what we needed was a syllabus which was less subjective than the carefully concocted account of what was alleged to be our cultural heritage; we needed a broader horizon. Certainly, we should teach Irish history, but we must also examine the histories of other nations. The GCSE syllabus, to my mind, wisely included Hitler's Germany and the Arab-Israeli conflict; this international element was healthy. At first, I was angry when the Head of Department decreed that we take the Arab-Israeli option instead of the Irish one, but then I became enthusiastic about teaching the former. I argued that an awareness of the conflict between two cultures in the Middle East plus exposure to the excesses of a totalitarian regime in Germany produced a deeper understanding of the horrors of prejudice than even a judicious selection of material on the Ulster Problem. This conviction was reinforced by my experience teaching A Level Irish history. When teaching Irish history, I decided that empathy with the past does not necessarily cultivate values of tolerance. There was, I believed, no guarantee that an understanding of our past changes the socially cultivated values which operate in the present.

In 1991 I wrote that 'we must not depend on government initiatives in the field of education: such steps are counterproductive, the most effective measures being those which are spontaneous and unpremeditated' (Conway, 1991). The Government, I thought, could lay the foundation for tolerance, by concentrating on ameliorating social and economic ills: values change when the environment in which they have been nurtured alters. This was to be a complex, gradual process and the factors which contributed to a change of mentality ought not to be over-simplified. I was then convinced that EMU could not be affected by chalk and talk, by carefully tailored syllabuses, or contrived, superficial socialising; but rather by open, honest, sustained, and above all voluntary, social interaction.

Increasingly, Northern Ireland's political situation has encouraged educationalists to focus on history's contribution to improving community relations. It has been claimed that teaching history might develop 'informed and responsive scepticism,' 'awareness of bias', 'empathetic response', 'tolerance for beliefs, culture, and ideas of others', and 'awareness of the strength/potential of the individual'. By promoting these skills, teachers, albeit unwittingly, were also inculcating personal and societal values. Was I right to be critical of this stand?

Furthermore, circumstances forced me to consider the selection of content in the history syllabus. The newly formed Department had to accommodate more teachers of A Level history. The European and British history were allocated to other teachers and I was asked to teach only the Irish paper. I felt that I was being marginalized with a view to being excluded from A Level teaching altogether. This speculation proved to be correct. The following year it was decided to replace the Irish Paper with the 'more relevant one' on the French Revolution on the pretext that it was the bicentenary year. But, conveniently, this was also the Special Paper taught by my Head of Department. I resented being unceremoniously dropped from A Level teaching: it was an area which I enjoyed and in which I felt I had considerable expertise. Moreover, the whole escapade had serious repercussions for Irish history teaching in the school.

Firstly, I was uneasy about only being allowed to teach the Irish history paper. With amalgamation, the school now contained a large number of boys who knew me only by repute. To them I feared I would be 'the female, Catholic teacher who taught Irish history'. This would be bad for my professional standing in the school as well as for the status of my specialist subject. I was also appalled by the fact that my Special A Level Irish history Paper was the only Irish history taught in the school! The trend province-wide in the 1980s was towards including more Irish history in the syllabus. When the A Level paper was dropped in 1989, we must have been one of the very few schools in Northern Ireland not offering any Irish history on the syllabus. By that time, I had not only developed a deep interest in the subject, but I was convinced that, on principle, Irish history must be taught.

It was not difficult to fathom the Head of Department's stand on Irish history. When I asked why we opted for the Arab-Israeli conflict instead of Twentieth Century Ireland for GCSE, I was told that it was a problem of books and empathy. After recommending suitable text books, I was assured that children from a Unionist background would not be able to empathise with Nationalists, so they would be safer doing the Middle East. As regards years 7 - 9, he said that they would find Irish history, 'too dull and difficult', but 'we would do something on Nendrum (a pre-historic archaeological site) with year 7'. Dropping Irish history at A Level can be explained by my colleague's preference for A Level teaching: my Paper was an impediment to his monopoly. It was primarily a question of internal political manipulation. Moreover, repercussions from irate parents, if the more controversial areas of Irish history were covered, were also feared. Above all, he wanted a quiet life, far removed from internal or external hassle.

My frustration over being impotent to influence this situation was a major factor leading to my resignation from the school in 1989. It also explains why I now strongly support the emphasis placed on Irish history in the Core Units of the Northern Ireland Curriculum, and how I have changed my position as regards Government interference in curriculum matters. Including or excluding Irish history from the school curriculum has not been responsible for the horrific bloodshed in the Province and, arguably, even the

most enlightened teaching will, in itself, not compensate for other more powerful factors, but I am convinced that it can help in the process of helping to produce receptive minds and making it more difficult for other minds to stay shut. But do other teachers and pupils share this view? An issue crucial to my thesis is how we teachers see our role as educators. How do we approach the process of inculcating a genuine respect for traditions which differ from our own? Theoretically, I was in a position to promote such values and was curious about my impact as an educator. These questions formed the beginning of my research journey. In my conclusions I will state the ways in which I have changed my mind along the route.

(iv) The Development of the Research Journey

Stage One

In 1991 I undertook a small-scale survey I with past sixth form pupils as part of my M.Ed research. Fundamentally, I was trying to ascertain the impact my teaching of Irish history had on my pupils I wanted to know how much they enjoyed the subject, how they rated my teaching techniques in particular, if they regarded the presentation as being biased. I also wanted to know the degree to which it had shaped their opinion of Irish politics at the time, and the extent to which it has remained influential.

Some of these problems were indicated in my M.Ed. dissertation on *Teaching Controversial Issues in History*, started in Belfast in 1988 and completed in Oxford in 1991. Here I raised questions regarding what constituted contentious issues in history and emphasised the difficulties teachers had in dealing with them (Conway, 1991). However, since my scope was limited by time and word restrictions, I decided to register for a PhD to build on the data and expertise gained in that research project by including more original documentary and empirical evidence.

Furthermore, I could use the skills and knowledge acquired when researching a history topic for an M.A. in Twentieth Century International History in 1986. My dissertation

considered the 'Ulster problem' by researching the political problems facing a small Ulster town in the period 1910-1925 when the community was divided along rigid religious lines (Conway, 1986). The study provided useful insight into the socio-political structures which influenced the educational system. I was able to explore the myth-making process that feeds sectarianism and, in the process, strengthen my conviction about the validity of including a historical survey. Such a survey would create a framework to orientate my current study.

Although there had always been an empirical thrust to my research, my interest in teaching sensitive subjects was further developed as a result of being involved in the Warrington Project (Conway, 1997a; Conway, 1997b). In this scheme I worked with Professor Patrick Buckland of the Institute of Irish Studies at Liverpool University to write support materials to assist the teaching and examining of Irish elements of the British history syllabus. I was thereby given insight into the problem of writing materials to present a potentially sensitive topic in the classroom.

As a Specialist Adviser for the National Teacher Research Panel (NTRP) since 2005, I have been inspired to pursue my work as a reflective practitioner and to encourage other teachers to pursue different lines of enquiry in their work. The NTRP organises a National Conference and celebrates teacher engagement in and with research.

I have also been fortunate enough to attend a Facing History and Ourselves workshop (FHAO) in July 2005 and found their materials and strategies to be such an invaluable source in teaching history that I wrote an article in *Teacher to Teacher* about it (TES Conway, 27 April, 2006).

Stage Two

The trickiest part of the journey was deciding which route to take. Initially I had an ambitious scheme of doing a grand tour of various international destinations. My

itinerary included Israel, Cyprus, Germany, USA and South Africa. All these countries had a history of divided communities and a contested history curriculum. Furthermore, I had personal contacts through which I could network.

I spent part of the summer of 1996 in Jerusalem in the Yad Vashem museum examining primarily teacher packs designed to inspire practitioners to tackle with confidence contentious issues such as the Holocaust. I also contacted friends and academics in South Africa knowing that this was a region ridden with strife and hope in those heady days of post-apartheid following the 1994 elections. Cyprus was another obvious area of conflict to which my attention had been drawn by the inspirational Frank Wright when he recounted his experience with the uncompromising Greek and the Turkish Cypriots. I exploited the fact that I had contacts in the area because my husband had taught in Nicosia and written for a local newspaper. Later in the summer, when I received literature from the Anti-Defamation League in New York, I was confident that this would provide me with another example of classroom history being infused with highly charged emotions. Finally, I investigated the attitude towards the Nazi past in history teaching in German schools by reading papers in journals.

Stage Three

Simultaneously, I spent long hours in the public records office in Belfast and Twickenham pouring over HMI and other government records. I examined school inspection reports for insight into the position of history vis a vis other subjects. This entailed doing a comparative study on English, history and geography. I also scrutinised history textbooks primarily in Britain and Ireland from the end of the twentieth century.

As a result of research into documentary evidence I identified four distinct phases in the teaching of school history from 1918 to 2001. Firstly, there was the period between the cataclysm of the Great War and the descent into the Second World War, 1918-1941; this period was characterised by strong elements of continuity with Victorian and Edwardian England and for that reason can be classified as the '*traditional*' era. The years 1941-1968 were a '*transitional*' time but a key period underlying twentieth century change.

From 1968-1985 these changes were consolidated and the '*New History*' was firmly established. Since 1985 the increasing emphasis on more modern concerns of heightened sensitivity has been instrumental in challenging conventions in writing and teaching history; this has come with an emphasis on new technology and market forces. The following table illustrates my interpretation of trends in history teaching.

Table 1
Historical periods of change

Period	Trend
1918-1941	Traditional (insensitivity)
1941-1968	Transitional (growing sensitivity)
1968-1985	New History (widespread sensitivity)
1985-2009	Modern Concerns (heightened sensitivity)

Having developed the above theory regarding British history I decided to drop or marginalise the international angle on the grounds that it was already too unwieldy and concentrate exclusively on Great Britain and Ireland. This would situate my research exclusively within a historical framework that drew almost exclusively from the documentary evidence.

Stage Four

Although I was enjoying pursuing a predominantly archival research project, I was still curious about current classroom practice. I continued to teach sensitive issues and remained intrigued by how other teachers and their pupils perceived them and dealt with the dilemmas they presented. I piloted some questionnaires with my own students and

after some adjustment sent them to targeted schools in Northern Ireland and Oxford. Concurrently I embarked on semi-structured interviews with teachers in both regions.

This data was so informative and resonated so acutely with my own experience that I decided to focus on empirical rather than documentary evidence. More pertinently, it exposed a rich seam of evidence that provided deep insight into the nature of emotional reactions to school history.

Stage Five

My commitment to supporting new staff in my department meant that from 1998 to 2001 I suspended the research. The data collected in 1996 seemed out-dated five years later and I wondered what changes had taken place in the intervening years. At this stage I embarked on what became a longitudinal study of three cohorts 1991, 1996 and 2001. By the early part of the millennium much had been written about different aspects of history teaching but my data remained unique. Moreover, it answered the questions that had fired my initial enthusiasm more precisely than the documentary evidence.

This research path led me to compare Oxford and Mid-Ulster.

(v) A Comparative Study of Oxford and Mid-Ulster

There were obvious practical advantages in targeting schools in Oxford and Mid-Ulster: I had teaching and personal connections with both places. Moreover, there were sound theoretical and methodological reasons for selecting such apparently disparate regions.

I am aware that traditionally, comparative education is the study of national systems but that more recently the implications of globalisation have undermined cross-national comparison (Green, 2002; Broadfoot, 2000). There is, in its place, a demand for 'more studies of education and learning across sub-national regions and communities' (Green, 2002, p. 19). I am also influenced by what Broadfoot refers to as the 'cultural

interpretation tradition' (Broadfoot, 2000, p. 9) which emphasises the need to understand educational systems and practice as part of their wider context (Beck, 2000, p. 9; Broadfoot, 2000).

At first glance there seems to be a world of difference between the rural backwater of Mid-Ulster and the cosmopolitan, industrialised, ancient city of Oxford, yet on closer examination the two are not entirely distinct. Indeed, there are significant similarities. People in both regions in the United Kingdom are exposed to many of the same cultural tendencies, reading mostly the same newspapers, watching the same reality shows on television, many of the same films, the same internet sites and following the same celebrities and (with the notable exception of Gaelic football in Catholic Mid-Ulster) the same sports. That these convergences became more apparent over time between 1991 and 2001 is reflected in interviews I conducted with teachers in both areas. In 2001, for example, teachers everywhere spoke of social problems such as family breakdown, the drugs culture, the decline of the influence of the church and discipline problems in school. Oxford despite its multi-culturalism was designated by one teacher who had previously taught in London as the 'white highlands'. Mid-Ulster for all its ethnic whiteness became more multi-cultural in the ten years under scrutiny. It must also be remembered that the large majority of students in the reputedly rural Mid-Ulster schools had (like their English counterparts) never been on a farm. One Cookstown English teacher interviewed in 1997, remarked that he found teaching Seamus Heaney's collection 'Death of a Naturalist' difficult because most of his pupils did not come from an agricultural background. (Lovesy, 1997). On the other hand, the rural complexion of Oxford is frequently over-looked.

Nevertheless, nothing can disguise the difference between an advantaged area in terms of the economy and one of high unemployment. Oxfordshire's Local Authority serves a relatively affluent population: the proportions of pupils from homes where adults have higher education qualifications and/or belong to social classes 1 and 2 are above average for the country as a whole (Aldrich and Dean, 1991). The percentage of adults aged 16 to 74 with degree level or higher qualification was 12.4 for Mid-Ulster and 15.8 for

Northern Ireland overall (2001 census). Although also of about average economic status in terms of the more depressed economy in the Northern Ireland, Mid-Ulster is still relatively speaking disadvantaged. This is illustrated by the fact that the average long term unemployment for Northern Ireland as a whole is 40.4 percent, for Mid-Ulster it is 39.7 percent (2001 census). Its mid-range status is again apparent in the Multiple Deprivation Measure ward level summary. Gortallowry ward (of which Cookstown is the main town) has an overall rank of 295 out of 582 wards. All wards in Northern Ireland are ranked, 1 being the most deprived (Shankill in Belfast) and 582 (Hillfoot in Castlereagh), the least deprived (NINIS, Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Information Service, 2009).

The advantage of doing a longitudinal as well as a comparative project is being able to trace change over time. When I embarked on collecting data in the area in 1991 the population of Mid-Ulster was composed of a largely settled, almost exclusively white community deeply divided along sectarian lines. The ratio of Catholic and Protestant was 57:43 respectively overall with a small majority of Protestants in the urban district of Cookstown. This changed marginally in favour of Catholics during the period studied. However, the ethnic composition of the population of Mid-Ulster changed spectacularly between 1994 and 2000 from being predominantly white to being a more multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society. In Dungannon the population was almost exclusively white while the largest other ethnic group was Chinese with only 58 persons (Northern Ireland Census, 2001). This was to change dramatically in the 2000s. At least 10 percent of the population of Dungannon were termed 'foreign nationals'. Schools had to adapt for the first time to having to provide for young people whose first language was not English. However, the precise impact this had on teaching sensitive topics in history is outside the scope of my research. The complexion of the Oxford population in the decade researched also changed. The already considerable multi-ethnic community in 1991 grew further by 2001.

As regards education levels and system Mid-Ulster is in many ways a microcosm of Northern Ireland as a whole. A variety of schools are represented and they are

categorised by two main factors: religion and selection. Only one substantial comprehensive school exists in the Cookstown and, as a state school, it is attended by mainly the Protestant community. An integrated secondary school was opened in Dungannon in 1995 and, although there are integrated primary and nursery schools in the area, they only comprise about 5 percent of the total school population.

The state and independent systems co-exist within Oxford City. There has been a long tradition of private or independent fee-paying schools in Oxfordshire, nearly all of which had a strong boarding component and most of which were single sex and largely selective in intake. Moreover, unlike Mid-Ulster, the schools were organised into three tiers: a transition was made from First to Middle School at age 9 and, then, a further transition at age 13 from Middle School to Upper School. The city's three-tier system of schools came into being in January, 1968. Previously the city aped Northern Ireland in having an Eleven Plus exam, with selective grammar schools and secondary moderns. In 1991, all schools, even those of an apparently 'confessional' nature, admitted young people from a range of religious backgrounds but generally the composition of state schools was very mixed ethnically whilst independent schools were predominantly white British. Mid-Ulster like the rest of the Province had a system segregated along religious lines.

In the early 1990s Oxford hit the news, not thanks to its supposed academic eminence (with Oxford University itself and the fast-expanding Oxford Brookes University), but because of the amount of joyriding in the Blackbird Leys estate; this was front page news for a while at a time when concerns over youth crime were featuring heavily. Politically it was noteworthy that Conservatives were disappearing from the City Council as Labour was taking over with the only viable opposition being, from time to time, a coalition of the Liberal Democrats and the Greens; this situation has continued up to 2009.

When I interviewed history teachers in Oxford in 1996, the tripartite system was still extant and the National Curriculum, introduced in 1991, had been recently modified by Ron Dearing. Local press accounts emphasized teacher dissatisfaction with inspections, testing, appraisal and an increase in unacceptable student behaviour. The perceived

increase in behaviour problems was thought to be due to a number of factors including the government policy of getting as many special needs pupils as possible out of special schools and putting them in mainstream schools (*The Oxford Times*, 9 April, 1993). Such problems were also reported by teachers in 2001 in schools in Mid-Ulster. In Oxford, many children were also excluded because schools, short of cash, decided to exclude those who made extra demands (*The Oxford Times*, 9 June, 1992). There was also evidence of sensitivity towards religion and ethnicity which was illustrated by a drive to recruit more teachers from ethnic minorities. The same inclination was mirrored in the Education for Mutual Understanding programme in Northern Ireland which, however, in Mid-Ulster served an already receptive middle-class.

The lobby to retain middle schools in Oxford remained strong in 1996. It was encouraged by the fact that national research showed a drop in attainment in the year or two after children moved into the secondary schools which did not appear to happen when the children stayed on in middle schools for an extra two years.

After July 2005 at a time of a perceived terrorist threat students from ethnic minority groups, particularly the Muslim and black communities in Oxford, were targeted in the increased emphasis on social integration. Meanwhile, greater prosperity in Northern Ireland, one positive spin-off of the relative peace that followed the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, was a factor in unprecedented immigration from other European countries. Cognisance of the changed demographics as well as ancient divisions between Protestant and Catholics are reflected in the Northern Ireland curriculum taught since September 2007. Making history relevant to current affairs may be good educational practice but problems can arise when what is on the news features largely in the lives of pupils.

By 2009 the research I did on Mid-Ulster and Oxford in the decade 1991-2001 was not only a comment on the teaching of history but also a contribution to the history of education studies. Crook and McCulloch, (2002), identify three key benefits to be gained from taking a comparative approach to the history of education. The first one is to 'establish detailed insight into comparisons and contrasts in our educational past' (p. 397)

and the second benefit is that it 'enhanced our understanding of influences and interaction' (p. 398). Finally, taking a comparative approach to the history of education generates or informs 'overarching theory and general patterns (p. 398)'.

(vi) Professional and Research Timeline

1974-1986: Taught English and history in the High School for Girls, Dungannon.

1986-1989: Taught English and history in the co-ed grammar Royal School, Dungannon.

1986: M. A. dissertation on the political history of Cookstown, 1910 – 1925, University of Ulster.

1988: Registered M. Ed. Queen's University of Belfast. (Transferred to Westminster College, Oxford in 1989.)

1989-2009: Head of History in Rye St Antony School, Oxford.

1991: July-August. Circulated a questionnaire to past pupils in Northern Ireland regarding learning Irish history. Interviewed history teachers in Northern Ireland.

1991: September-December. Comparative study between my current students in Oxford and my past pupils in Northern Ireland regarding learning Irish history.

1996-1997: Ph.D. registered at Westminster College, Oxford.

1996: September-August. Interviews with teachers in Northern Ireland and Oxford.

1996: September. Questionnaires circulated to students in Northern Ireland and Oxford.

1997: Warrington Project. Wrote materials for teaching Irish history in British schools.

1998-2001: Suspension of research for professional reasons.

2001: Registered Ph.D. at Oxford Brookes University.

2001: September-December. Interviews with teachers in Northern Ireland and Oxford

2001: September. Questionnaires circulated to students in Northern Ireland and Oxford.

2002: Registered Ph.D. Institute of Education, London.

2005: Specialist Advisor, National Teachers Research Panel.

2006-2008: Suspension of research for personal reasons.

2009: Submitted thesis

Summary

I have introduced my work by explaining the following: the target audience; the theoretical underpinning of the research design in reflectivity; the debate about the transformative and instrumental purpose of history; the philosophical, psychological and sociological topics raised. All these issues generated the research questions. I then have revealed who and what inspired me to write before recounting my experience as a serving teacher. Following this the complex range of ideas and circumstances that moulded change and those which militated against it have been placed within a historical and personal context. Finally, I have recounted the various stages of my research journey and explained the importance of my comparative study of Mid-Ulster and Oxford.

Chapter Two

Philosophical, Psychological and Sociological Concerns

In this chapter literature is reviewed to identify issues that I consider to be crucial to my research question: who or what determines sensitive issues in history. Part One attempts to unpack the notion of sensitivity within a mainly philosophical framework, but takes the research findings into account, whilst Part Two takes a more psychological and sociological approach.

Part One

Here I contend that, to reach an understanding of the concept ‘sensitive’ in the context of school history, we must first look at how history as a discipline has been defined. The contentious question of the subject’s social purpose leads to an investigation of history’s connection with morality and to a consideration of the conceptual difference between ‘morality’ and ‘empathy’. It is also necessary to explore the dominant theoretical stances regarding ‘controversial’ issues before acknowledging the conceptual difference between ‘sensitive’ and ‘controversial’. Only then can the specific problems regarding teaching history in Mid-Ulster and Oxford be better understood.

(i) History as a Contentious Subject

E. H. Carr attempted to answer the question ‘what is history?’ by acknowledging that the answer consciously or unconsciously reflects our position in time, and forms part of our answer to the broader question of the view that we take of the society in which we live (Carr, 1961). Rusen developed the debate by considering history as an elaborated form of memory (Rusen, 2002). Each era writes its history to accommodate its needs. Roy Foster reminds us that ‘the idea that there are past periods that carry an uncanny assonance with our own sense of the present chimes strongly with the symmetries and repetitions of Irish history (Foster, 2009, p. 2). It is not surprising that, in the market-driven early twenty first century (where catastrophic economic events in late 2008 and early 2009 have led to some doubt being expressed as to the efficacy of markets), history

must be seen to be accountable and economically productive. Yet, as Margaret Macmillan argues:

The passion for the past is clearly about more than market forces or government policies. History responds to a variety of needs, from greater understanding of ourselves and our world to answers about what to do (Macmillan, 2009, p. 6).

The current trend is to draw the academic history of the universities into the media spotlight albeit in a diluted version. Consequently, professional historians can less easily claim that they are engaged in an esoteric discipline, familiar only to the initiated. Neither is the past approached with the same degree of certainty as it was when Acton stated that it would one day be possible to produce ultimate history. This belief 'has been rejected long ago' (Plumb, 1957, p. 4). Plumb highlighted the problem of objectivity: '...historians expect their work to be superseded again and again'. By 2008 this was certainly the case. Tosh proposed that what historians supply is 'the time continuum, which demonstrates the extent of variation within our own culture' (Tosh, 2008). Such tentativeness contrasts with Elton's confidence that:

In a very real sense the study of history is concerned with a subject matter more objective and independent than that of the natural sciences. Just because historical matter is in the past, is gone, irrecoverable, its objective reality is guaranteed; it is beyond being altered for any purpose whatsoever (Elton, 1967, p. 67).

The public is less concerned with such guarantees of objective reality. The commonest question asked of historians is whether history serves a purpose. Can we learn from the past? Is the subject useful?

History as a discipline is, therefore, a contested subject, 'always has been, and always will be' (Crook and Aldrich, 2000, p. 63). To make matters worse, teachers have admitted to being bewildered by the constantly changing demands of the curriculum and by the not always consistent or compatible aims of the academic historian and the teacher practising in the secondary school. The philosophical debate which continues among historians has created tension between those who consider that there is a conflict of interest between history teaching at secondary school level and the academic pursuit of

the subject at the universities. An influential historian such as Elton even had serious doubts about the wisdom of teaching history to schoolchildren. He posed the question 'Can history be taught at all?' 'History', he claims, 'deals with the activities of men, not of abstractions, and a measure of maturity is really necessary before the student can understand what is before him and is being said to him ... In a very real sense, history is not a good subject to teach to children, or rather the real thing - academic history - is wrong for them' (Elton, 1967, p. 134). Most historians as well as history educators currently believe that it is essential to engage young people in historical activity to prepare them for a participatory, pluralist democracy (Barton and Levstik, 2004). Yet there are concerns about the manner in which this might be achieved: 'History teaching in schools is designed to accommodate as many different demands on content as possible, at the expense of conveying what historical perspective means and how it might usefully be applied to current issues' (Tosh, 2008, p. 4).

Tosh views the role of history as turning on two different issues. The first concerns the political ends that history might serve (Tosh, 2008); the second concerns the validity of history as a branch of knowledge. This duality in the approach to history teaching has been an overarching concern for those contributing to effective history teaching. If history teaching is to be successful then it is important that not only the teacher has a clear understanding of the discipline but that 'there is a shared understanding of what "history" is' (Haydn et al., 2008, p. 2).

(ii) History's Moral Purpose

Historically, history as a discipline has been accepted as a morally exemplary tale, a feature of a nation's identity and values that are of political worth (Black and Macraill, 1997; Haydn et al., 2008). In the great nineteenth century works of Hallam and Macaulay politics and morality were not separated. There is continuity between this acceptance of the moral purpose of history and the debates about the content of the school history curriculum in a rapidly changing society (Husbands, 1996). The official aim of the National History Curriculum was to ensure that young people learn about the

history of their country. This was first established by the National Curriculum History Working Group in that it agreed that:

An understanding of British history should be the foundation of pupils' historical learning, since it is the main framework of their immediate experience, in political, economic, social and cultural terms (DES, 1990).

Low-Beer also reminds us that many of the reasons given for teaching history in school are practical and moral ones (Low-Beer and Blyth, 1983). 'Given this pressure on school history to teach practical moral lessons', she stated in an interview I had with her in 1995, 'the problems are likely to be more prominent for the schoolteacher than for the historian'. Low Beer readily distinguishes between academic and school history: they are intrinsically different and it is valid to take another approach and acknowledge different aims.

Indeed, as we approach the end of the first decade of the third millennium there are many critical voices raised against school history. Many agree with Barton and Levstik, (2004) that conservatives think that it is too multicultural, and multiculturalists think that it is too conservative. For Furedi (1998, p. 127), 'history has come alive', yet in 2003 the British Prime Minister Tony Blair lamented that there has never been a time when study of history provided so little instruction for our present day (*TES*, 16 March, 2003).

Shemilt specified the following five areas as justifying school history:

1. A means of acquiring and developing such cognitive skills as those of analysis, synthesis and judgement.
2. A source of leisure interests.
3. A vehicle for analysing the contemporary world and one's place within it.
4. A means for developing understanding of the forces underlying social change and evolution.
5. An avenue to self-knowledge and awareness of what it means to be human (Shemilt, 1980, p. 32).

It is this final point that acknowledges history as an avenue for ethical behaviour.

(iii) The Conceptual Difference between ‘Morality’ and ‘Empathy’

There is surprisingly little research about the emotional aspects of teachers’ lives (Sutton and Wheatley, 2003). They raise the possibility of research into the direct influence of specific emotions on teacher motivation for particular teaching tasks and contexts. Others in the field emphasise the impact that emotions have on teachers interaction with their students, especially the extent to which students observe physiological changes during the emotional process including sweating, blushing, and breathing fast (Petty and Cacioppo, 1981). Emotions, it is agreed, have a negative and positive effect on teaching and learning. Some research has been done into how ‘Motives derive their impelling force from their affective component’ (Epstein, 2007, p. 213). Such work has relevance for understanding the extent to which the teachers’ and students’ emotional interaction impacts on sensitive topics in history.

Furthermore, it is important to consider both cognition and emotion to understand the ways in which the notion of personal and collective identity is closely connected to a feeling of empathy in history education. Lee has commented on empathy as *not* being a ‘special facility for getting into other people’s minds’. He opines:

If understanding people in the past required shared feelings, history would be impossible. We cannot experience the fear felt by people in Britain in 1940 that Hitler might triumph and occupy their country (Lee quoted in Donovan and Bransford, 2005, p. 246).

A similar stance is taken by Davis who complains that:

Too commonly, people misunderstand historical ‘empathy’ as sympathy or a kind of appreciative sentiment... Such meanings wreck violence, not only against empathy, but also against the entire sense of history (Davis and Mirabella, 1990, p. 8).

Acceptable definitions for many revolve around the kind of historical thinking that enriches understanding within the context (Arthur and Phillips, 2000; Ashby, Gordon and Lee, 2005; Husbands, 1996; McCulloch, 2004; Pate, 1999). Although such ‘empathy’ for the most part is intellectual in essence, the term has been popularised to include an emotional dimension (Low-Beer, 1989). Despite the efforts of many (Ashby and al,

1997; Yeager and Foster, 2001), empathy has retained this connotation and has, for better or worse, been married to students' emotional responses to the lesson taught:

Should children feel uncomfortable with issues such as the holocaust? If they do not then teachers could be accused not only of a lapse of moral responsibility but also of failing to stir the imagination and develop empathy (Phillips, 2008, p. 222).

I prefer to situate my work in the under-researched but less ambiguous concept of emotional responses to history (Bage, 1999; Byrne, 1997). This is not to proffer the idea that the past can and should be felt but that there are issues about the past that make us feel uncomfortable in the present. I like to distinguish between feeling with and feeling for. We cannot feel with the people in the past whose experience is unique, but we can feel sympathy for their plight. We can never know what it was like to be in Auschwitz but to have an emotional engagement with their plight in feeling a sense of moral outrage is at worst understandable and at best laudable.

Having an emotional response to an issue is not necessarily a positive outcome of studying the subject. Emotions can (and usually do) cloud judgement. If teachers were to select a syllabus that pandered to students' thirst for the unsavoury most would opt for one that included the horrors of "the 'Hitler's and Henry's", so abhorred by the press in the past few years, 2007 to 2009, and few students would wrestle with the apparently duller but arguably more worthy subject of the British constitution.

Compiling a syllabus that appeals to the ghoulish, the spectacular and the violent is debatable educational practice but evidence points to its success in attracting young people to the subject. Levstik concludes that students' interests in history are 'influenced by the content of the history course' noting how in one classroom the children sometimes bring up historical problems related to current concerns – racism usually – and that 'It is unlikely that students will develop more sophisticated approaches to historical thinking if they have never come to care about the content of history' (Levstik and Barton, 2008, p. 217).

Levstik also has reservations about the ‘degree to which the less savoury aspects of life are omitted from a particular classroom’. She believes that ‘Children can handle a more balanced approach’ (Levstik and Barton, 2008, p. 219).

Nevertheless, as Phillips suggests, ‘The issue is about the effective engagement of young minds with subject matter which might be described as challenging’. He then enquires ‘Is shock really the best way to achieve this?’ and adds that ‘perhaps there is still a place for an appreciation of why some topics can be described as sensitive’ (Phillips, 2008, p. 109).

(iv) Sensitive Issues Defined

‘History becomes emotive and controversial when past events have a resonance with current problems faced by society’ (Phillips, 2008, p. 111). I argue that in history no topic is intrinsically sensitive but may become so as a result of the teacher’s and/or student’s reaction to it. My thesis therefore asserts that sensitivity in history is a complex, dynamic phenomenon; it regards sensitivity as being completely the product of social construction located in time, space and culture. This definition is more extensive than that given in the TEACH report from the Historical Association (TEACH, 2007) on the ‘Challenges and Opportunities for Teaching Emotive and Controversial History 3-19’ which succinctly defined emotive and controversial issues as where there is:

Actual or perceived unfairness to people by another individual or group in the past. This may also be the case where there are disparities between what is taught in school history, family/community history and other histories. Such issues and disparities create a strong resonance with students in particular educational settings (p. 3).

Whilst the definition correctly comments on the students’ reaction to school and community history, it gives, for my purpose, insufficient recognition to the problem of the teachers’ ideological positions and emotional responses. In the general recommendations for Key Stages 3, 4 and Post-16 there is no direct mention of the teachers’ personal needs. Certainly the suggested short term and long term strategies emphatically recommend giving more attention to initial teacher education and to sustained professional development for history teachers. Here the emphasis on guidance

for good practice appears to regard the teacher primarily as a practitioner and facilitator for the students instead of fully recognising that the teacher's own particular emotional requirements are as much at the heart of the problem as the students' response. Excellent though the recommendations are I conclude that they do not go far enough. My thesis explores both teachers' and students' reactions to sensitive issues over time, place and culture, thereby aiming at a more holistic approach.

Gary McCulloch contributes to the debate on what makes history sensitive when he reflects on the role of national security within the history of education, particularly after the terrorist attack in London in July 2005 in his chapter in the edited book of Crook and McCulloch (2007, p. 182). He states that at the same time as there is a preoccupation with 'education for security' there has also developed 'a culture of education for change' (McCulloch, p. 193). Recent theories addressing concerns to achieve the cohesion of small groups or communities, what has been termed 'micro-cohesion' (Alexander and Potter, 2005), also make explicit links between this and education and tolerance. History teaching, always a tool for transformation, has become more contested because 'we live at a critical time...education has to enable people to understand what is happening and learn how to direct change (Samuel, 1989, p. 78).

(v) The Dominant Theoretical Stances regarding Controversial Issues

Before broaching the more precisely ethical dimensions of the subject, the notion of 'controversial' history must be addressed. This can be done by unpacking competing as well as corresponding philosophical positions. Bailey (1975) and Stradling (1984) are exponents of a stance adopted by the School's Council and the Humanities Project team. They regarded controversy in behavioural terms (Stradling, 1984). According to Bailey:

That an issue is controversial is, of course, a matter of social fact. That is, an issue is controversial if numbers of people are observed to disagree about statements and assertions made in connection with an issue. (Bailey, 1975, p. 122).

The School's Council defines controversial issues as follows:

By a controversial issue we mean one which divides students, parents and teachers because it involves an element of value-judgement which prevents the issues being settled by evidence and experiment (Schools Council, 1970, p. 79).

This relativist view is also closely allied to realism as expounded by Searle, (2001) when he defends the existence of a real world comprised of objective facts. These, he argues, fall into two categories. In one category are those facts (he calls them 'brute facts') which exist independently of what humans think about them and, secondly, there are those facts (which he calls 'social facts') which 'depend for their existence on human thought' (Searle, 2001, p. 78). Relativism in dealing with controversial topics and the primacy of social context are at the heart of the debate. It is interesting how Dearden rejects Bailey's approach on the grounds that:

If all that is needed is for a number of people to assert a counter-opinion for the matter to become controversial ... then even the shape of the earth becomes at once controversial (Dearden, 1981, p. 38).

Gardner (1984) agrees with Dearden that there is more to something being controversial than the 'social fact' of disagreement but he also concedes that Bailey's account is to be commended in that 'some but not all moral, aesthetic and prudential issues are controversial' (Gardner, 1984, p. 383). Still, he acknowledges, as Dearden notes, that 'Maths, Science and other areas can and do have controversies' and agrees by implication with Stradling (1984) and the Humanities Curriculum team that 'if something is to count as a controversy there has to be the social fact of disagreement'. In his concluding remarks, Gardiner advises us to consider what features of subjects and disciplines should be brought to the fore. He states that 'A concern for truth and accuracy requires us to avoid cultivating the mistaken idea that human inquiry is a domain of peaceful and ordered expansion and progress' (Gardner, 1984, p. 381).

Stradling (1984) also recognises that much of the advice which has been offered to teachers on how to handle controversial subjects in the classroom appears to be derived from a theoretical analysis such as that offered by Gardiner and Bailey rather than from

classroom practice. His conclusions are drawn from current classroom research to demonstrate the problems of attempting to lay down hard and fast rules for teaching controversial issues which he identifies as those traditionally taught in social studies, humanities, religious and moral education and general studies. They include topics such as racism, sexism, the role of the police and the use of direct industrial action.

Of course, in the linguistic, logical sense Dearden's more absolutist assessment is correct. Nevertheless, my thesis admits the primacy of relativism. By agreeing that sensitivity is a social construct I argue that as regards teaching history in schools no topic is intrinsically sensitive but may become so as a result of the teacher's and/or student's emotional reaction.

(vi) The Conceptual Difference between 'Sensitive' and 'Controversial'

A controversial topic is here interpreted as one which is necessarily contentious, but in a divided community a dispute can be highly charged because it frequently combines the notion of deeply held views alongside the inability to recognise that the evidence on which they are based is inconclusive. A strong case is made for emphasising that sensitivity encompasses the emotive, non-rational factors in a dispute to distinguish it from the exclusively controversial.

I argue that an issue is controversial when it operates predominantly in the cognitive arena where there is a possibility of finding a rational conclusion. On the other hand, issues become sensitive and delicate when they operate primarily in the arena of feelings or values thereby reflecting a more inter-personal or sociological outlook.

Emphasis will also be placed on the variations of sensitivity. Although I make no systematic effort to quantify, a given topic is not perceived to be emotive to the same degree in all circumstances: modern Irish history is contentious in Northern Ireland but might not be so in Germany; the holocaust is a very sensitive issue in Germany but is much less so in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, a strategy suitable for one area might not

be appropriate in another. Deep understanding of the phenomenon comes from delving more deeply into the pupil/teacher relationship and from enquiring into the experiences and prejudices of both teacher and pupil within the context of cultural differences.

‘Controversy’ then suggests an area of prolonged disagreement which tends to remain cognitive. On the other hand, ‘sensitivity’ operates very much in the affective domain where discussion of a topic may be restricted to prevent embarrassment, not to hurt feelings or to avoid giving offence within the context of personal and social relationships. My research emphasises: the personal and situational contexts of the cognitive, the affective and the behavioural; the extent to which sensitivity is overt or covert, temporary or permanent; and the degree to which it is felt by the teacher only or by some students. A further vital area explored is the extent to which sensitivity in the classroom can be viewed as having a negative or positive educational impact.

(vii) Sensitive Issues in History defined by Teachers and Students: Evidence taken from Interviews and Surveys, 1991-2001

One of the many challenging definitions of sensitive issues in history which I have come across in my surveys circulated in 1996 was written by a sixteen year old Protestant from Tyrone in response to the question ‘Is it important to teach sensitive issues in history such as the recent troubles in Northern Ireland?’ He writes:

Sensitive issues are generally those around which prejudice and the misunderstanding that causes events such as the troubles originate. The only way to begin to resolve these is to teach the facts surrounding them without bias, and thus present a more informed and realistic knowledge on which greater tolerance and understanding can be built.

The suggestion made about how to resolve misunderstandings is in itself controversial; not everyone subscribes to this view. The same question was answered by a seventeen year old Catholic schoolgirl from the Mid-Ulster region as follows: ‘Personal experience dictates attitudes. It’s a delicate topic and best left untouched’. Yet her view was a minority view: most of the pupils I surveyed demanded to be taught ‘the facts’ surrounding contentious issues. But what were these facts? And how should they be

taught? And who or what defines sensitive topics? These were the major questions that intrigued me and the teachers I interviewed.

It is not surprising that two young people reacted in different ways to the teaching of contentious topics in the classroom when the 'experts' remain divided on how the topic ought to be approached and defined. Until changes in curriculum development became more evident from the late 1960's the opinion of the above schoolgirl was reflected in educational practice in a number of schools in England and Northern Ireland. By the end of the century it was accepted practice to encourage teachers to tackle even the most sensitive topics. I have explored teachers' responses to this challenge.

Sensitivity in the classroom was (as a knee-jerk response) often presented in English schools as an intellectual rather than an emotional problem by teachers. This was especially the case in the data I collected in 2001. There was a minority of teachers such as the male state school teacher who initially emphasised the extent to which history was full of 'irrational conflicts based on ill-informed presumptions and social constructs formed well before the individuals were alive'. A female teaching in an independent school acknowledged the emotional element but, in a similar vein to her male counterpart, couched the notion in the abstract. She said: 'Like economic policy, sensitive issues are more difficult to teach to higher secondary pupils than concrete things like how people lived and things which engage their emotions, like child labour in factories'.

There were others interviewed in 2001 that saw sensitivity as being any issue which was very alien to the culture of the lesson and which was more difficult to teach than one that was familiar: for example, trying to teach the social hierarchy in France before the Revolution to an African student. Frequently the question was thrown back at me with the response 'It depends on how you define "sensitive"'. Nearly always did these teachers emphasise the potential of most of the areas they taught to be politically sensitive. Another female independent-school teacher went a step further when she commented in 2001:

There is nothing that I teach that I don't feel obliged to point out the political implications and the ethics of it. If we are doing the Tudors and they say that Henry VIII was a good king they must know the cost to ordinary people of government policies and the principles involved and I think that is politically sensitive.

Another teacher in a similar school in the same year also took the line that sensitive issues are intellectually contested ones, such as gaining the franchise. With issues that were no longer considered to be controversial, it was the history teacher's role 'to make them understand the controversy'.

Nearly all teachers (some in response to other questions) on further reflection acknowledged the emotional component of the concept. Those who initially latched on to this element were nearly always from state schools. Such teachers agreed that situations could arise that needed sensitive handling when different members of the class had very different and deeply held convictions. These, I was told, needed great care and sensitivity in the way they were handled. It seemed obvious to them that history which deals with aspects that touch on pupils own lives can be thorny. There was also a perceptible change over time in what teachers in the Oxford region defined as being sensitive with increased racial and ethnic tensions being the most often quoted factor.

The teachers I spoke to in Northern Ireland in 1991 shared all the previously-mentioned concerns but they placed emphasis on a more emotional area. Their particular concerns focused on dealing with pupils who had suffered personal injury or bereavement as a result of the troubles. Several teachers, working in more volatile parts of the province, had pupils with close relatives who had been killed or maimed:

One girl in my class has had a brother killed; another had a sister blinded in an explosion. I don't feel comfortable or qualified to teach the more sensitive modern period; it's a job for a counsellor, not a conventional teacher.

By 1996, the vast majority of teachers had accepted the Common Curriculum as a fait accompli and most were favourably disposed towards it; the revision by Dearing the previous year had made the content more manageable. Nevertheless, many still

complained about a lot of Irish history being difficult, even dull. Although there was relief that there would be no SATs at KS3, teachers worried about how the curriculum (especially the core unit on Home Rule) could be delivered to younger students.

Most teachers interviewed in Northern Ireland in 1996 gauged the level of sensitivity in the classroom by the reaction of their students. They insisted that when they raised certain issues in the classroom the reaction of the children themselves indicated that the issue was sensitive. Students, most teachers reported, nearly always responded in one or more of the following ways: 'Some were surprised that the topic has been raised at all'; 'they clammed up'; 'there was a reluctance to talk about it'. Often, 'they were irrational and gave ill thought-out responses which were emotional responses'. Teachers were also uncomfortable when they got a 'tribal reaction' that reflected 'strong prejudice' or 'a stereotypical response which had a bit of venom to it'.

I identified a range of internal and external factors to explain why teachers found teaching certain topics needed more delicate handling than others. The factors external to the classroom included contemporary political problems, the school and community ethos, geographical location, the media, social pressure and curriculum defects. Classroom influences were located in inter-personal relationships which were often determined by the disposition, background, age and ability of the students and teacher.

Although topics relating to national identity and contemporary history were seen as being contentious in both regions, in Mid-Ulster teaching Irish history was almost the only problematical issue identified. Oxford teachers were more diverse in their opinions. Sensitive topics were reported to be not only those that touched on Britishness and the Empire but also Germany in the context of the wars and the Holocaust. Since the interviews were conducted at the height of the IRA campaign, teaching Irish history could also be difficult in England.

It must be emphasised that most mid-Ulster teachers did not find teaching Irish history a problem most of the time. The majority interviewed insisted that they had no difficulty

teaching any period of it. A female teacher in a maintained (Catholic) selective school said that 'Controversy doesn't arise in the classroom, unless it does and I'm calling it something else. I'm not even aware of kids arguing after class is over'. A male teacher in a controlled (Protestant) school admitted that 'I would have been more uncomfortable with issues of sex rather than political controversies'.

Many teachers reported that their students had no inhibitions about learning Irish history but the reasons they gave for this varied. One Catholic male, teaching in a boys' non-selective school, believed that the problem for some of his pupils was that: 'They don't realise that an issue is sensitive! They are brought up in a Republican Catholic background and they don't realise that these subjects could be sensitive for someone else'. On the other hand, a selective school teacher commented on the homogeneous background of her class that led to common assumptions: 'They are all coming from a nationalist background. I would never have a child stand up and say something outrageously Republican'.

An interesting suggestion made by another selective school teacher was that students were more likely to be involved in confrontation during Social Studies, English or Religious Studies. Certainly controversy is not the preserve of the historian. A number of teachers decided that the more sensitive issues were contraception, abortion and euthanasia, topics more likely to be discussed in subjects other than history.

It must be remembered that not only were Northern Irish schools largely mono-cultural in the sense that the population was overwhelmingly white and, in 1996, very few classrooms were 'mixed', that is comprising Protestant and Catholic pupils; the vast majority of schools had pupils of similar religious persuasions. Nevertheless, within controlled schools there was considerable diversity of a different kind: Church of Ireland, Methodist, Presbyterian, Free Presbyterian, Baptist and avowed atheists, for example, co-existed. Much has been written about the segregated schools system and the establishment of integrated education (Arlow, 2004; Dunn, 1986; Gallagher, 2005).

Few teachers thought that if they had mixed classrooms it might be easier. Indeed most teachers in controlled schools said that it would make the problem worse because even on an elementary level finding the right language to describe things is tricky. A teacher I interviewed in 1996 from a controlled (Protestant) school feared ‘putting my foot in it, e.g. is it the Republic or the Free State?’ Even with all Catholics in the class, one maintained non-selective teacher said that she agonised about calling Eire a republic (which it is) or a ‘free state’ which IRA sympathisers claim it still is. Is it Derry or Londonderry: to refer to the city as ‘Londonderry’ emphasised the British connection and was offensive to nationalists who preferred ‘Derry’. A female teacher from a controlled comprehensive stated: ‘we don’t have the black and white problem here but we have the religious problem: the Protestant versus the Catholic’.

Issues in history become sensitive when they are perceived to threaten any aspect of personal and national identity. I tried to gauge the students’ emotional response to the lesson taught. I noted research undertaken by Barton and McCully which highlighted the ways in which young people’s interests influence the history lesson:

The children sometimes bring up historical problems related to current concerns – racism usually. It is unlikely that students will develop more sophisticated approaches to historical thinking if they have never come to care about the content of history. The teacher’s conception of history can affect the form and structure of history instruction (Barton and McCully, 2002, p. 19).

Levstik has reservations about the ‘degree to which the less savoury aspects of life are omitted from a particular classroom. She believes that ‘Children can handle a more balanced approach’ (Levstik and Barton, 2008, p. 59) and concludes that it is important to make the history taught personal and to make the connection to their lives.

(viii) The Problems of Teaching History in Mid-Ulster and Oxford

Partly as a result of the work of the Humanities Project Team in the 1960s there was a greater willingness in history education to promote the teaching of contentious topics. The 1967 Humanities Curriculum Project’s aim was to ‘develop an understanding of

social situations and human acts and the controversial values which they raise'. Issues such as poverty, race relations, law and order and wars were to be studied. While these changes were formalised in the recommendations made in the Humanities Curriculum Project, they were the product of more complex social and political factors. Experience and previous research show that the extent to which a topic is contentious can depend on the teaching situation rather than the subject matter. Ireland's problems may not have impinged on the lives of English children until they were made aware of them as a result of an IRA bombing campaign (Gallagher, 1996).

Throughout this work I argue, as indicated earlier, that controversial issues and sensitive issues are not necessarily identical: a topic may be the subject of controversy without being problematical for the teacher or the pupil. Bismarck's role in unifying Germany or the decline of the Liberal Party in Britain is hotly debated historical issues but usually do not require sensitive handling. On the other hand, apparently innocuous topics such as family history or even local history can easily prove to be a sensitive area for some pupils. The Holocaust may elicit sympathy from Gentile children in Northern Ireland and most English schools, but it can hardly rate as a sensitive issue in the same way as it does when taught in a Jewish school. Issues such as the French Revolution or the English Civil War are the subjects of lively debate among historians, but when introduced into the classroom are unlikely to cause offence or upset children, their parents or outside opinion.

I intend to illustrate in this thesis the close relationship between what the teachers considered to be the purpose of history teaching and the extent to which they found a topic sensitive. Both of these considerations also largely determine the teaching strategy used and the students' responses.

It has been said that the Irish suffer not, as is often maintained, from too much history, but from too little; that is to say, they have 'Too little awareness of the real context in which their country and its sectarian myths have developed' (Harkness, 1979). Moreover, the fact that a more fair-minded view of history has been constructed (as Irish scholars

have done) does not necessarily mean that it will prevail over popular distortions. The mental reflexes of a lifetime are hard to overcome especially when they are grounded in strong self-interest, at least for the short term. Attention will later be drawn to the ways in which in certain teaching situations some topics are so highly charged with emotion that they take sensitive handling by the teacher.

I acknowledge that there are degrees of sensitivity because situations and issues are constantly changing. Two areas which are obviously sensitive are: the background and development of the 'Troubles' in twentieth-century Ireland when they are taught in Northern Ireland; and in England the teaching of the slave trade or the process of acquiring and ruling the British Empire. These topics may bear strongly on the lives of pupils and teachers.

A currently popular criterion for any selection of a topic in a humanities course is the topicality of the theme. Current educational wisdom promotes the selection of topics with which a particular group of students can identify and ones that are likely to promote social stability. The GCSE syllabus is an interesting barometer of what is considered to be the latest trend in educational circles. The Arab-Israeli crisis, South Africa and Northern Ireland replaced China and Indonesia in the 1980s. By 2007, Irish topics in England were being replaced by the slave trade and the crusades in the proposed GCE A Level syllabus (OCR, 2008).

Part Two

I now explore the concept of sensitivity philosophically, psychologically and sociologically. The complex range of ideas and circumstances that moulded change and those which militated against it will be placed within a historical context, one that recognises the importance of the political, economic and cultural environment. My conceptual framework and methodology then will be re-examined before recounting the reactions of teachers and students in Northern Ireland and Oxford in 1991, 1996 and 2001 to the teaching of sensitive issues in history. Finally, comparisons will be made between

the perceptions and experience of teachers and students in both regions throughout the key decade researched.

(i) The Relevance of Personal and Collective 'Identity' in Determining Sensitivity in History Teaching

Rowling (2003) suggests that a central factor in determining sensitivity in any issue is the involvement of the individual, that is, her inner thoughts, emotional reactions, beliefs and behaviour. She concludes that:

Sensitive issues have the capacity to arouse intense and deeply felt personal reactions. These emotional reactions are a result of the interaction of the issue, a person's beliefs and experiences, the context and the meaning of the issues to the individual (Rowling, 2003, p. 34).

The teacher must also acknowledge her own prejudices. Indeed, the extent to which history teachers are far from being neutral, passive conveyers of knowledge has been pursued by a wide range of thinkers. It has been persuasively argued that professional knowledge, what Phillips (2008) refers to as the chemistry of history lessons, is information held implicitly by the teacher. This largely explains why some of the most talented history teachers occasionally find it difficult to articulate the secret of effective teaching to student teachers (Brown and McIntyre, 1993; Cooper and McIntyre, 1996; John, 1991). The point is made by John that teaching is:

A multi-faceted, complex task. History teachers are not passive deliverers of knowledge, or simply adept as classroom managers, they are highly skilled professionals with a complex knowledge base, which they draw upon to produce learning in their classes (John, 1991, p. 7).

Too often teachers are accused of ignoring the insights and talents which pupils could bring to the classroom because they do not take time to pursue the range of experiences pupils acquire outside the classroom. This point was forcefully emphasised by Professor Harold Rosen when he remembered feeling slighted and uncomfortable when his class teachers failed to take account of his Jewishness and more particularly of the opportunity lost to him and his classmates in a deprived working-class area of the teacher not realising the richness of the culture afforded to him outside school by his having access to

Shakespeare in a Jewish theatre (Lovesy, 1997). Harold's son Michael, the broadcaster and children's writer, hopes to set up children's literature trails, publicising the streets, villages and towns in Britain that have connections with children's books and authors (*TES*, 15 June, 2007). The Rosens firmly believed in bringing community culture into the classroom regardless of the potential for tension though, on a practical level, teachers cannot be expected to have the time or the skills to delve fully into the background of possibly 30 pupils; bringing their diverse experience to the classroom needs time, tact, patience and skill.

Whilst the Rosens are surely correct in acknowledging the pupils' cultural diversity, it is also essential that the teacher is aware of the problems created when a range of preconceived ideas is brought into the classroom. It must also be noted that the 'facts' learned in the classroom will be interpreted in the light of these biases: history teachers who aim for objectivity must be aware of the extent to which the reasoned line may be distorted.

These problem areas addressed by teachers dealing with sensitive issues in history are critically addressed by the concept of 'identity'. They include the question of personal identity as much as the various representations of collective identity. Personal identity embraces the self; it characterises the consciousness a human being has of her/himself and of his/her continuity over time. This is the sense in which it has been used by Erickson, (1950) in terms of a subjective sense of continuous existence and a coherent memory. Benedict Anderson considers the common identity of a 'we' which has increasingly been conceptualised as what he terms 'true imagined communities', social and cultural constructions. Representations of collective identity in various forms are thus seen to be relevant. Of course gender, status and age are also considered to be significant.

George Kelly (Kelly, 1955, p. 67) expounds in his two-volume work a personal constructs theory which, as I have already indicated provides valuable insight into how we each construct our own personal ways of seeing the world (our personal construct

system) and which is held to define the understanding by which we live. Although we are all influenced by the society and the times in which we live, the meaning systems that we construct as a result of our interpretation of experience are individual. Within these systems, change is always possible, but difficult because change in one part of the system challenges all other beliefs. Kelly's fundamental postulate for personal construct psychology is that a person's processes are psychologically channeled by the way in which he anticipates events. He sees all people as personal scientists engaged in anticipating the world. He states that a person anticipates events by construing their replications. This emphasis on the role in behaviour of a view to the future is what distinguishes Kelly's approach to psychology. Anticipatory processes are, according to Kelly, the source of all psychological phenomena:

A person's processes, psychologically speaking, slip into the grooves which are cut out by the mechanisms he adopts for realizing his objectives (Kelly, 1955, p. 54).

These grooves provide templates for construing events which he terms personal constructs: 'Man looks at his world through transparent templates which he creates and then attempts to fit over the realities of which the world is composed'. Kelly goes on to say that constructs are used for 'predictions of things to come, and the world keeps on rolling on and revealing these predictions to be either correct or misleading' (Kelly, 1955, p. 58).

Followers of Kelly have creatively used his ideas to interpret people's views in a variety of contexts. Barton and McCully (2002) adopt his techniques to explain students' ideas about history in Northern Ireland by providing them with a range of items for comparison. They wanted their categories of analysis to emerge as much as possible from the young people's own ideas. Their findings indicated that during the first three years of secondary school (ages 11-14) students in Northern Ireland identified with a range of historical people, events, and patterns, and that these are not exclusively related to their own political or religious communities.

(ii) The Relevance of National 'Identity' in Determining Sensitivity in History Teaching

How do teachers respond to the challenge of presenting national history in the classroom? How do they rate the impact of their lessons on young people? After all, it is the case that history more than any other subject has always been considered to be a major instrument for nation-defining. As Rusen reminds us, 'historical memory and historical consciousness have an important cultural function: they form identity' (Rusen, 2002, p. 7). Such questions are therefore best considered within the context of a consideration of notions of national identity and an examination of the conflict between underlying principles of school history and popular versions of the past. These controversies are also highlighted in debates over the school curriculum.

The intellectual and cultural underpinnings of national identity are difficult to fathom not least because they involve issues of ethnicity and cultural affinity as well as religion, all of which are fuzzy concepts. National identity is defined as being the 'cultural outcome of a discourse of the nation' (Delanty and O'Mahony, 1998, p. 2). A major concern of any historical/ educational assessment of identity is the formation of the individual's attitudes towards politics. This development is considered to take place in a context of permanent identity conflicts (Aldrich and Dean, 1991; Appleby, Hunt and Jacob, 1995; Dean, 1991; Scherrer, 2001; Straub, 2002). It operates in the classroom situation where the young person is presented with accounts of his/her nation's history that may contain many discrepancies from the version of the same events learnt from other sources, for example, in the home, from friends, or from the political mural at the street corner. Straub was careful to note that 'Only individuals can construct identity, groups cannot. Societies (or 'nations'), as well, have no proper identity' (Straub, 2002, p. 78).

The most valuable way to interpret identity and prejudice is to take a multi-layered approach which considers the individual, cognitive, group, and societal/cultural levels for analysis. I am not attempting to explain precisely the process through which individuals come to adhere to values, to build personal attitudes, and eventually to chose among diverse political identifications as explained in the classical psychological approaches

(Allport, 1954; Erickson, 1950). Rather, I am more concerned with what these perceptions are, and the ways in which history classes in school are seen by both teacher and student to have an impact on national identity.

At the macro level, historians and critics have tried to unravel questions of national identity which draw attention to the idea of having roots in a particular place, in acknowledging a common heritage or having a cultural affinity with a defined community. Recent works have tackled interpretations of Englishness, Britishness and Irishness by integrating the history of events with the history of ideas about those events (Alibhai-Brown, 2000; Brockliss and Eastwood, 1997; Colls, 2002; Davies, 1999; Kearney, 1995; Walker, 1996; Walker, 2000).

Our attention is drawn by these writers to the ways in which national identity must correspond to and make sense of the real world. Furthermore, it has been argued that our personal sense of identity with its elusive chameleon shifts is not the most useful way of approaching questions of political identity. An interpretation that has informed recent scholarship has been that which regards nations as imaginative constructs which develop out of social and political experience; they are 'the products of imaginative ordering of that experience, not its revealed reality' (Cubitt, 1998, p. 14).

Colley (1992) develops this idea when she asks whether, after so many changes, it is any longer possible successfully to redesign and refloat a concept of Britishness for the 21st century. She suggests instead that we should leave intransigent issues of Britishness to look after themselves, and focus instead on an area where we can all make a substantial difference. Consequently, identities have been seen as constructions based on common practices and form part of a shared understanding of the world; so, not surprisingly, the school curriculum has been a focal point in a struggle to find a national identity that is morally as well as educationally acceptable (Colley, 1992).

Tate and Patten (*TES*, 18 September, 1995) have promoted the extensive teaching of British history to provide the necessary palliative to social fragmentation by transforming

the way young people see themselves as part of the wider community. Nevertheless, debates about the impact of school history on the formation of national identity in Britain have tended to denigrate or ignore the role of history lessons (Carrington and Short, 1995).

Recent research emphasises that teachers who recognise how young people's national and racial identity shape their interpretations of history and society will be better equipped 'to fashion pedagogical interventions which respect the diversity of young people's interpretations and promote classroom discussions which enable young people to learn from their differences' (Epstein and Shiller, 2005, p. 202).

For the last decade, a range of research on adolescents' historical thinking touched upon, or directly dealt with, the nature of students' ideas about different historical representations: student's prior conceptions of history, the progression in their ideas about historical accounts (Lee and Ashby, 2000; Lee and Shemilt, 2004), students' ideas on objectivity in history (Barca, 2005) and on significance in history (Cercadillo, 2001).

Writers in Britain have emphasised that the National Curriculum was not merely a debate over teaching methods but nothing less than a public and vibrant debate over the national soul (Halpin and Walsh, 2005). This explained the direct interventions in the 'great history debate' by successive Secretaries of State, by Prime Ministers and by New Right pressure groups (Crawford, 1995). Thus, Anderson, following his own notion of the nation as an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1991, p. 1), claimed that the National Curriculum was an inevitable source of conflict as 'different groups with different national imaginings' sought to define it (Anderson, 1991, p. 34).

Tosh reminds us that 'recognising that the past is another country does not empty it of practical relevance' (Tosh, 2008, p. 34). The extent to which the history book is mightier than the sword remains to be seen but in the mid 1990s the fragile ceasefires in Northern Ireland accelerated the process of revisionism in history writing in the province. Long-held conceptions of the past were challenged in academic journals and conferences. At a

conference held in New York University in December 1995, Kevin Whelan stated that 'Irish historiography, as with Irish history itself, finds itself at an important cross-road'. He urged fellow Irish historians to elevate historical debate out of politics, stressing that:

History in Ireland, more so than most places, is political, and only separating from the political realm could the new space be filled with a peaceful, more inclusive vision of Ireland (Whelan and Bradshaw, 1995, p. 7).

A major reason why Irish history continued to be sensitive was explained by Bradshaw at the same conference. He categorised certain colleagues as 'good' revisionists and 'bad ones', largely on their approach to moral problems raised by past actions. In his opinion, those who did not sufficiently acknowledge the pain and suffering caused by, for example, the Cromwellian massacres and dislocation and the Famine, or those who dismiss the motives behind the Easter Rising, are 'failing to acknowledge the basic humanity of the victims and the right of others to sanctify their story'. For Bradshaw, it was only by examining and acknowledging the 'horrible truth of these events that the past can be dealt with' (Whelan and Bradshaw, 1995, p. 66).

Is the correct way to approach contentious issues in Irish history to sensitise them? Roy Foster and other revisionist historians have been accused of 'deflating critical events in the Irish nationalist pantheon' at the expense of those who genuinely suffered and died. Foster for his part suggested that 'the interrogative nature of contemporary Irish historiography, including his own, is a sign of growing cultural confidence' (Whelan and Bradshaw, 1995, p. 68).

As well as being the theme of numerous conferences over the past twenty-five years, in which papers and workshop reports were subsequently published (thereby providing a broad and informed approach), the revisionist controversy has also inspired further research into the effects of different teaching strategies. An important spin-off from teachers and academics having had the opportunity to come together was a consciousness-raising process which increased interest in the problems of presenting

contentious topics in Irish history while sustaining objectivity and providing appropriate texts for use in the classroom.

The ongoing debate indicates that Irish academics from the outbreak of the 'Troubles' in 1969 to the present day are susceptible to accusations of partiality or ideological motivation (Bardon, 1992; Buckland, 1981; Connolly, 2007; Farrell, 1976; Foster, 2009; Lyons, 1979; O'Day, 1993; Stewart, 1989). There are many historians who despite their scholarly contribution to Irish history have at some stage been stigmatised and accused of partisanship. With this being the case among leading Irish scholars, it is hardly surprising that the teaching of Irish history at secondary school level remains hotly debated.

(iii) The Role of Multi-Culturalism

Education for multi-culturalism was a major trend in liberal education in Great Britain in the 1990. The media debate to which it gave rise highlights the fuzziness surrounding the term. Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997) indicate the vague usage and ultimate meaninglessness of the term. Feinberg (1996) also notes that the terms pluralism and multi-culturalism are erroneously sometimes used interchangeably. Despite being from the same origin they lead in different directions and point to different social norms. Feinberg offers equality of opportunity, freedom of association and choice to the individual but, this he contends, does little to ensure that such procedures will be enforced. Conversely, multi-culturalism values cultural differences as authentic.

Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997) identify five types of multi-culturalist education:

1. Monocultural and assimilative.
2. Natural equality and humanity. It is assimilative by default in that it does not challenge power inequalities.
3. The views of difference as enriching, fostering cultural identity and pride; this does not address structural inequalities.

4. Left-essentialist multi-culturalism. This regards the rights and history of minority groups as sacrosanct and asserts that these can only be properly articulated by the group itself.
5. Critical multi-culturalism, which has a close affinity with critical pedagogy. It argues that since power shapes consciousness, the interests of minority groups can only be furthered by challenging class and cultural inequalities through an emancipatory commitment to social justice and egalitarian democracy.

Although Kincheloe's work is criticized for its use of a variety of methods and theories that appear to make issues more complicated than is necessary (Smagorinsky, 2007), his ideas on critical multi-culturalism offer valuable insights into how to frame teachers' concerns when dealing with contentious issues and to the possible connections between teachers' ideologies and the strategies they use in the classroom.

(iv) The Values Represented in History Teaching

In the conceptually complex area of values and their influence on history education there is no consensus over what is worth pursuing. Philosophers acknowledge that the word moral has 'a very vague spectrum of uses which shade into one another and are hard to distinguish' (Hare, 1992, p. 55). Despite this, he and other moral philosophers such as Kohlberg (1981) and Wilson (2000) elevate current ethical issues. Pring, in particular, presents education 'as a moral practice' and places contentious ethical issues at the 'heart of education'; he believes that it is the role of the teacher 'to make connections between the different worlds of drama, literature, art, science and religion' (Pring, 2000, p. 45). He could have included history on this list but it is left to the historian to make a more subject-specific case.

What makes history and other school subjects contentious has led to disagreement among educationalists concerned with curriculum issues. Peters emphasises the intrinsic value of education by making it clear that his concern is with a concept of education which

implies 'the development of states in a person that involve knowledge and understanding in depth and breadth' (Hirst and Peters, 1970, p. 25). But in the context of religious and ethnic divisions this interpretation is inadequate in that it does not take into account the extent to which the emotional difficulties faced by teachers are daunting. Such problems will not be solved by subject knowledge alone; personal and professional development is essential in providing coping mechanisms to deal with moral dilemmas.

Greater insight into this aspect of education is shown by Stradling who writes that what makes one topic acceptable and another contentious in an educational setting is the fact that 'society at large (or the local community, or the school itself) is clearly divided' and on these divisions 'different groups offer conflicting solutions based on different values' (Stradling, 1984, p. 108).

(v) The Position of School History

Depending on who one talks to or what book or journal is consulted, history in the school is possibly thriving, threatened, ailing, in steady decline, or in danger of being subsumed by another more useful, novel or entertaining subject (Phillips and Furlong, 2001). There was short-lived optimism about the permanent and probably dominant role of history in 1990, when it achieved the status of a Foundation Subject compulsory to the end of KS4 at age 16 (Crook and Aldrich, 2000). In 1993, however, history was demoted to the position of being optional like geography and was further demoted in 1994 when, following the Dearing Review of the National Curriculum, neither history nor geography was to be a compulsory subject at KS4 (Cooper, 2000).

In the early 1990s in the UK the numbers taking history for GCSE declined, whilst those taking geography rose. In 1994, as a percentage of the Year 11 roll (15-16 year olds), slightly more girls were entered for GCSE history than GCSE geography, but significantly more boys took geography than history. In total, 41% of pupils in Year 11 were entered for geography, whereas 35% were entered in history. This gave rise to

sufficient concern for SCAA to be prepared to consider funding research into the reasons why history was losing pupils to geography (Bourdillon, 1994).

More recently standards at GCSE and at GCE A Level are thought to have improved. This is reflected in the increase in the percentage of Grades A to C in history from 60.2% in 1992 to 86.2% in 2005 (McCall, 2007). And, despite not being offered in some schools, history remains popular nationally. In 1997, 227,000 pupils took GCSE history and by 2006 the figure had risen slightly to 232,000. The number of schools where no pupils at all took history GCSE dropped from 94 in 1997 to 68 in 2006 (*TES*, 27 April, 2008).

In the nation as a whole there appears to be something of heritage nostalgia with sumptuous period films together with National Trust Membership and visits to historic stately homes became popular. To all this could be added campaigns for the protection of the countryside, evening classes in local history and the popularity of media historians like Starkey and Ferguson. This evidence appears to suggest that, while history is jockeying for position in schools, it has long flourished with the adult population, something that was noted in 1972 by Steele who wrote that:

As a leisure pursuit history is a growth industry, enjoyed not for the philosophically weak reason that it helps to explain the present, but because it exists in its own right, establishing exhilarating contrasts with the present, nourishing both intellect and imagination (Steele, 1976, p. 139).

(vi) Teaching Strategies

Another recurring lament in history education is the fear that in schools the subject is in danger of imminent death through the intolerable dose of boredom it inflicts on a captive but uncaptivated audience of schoolchildren (Price, 1969). Baldwin commented:

Too long have books designed for the instruction of children been written in a dry and repulsive style, which the pace and perseverance of our maturer years would scarcely enable us to conquer. Too long have their tender memories been loaded with a variety of minute particulars which as they excite no passion in the mind, and present no picture, can be learned only to forget (Baldwin, 1973, p. 56).

Evidence of poor teaching is found in numerous Inspectors' Reports and in comments made by distinguished academics from Freeman, writing in 1879, to Fines complaining nearly a century later that:

Above all the same nonsensical methods decried years ago continue in the schools: notes are dictated, passages are learned off by heart, vast periods are scampered over so quickly that no real understanding can possibly be achieved, and the fetish of chronological sequence holds sway in spite of everything that has been said against it (Fines et al., 1994, p. 8).

An enquiry of 1966 found that children put history at the bottom of their list of useful and interesting subjects and second from the top of useless and boring subjects (Price, 1986). In 1968 the findings of the Schools Council Enquiry, which investigated the attitude of school-leavers towards a range of subject revealed, for instance, that the pupils surveyed regarded history as one of the most useless and boring of subjects. Typical comments on the way in which the subject was taught were: 'They went on and on, the same thing over and over again'; and 'It's the way we are getting it, not discussions, just questions. We have to look up the answers'. Similarly, Blishen quoted Judith (age fourteen) to the effect that:

I awake to a sickening thud each Monday morning - double history, eighty minutes of toneless drone of the master's voice and the pendulum swing of his leg over the desk' (Blishen, 1969, p. 4).

It is the presentation as well as the content of a subject that impacts on pupils. By its very nature, the pupil-teacher relationship is one in which tensions can develop and misunderstandings abound. It is an unequal relationship: the teacher is placed in a position of authority and is expected to be an authority on her subject. Added to this there could be differences of gender, race, and age, social and economic background. These factors militate against barriers being totally broken down even when rapport and mutual trust appear to be evident.

It is proposed here that unless the teacher tackles contentious topics in a manner which is informed factually and fully alive to possible emotional implications, the history lesson

will be less rewarding: indeed it could be argued that history as a discipline will be seriously undermined.

Returning to our survey we find that the chronological teaching of history and almost exclusively British history was accepted by most teachers until the advent of 'New History' in the 1970s with the Schools Council History 13-16 Project which fundamentally challenged not only what was taught in school but also introduced innovative styles of history teaching. Emphasis was placed on involving children in how history worked, primary sources were introduced, concepts such as empathy presented and an inquiry - based approach encouraged. A crucial element in this new method of teaching was the idea that effective learning could only take place when the students' existing knowledge and conceptions of the past were taken into account.

New History offered a rationale for the inclusion of the subject on the school timetable. We have seen how the relevance of school history was identified by Shemilt in his evaluation of the 13 -16 Project (Shemilt, 1980) but we should also note that an approach to history that appeared to undermine a sense of chronology (Williams, 1994) and encouraged an over-emphasis on empathy and moral relativism was much criticised at the time (Beattie, 1987).

History teachers were to be concerned with weighing up evidence in an effort to understand who, what, when and how events such as the crusades occurred. In this way they are dealing with controversial questions but it is when they focus on the why and should and ought questions that more issues become more highly charged emotionally. The New History approach encouraged issues to be more upfront, forcing teachers to re-appraise their role and their teaching strategy especially as regards making their own political and ethical views explicit.

The New History was also a precursor of many international advances in multicultural education and dealing with contentious issues in history in the classroom. A well-

established method of dealing with sensitive issues was to take the position of the neutral chair.

Changes in history syllabuses since the introduction of the National Curriculum have made it possible to teach in ways that promote personal self-fulfilment for all students because Study Units contain more information about non-European people. It has been suggested that this might be 'counter-productive' as regards promoting feelings of 'positive engagement in some students of colour' because of what is termed 'the victim focus'. Traille surmises that, although personally relevant content might play a large part in gaining attention, it cannot in itself be the whole answer to achieving more student engagement (Traille, 2006).

Summary

This chapter has distinguished between controversial and sensitive to emphasise the emotional aspect of the concept of sensitivity. The myriad ways in which school history is sensitive are indicated and causal links made between conceptual, affective and behavioural factors. Each era writes history to accommodate its needs. A currently popular criterion for any selection of a topic in a humanities course is the topicality of the theme. Most historians as well as history educators currently believe that it is essential to engage young people in historical activity to prepare them for a participatory, pluralist democracy. I argue that in history no topic is intrinsically sensitive but may become so as a result of the teacher's and/or student's reaction to it. My thesis therefore asserts that sensitivity in history is a complex, dynamic phenomenon; it regards sensitivity as being completely the product of social construction located in time, space and culture.

We have seen how the history teachers' sense of morality and belief in the aims and purposes of history have been shaped by debates among historians and educationalists as well as by their own temperament and experience. We are reminded that the assumptions underpinning challenges are founded on an instrumentalist approach to curriculum planning. This increasing emphasis on usefulness and relevance has changed the direction of history teaching. New strategies in dealing with prejudice reduction and multi-cultural education have been considered. Practitioners can be left feeling more vulnerable to factors outside their control; but, despite these tensions, within the practice of school history it is comforting to be reminded that in 2008:

History teachers continue to pursue the goals of defining and debating the nature of true quality in historical learning, of looking at and listening to pupils, of learning to support pupils in new ways in order to strengthen both the rigour and the enjoyment of their practice of history (Phillips, 2008, p. 251).

Chapter Three

The Context of the Research: 1991 – 2001

Deeply embedded within my conceptual framework is the conviction that factors external to the classroom determine what becomes sensitive during the history lesson.

My comparative and longitudinal research methodology also demands an appreciation of what according to Kandel, is 'the intangible, impalpable, spiritual and cultural forces which underlie an educational system; the forces and factors outside the school matter more than what goes on inside it' (Kandel, 1933, p. 73).

(i) International Concerns

My data were first collected in 1991 a year that saw the collapse of the Soviet Union. Historic ethnic rivalries once held in check by communist troops resurfaced in Eurasia, events that had a profound impact on the nature of political sensitivity. Not only was the map of Europe redrawn, so too were the age-old rivalries, hostilities and nuances of the Cold War re-cast. Demarcation lines between right and left became less rigid and new political relationships and even friendships started to be forged openly, not only between East Europe and West Europe, but also between the USA and the new Russia.

These political shifts filtered down to the classroom in myriad ways and effected change in the school curriculum. As a result of religious and ethnic conflict in Yugoslavia grabbing headlines, the new Balkan crisis, which focused on the conflict between Muslim and Christian, now seemed a likely contender for inclusion in the school history curriculum, especially as a possible GCSE option, alongside South Africa (following the release of Nelson Mandela from detention) and the ever-present Northern Ireland and the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Guerrilla warfare and terrorist activity from Sri Lanka to Atlanta to Afghanistan to Moscow formed the backdrop of my data collection in 1996. Divisions over Europe persisted with associated conflicts over conceptions of national identity featuring in the UK in general and Northern Ireland in particular where the SDLP argued for greater European integration to heal community divisions and the DUP feared 'Popish influences' in the European Parliament.

The attack on the Twin Towers in New York in 2001 and the resultant war in Afghanistan coincided with my final data collection. Militant Islam and inter-community relations with Muslims now came centre-stage as the 'war against terror' was begun. All this upheaval may well have had one benign effect on Northern Ireland: it made a renewed terrorist campaign by the Provisional IRA, as opposed to other dissident Republicans, much less likely.

(ii) National Concerns in England and Wales: 1991 – 2001

At a national level, the 'feel bad' factor in the United Kingdom was in full swing in 1991 when I collected most of my data. By then violence in Northern Ireland had been in motion for over twenty years but was now overshadowed by the Gulf War.

Whilst Europe was increasingly a key issue that divided the governing Conservative Party further concerns were expressed over increased immigration, itself a consequence of increased globalisation. Of course white British people had responded in different ways to the presence of new waves of immigrants since the 1950s. It has been argued that the responses of British society were 'complex and exhibited considerable evidence of ambiguity and variability. A clear, constant dividing line between admiration and tolerance and intolerance, was not always easily drawn (Holmes, 1988, p. 67); '...it is difficult to isolate a continuous and dominant line of anti-immigrant sentiment' (Gilroy, 1992). Furthermore, in terms of drawing well-grounded lessons about the notion of tolerance, Holmes's analysis would seem to suggest that the spectacle of racism was just one of several ideological forces at work, a perspective that is in obvious and sharp

contrast to the argument advanced by those who see 'race' and racism as lying at the heart of the contemporary legacy of immigration (Brivati, Buxton and Seldon, 1996, p. 55; Gilroy, 1992, p. 51). The contemporary issue of 'whose country' which was in place for over three decades was reflected by the debate 'Whose History?' in the National Curriculum Working Group Report (DES, 1990, p. 1).

Prime Minister John Major's declared nostalgia for an England that no longer existed was widely derided. Cricket, the village green and warm beer was fast being replaced by the impact of globalisation and multiculturalism. Nonetheless more assertive nationalist views were still around; few would forget the remarks of Conservative MP Norman Tebbit who in 1990 had set his infamous 'cricket test' in which he questioned the nationality status of black and Asian Britons who cheered for teams other than the English one. Others who were pessimistic about the impact of globalization took up this caution against the dissolution of the old structures and boundaries of national states and communities and the increasing trans-nationalisation of economic and cultural life. Within this context 'globalization' referred to anything from the internet to a hamburger. It was imagined in terms of the 'creation of a global space and community in which we shall all be global citizens and neighbours' (Robins, 1997). Frequently it was seen as being 'a polite euphemism for the continuing Americanisation of consumer tastes and cultural practices' (Strange, 1996).

What became increasingly apparent were the British consumers' reactions to 'Americanization', which ranged from local variations to the more specific (CAIN; Morley and Robins, 2001; Morley, 2001). Hebdige and Chambers demonstrated that, whilst for some Americanism was seen as a threatening trend, for many British people, especially youthful consumers, America served to represent the possibility of 'escaping the traditions and institutions of British life'. Indeed it signaled 'a more extensive and imaginative sense of the possible' (Chambers, 1990). Gillespie's study of the relations between consumption and ethnicity for young Punjabi Londoners in Southall provided an example of this (Gillespie, 1995; Murray, 1996). Asking about attitudes to TV adverts, Gillespie was struck by the use of America as a symbolic space that allowed these

consumers to achieve one of their primary consumption aims: 'being cool'. For them, American products escaped both Britishness, with its connotations of cultural exclusion, and Indianness, with its parental associations. However, the ground was shifting as regards the supposedly "uncool" positioning of British youth cultures. Indeed, Newsweek declared London the world's coolest city in October, 1996.

Another characteristic of Britain in the mid 1990s was the large and growing group of long-term unemployed. They were identified by the New Right as a separate 'underclass' with a distinct culture - a 'dependency culture' - of its own. Moreover, members of this underclass, it was argued, were responsible for their own plight (Murray, 1996):

They didn't lack just money. They were defined by their behaviour...their children grew up ill-schooled and ill-behaved and contributed a disproportionate share of the local juvenile crime rate (Murray, 1996; Roberts, 1999).

But, also by 1996, the powerful force of globalisation and the legacy of empire were ingredients for the relative tolerance of the British population. This was apparent in the visibility of mixed race couples and mixed peer groups and the influence of Asian and black cultures on British youth culture.

Nevertheless, this was the unofficial rather than the official situation. Much was made by the media of 'institutional racism', a term popularised by the press following the police force being discredited by its failure to achieve justice in the Stephen Lawrence race killing of 1991. The 1991 census revealed that out of a population of 54.87 million, 51.80 million were white: just 5.5% of the total population was black and Asian. This was a rise from 2.3% in 1971 and 3.9% in 1981 (Roberts, 1999).

The free market became king. Paradoxically as globalization developed it promoted a more intense awareness of national identity. Becoming aware of other cultures can sharpen the consciousness of your domestic culture (Abercrombie and Warde, 2005). During the 1990s historians and critics asked more probing questions about the meaning of the Anglo-British state. Robert Colls remarked that one of the difficulties

he faced in writing his book 'Identity of England' had been the rapid decay in old ways of seeing the world:

Our deepest structures of identity -- to do with the idea of coming from a particular place and being a particular kind of person with roots and aptitudes and characteristics -- for so long driven deep into the ground of our being, are now decaying from within. It is only a matter of time before they become unserviceable (Colls, 2002, p. 5).

Concern about immigration and race relations increased dramatically in the late 1990s. In 1996, just 3% of Britons had cited race as one of the most serious issues facing the country, but it was 19% in 2001. 33% of respondents said law and order was the most important, 26% cited health and 23% unemployment. In Europe as a whole, 29% cited unemployment and only 18% health (Mori/*The Guardian*, 2001).

Of course deprivation is a huge factor in academic under-achievement. Research showed that minority ethnic pupils, especially Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Black African and Black Caribbean pupils were more likely to experience deprivation than White British pupils. For example, 70% of Pakistani and 60% of Black African pupils lived in the 20% most deprived postcode areas compared to less than 20% of White British pupils (SRN, 2006). Data from the Department of Education's Longitudinal Study of Young People in Education (LYPSE) showed that parents of Pakistani and Bangladeshi pupils were the least likely to be qualified to degree level and the most likely to have no qualifications. Pakistani and Bangladeshi pupils were most likely to live in households where the head of the household had never worked or was in long term unemployment.

Apparent differences in the achievements of different racial groups were a matter of controversy. As one letter-writer to *The Guardian* mused:

If institutional racism is responsible for Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black-Caribbean children doing worse than their white equivalents, then what is responsible for Indian and Chinese children doing so much better? (1 March, 1999).

Set alongside this was the observation that black girls did, on average, far better than black boys in terms of examination success.

Indeed, female achievement in schools was starting to outstrip that of boys on average. One common explanation was that girls had benefited from the new style of teaching which favoured continuous assessment. Girls, it seemed, were naturally more consistent workers, plodding away to accrue credits whereas boys were better at coming up with a flash of brilliance at the end of a lazy year.

Sex also reared its head in other ways. There was a fear expressed that children were being taught to act out homosexual roles in the classroom by using a new educational pack for teenagers that was originally designed to help with this sensitive area of sex education. The repeal of Section 28 banning the 'promotion' of homosexuality in schools was a controversial issue: the government suffered a series of defeats in the House of Lords over this. (*The Week*, 27 July, 2000). The road, however, to greater tolerance of gay relationships was being won - in the British mainland, anyway, as homophobia remained rife in Northern Ireland.

An increased awareness of the need for greater sensitivity in the use of language was evident in reports on politics, the media, literature and social interaction. What became known as political correctness or PC, though frequently a well-intentioned effort to avoid giving offence, especially in racial or religious matters, could reach extreme levels in some cases. National identity, particularly when connected with racist connotations, caused alarm in some newspapers. A letter to the *Western Daily Press* wanted the term 'Black British' to occur on application forms and 'Black Other' to be removed, (*The Western Daily Press*, 12 October, 1998).

Meanwhile, fears were voiced in 'Moral Evasion', published by the right wing Centre for Policy Studies (16 January, 1999), that Britain was turning into a moral wasteland. The culture of rights was said to coexist with a cynicism about the distinctions between right and wrong. On the more liberal side, part of the New Labour project was to emphasis responsibilities as well as rights. In another context, in Northern Ireland, there were also

concerns that the prevailing ethos stressed individual rights rather than the common good and particular identities rather than commonalities.

(iii) National Concerns in Northern Ireland: 1991 – 2001

Since it is a major contention in my thesis that what is sensitive in history teaching is determined by the political climate in which the teaching takes place, it must be noted that the survey distributed in 1991 was conceived under the long shadow of discontent which emanated from the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 which had immediately led to a lengthy campaign where the Unionist slogan ‘Ulster Says No’ was proclaimed on banners and memorabilia throughout the province. By the end of 1989, Ulster (that is, the majority of Northern Ireland Protestants) still said no to any possibility of the loosening of the ties which bound it to mainland Britain. Margaret Thatcher’s government claimed to be closely wedded to the status quo, but the Agreement, in the eyes of Unionists, smacked of Dublin-London complicity, of a sell-out to traditional enemies, of a threat to their British identity which was moulded by historical myths perpetuated beyond the classroom. This involved a selective use of notional history gleaned from indoctrination by bigoted sources and not redressed by formal education. A more balanced view of Irish history was not presented in the classroom because frequently little or no Irish history was taught in school.

Peace in 1990 seemed a pipe dream. Whilst ethnic minorities became even more established in Britain, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Peter Brooke, fuelled the Loyalists’ insecurity by suggesting that the government might talk to Sinn Féin provided the IRA renounced violence. Brooke’s initiative was severely criticised by Unionists who were convinced that his proposal encouraged terrorists in their ‘armalite and ballot box’ tactics. This, in the wake of the release of the Guildford Four, and in a year that resulted in 62 shootings, 566 bombs planted and 433 persons charged with terrorist offences, kept political passions high.

These incidents were reported extensively in the British press and such events, together with a further upsurge in violence in the New Year, were likely to have affected how people generally viewed Ireland. The teachers and girls I surveyed in Oxford in 1991 could not be immune to anti-Irish prejudices, which were current in England at the time largely as a result of the IRA bombing campaign. Like their Ulster counterparts, they had imbibed a number of historical and political myths outside the classroom.

The questionnaire targeting Oxford students was distributed in January 1991 shortly after a number of high profile atrocities had taken place in mainland Britain. On July 20, 1990, an IRA bomb exploded at the London Stock Exchange and although there were no casualties, it caused extensive damage. Ten days later the Conservative MP for Eastbourne, Ian Gow, was killed outside his home by an IRA bomb planted under the front seat of his car. Air Chief Marshal Sir Peter Terry was shot and wounded in an IRA attack at his home in Stafford. In Northern Ireland six soldiers and a civilian were killed when the IRA forced two 'human bombs' to drive to army check points on 24th October.

John Major vowed to continue the search for peace in Northern Ireland begun in 1994. Significant inroads had been made into the process by a declared IRA ceasefire that year. However, before the end of 1996 the fragile armistice was shattered by the Docklands blast after which the IRA declared that it had ended the ceasefire 'with great reluctance' claiming it was driven to it by British bad faith. Shortly afterwards a bus was blown up by IRA in central London accidentally killing the bomber. Nevertheless, avenues to negotiation had to be left open. Former U.S. Senator George Mitchell advised that paramilitary groups in NI should not be obliged to begin disarming before peace negotiations began (Mitchell, 1999). Mitchell's appointment as the honest broker was objected to by Ulster Unionists and some Conservative MPs.

Ways of compromise had to be found especially after the May 1996 elections to all party talks when Sinn Féin, the party linked with the IRA, took 15% of the votes and seventeen out of 110 seats, its best ever result. However the situation looked dire a little later when an IRA bomb blasted Manchester city centre injuring 200. And there was grave concern

in Northern Ireland when, during the summer marching season, Orange Order loyalists confronted the police at Drumcree to assert the right to march. Protestants then took to the streets across the province blockading roads and driving many Catholics from their homes. Faced with threats of worse violence the RUC let the march go ahead. This resulted in rioting by Catholics.

Northern Ireland seemed to be on the brink of a return to sectarian warfare when I collected more data from schools in the province in 1996.

When the Labour Party leader Tony Blair took power in May 1997, a settlement of the Northern Irish conflict, which had been raging for nearly thirty years, was high on his agenda. By mid-June, the demand for decommissioning prior to Sinn Féin's entry into talks was dropped. The IRA declared another ceasefire on 20 July, 1997, and Sinn Féin entered the talks on 9 September.

It was not until April 1998, that the chairman of the talks, George J Mitchell, was able to put pressure on all parties for an agreement that would facilitate a referendum in May. There followed intensive talks between the local parties, and much arm-twisting by the British and Irish governments throughout which negotiations Unionists refused to engage directly with Sinn Féin. Surprisingly a compromise was reached which became known as the Good Friday Agreement (Mitchell, 1999). Three new interlocking institutions were set up. Relations within Northern Ireland were to be addressed by a power-sharing assembly that would operate on an inclusive basis. All of the main parties would be members of a permanent coalition government. Key decisions would be taken on a cross-community basis. Relations between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland were to be dealt with through the creation of a North-South Ministerial Council which would allow co-operation between the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Irish Parliament on certain functional issues.

The Agreement received 94% backing in a referendum in the Republic of Ireland. In another referendum held in Northern Ireland 71% of voters supported the compromise

though whilst most Nationalist and Republican voters backed it, Unionists were evenly split between supporters and opponents of the Agreement.

The remaining problems were summarised in the phrase 'no guns, no government'. Unionists were still unhappy at the prospects of Sinn Féin assuming ministerial office in the absence of IRA decommissioning. IRA statements, while re-affirming the ceasefire and giving support for the peace process, refused even to accept in principle that decommissioning could take place at some time in the future.

This issue blocked further progress so in 1999 the British and Irish governments invited George Mitchell to help break the deadlock. The resulting Mitchell Review scraped through the Ulster Unionist Council and enabled a Northern Ireland Executive to be elected which took office in November. The UUP and SDLP nominated three ministers each, and the DUP and Sinn Féin two each. Martin McGuinness, a suspected former IRA leader, became Minister of Education.

Unionist discontent continued to grow and, early in 2000, Peter Mandelson, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, suspended the devolved institutions. This marked the beginning of a cat and mouse game played by all parties whereby the continued life of the new institution was precarious. It was restored, after another close vote in the UUC, following an IRA statement that contained the breakthrough phrase that it would 'completely and verifiably' put arms beyond use. A semblance of normal government was, however, undermined by wrangling over the political issues of decommissioning, demilitarization and policing. Indeed peace brought greater polarization in the electoral sense: Sinn Féin continued to make inroads into the SDLP vote whilst the hard-line DUP, building on Unionist perceptions that too much had been given away to Republicans, gained on the more moderate UUP. After more wrangling the Executive and Assembly were suspended again in 2002 and direct rule was restored (Gallagher, 2002).

(iv) Educational Initiatives in England and Wales

At the beginning of the last decade of the twentieth century, depending on who one talks to or what book or journal is consulted, history in the secondary school is positively thriving ... threatened ... ailing ... in steady decline ... or in danger of being subsumed by another more useful, novel or entertaining subject. Certainly, there was short-lived optimism about the permanent and probably dominant role of history in 1991, when it achieved the status of a Foundation Subject, compulsory to the end of Key Stage Four at age 16, as a result of the revolutionary innovation in Britain of a national curriculum.

Although history's capacity for the shaping of the collective mind has always been obvious (Guyver, 2006; Husbands, 1996), the National Curriculum, by specifying a multi-cultural approach gave the aspiration heightened emphasis in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in the late 1980s. In England, the debate focused on the extent to which English history was to be prioritised; the pluralist nature of English society was acknowledged in the inclusion of European or World history. The controversy was given a new direction by the need to frame a unified syllabus for English schools.

Greater awareness of the rights of minorities formed part of the rationale behind the Education Act of 1986 that forbade the teaching of partisan views. This did not lead to serious interference with history teachers but it tended to reflect widespread rumours about teacher bias. Complaints against certain schools were said to originate in Conservative Party distrust of anti-racist campaigns by local councils (Kiberd and Hennessey, 1988). But it was not until the 1988 Education Reform Act that history came into the limelight and occasioned more debate in the media than any other subject in the National Curriculum. Here fears of conflict between the various ethnic minorities and between them and the white majority played a major role in delineating the role the curriculum carved out for itself in an effort to accommodate itself to the New Britain.

The Education Act had facilitated the setting up of a History Working Group which, in April 1990, reported on the purpose and content of school history. At the time a more

positive interpretation of the National Curriculum for History was that it tried to be all things to all people by cramming into the programmes of study as many historical strands as possible. The political, social, economic, cultural, local, national and international facets of history were all given a place. Laudable though this may have been, it appeared to take no account of the restricted time allocated to history in schools and the limited resources available.

The official aim of the National History Curriculum was to ensure that young people learned about the history of their country (DES, 1990; Guyver, 2006; Husbands, 1996). The Working Group agreed that:

An understanding of British history should be the foundation of pupils' historical learning, since it is the main framework of their immediate experience, in political, economic, social and cultural terms (Little, 1990, p. 322).

Writers have emphasised that the National Curriculum was not merely a debate over teaching methods but nothing less than a public and vibrant debate over the national soul (Anderson, 1991; Little, 1990; Phillips, 1998; Samuel, 1989). This explained the direct interventions in the 'great history debate' by successive secretaries of state, by Prime Ministers and by New Right pressure groups (Crawford, 1995). Thus, following the notion of the nation as an 'imagined community', McKieman (1993, p. 34) claimed that 'the National Curriculum was an inevitable source of conflict as "different groups with different national imaginings" sought to define it'.

Phillips skilfully documented the interference of politicians in the History Working Group. He considered this period to be the one in which the government made the most blatant attempts to control and influence the subject (Phillips, 1998). Mrs Thatcher, who tried to influence the group in a more nationalistic direction, wrote in her autobiography that she was appalled when the History Group delivered its report (Thatcher, 1995). In England, the New Right made claims since the 1980s that there had been a flight from British history. The courses which offered predominantly world history encouraged some journalists to claim that GCSE students could not study British history anymore.

Mrs Thatcher showed anxiety that her government had given its approval to history curriculum proposals which could be manipulated for the purpose of political propaganda by those she most abhorred. Her fear that the National Curriculum would be perverted in the hands of Socialists, Marxists and Trotskyists now appears to be a huge over-reaction. It can be argued that the issue of control over the curriculum is groundless in a democratic society which operates on consensus principles and which respects freedom of thought. There must be a reluctance to lay down a particular line on the teaching of history, because the political complexion of governments is bound to change because of the very nature of the electoral system. History, according to Raphael Samuel, should be 'a rock which is unassailable by politicians' (Samuel, 1998). Teachers should be free, within guidelines that have themselves been written by historians, not by politicians, to teach as they see fit. He also reminds us to:

... ask awkward questions about seeing things from a British perspective. This might seem like treachery to a certain type of 'good' citizen, but it is surely healthy to try to see the history of other parts of the world from their internal point of view. This fosters international understanding and good relations with foreign countries. We may also see that they are not as foreign as we thought (p. 25).

The National Curriculum (established under the 1988 Education Act) created 'Key Stages' (KS). KS1 covered ages 5-7, KS2 ages 7-11 and Key Stage 3 ages 11-14. There was immediately a problem for schools (such as those in Oxford) in three-tier systems which crossed these Key Stage boundaries. With a hung council since the mid 1980s ensuring indecisiveness and too many interest groups agitating against change, the three tier system lingered on in Oxfordshire for another 13 years.

In 1995, the National Curriculum was substantially revised. Prescription of content was trimmed; the number of attainment targets reduced from three to one, and the number of levels of attainment was reduced from ten to eight. Five key elements sought to clarify the underlying ideas for the delivery of history in schools, encouraging teachers to teach in a more holistic fashion, which developed historically specific skills and communication skills through sequences of historical content. Attainment Target 3 ('The

use of historical sources') became known as 'historical enquiry', while Key Element 4 aimed to encourage teachers to think in enquiry-led ways where pupils might use evidence to construct tentative answers to historical questions. This contrasts with the approach to source work often taken in the early years of the National Curriculum, succinctly described by some as 'death by sources A to F'. Historical Interpretations (now termed 'Knowledge, Skills and Understanding') was retained. This ensured that history teaching aimed to develop an understanding of the nature of history as the study and interpretation of the past thereby suggesting that the practice of history teaching had moved beyond the 'great tradition' to alternative traditions in relation to pedagogy and content. Current practice appeared to have revolved around what Christine Counsell called 'the distracting dichotomy' of skills and content (Counsell and Historical Association, 1997). What was less clear was the extent to which the practice of history teaching had resolved the tensions between competing ideas of the purposes of history teaching.

The UK had a largely comprehensive school system though grammar schools still lingered in some areas of England (thereby helping to make neighbouring comprehensives more like old-style secondary moderns) and there was a burgeoning independent school sector which siphoned a proportion of pupils and students from higher income backgrounds. The Conservative government from time to time threatened to create more grammar schools but nothing much was done as it battled its declining popularity and had its own divisions over Europe to occupy it even more.

In the state comprehensives there was a clear move throughout the 1990s towards the use of streaming and setting. The full consequences of this are still being contested but there is no doubt that, as Hallam (2002) writes, "Those in the higher streams and grammar schools were oriented towards university, while those in the lower streams and at secondary modern schools were targeted towards the job market' (Hallam, 2002, p. 37).

By 2001 there had been two revisions to the National Curriculum for history since its inception in 1991. The 1995 revision of the National Curriculum had placed a much

stronger emphasis on vocational education post-14 than the early version and its other initiatives seemed to fulfil Carol White's hopes for school history when she argued in 1996 that the subject must fit into school's principles and aims and that if these aims include the development of tolerance, the understanding of other cultures and societies, the promotion of citizenship and social responsibility then the place of history cannot be denied (White, 1996, p. 25).

The 1999 revision led to Curriculum 2000 which amongst other things required citizenship to be a statutory part of children's education. This area seemed to offer opportunities for history teachers according to the report on Teaching History (DfEE/QCA, 1999). The development of 'thinking skills' and the provision of spiritual, moral, social and cultural guidance were also requirements for pupils. All these had implications for the ways in which history was taught (Phillips, 2008, p. 24).

Curriculum 2000 gave history departments much more freedom to create their own programmes of study. The guidance referred to the Key Elements (DfE, 1995) as being five areas of knowledge, skills and understanding, but the written descriptions of these areas were very similar to the 1995 model. Programmes of Study did indeed become Breadth of Study. The content provided for a brief outline of three British, one European and two world studies. Publication of Curriculum 2000 coincided with the launch by the QCA of the schemes of work which suggested ways of creating a coherent framework for the KS3 history curriculum. It identified key or focus questions for student inquiry. All this was relatively uncontested but difficult issues were raised when Ofsted and QCA reports commented on aspects of school history which highlighted the problems of teaching citizenship and elements of the National Curriculum that dealt with 'the nature and origins of Britain's ethnic diversity' (2001/02, pp 6-7) and the need to question whether the curriculum was significant and relevant for young people.

Other government initiatives that impacted either directly or indirectly on history teaching included the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) which was established by the Prime Minister in 1997 to reduce social exclusion in England. Equivalent units were established

in Wales and Northern Ireland. The Government's concern with social exclusion has had a substantial impact on education reforms, many of which were aimed at creating a more inclusive education system. Some of the main initiatives include: the Sure Start programme, which combines initiatives concerned with the health and well being of young children and families; Excellence in Cities (EiC), which seeks to tackle problems experienced by children attending primary and secondary schools in England; Education Action Zones which have been established in deprived areas to raise educational standards.

It was claimed that 'No part of the United Kingdom had been untouched by the politics of choice and diversity, managerialisation and centralisation introduced in 1988' (Jones, 2003, p. 159).

(v) Educational Initiatives in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland still operated a selective system of education. Although there were comprehensive schools in most areas, the region remained (and still remains) the largest area in the United Kingdom which operates selective schools. In the last year of primary school, children sat the Eleven Plus and the results determined which school they would go to. If the young person failed the examination s/he was likely to attend a local non-selective secondary school which may be referred to as a 'non-selective', an 'intermediate', a 'college' or simply a 'secondary' school.

In 1997 the Northern Ireland Office commissioned research on the effects of selection. This research was published in 2000 (Gallagher and Smith, 2000). It was largely critical of selection highlighting 'a polarity of achievement' with under-achieving schools as well as the under-representation of children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds in grammar schools (McKeown, 2001).

Hallam indicates that figures for 1995 show that 91 per cent of grammar school pupils gained five or more GCSE A-C grades, in contrast to only 27 per cent of secondary school pupils which 'has clear implications for progression to higher education and subsequent employment prospects' (Hallam, 2002, p. 37). Such considerations were leading to strong stirrings against selection at the age of 11 and against the Eleven Plus examination.

The system was, in effect, both socially selective and also segregated on religious grounds. With no fully private or independent schools in Northern Ireland the majority of Protestant children attended state controlled schools whilst the majority of Catholic children attended Catholic maintained schools. Despite the fact that the schools remained largely segregated on grounds of religion throughout the period 'there was little consensus on the consequences of segregation or on the most effective means for promoting reconciliation and tolerance' (Gallagher, 2005, p. 431)'.

That said, there is no doubt that there was some pressure for integrated education. Reviewing the situation as it was in 2001, Gallagher points out that through the 1980s, after the establishment of the first integrated school in 1981, another dozen schools were founded and that, following the education laws of 1989 that mandated government to support new developments in integrated education, over the 1990s another 30 or so schools opened. He goes on: 'Currently, there are a little over 50 integrated schools, out of a total stock of 1,100 schools and they take about 5 percent of the total school population. The schools currently have to turn away large numbers of students each year as most receive more applications than they have places. Opinion poll evidence also suggests that a majority of people in Northern Ireland want more integrated schools to be available' (Gallagher, 2005, p. 431).

Yet the province's secondary school systems still remained largely divided along religious lines, with maintained, Catholic schools on the one hand and controlled schools attended by 93% of Protestant children on the other. The perception had long been that each system produces adults who conformed to the political ideas of their parents. This was partially tested

in a survey by academics from Aberdeen, the Australian National University and Ark, a joint research forum of Northern Ireland's two universities, who looked at the impact of integrated education. They found that Protestants who attended integrated schools saw themselves as 'Northern Irish' as opposed to 'British' or 'Ulster' (which has strong loyalist connotations). While not embracing Irish nationalism, they were more likely to 'occupy the middle ground of Northern Ireland politics': they were 'willing to detach themselves from a British or unionist identity but not to adopt the identity of the other side' (John O'Farrell, *The New Statesman*, 27 February, 2006).

Catholics who attended integrated schools showed similar effects: one-third wanted a united Ireland, compared with more than half of Catholics from segregated schools. In short, integrated education tempered the edges of unionism and nationalism. The catch was that only 4.6% of pupils attend integrated schools, so they could make only a small difference.

O'Farrell has reminded us that segregated education still had its apologists, who say that sectarianism is learned more at home than at school, and that the kind of people who send their kids to integrated schools are already less likely to be entrenched unionists or nationalists. He concludes that:

'the latest research is the sort of empirical evidence that in other places would close down debate and usher in fundamental change, but in Northern Ireland both sides will probably ignore it. Blame their education' (John O'Farrell, *The New Statesman*, 27 February 2006).

If integrated education represented only a small overall change in the period as a whole changes in the content of history lessons were much more significant.

In the 1980s Irish history had had a relatively high profile due to a number of factors: the New History movement of the 1970s; the increased popularity of local history; changes in the examination system; the numerous academics (from Jack Magee to Malcolm Skilbeck) who championed its cause by research, publications and conferences; adventurous schoolteachers who introduced it to their students; and not least to the fact

that it was considered a vehicle for lessening bigotry and bringing about peace in the Province.

Included in the GCE Ordinary Level (OL) examination (which was replaced by the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in 1988), was an Irish history component which examined the period 1906 - 1964. Generally, two questions were set on Ireland: one covered the Home Rule crisis through to the War of Independence; the other traced the development of the two separate states until 1964.

Nevertheless, the vast syllabus stipulating the coverage of Twentieth Century British, European and World history for an examination requiring five essays in two hours thirty minutes encouraged teachers to be very selective. Many omitted the Irish option completely, others (including myself) only prepared students for the earlier period. And, despite constant urging from examiners, who in their annual reports (NISEC, 1986/7) persistently lamented the poor response to set questions on Irish history, this situation continued until GCE was replaced by GCSE in 1988 (NISEC, 1988).

From then on, also, all schools in Northern Ireland followed the Northern Ireland Curriculum which was based on the National Curriculum used in England and Wales although it emphasised a greater depth of knowledge compared to the mainland. (NISEC, 1988) At age 11, on entering secondary education, all pupils studied a broad base of subjects very similar to England and Wales with history being a compulsory subject at KS3. At the end of KS3 students select which subjects to continue to study for the GCSE Examinations. Teachers were free to select any examination board for GCSE and A Level but most teachers opted to do the Northern Ireland board. The majority of examinations sat and the education plans followed, in Northern Irish schools were set by the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA).

The Northern Ireland Board then included an Irish history option in the GCSE syllabus. Paper 1, section A in its Modern World Study, offered the choice of one of the following: (A) Israel and the Arab World, 1919-1984; (B) The United States of America, 1917-

1984; (C) Aspects of Social and Economic history of Britain and Northern Ireland, 1919-1985; (D) Ireland, 1905-1972. There was a compulsory document-based question as well as one essay on the examination paper.

By 1989, a dramatic increase was evident both in the number of schools tackling Irish history and in the prominence it was given at all levels in the curriculum, including A Level and GCSE examination options. (NISEC, 1988) Nevertheless, not all schools took up these options or covered them in depth. Some teachers found ways of side-stepping regulations that they did not feel competent or willing to deliver.

As with the rest of the United Kingdom, history as a formal school subject was in decline on the basis that fewer candidates were taking examinations in the subject. Geography was seen by many as the easier option.

The Common Curriculum, that had been created in 1989 started to force even the Irish history sceptics and backsliders to alter their ways. The study of Irish history gained its apogee of respectability in 1991 through official recognition. The new Common Curriculum established a mandatory course of study. This course did not continue to the age of 16 (as at first seemed possible) but, instead, followed the English model and made history compulsory to the age of 14.

The process of change had been gradual, however, primarily because the subject was not considered to be safe and there was a problem of surrounding polemics and propaganda. Also, resources, especially textbooks, were inadequate.

It is a widely accepted myth at the time that few Protestant schools had attempted to teach Irish history and that the subject occupied a central position in Catholic schools. Recently, this generalization has been shown to distort reality for while there is some evidence that more Irish history was taught in Catholic than in non-Catholic schools, 'the children in Catholic schools suffered as well'. (This is my own experience and has been confirmed by the vast majority of Catholic teachers interviewed).

Another reason why it was neglected was that (as reported by the Catholic teacher in Mid-Ulster 1991) quoted above 'Catholic teachers in many areas considered it safer not to teach the subject at all'. One explanation for this is that Catholic teachers feared that since the examiner was likely to be Protestant their students could be penalised for attempting an Irish history question. It was a 'gamble' they were not prepared to take.

The proportion of British history in the curriculum had been a contentious issue: in the end the main recommendations of the History Working group on 6th April, 1990, included an increase from 40% in the interim report to 50% of history curriculum time. Overall, however, the new history syllabuses in Northern Ireland made valiant efforts to address the excesses of sectarian bitterness in the province by grasping the nettle and including even contentious periods of Irish history to allow students a more balanced understanding. They were to begin to study national history in KS3, and each of the three required years of study featured a core module focusing on a period deemed essential for understanding Irish history, but placed within the wider context of Britain and Europe; topics included the Normans, conquest and colonization, the Act of Union, and partition.

A popular misconception is that the rationale guiding the Northern Ireland curriculum was distinct from the Welsh and English deliberations. But it must be remembered that the Working Group on History for England and Wales and the History Committee for Wales had reported while the Northern Irish group was still deliberating and the Irish Group admitted to having absorbed much of the report of the former and having benefited from the insights offered by the latter. Moreover, the Order set out a curriculum similar in some ways to that of the National Curriculum for England and Wales, but with the following significant differences in relation to history: history was to be included within an Area of Study called The Environment and Society; the programmes were devised for pupils aged 4-16 (5-16 in England and Wales) and the programmes of study placed an emphasis on teaching Irish history:

To help (children to) understand the present in the context of the past; to help give pupils a sense of identity; to help to give pupils an understanding of their cultural roots and shared inheritances; to contribute to pupils'

knowledge and understanding of other countries and other cultures in the modern world; to train the mind by means of disciplined study; to introduce pupils to the distinctive methodology of historians; to enrich other areas of the curriculum and to prepare pupils for adult life (NICC, 1989).

History was acknowledged to have a major contribution to make to the achievement of the aims and objectives of Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) and Cultural Heritage (CH) (NICC, 1989). The Department of Education recognised that many had been worried about EMU seeing it as:

Yet another subject in an already over-stretched curriculum; as a threat to particular traditions and cultures; as an attack on the concept of segregated education in Northern Ireland; as a form of propaganda, whereby children are trained in what to believe; as a cosmetic alternative to the creation of a just society (NICC, 1990).

The rationale for EMU the guide insisted, was none of these things, and it cleverly responded to each criticism. Nevertheless, what is important in the final analysis is not so much what EMU was but rather what it was perceived to be, and, how in practice it was to be delivered. In effect, this meant saddling Irish history with a social conscience. This aspiration of reconciling the two traditions through directing attention towards shared traditions also inspired the inclusion of Cultural Heritage in the Cross-Curricular themes. It is stated in paragraph 2, section 13, that:

Several respondents suggested that there should be opportunities for pupils to gain awareness of aspects of history, culture and traditions which contribute to the cultural heritage of Northern Ireland. The government welcomes and accepts this suggestion as a positive measure aimed at lessening the ignorance which many feel contributes to the divisions in our society (NICC, 1990).

Similar sentiments were expressed in the Proposals for History in the Northern Ireland Curriculum:

Teachers should not hold back from dealing with controversial questions of morality or values which unite or divide people. It is essential, however that pupils are given a balanced presentation of opposing schools of thought (NICC, 1990).

The History Working Group recognised that:

History remains a live issue in Northern Ireland, but what passes for history does not always live up to its name. Too often, partial views, prejudiced accounts and dangerous myths have been harnessed to processes inimical to the pursuit of truth. The members of the Working Group have been particularly anxious, therefore, to construct a programme of study that has balance and breadth and that pays due attention to objectivity and the disciplined use of sources (NICC, 1990).

According to Dr. Mawhinney, the Northern Ireland Education Minister at the time, 'the initiative should help children understand more about themselves and others, and to realise that differences don't have to lead to division'. Underlying these recommendations of 'The Way Forward' document, October, 1988, was the philosophy that social harmony could be promoted by instigating change in the formal and hidden curriculum. It stated that:

The government also believes it to be appropriate and necessary that the curriculum of every child should include elements of Education for Mutual Understanding, which has already helped to foster valuable cross-community contacts among many of our schools (NICED, 1988).

In the attention paid to national history and in the cross-curricular themes, the sensitive nature of history had been highlighted in both the National Curriculum in England and Wales and the Common Curriculum in Northern Ireland. However, the unstable nature of Northern Irish society pointed the debate about the cross-curricular themes in a different direction from England and Wales. From the beginning, the themes carried statutory weight which automatically gave them high profile and ensured that controversy would follow them closely.

Given these objectives, it is not surprising that a heavy dose of Irish history was administered through the Core HSUs at all Key Stages and featured prominently in local history school-designed study units. Despite the fact that history became compulsory only to KS3, that was enough to ensure that, in future, no pupil would leave school without at least a smattering of Irish history.

At the beginning of the millennium, teaching Irish history in Northern Ireland had been compulsory for nearly a decade. The onset of peace, albeit a precarious one, had helped

to accelerate other patterns of educational change and social behaviour which history teachers were to find challenging.

Summary

Internationally the ending of the Cold War did not mean the ending of divisions in Europe as ethnic warfare and international religious fundamentalism were to make the world perhaps as unsafe a place as ever. Peace did break out locally from time to time; the precarious Northern Ireland peace process is an instance of this, a process assisted by the active efforts of three governments, those of the United Kingdom, the Irish Republic and the USA.

The UK became even more of a multi-cultural and multi-racial society and new issues of dealing with the attitudes of Muslims, especially sensitive in 2001, arose alongside the old ones of determining what it is to be British in an epoch when the world seemed to be arriving on Britain's shores and how to teach the few tricky areas in history classes like race, probably small beer compared to the communal divide in Northern Ireland.

There the Common Curriculum, aping the National Curriculum on the British mainland, brought in far more prescription, a vital element in the bringing of Irish history to the centre of the curriculum.

Chapter Four

Methods and Methodology

In Part One of this chapter, the conceptual framework which provided the rationale for the design of the thesis will be delineated. The methods through which the findings have been gained together with sampling procedures and the characteristics of participants will be explained. This will be followed in Part Two by a discussion of concerns pertinent to data collection, analysis and reporting and a final look both at the limitations of the thesis and its contributions to knowledge.

Part One. Theoretical Stance: the Rationale for the Methods used

(i) The Theoretical and Methodological Influences

The theoretical and methodological influences which have shaped the work have arisen from the questions of: who or what determines sensitive issues in history education; how they are perceived by history teachers and their students; and the extent to which these issues change over time and place. My perspective is essentially historical but a more eclectic approach, informed by the social sciences and particularly by the concept of being a 'reflective practitioner', is taken in the collection and analysis of data to enable my own experience to be located and understood. Consequently, the theoretical framework is heavily indebted to numerous historians, moral philosophers, educationalists, psychologists and sociologists, as well as being informed by my own empirical research.

(ii) Research Paradigm

The research paradigm of this study is both qualitative and quantitative. It sets out to explore issues related to the teaching of sensitive issues through semi-structured interviews with adults and structured questionnaires with students. I do not claim that they are generalisable or even representative of the population of the United Kingdom as

a whole but by targeting the same regions Oxford and Mid-Ulster three times over a period of ten years, it is possible to see certain patterns emerging that should inform other research in the area. My goal is to highlight patterns, concepts and interpretations rather than provide a definitive explanation of the phenomenon studied.

This research belongs to the tradition of history education studies developed around an understanding of influences external to the classroom as well as on the interpersonal relationships controlling the history lesson. Sensitivity is broached in the following ways: philosophically (what is meant by the concept?); psychologically (why do people respond the way they do?); sociologically (how does it impact on and arise from social patterns?); and historically (how has it developed over time?).

(iii) Comparative Framework

I consider the macro socio-historical context to suggest an explanation for teachers' and students' approaches to sensitive issues. Comparing Mid-Ulster and Oxford is advantageous because comparatives teach how contexts shape educational change by considering how far 'pan-regional characteristics, net of the policy diffusion effects between countries within them, do in fact explain cross-regional variations in systems characteristics' (Green, 2002, p. 6) I consider the macro socio-historical context to suggest an explanation for teachers' and students' approaches to sensitive issues.

(iv) Theories that Informed Methods

Not all studies of history education use clear theoretical frameworks. The field has been referred to as one in-search-of-theory (Seixas, 1993). Barton exhorts the researcher to ask questions derived from specific theoretical frameworks and to interpret findings in light of such theory (Levstik and Barton, 2008). Good research requires good methods and good theory (Green, 2002; Levstik and Barton, 2008, p. 89).

My approach also gives primacy to the social environment from which the documentary evidence, interviews and surveys were drawn and my interpretation relies heavily on grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) which broad interpretative framework emphasises exploration rather than the verification of hypotheses (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Therefore, the most frequently used set of analytic procedures in this study is 'grounded theorising'. As Boulton and Hammersley state, 'the analytical categories used to make sense of the data [...] have to be developed in the process of data analysis' (Boulton and Hammersley, 1996, p. 290). This theoretical framework is the backdrop against which actual research methods employed in this mainly qualitative work with its semi-structured interviews and coding procedures are implemented.

Barton and Levstik have drawn my attention to Wertsch's (1998) theory of mediated action (Wertsch, Río and Alvarez, 1995) which uses Kenneth Burke's framework for understanding human action and motivation. Burke considers the following inter-related elements as providing a framework for human action:

1. Act – the thoughts or deeds in which humans engage.
2. Scene – the setting or background in which the acts take place.
3. Agent – the person who engages in the act being examined.
4. Agency- the means by which the acts are carried out (more often referred to, among sociocultural theorists, as cultural tools or 'artefacts').
5. Purpose – the motivation for engaging in action (Burke, 1966).

Kelly's personal constructs theory (Kelly, 1955) has informed my understanding about how we each construct our own personal ways of seeing the world (our personal construct system); he maintains that this system defines the understanding by which we live.

The psychological perspective associated with social identity theory (SIT) has been useful in interpreting the dichotomy between what is reported by teachers in the different regions. This contact hypothesis is illustrated by Allport (1954), Hewstone and Brown (1986) and Pettigrew (1998).

Althusser's ideas have encouraged me to consider how history teaching has the potential to become sensitive amid fears that, as an agent of change, history to some must be 'in the right hands' and presented in a manner 'appropriate to the dominant ideology' (Althusser, 1971, p. 23). This stance underpinned interview questions and analysis of data.

Bourdieu was also influential in drawing my attention to the education structure, together with the pedagogical processes embodied within it, and how it operates to ensure the reproduction of existing social categories, classes or groups (Bourdieu, 1984).

I raised questions about the extent to which schools are part of society's problem rather than part of the solution and the extent to which teachers are the '... naïve bearers of a sectarian culture looking for ways of contributing to its future development' (Reynolds and Skilbeck, 1976, p. 127).

Certainly James Banks's five dimensions of multicultural education have informed my approach to good practice in potentially sensitive situations (Banks, 1997; Banks, 2007): they were designed to help educators re-evaluate their approach to placing minority groups such as Mexican Americans or African Americans in the curriculum:

1. content integration.
2. knowledge construction.
3. equity pedagogy.
4. prejudice reduction.
5. empowering school culture and social structure.

Further research indicates that vicarious experiences such as video tapes, simulation games, and films can be very powerful and can positively influence, for example, students' racial attitudes (Banks, 2007).

When formulating questions for interviews with teachers in 1991, I used Jenkins' (1980) categorisation. He suggested four ways in which schools could react to the political violence in Northern Ireland:

- (1) Defining schools as 'time-out' by keeping contemporary cultural and political issues off the curriculum;
- (2) Putting the school 'up front' in the cause of understanding and eventual reconciliation; allowing cultural, social and political issues a place in the curriculum; encouraging teachers to see themselves as part of a possible solution rather than a part of the problem;
- (3) Seeking compromise and an absence of internal conflict amidst general fuzziness, often without a cross-school policy;
- (4) Adopting a local position which might be termed one of modified sectarianism (Jenkins, 1980, p. 13).

I have been influenced by this model to form a useful framework for categorising the different approaches to teaching sensitive issues taken by the teachers that I interviewed. Despite my great debt to it and other theoretical sources, none provided a conceptual framework precisely appropriate to my needs. I consciously or unconsciously adapted these theories in arriving at my own distinctive conceptual framework but my schema evolved out of ideas I had before embarking on the research and was consolidated by further reading and, particularly, by my growing awareness of self and others while I was analysing my empirical data.

(v) The Reflective Practitioner: Methodological Advantages and Disadvantages

I am influenced by diverse research theories and strategies including self-reflection: my own story gives rise to questions central to the thesis and helps inform its conclusions. I am a history teacher, not a professional historian. Although I have done some original research into Irish history (Conway, 1986), I position myself as a reflective practitioner of history at secondary school level who combines the skill of a historian and a classroom teacher to bring experience, rigour and reflection to the research process. Education is

about thoughtful practice; it must be systematic and lead to contemplative action. My prior knowledge is used to interpret research knowledge. Increasingly, all teachers are encouraged to be involved in research and to reflect on their own practice:

We want to encourage teachers as reflective practitioners, to think about what they do well, to reflect on what they share with their colleagues, as well as identifying their own learning needs (Phillips, 2002, p. 23).

As a Specialist Advisor to the National Teachers Research Panel, I am aware of the multitude of bodies that exist to support and inform teachers in this endeavour.

Reflection, according to Phillips, means 'interpreting one's own interpretations, looking at one's own perspectives from other perspectives and turning a self-critical eye onto one's own authority as interpreter and author' (Phillips, 2002). Also:

At the heart of becoming a teacher is, above all else, being a learner – a lifelong learner. To learn one has to ask questions, of oneself and of others, and to know that this process is valued and shared across the school (Miles and Huberman, 1984).

The primacy of learning from reflection on my personal experience is certainly a motivating force in my research and an essential part of my theoretical stance but it is only part of my stance. The precise nature of moving from 'unconscious learning to conscious learning' (McIntyre, 2003, p. 76) owes much to my understanding of the historical process, especially as regards empathy and oral evidence. As a historian I considered 'my story' to be oral testimony and tried to use it as an objective as well as a subjective source with the other evidence from serving teachers. I am conscious of my role in constructing the narrative as well as analysing the facts. I see my testimony as an eyewitness account and try to look at it dispassionately and fairly but the historian in me knows the limitations of this approach and is aware of all the biases of the selection process as well as those from my particular temporal environment.

'All understanding is self-understanding' (Schwandt, 2001, p. 9). In taking into account what I know and how I know and being conscious of the cultural, political, and

ideological origins of my own perspective as well as the perspective of those I interviewed I aim to further the triangulated inquiry. The process forced me to consider not only what has shaped my perspective but that of other teachers and students. I think about how they know what they know and what has shaped their world view. I think about how they perceive me. I have tried to strengthen the validity of my findings by triangulating with different methods. My stance has been subjected to self criticism by reflexivity. In this way I aim to be aware of the effects of my particular bias on the research and the effect of the research on me.

Michael Quinn Patton (2002) offers the phrase 'empathetic neutrality'. As a point of departure he suggests that there is "a middle ground between getting too involved, which can cloud judgement, and remaining too distant which can reduce understanding" (Patton, 2002, p. 50). Patton recognises that research needs credibility to be useful. He advises us to adopt a stance of neutrality but insists that 'Neutrality does not mean detachment'; he also realises that much depends on 'the researcher's direct experience of the world and insights about those experiences'. This includes learning through empathy (Patton, 2002). I have also tried to adapt what qualitative methodologist Norman Denzin has called 'the studied commitment to actively enter the world of interacting individuals' (Patton, 2002, p. 8).

My methodology was very influenced by autoethnography where I start with my personal life and pay attention to my physical feelings, thoughts, and emotions. I use what Ellis and Bochner call systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall to try to understand an experience I've lived through. Then I write my experience as a story (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 341).

My thesis is also written from an historical perspective in that it locates this oral evidence within a chronological framework which is itself compiled out of primary and secondary evidence. Instead of the term 'case studies' for the teachers' data, I prefer to use 'oral evidence'. Whilst I adopt an eclectic approach which includes a number of theoretical stances, the dominant discourse is historical. I consider myself to be working

primarily within the historical tradition pursuing the past from a variety of sources. By considering the process of continuity and change, cause and consequence, significance and salient turning points, and by imposing order and synthesis on apparently unconnected facts, I am constructing an historical narrative.

I aimed to take the approach recommended by Patton who offered the phrase 'empathetic neutrality' as a point of departure by which he suggested that there is 'a middle ground between getting too involved, which can cloud judgement, and remaining too distant which can reduce understanding' (Patton, 2002, p. 209). I also tried to produce what qualitative methodologist Denzin has called 'the studied commitment to actively enter the world of interacting individuals' (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p. 36).

(vi) Validity, Reliability and Triangulation

'Qualitative analysis can be evocative, illuminating, masterful and wrong' (Robson, 2002, p. 262). Any story no matter how well told lacks validity if, after being double-checked by reasonable colleagues, it is challenged by different findings because the story does not fit the data presented. Reliability requires repeatability or consistency. If an experiment is repeated many times and gives identical results, it is reliable. In terms of second hand sources reliability refers to how trustworthy the source is. The reliability of a source can be assessed by comparing it to several other sources.

Robson suggests that 'unless a measure is reliable it cannot be valid' (Robson, 1993 p. 66). He also warns against attaining reliability but not having validity and makes the distinction between external validity (how well the results generalise beyond the sample of subjects researched) and internal validity (the soundness of the procedures used in the experiment (Manion, 1989, p. 67).

Linked to this is triangulation which is usually defined as the use of two or more methods of data collection. The aim is to employ different methods that have different biases, different strengths and different perspectives so that they complement and reinforce each

other. One method provides only 'a limited view of the complexity of human behaviour' (Miles and Huberman, 2002, p. 234). With triangulation findings are more dependable 'when they can be buttressed from several independent sources. Their validity is enhanced when they are confirmed by more than one "instrument" measuring the same thing' (Denzin, 2008, p. 237). Denzin specifies two categories in his typology: within methods and between methods triangulation. Within methods concerns the replication of a study as a check on reliability and theory confirmation. Between methods involves the use of more than one method (Campbell and Fiske, 1959). Denzin suggests some principle types of triangulation used in research:

1. Time triangulation.
2. Space triangulation.
3. Combined levels of triangulation.
4. Theoretical triangulation.
5. Investigator triangulation.

As a further check on validity, the between methods approach 'embraces the notion of convergence between independent measures of the same objective' (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p. 156). I used a variety of documentary evidence, interviews with teachers (and some students), surveys with pupils (and some teachers) and personal experience. I compared the findings from the teachers' and students' data over time and over place. I considered this mixed methods approach to be particularly appropriate for my research. My blend of historical, qualitative, quantitative and longitudinal methods has been an apposite technique to assess the nature of sensitivity in history teaching and learning from 1991 to 2001.

In my research I used most of the strategies listed in Denzin's typology. A prominent one was time triangulation with its longitudinal and cross-sectional aspects which I employed when I compared the 1991, 1996 and 2001 cohorts. Space triangulation was considered when I contacted schools in Oxford and compared them with schools in Mid-Ulster. Investigator triangulation came into play when I compared my teaching experiences with that of other teachers in similar or contrasting situations.

I used methodological triangulation when I cross-referenced documentary evidence with the findings from surveys and these with the findings from interviews. My theoretical base, though mainly historical, relied upon philosophical, psychological and sociological studies. What happens inside the classroom continues to be, in many respects, a microcosm of societal upheavals. I am attempting to offer a multi-causal explanation for what history teachers have perceived as an increase in the diversity and intensity of sensitive issues in teaching history in the period 1991 to 2001. It is easier to identify than to prioritize factors which usually operated simultaneously on different levels.

Multiple methods were very suitable for my evaluation of the more controversial and sensitive aspects of history teaching; they gave a more rounded picture of students' and teachers' views and the educational institutions and communities in which they lived. I also used triangulation when researching a large sample of schools, students and teachers for a more rigorous, holistic outcome and, in presenting the bigger picture, to achieve greater validity. This involved conceptualising a top-down process which accounted for the different layers of influences that impacted on classroom relationships. At a macro level these ranged from the international to the national; at an intermediate level, the local and school community; and, finally, at a micro level, the teacher and student.

'What is crucial for validity - and consequently for reliability - is to try to picture the empirical social world as it actually exists to those under investigation rather than as the researcher imagines it to be' (Filstead, 1970, p. 4). Filstead emphasises the importance of participant observation, depth interviewing, detailed description and case studies.

(vii) Questionnaires: Advantages and Disadvantages

I used questionnaires to obtain information about students' opinions and attitudes regarding their teachers' teaching strategies. The main reason why I employed this method was because it enabled a much larger and more widespread sample to be investigated. Moreover, the responses were easily coded and quantified especially

through the use of the SPSS software package. I had limited time and had access to a large number of my own students to pilot the questionnaire and to discuss responses and problems. I tried not to constrain the students by limiting their replies but as far as possible gave them the opportunity to comment on the question as well as tick boxes.

The main problem I had with the questionnaire design was ensuring that the wording was as unambiguous as possible and that the questions delivered the information I required. The difficulty with any test for attitudes is providing a valid measure for telling me what I needed to know or at least something approximating to the truth. I am confident that it provided an indication of the extent to which students felt uncomfortable with certain topics but I could not determine a clear amount of attitudes and affective traits. This, however, was not the purpose of the exercise. In an effort to measure emotional reactions I used a 5 point Likert scale (1932) which provided more precision and accuracy for responses to questions that required statements of opinions.

There was, of course, the problem that I had little control over the circumstances in which the questionnaire was administered. I tried to achieve some degree of uniformity by explaining the objective of the survey to the teachers who were distributing it and instructing them on the advice that students should have before completing it. I found that on balance it was advantageous to request the students to include their name and school as well as year group on the script to ensure that it was taken seriously but on the understanding that all students remained anonymous.

Of course, there was the possibility that students would not answer truthfully out of fear of offending their teacher or write their version of answers which were deemed to be socially desirable rather than reveal their honest feelings and opinions. Wolf comments that 'Too often investigators assume that respondents possess the information to answer questionnaire items, can read and understand the items, and are answering honestly' (Wolf, 1997, p. 425). I am also aware that by including certain examples to help interpret the question I was leading the response in a certain direction rather than leaving it truly open. I gave for example the holocaust as a possible sensitive topic. In doing so I feared

I unbalanced the responses too much in that direction. However, the alternative of not constructing a definition was worse as I discovered in the early stages that unprompted students stated that they in fact only felt uncomfortable when their teacher (especially if he was male and they female) was talking about sex.

Despite its obvious limitations I am convinced that the questionnaire provided considerable insight into young people's ideas and attitudes regarding sensitive issues in history. The relationship between time, place and the findings of other research projects is too great to be coincidental.

(viii) Interviews: Advantages and Disadvantages

By means of semi-structured interviews, I was able to probe more deeply into how precisely sensitive situations in history affected the history teacher, how they perceived them and what coping strategies they employed. I recognize that the credibility of my interviews depends to a great extent on my particular skill, rigour and competence. Complete objectivity is an unrealistic aim so I tried to follow Patton's advice and 'understand and depict the world authentically in all its complexities while being self – analytical, politically aware, and reflexive in consciousness' (Patton, 2002, p. 53).

As far as possible the interviews were conducted in a neutral environment in order to overcome factors that may impinge on the freedom of the respondent to speak frankly. Without exception, respondents seemed comfortable with the environment and the interview questions.

Artificiality may have resulted from the interviewer's presence. I was the single researcher who conducted all interviews and this is acknowledged. There is also the question of leading/being led which relates back to how interviewers should keep people on the topic. I found myself being reluctant to interrupt when the teacher gave me information that was interesting and informative in another context but was not relevant to the question asked. That also is a matter of judgment and a potential source of bias:

what the researcher may see as off-topic may be precisely what the interviewee sees as important to it. What appears to be a red herring at the time can become very pertinent subsequently.

I was reminded by Fontana and Frey (1994) that there are various obstacles to face when interviewing. They are: access, understanding language and culture; the presentation of oneself; finding an informant; gaining trust; and establishing rapport. There are also issues of power and gender as defined by Oppenheim:

Research needs credibility to be useful. Seek honest, meaningful credible and empirically based findings. Adopt a stance of neutrality with regard to the phenomenon under study. Neutrality does not mean detachment ..(it)...uses the researcher's direct experience of the world and insights about those experiences. This includes learning through empathy (Oppenheim, 1992, p. 83).

However, I am aware that I did not always remain neutral when it came to voicing an opinion about a government policy or certain issues regarding integrated schools and sectarianism but had to be careful at which point (if at all) I made my views known. A great advantage of interviews over questionnaires is the greater opportunity they offer to provide flexibility and spontaneity during the course of the interview.

The major problem I found with interviews was the time constraint. It was time-consuming to set the interview up, to travel to it, and to spend hours transcribing the material. I did not issue a questionnaire to teachers because I preferred the deeper probing enabled by semi-structured interviews. The logistics were such that it was possible (but not always easy) to meet teachers over the years either through personal friendships or by formal introduction by letter or phone. Each interview was tailored to reflect the individual circumstances and experience of the teacher but many questions were identical for greater ease of analysis and standardization.

(ix) Ethical Issues

Working in the sensitive area of teachers' and students' emotional response to history placed the onus on me to follow official guidelines. I also followed my own sense of fair play. In my research design I built in an open agenda where I was honest about my motivation and promised confidentiality for all teachers interviewed. When reporting findings I named academics whose views were already in the public arena through their publications. I did wonder how ethical it was to encourage teachers, usually strangers, and especially in areas where there is violence (Mid-Ulster at the time of the interviews) to speak at length about topics that are emotionally charged and then to switch off the tape recorder and disappear as if I'd been doing a customer survey for Tesco! I reacted spontaneously by employing strategies to deal with the problem such as the following:

1. I confided my opinions and fears to them openly and honestly.
2. I engaged in a lot of small talk before leaving.
3. I kept in touch afterwards as far as possible.

During the writing up process I was conscious of distinguishing between my and others' views and made a genuine effort not to distort or misrepresent teachers' views either by giving misleading accounts of the data to support my own values and preferred outcomes or by any lack of clarity. I structured my reporting of findings to replicate others' voices as fully and honestly as possible. As far as possible I reproduced their exact words by making a literal translation of the interview and quoting at length. In this way the readers could make up their mind about the teachers' perceptions of their role and views on their students.

As regards analysing the students' survey, I used the SPSS software package, as already indicated, to ensure greater accuracy and in the early stages consulted students about the language used in the questionnaire to avoid misinterpretation of the questions. I required students to place their name on the script to ensure that it was taken seriously but all students remained anonymous in any subsequent report.

Finally, there were ways in which having taken up so much of people's time galvanised me to complete my work. I felt I owed such a debt to those people that it would have been unethical of me to not present the information they had provided over the years.

Part Two: Data Collection

A. 1991: Pilot Study

I found the 1991 data collection an invaluable trial or pilot for a more in-depth study in 1996 and 2001.

The presentation of the 1991 data has been changed in order to provide greater clarity. Only the findings relevant to my analysis of 1996 and 2001 have been reported. However, the interpretation of the data remains the same as in the original.

(i) 1991: Mid-Ulster Students Survey: Participants, Context and Questions

Table 1: Participants in Students Survey, 1991

Date of data collection	Type of School	Region of school	Number of schools participating	Year (age)	Number of Students Surveyed
July- Aug 1991	Grammar	Mid-Ulster	1	20 -28	24
Sept -Dec 1991	Independent	Oxford	1	16 -18	6

Context

Before amalgamation with the boys' school in 1986, I had taught girls both Irish and European history on a two yearly rota. After that, I taught only Irish history annually. I calculated that between 1980 and 1989 I had taught 53 pupils at A Level.

Most of the students were still living in Ireland, but two had moved to England, and one was living in Scotland, one in France and one in Canada. All came from a small market town but in an area known as the 'murder triangle' because of the large number of sectarian murders committed there. Most came from a middle class background. Nearly all had passed the Eleven Plus examination. All had elected to do A Level history at an academic school. All were from a Protestant background. I cannot claim that they were typical of young people in the province. They were more likely to have been well disposed towards Irish history and more willing to take an objective approach than others of their age because of their family background and level of education.

Obviously many had changed their name and address, so I had to expend much time and effort in contacting them. School records were invaluable in that they provided a basis from which to work, but it took several phone calls, numerous misdirected letters, plus four months of my time before I succeeded in circulating 26 questionnaires. I received 24 replies, 18 of which were from females (Conway, 1991).

Since, for practical reasons, I was unable to pilot the questionnaire directed at my past pupils in Northern Ireland in 1990, I sought advice on it from a number of colleagues and, after consideration, modified it extensively.

The Survey Questions

In the survey I devised 15 questions that aimed to explore a range of students' attitudes. They were given a prescribed number of options within each question, invited to circle their response (more than one if applicable), and then to write a comment in the space

provided. Fundamentally, I was trying to ascertain the impact my teaching of Irish history had on my pupils. It was, in many cases, their first formal exposure to it. I wanted to know how much they enjoyed the subject, how they rated my teaching technique and, in particular, if they regarded the presentation as being biased. Furthermore, I was interested in the degree to which my teaching had shaped or disturbed their opinion of Irish politics at the time as well as the extent to which it had remained influential in the years that followed.

(ii) 1991: Oxford Students Survey: Participants, Context and Questions

The Context

This study focused on six year 12 girls in Oxford who came from a very different cultural background from my Irish students. Of the six, one was American, two had lived overseas and the other three came from the Home Counties. One had an Irish Catholic mother but otherwise they had no direct connection with Ireland. Their parents worked in either the diplomatic service, the armed forces or as company directors. All were Catholic. They attended a very expensive independent school that tended to be of mixed ability before the sixth form. Most sixth formers were academically motivated. I cannot claim that they were typical of young people in the area. These girls were not immune from the anti-Irish prejudices which were current in England at the time largely as a result of the IRA bombing campaign. Like their Ulster counterparts, they had imbibed a number of historical and political myths outside the classroom. I was also trying to inform myself not only about the extent of their knowledge but also the degree to which they were receptive to learning Irish history.

The Survey Questions

It was important for me to investigate how the group regarded the Irish, and in particular, what political leaning they anticipated that I would have in my exposition; so I circulated a questionnaire and a general knowledge quiz on Ireland before the formal lesson.

The collection of data was very straightforward. I told the girls about my research and they agreed to participate. All data were collected during lesson time. The project formed an integral part of history lessons for the A Level course which had a small component of Irish history within the context of British history and a special paper on the Rise of Labour.

Before introducing the group to Irish history, I approached the headmistress for help in assessing my teaching. I thought that since she was new to the school and we were not personal friends, she would have fewer qualms about criticising my teaching than a colleague with whom I worked closely. I invited the headmistress to do the same quiz and questionnaire as the girls and specified areas for her to comment on after the lesson.

At this stage I was also experimenting with ways in which I could monitor the contribution made by the study of history towards changing young people's attitudes. It was all part of a learning process for me as well as for them. I was still relatively new in the school and wanted feedback from my students in order to improve my teaching techniques. At the time I did not see it as a possible research strategy that could be used on a larger scale but merely intended to use the data for an M. Ed. Dissertation.

B. The Main Study: 1996 and 2001

(i) 1996 and 2001: Student Data

I conducted a comparative study among samples of students in two geographical areas of the United Kingdom: Mid-Ulster (Magherafelt, Cookstown and Dungannon) in Northern Ireland and Oxford in England. These areas of Northern Ireland and England were selected on the grounds that: (a) their history syllabus reflects the cultural differences of the groups they historically associate with (Ireland and England, respectively); (b) the syllabus is delivered by teachers who reflect the regional variety: they are usually from the same cultural and religious backgrounds as their students (white British in Oxford, and, in N. Ireland, Catholic teachers in Catholic schools and Protestant teachers in

Protestant schools); (c) the students come from socio-political contexts with different experiences of national identity and inter-group conflict.

The data was taken from 1737 students. The following table shows the number of students in each group. The categories in Table 3 describe variables (type of school, cohort, etc) which were treated as independent variables.

Schools were selected using the following criteria

- They were in the geographical areas of Oxford and Mid-Ulster
- In Mid-Ulster they provided a balance between Protestant and Catholic.
- In Mid-Ulster they provided a balance between selective and non-selective.
- In Oxford they provided a balance between State and Independent.
- The Principal and Head of History agreed to the survey and interviews.

Table 2: Participants in Students' Survey, 1996 and 2001

Date of data collection	Region and Type of School	Number of schools	Date of data collection	Type of School	Number of schools targeted
April –June 1996	Mid-Ulster Protestant Comprehensive	1	Sept- Dec 2001	Protestant Comprehensive	1
April –June 1996	Mid-Ulster Protestant Secondary-modern	2	Sept- Dec 2001	Protestant Secondary-modern	2
April –June 1996	Mid-Ulster Catholic Secondary-modern	2	Sept- Dec 2001	Catholic Secondary-modern	2
April –June 1996	Mid-Ulster Protestant Grammar	2	Sept- Dec 2001	Protestant Grammar	2
April –June 1996	Mid-Ulster Catholic Grammar	2	Sept- Dec 2001	Catholic Grammar	3
April –June 1996	Oxford Comprehensive	3	Sept- Dec 2001	Oxford Comprehensive	3
April –June 1996	Oxford Independent	4	Sept- Dec 2001	Oxford Independent	4
April –June 1996	Oxford Middle	2	Sept- Dec 2001	Oxford Middle	0

Table 3: Number of students that completed the questionnaire, broken down by cohort, demographic and school characteristics

	1996	2001
Catholic NI Schools	314	208
Protestant NI Schools	199	144
State English Schools	195	182
Independent English Schools	294	200
Grammar NI schools	257	205
Secondary NI schools	256	147
Younger students (years 7- 9)	726	316
Older students (years 10-13)	276	418
Male students	437	269
Female students	565	458

(ii) 1996 and 2001: Design and Sampling of Students Questionnaires

I used questionnaires to obtain information about students' opinions and attitudes and teachers' use of teaching methods. The main reason why I employed this method was because it enabled a much larger and more widespread sample to be investigated. Moreover, the responses were easily coded and quantified especially through the use of the SPSS software package. I had limited time and had access to a large number of my own students to pilot the questionnaire and to discuss responses and problems. I tried not to constrain the students by limiting their replies but as far as possible gave them the opportunity to comment on the question as well as tick boxes.

In 1996 I contacted ten schools in each region. Although special consideration was given to places where I knew the head of history, schools were targeted primarily because they were among the leading types of school in Northern Ireland and in Oxford as seen below.

I sent a number of questionnaires (usually 50 to 100), a cover letter and a stamped addressed envelope to the heads of history departments who had previously agreed to

circulate the questionnaires to their students and return them to me by the end of term. At the same time I arranged a mutually convenient time to conduct a semi-structured interview with the teacher.

Students Sampling Problems

In January 2001 I contacted the schools to ask for their co-operation in circulating the same questionnaire sent in 1996 to a similar range of students and asked for them to be returned by Easter. In some cases my previous contact was no longer in the post and the current Head of Department was unable or unwilling to co-operate with me. I responded to this by searching for new schools, thereby weakening some of the continuity and balance of my work. Fortunately, my sample was large enough to compensate for some of the discrepancies.

One of the Oxford schools had closed down and two others didn't co-operate. This left four of the earlier cohort which I had to supplement with other schools.

Two of the Mid-Ulster schools had amalgamated and, since the new school and one other were unresponsive, I had to replace them with three newly recruited schools.

Out of the 1737 students who returned the questionnaire in 1996 and 2001:

59% were females and 41% were males;

58% were surveyed in 1996 and 42% in 2001;

Students ranged in age from 11 to 18.

(iii) Questions in the 1996 and 2001 Students Surveys

I aimed to make the questionnaire as clear, short and comprehensive as possible. It covered both sides of one A4 page and contained 6 questions

1. Students were also asked *to state their full name, gender, school year and the name and region of the school.*

2. **How much do you like history?** (On a Likert-type scale ranging from a low of 1 to a high of 5.)

3. **In what ways were you taught history?** (On a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 never to 5 very often.)

The strategies given were:

- Teacher read from a book
- We read books at home.
- We did projects
- Teacher dictated notes
- We were given worksheets
- We made notes at home
- We read aloud in class
- We discusses different views
- We wrote essays
- We copied from the blackboard
- We looked at evidence
- We did role-plays/debates

4. *What topics did you feel uncomfortable being taught?* (Up to 6 topics could be chosen and space was provided for at least two reasons to be given for the choice)

5. They were asked to: *Evaluate the degree to which eight different sources helped them to develop their opinions about the history of their country* (Ranging from 1, 'unimportant', to 5, 'very influential'.) The eight factors stated were:

History classes in school

Parents/relatives

TV/films

Reading history books

Other subjects

Reading newspapers

Friends

Personal experience

6. *To what extent do you agree with six statements on learning about sensitive issues in the classroom* (On a scale from 1 'Strongly disagree' to 5 'Strongly agree'.) A space was left for students to comment after each of the following statements:

- It is wrong to teach sensitive issues in history in case you offend people.
- It is important to teach even topics that might embarrass people in order to learn the truth.
- Teaching sensitive issues in history creates bitterness.
- My teacher's views are biased.
- Learning history makes people tolerant of others.
- History has no relevance to life.

7. An *open-ended question* about their views on learning about issues in history that could easily offend or hurt people.

C. Teachers Interviews

(i) The Mid-Ulster Pilot

Sample

Initially my research was designed to target only my past and present pupils. At first I talked to three teachers who were friends to get their opinion on the new curriculum. I was so interested in their opinion that I asked for a more formal interview where I

prepared questions and either taped their responses or took copious notes. I based my findings on interviews with twelve history teachers, two academics and one HMI in 1991. All teachers lived in Mid-Ulster and worked in secondary schools there: seven were female, five male; they were all experienced teachers aged between 35 and 50. The three others were male. Overall, 15 people were interviewed; nine came from a Catholic background and six from a Protestant background.

I interviewed these teachers in the summer of 1991 at the same time as I carried out the surveys with students in Northern Ireland. It was part of the data collected for an M.Ed. degree. Five of the interviews were taped and notes were taken on other occasions. The interviews were semi structured. I prepared questions but welcomed spontaneous comments. The interviews were conducted mainly in a neutral venue such as a teachers' centre and they lasted from 10 to 45 minutes.

All teachers lived in mid-Ulster and worked in secondary schools. They were all experienced teachers mostly aged between 30 and 55. As far as possible, I aimed to include equal numbers of males and females and achieve a balance between Protestant and Catholic.

Context and Samples

The interviews were conducted in either the summer of 1991 or sporadically throughout 1996 and 2001. I targeted more teachers in the later cohorts and therefore had to be more flexible regarding time. I made a genuine effort to allow the individual voice to be heard. The advantage of accumulating responses to open-ended questions is, as Lofland explains: 'to capture participants "on their own terms"' (Lofland, 1971, p. 7). My approach, to repeat, was influenced by the 'grounded theory' of Glaser and Strauss (1967) who impressed me with the notion of becoming immersed in the data – being grounded - 'so that embedded meanings and relationships can emerge' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 189). I was aware of the following problems:

- a) Were the questions that I asked ethical and appropriate to my research questions?
- b) Should I have a set number of questions and order and structured them rigidly?
- c) How long should the interviews take?
- d) Where should they take place?
- e) How much information should I give the interviewees beforehand?
- f) How much should I know about them before the interview?
- g) What follow-up should I have afterwards?
- h) The need to cultivate awareness of non-verbal messages e.g. avoiding eye contact
unease.
- i) The need to guarantee that my observations and interaction were accurate.
- j) An awareness of my opinion of and emotional reaction towards my interviewees
- k) What was the best way to get 'authentic rather than easy data'?
- l) The extent to which I voice my opinions as a practising teacher currently
embroiled in sensitive situations and with experience of a variety of different
circumstances.

1991: Interview Questions

When formulating questions for interviews with teachers in 1991, I identified three areas of interest:

1. The extent to which teachers believed that schools, whether actively or passively, are indeed agents of change (Jenkins, 1980);
- 2 The extent to which teachers are conscious of transmitting values (Reynolds and Skilbeck, 1976);
3. The extent to which teachers are receptive to changes in the common curriculum.

I structured questions according to Jenkins' typology. I asked teachers open ended questions about the other topics.

Table 4

Participants in adult interviews: 1991, 1996 and 2001 in Mid-Ulster

Year	Female	Male	Protestants	Catholic	Total
1991	7	8	6	9	15
1996	17	21	18	20	38
2001	28	15	11	17	28

(ii) The Main Study: 1996 and 2001

It was as a result of the insights I gained from the procedure followed in 1991 that I later decided to target teachers in both Oxford and Mid-Ulster in the 1996 and 2001 cohorts. All the Irish teachers lived in mid-Ulster and worked in secondary schools. They were all experienced teachers mostly aged between 30 and 55. As far as possible, I aimed to include equal numbers of males and females and achieve a balance between Protestant and Catholic

My research dealt with emotions and it was impossible to get to the depth of the teachers' emotion without speaking directly to them. I tried to provide a comfort zone within which teachers could respond in such a way that represents accurately and thoroughly their points of view. I did this not only in allowing digressions from the questions I had prepared but in the way I had set up the interviews by giving them as much information as possible beforehand about my project by trying to make them feel at ease in allowing them to dictate the time and venue of the meetings. They were not always at school and frequently were at either my home or theirs. If possible I arranged for refreshments to be provided to create a sociable relaxed ambience where they could feel comfortable. The interviews lasted from 20 minutes to one hour. There was a disparity in the time taken to interview various teachers could allow more time at school than others and often we were diverted by social conversation.

I had a set number of questions but did not structure or order them too rigidly to exclude spontaneous comments. I was aware of my own opinions, my interviewees and of their own possible different emotional reaction. Trying to create a relaxed atmosphere appeared to be the best way to get the responses authentic.

I conducted follow-up interviews with five teachers to ensure that I was not misrepresenting them and to have further evidence of teachers' responses not only to their earlier comments but also to the findings from the students' surveys.

Table 5

The Oxford Sample. Participants in Adult Interviews: 1996 and 2001 in Oxford.

Year	Female	Male	State	Independent	Total
1996	9	9	9	9	18
2001	9	7	8	8	16

1996: Interviews with Teachers in Oxford

18 teachers were interviewed:

- (1) A middle school in the state sector; three teachers, (two male and one female)
- (2) Upper schools in the state sector, six teachers (three male and three female)
- (3) Independent schools, nine teachers (four male and five female);

2001: Interviews with Teachers in Oxford

16 teachers were interviewed:

- (1) State schools: eight teachers - four male and four female.
- (2) Independent schools: eight teachers - three male and five female.

I felt that I achieved a good balance of male/female and state/independent teachers in Oxford but in 2001 I was not able to interview any more than three of the same teachers that I had interviewed in 1996. By 2001 the middle schools had either closed down or were on the point of doing so and were not receptive to giving interviews. Oxford had a more transient population than Northern Ireland and, although I was teaching in Oxford, I had a closer network of teachers in Mid-Ulster.

(iii) 1996 and 2001: Teachers Questions

I asked questions regarding the **internal and external factors** that teachers thought impacted on teaching sensitive issues in the classroom.

External

- To what extent do teachers perceive the current international/national political situation to have affected history teaching in the classroom?
- To what extent has the local community or school affected history teaching in the classroom?
- To what extent have curriculum/educational changes affected history teaching in the classroom?

Internal

- Were any particular topics found to be more sensitive than others?
- Why this was the case? (This was to achieve some insight into the teachers' preconceptions.)
- How did they view their students' ability and what particular knowledge/biases did their students bring to the classroom?
- What strategies did they use to teach sensitive issues?

D. Documentary Evidence

- Newspaper archives
- Inspectors reports in Northern Ireland and in Oxford
- Past and current issues on Teaching History and other relevant journals.
- Educational archives in the public record offices in Belfast and in Kew.

I used the *Oxford Times*, a weekly local paper, to research teachers' views in Oxford in 1991 because I did not interview teachers then. It was easy to negotiate access to the newspaper archives and I either took handwritten notes or photocopied extracts. These reports were also helpful in providing background information of the political, social and educational system in the city; the newspaper was particularly useful in detail the debate over the closure of the middle schools.

National newspapers and the *Times Educational Supplement* were important sources of contextual development and debates especially regarding the position of ethnic minorities and the introduction of educational initiatives.

At the beginning of the research project I used the archives in the public records offices in Belfast and Kew for information about the changing role of the history teacher and the position of history vis a vis other competing subjects such as English and Geography. Much of this research was not used directly in this thesis because its focus was directed towards the empirical evidence.

I used the above sources and have been influenced by Gary McCulloch's work which examines in depth the role of documentary sources in history and social research (McCulloch, 2004).

E. Analysis of the Data

1. Qualitative Analysis

Before I started interpreting the interviews, I had ideas that arose out of my research questions and my personal experience about what I was likely to find. My strategy was based on the inductive reasoning approach which involves discovering patterns and themes and categories in the data through my interaction with it. I was influenced in the early stages by the “Open Coding” suggested by Strauss and Corbin who emphasise the importance of being open to the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Again I must mention the pertinent Grounded Theory of Glaser and Strauss (1967) who emphasised: becoming immersed in the data; being grounded so that embedded meanings and relationships can emerge.

My work is inductive in that analytic procedure is data-oriented while still acknowledging the role of theory in shaping the interpretation of data. According to Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000, p. 15), researchers who position themselves within the framework of grounded theory start inductively but not in a sense that their induction starts directly from data. Instead, the framework of grounded theory involves the second phase: that is, ‘comparison between several cases with a concomitant extension of the empirical base’ (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000, p. 15). This method enables researchers to conduct a more abstract level of analysis, leading them to generate and develop theory. Even though the first phase of analysis in this study has involved ‘open coding’ (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 61), dependence on theory cannot be dismissed. For instance, some of categories in this study were ‘literature-derived-concepts’, which ‘are loaded with analytic meaning and may already be considerably well developed in their own right’ (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 68).

Interpretation of my data relied heavily on what Maxwell (1992, p. 281) calls ‘internal validity’: that is, ‘a realist conception of validity that sees the validity of an account as inherent, not in the procedures used to produce and validate it, but in its relationship to

those things that it is intended to be an account of' (Smith and Deemer, 2003, p. 432). Of paramount importance here is ensuring a correct 'fit' between research questions and actual methods as well as provision of a clear description of one's theoretical stance and research techniques.

I therefore took this loosely structured, emergent, inductively grounded approach to gathering data because, as Wolcott puts it, there is merit in open-mindedness and willingness to enter a research setting looking for questions as well as answers, but it is "impossible to embark upon research without some idea of what one is looking for and foolish not to make that quest explicit' (Wolcott, 1990, p. 102). Lack of focusing, he advises, leads to indiscriminate data collection and data overload.

I found the process of transcribing recorded interviews myself useful. I did it verbatim as much as possible so that I did not lose the flavour of the tone and language. I then reread the interviews and reflected on them and thought about my research questions before putting them into categories. The ensuing categories led to theoretical propositions arising from the data. I refined these interpretations until a point where I judged saturation had been reached. I had read the material several times until patterns and categories emerged. At this stage I coded by hand making multiple copies and cutting them into individual chunks and by colour coding as I went along and putting into apparent themes with each theme in a coloured folder. This strategy was recommended by Patton (2000). I then transferred the transcripts into a qualitative software package NVivo when the interviews became too numerous to simply cut and paste manually.

(i) 1991: Interviews with Teachers

It was with the range of teachers' views in mind that I attempted to make an elementary link between external and internal factors by placing Irish teachers into three categories according to their views on the prospect of having to teach Irish history. I initially considered these views to be one of these three:

1. Negative

2. Positive

3. Ambivalent

However, responses did not fall neatly into these boxes. A continuum linking the *very optimistic* at one end to the *very pessimistic* at the other more accurately reflected the ambiguities in the range of views. On the right end of the continuum I placed the teacher who unreservedly welcomed the inclusion of mainly Irish history in the curriculum, at the left end were those teachers who disagreed with or even feared teaching the prescribed syllabus. The great majority of teachers (70% - 80%) could be placed right of centre.

I made a further attempt to interpret teachers' emotional and intellectual responses to teaching controversial issues after I conducted interviews in 1996 and 2001 in both Oxford and Northern Ireland. My grouping arose out of my desire to express the link between the teachers' perception of the purpose of history teaching and the teaching strategies they used in the classroom. This is underpinned by what I had identified as being the salient external and internal factors. Whilst looking for categories it is more useful to note their occurrence rather than being concerned to label any one teacher: a teacher in her time (sometimes even lesson time) plays many parts by constantly moving between one position on the spectrum and the other. All is in a constant state of flux and it would be invidious to suggest that one response is superior to the other.

In doing so I was influenced by an eclectic mixture of thinkers across the ideological divide such as Althusser (1971) Beattie and the Centre for Policy Studies (1987), Bourdieu (1984) and Skilbeck (1973) who looked at the teacher as being a social engineer and by Barton and Lestik's (2004) consideration of the role of the history teacher in citizenship education. Also important were Stradling's (1986) look at a teacherly conception of a balanced strategy as well as the neutral chair role as envisaged by Skilbeck (1978). I distinguished between teachers who tended to place emphasis on the extrinsic or social aims of education and those who seemed to give priority to history's intrinsic value as a way of developing a critical stance within the framework of the discipline.

(ii) 1996 and 2001: Interviews with Teachers

Transparency is necessary for accountability. The challenges of how to provide a transparent account of the use of the software program QSR*NVIVO (QSR, 2000) within a grounded theory framework are dealt with by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and by Strauss and Corbin (1998).

(iii) Avoiding Problems using NVivo

Lyn Richards identifies what she calls the ‘the seven deadly sins’ of qualitative software:

1. Software won’t think;
2. It distances researchers from data;
3. It (only) does grounded theory;
4. Its rigid, traditional method is inflexible;
5. It forces researchers to code;
6. It forces top-down thinking;
7. It is responsible for unplanned projects by unskilled researchers.

She suggests taking the following into account when using Nvivo:

1. Lack of writing and teaching on qualitative software must be understood in the context of problems with data handling and validity;
2. The software forces the researcher to face these issues;
3. Change is retarded and made far more painful by the inertia of writing and teaching;
4. Change is absolutely irrevocable – the next generation will of course use software;
5. So the writers and teachers must deal constructively with it and ideally lead it;
6. They can do so. Nothing in software forces rejection of anything in traditional methods;

7. Indeed software can remove barriers to doing it well and take it much further (Richards, 2004).

As a promoter of the software with a financial interest in it, it is not surprising that she notes the software's potential to 'manage, access and analyse qualitative data and to keep a perspective on all of the data without losing its richness or the closeness to data that is critical for qualitative research' (Bazeley and Richards, 2000).

Possible Problem Areas

I noted the following issues when I used the programme:

1. Not recognising its limitations. NVivo cannot analyse data on its own. It is simply a tool to be commanded by the user and performs only what it is told to do;
2. Ignoring findings or data that aren't readily codable but are important;
3. Over-reliance on the structure of the programme thereby allowing the codes, the software or the coding manual to determine the form and content of interpretative activity or indeed the entire work;
4. Failing to take account of important situational and contextual factors of the interviews;
5. Ignoring findings or data that aren't readily codable but are important;
6. Coding late in the research process so that propositions cannot be tested along the way.

I made the following efforts to avoid these problems utilising a range of strategies:

1. The interpretative activity was started only after I revised the available literature. As themes emerged, the literature was explored further in order to better understand and validate the research findings;
2. I also kept in mind the findings from the quantitative and documentary analysis to aid the process of triangulation;
3. Patterns were explored after the transcripts had been coded. Free nodes were reviewed according to the number of documents coded. The passage was reviewed to ensure that the coding was accurate. The research question dominated the direction and extent of this exploration;
4. In some transcripts, important information was given that was not directly related to the theme of this research. Some important experiences and information did not contribute in a practical way to this particular research question. The research question was revisited many times during the coding;
5. As far as possible I transcribed the interviews within a few days of recording and coding commenced immediately. Codes from the early transcripts were reviewed repeatedly as new transcripts were coded to make sure the codes were specific, and to check if themes had continued on through subsequent interviews. Some early coded passages were re-coded to be more specific to the emergent themes but remain in context with the original transcript.

The question of "leading/being led" relates back to the earlier discussion of how interviewers should "keep the respondent on the topic". That also is a matter of judgment and a source of bias: what the researcher may see as off-topic may be precisely what the interviewee sees as important to it.

(iv) Coding the 1996 and 2001 Teachers Interviews

My key point is that I tried to allow the teachers' voice to come through, to speak directly to the reader.

In reaching conclusions I asked the following questions.

- Are there any common/contrasting elements in the teachers' responses?
- Can this be explained by factors like location or type of school?
- Are there any changes over time, particularly over the past 10 years?
- What has remained the same in teaching sensitive issues?
- What was the impact of teaching Irish history: and has EMU improved the situation?
- What strategies do teachers use to deal with sensitive issues?
- How and why have these strategies changed?
- How does the issue being sensitive affect the class dynamics (the teacher/pupil and pupil/pupil relationships)?
- How important are degrees of sensitivity? (Teachers report that some degree of sensitivity can make for more interesting lessons especially if there is interactive learning.)
- Can students learn concepts more easily if confronted with prejudice?
- What is the impact of teaching sensitive issues on empathy?
- Is any one teaching strategy likely to increase /decrease sensitivity? For example, do dictated notes inflame passions less than discussing topics?
- Is any one opinion about sensitivity more likely to come from a person who finds a topic sensitive?
- How influential is history teaching at school for changing values/attitudes/opinions particularly on issues of national identity?
- What are the ways in which what is sensitive is in a constant state of flux?
- Does the teacher have a role as a possible social engineer? Is the teacher willing/able to change values?
- To what extent are they conscious of their own bias?

I attempted to identify core consistencies and meanings, to look for patterns. I noted for example that almost all the teachers reported feeling uncomfortable when teaching issues related to national identity. This core issue I placed with influences external to the classroom.

Coding

Stage One

I became familiar with the descriptive accounts given by teachers' perceptions of sensitive issues, their students and their teaching strategy to create a profile of a number of teachers in teaching situations.

Stage Two

I searched for patterns by *interpreting material at an individual and group level* and thereby created categories for these links which I stored as nodes in NVivo.

Table 6: Categories

External	Internal
a) The current international and national political situation	a) Teachers' preconceptions
b) Educational changes	b) Teachers' opinion of their students stance
c) The influence of the local community	c) Teachers' ideas on the role of history
	d) Teachers' strategies

Based on my finding from the 1991 interviews, I formulated the following categories to describe teachers' response to having to teach sensitive issues in the classroom.

Table 7: Teacher Characteristics

Characteristic: Lion	Characteristic: Fox	Characteristic: Mouse
Theorist: Friere, Skilbeck Banks	Theorist: Warnock, Skilbeck, Phillips	Theorist: the classroom practitioner
Crusading: vigorous provocative controlling	Conciliatory: navigates cajoles avoids direct confrontation	Cautious: fearful retreats like a mouse when threatened by a cat
Strategy adopted	Strategy adopted	Strategy adopted
Makes political views clear	Usually honest broker or neutral chair	Often neutral chair but may avoid teaching issues.
Purpose	Purpose	Purpose
Believes that history has a clear and important role to play in improving community relations and that this role should be made explicit in the classroom.	Believes that history has a clear and important role to play in improving community relations but that this role should remain implicit.	Believes that history as a discipline should not be compromised by the teacher having a social agenda.

Stage Three

I analysed the internal patterns or categories in the findings to draw conclusions and insights into the nature of sensitivity in teaching. I considered, for example, how a teacher's ideology influences the teaching strategy used or ways in which her preconceptions impacted on her views of her students.

Exposing the sensitive topics chosen by teachers and their students is interesting but the reasons why they are identified as such is more important. I believe that if we are to dig below the surface to fully understand the nature of sensitive issues in the classroom we must examine them within the context of the particular political, economic and social changes that formed the milieu in which the teacher and student operated. I give exemplifications of my categories below.

(v) Examples of Teachers Responses Placed in Categories

Mouse

1. I had one child, one year, whose uncle had been shot and I knew both. It was the only time I ever felt uncomfortable because every time I tackled the modern stuff, I was very aware of the impact it was having on the child. Was this bringing everything back? I must say he handled it very well. I was scared (*Ulster, 1996*).

Mouse

2. One thing I struggled with was how to get a balanced approach. I remember planning an empathy exercise which involved a slave and slave owner but in the end I simply stated the case from the owner's point of view and didn't look at it in an empathetic way. I couldn't bring myself to let them write from a slave owner's point of view because I was afraid that that was what they'd take away with them (*Ulster, 2001*).

Fox

3. I suppose bias is always at the back of your mind. I would hope that all teachers especially history teachers would present in an objective way. Of course everybody has their own personal point of view but that doesn't come across to the children. You've got to be objective and I'd like to think that 99.9% are. We're not social engineers because what we're doing is asking people to think critically (*Ulster, 1996*).

Fox

4. Personally I don't feel uncomfortable with any topic. I enjoy teaching them all. I have to be careful handling some topics definitely. I don't think I've ever been uncomfortable with any but I have to be careful in approach with, for example, the Irish Question. I'm half Irish; my mother comes from a particular religious background. I'm aware of that. Kids know about things like that. I just have to be careful not to impose any views on them. I know I'm biased personally (*Oxford, 1996*).

Fox

5. I don't think that you should necessarily wear your heart on your sleeve but in terms of values and humanity and morality they should come out of it, although, of course, morality itself is not entirely objective. One hopes you see conflicting values and you appreciate man's inhumanity to man but also you appreciate the humane things about it as well. I suppose History has more ethical and spiritual content than most subjects. But you can't dictate, you encourage pupils to think for themselves (*Oxford, 1996*).

Fox

6. I think that instead of confronting very sensitive issues head on in Northern Ireland where there are still too many entrenched views, more emphasis should be placed on what we have in common. We could do a lot more of this shared heritage. There is a tendency to ignore that. We could do a lot more common history. Teachers are trying to anyway but it could be brought up more up front when you deal with the more recent events and the controversies and the deep seated prejudices etc resentments (*Ulster, 2001*).

Fox

7. I think the role of a History teacher is to stimulate pupils' imagination, fascinate them with the differences between past and present, give them the means to examine evidence and draw conclusions from it by developing their critical judgement as far as possible. We must develop an awareness of sequence and causation and make them aware that different people may hold different views on historic events and they need to judge these. I think there is a limited role for making pupils aware that certain causes of action in politics are liable to have certain consequences (*Oxford, 2001*).

Lion

8. I see history as a political activity. I tell the children that there is no such thing as being unbiased and that they must feel that they can debate with me and I don't want to impose my views on them. I am going to challenge extreme right wing views and I think that is my ethical responsibility (*Oxford, 2001*).

(vi) Reporting and Analysis

I linked internal factors and external factors together over time and place to consider, for example, the extent to which they were different or similar in each school and cohort.

Comparison between Data Collection and Analysis of Findings

It is noteworthy that my coding and analysis took the opposite path from my data collection where I started with the international situation and ended up with the classroom situation. Here I started with the student and teacher and moved out towards the macro.

Data Collection:

International → national → government initiatives → community → classroom.

Data Analysis:

Classroom → community → government initiatives → national → international.

Reporting of Interviews

- 90% + - almost/nearly all/nearly unanimous
- 80% - 89% - a very large majority/overwhelming majority/vast majority/ a great many
- 70% - 79% - a large majority/the great majority/ a great number/around three quarters
- 60% - 69% - a sizable majority/ a considerable majority
- 50% - 59% - a small majority/most/a little more than half
- 40% - 49% - a highly significant minority/ just less than half/
- 30% -39% - a sizable minority/ a significant minority
- 20% - 29% - a minority/ around a quarter
- 10% - 19% - a small minority/ a very few/ a small number.
- 0% - 9% - hardly any/ a very small number/an almost negligible amount.

2. Quantitative Analysis

(i) 1991: Students Questionnaire Analysis

The sample was small enough to calculate the responses instead of using SPSS software. I considered each question in the order in which it was asked, and placed the comments into appropriate categories. I noted the percentage of students making the responses and the less typical statements. The fact that most students made detailed comments as well as circling answers made the task of analysing the data trickier as well as more interesting because I also had to consider the qualitative as well as the quantitative.

(ii) 1996 and 2001: Students Questionnaire Analysis using SPSS

As regards analysing the students' survey, I used the SPSS software package to ensure greater accuracy and in the early stages consulted students about the language used in the questionnaire to avoid misinterpretation of the questions. I also took note of commonly made responses and the less typical statements.

(iii) Plan for the Analysis of the Student Survey

The data is taken from 1737 students. Table 3 shows the number of students in each group. The categories in here describe variables (type of school, cohort, etc) which I treated as independent variables.

There are roughly speaking four sets of dependent variables:

(A) Extent of liking history (1 = low to 5 = high);

(B) Ways of being taught history (twelve different ways assessed; response scale: 1 = never being taught in this way; to 5 = very often);

(C) Sources for developing opinions about history (eight different sources assessed; response scale: 1 = unimportant; to 5 = very influential);

(D) Views about history as a sensitive topic (six statements; response scale: 1= strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = I don't know; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree).

Responses have been converted to: 1= Disagree/Strongly Disagree, 2 = Agree/Strongly Agree and 3 = Do not know.

The results of the analysis span four questions in the thesis: (1) students' views in 1996; (2) students' views in 2001; (3) comparing cohorts; and (4) conclusions.

Stage 1: Students' Views in 1996

- Selecting students in the 1996 cohort.
- Independent T-tests to look for significant differences between different types of schools regarding dependent variables A, B, and C.
- Factor analysis was used for ways of being taught history and sources of influence; the solutions found in each case were neither stable nor clear. Also the internal consistency of some of these derived scales was too low.
- Cross tabulations to look for significant differences between different types of schools regarding dependent variable D.
- The results of all previous analysis will be shown in charts and tables.
- Multiple regression to find whether after controlling for differences in age and gender, various types of schools significantly contribute to the prediction of A, B, and C.
- Logistic regression to address a similar question as before for dichotomous dependent variable D.

Stage 2: Students' Views in 2001

- Selecting students in the 2001 cohort.
- Repeat the process as for 1996.
- Analysis of variance (ANOVA) to look for significant differences between different types of schools and cohort regarding dependent variables A.
- Analysis of variance (ANOVA) to look for significant differences between different types of schools and cohort regarding dependent variables A.

- Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to look for significant differences between different types of schools and cohort regarding sets of dependent variables B and C.
- Cross tabulations to look for significant differences between different types of schools and cohort regarding dependent variable D.
- Multiple Regression to find whether after controlling for differences in age and gender, various types of schools and cohort significantly contribute to the predictions of A, B, and C.
- Logistic Regression to address a similar question as before for dichotomous dependent variable D.

Stage 3: Conclusions

Bringing all findings together for discussion and drawing conclusions.

F. Final Comments

a. Methodological Limitations of my Research

Most of the limitations and weaknesses I identify in this work are methodological. There was the possibility that in focusing on my own experience my voice might overshadow those of my interviewees. By concentrating on the interpersonal I risked subjectivity with my emotional involvement and possibly drawing attention away from the phenomena being studied.

Thus the strategy I employed has drawbacks: 'Paradoxically, attempts to critically evaluate and deconstruct become, themselves, rhetorical strategies to claim authority and credibility' (Findlay, 1996, p. 226). There were 'the dangers of infinite regress with researchers indulging in endless narcissistic personal emoting' (Findlay 1996, p.227). I do however believe that personal revelation is only useful if links are made to analyse its relevance in terms of the broader study.

I am also aware of other possible methodological weaknesses. In research a variety of techniques are used to assure internal and external validity. One such is the random selection of subjects. It could be claimed that my sample of teachers was a non - representative sample of the teacher population. Nearly all those interviewed were Heads of Department and over 40 and most were females. Also, in Northern Ireland, most were Catholic but that represents the proportion of Protestant to Catholic teachers in Mid-Ulster.

There were other weaknesses in the 1996 and 2001 survey samples: the inclusion of only 43% of students in English state schools and 57% from independent schools represents an imbalance because most young people attend state schools. There was also a gender discrepancy in the survey with 59% being females and 41% males.

In a strictly longitudinal study continuity and consistency are essential. The same profile of teachers (preferably the same teachers) should have been targeted and the same number and school included each time I collected data. Furthermore, as I have already indicated, I cannot claim that the past pupils I surveyed in 1991 were typical of young people in the province. Coming from a selective school and having opted to continue with history to at least A Level, these young people were more likely to have been well disposed towards Irish history and more willing to take an objective approach than their contemporaries.

Yet this approach seemed suited to my work because, at the time of undertaking it, little was known about the research area. Certainly in selecting extracts from the interviews and in categorising them I imposed an ordered framework on these findings but one that I thought appropriate to the questions I was researching. Yet I would not be surprised if another researcher made a different selection of the same data to answer different research questions or to fit a different conceptual framework.

However, I am convinced that my approach and conclusions are reasonable and they are valid insofar as any research into human nature with all its inconsistencies can be valid.

In an effort to minimise the inherent weaknesses due to dealing with people I tried to be as rigorous as possible by subjecting my methods to a process of triangulation.

b. Reconciling Quantitative and Qualitative Methods and Assessing the Contribution to Knowledge

The apparent discrepancy between teachers' and students' views must be reconciled. Any analysis must take my different methodological approaches as well as the different interpretations of the nature of history as a discipline into account. The validity of comparing the findings from a students' (or indeed any) questionnaire with lengthy, probing interviews with teachers must be considered. Discrepancies between the two may be incontrovertible or they could be more apparent than real.

I think that neither scenario fits the claims made here. Or, at least, neither tells the whole story. Certainly it is true that there are some inconsistencies when findings from a survey are compared with data extrapolated from interviews. I will not attempt here to make a case for the superiority of the quantitative over the qualitative.

It is more apposite that I acknowledge that in their response to my question about learning about the history of their country, the young people surveyed were considering primarily the contribution history lessons made to their factual knowledge. Teachers, when interviewed, were more concerned about the inculcation of beliefs and the long term changes made to attitudes, particularly as regards community relations as a result of learning history at school. In other words, both students and teachers were responding to conflicting interpretations of the purpose of history.

The survey did not delve deeply into the roots and impact of prejudice because it was designed to do a different and much less subtle job. The questionnaire considered the more mechanistic, functional side of history with questions about liking, relevance and knowledge transmission. The teachers' interviews added a further dimension; within their scope lay questions of motivation, morality and emotion. These feelings could not

be fully explored within the confines of the survey. However, I was able to obtain deeper insights into the function of classroom history by using both methods and at the same time facilitating the process of triangulation.

Some overall comments are in order here. When students and teachers were interviewed there was agreement about the extent to which knowledge does not automatically confer tolerance. Nevertheless, regardless of how history is ultimately interpreted, students generally come to class with the expectation that they will learn the facts or, as they so often said, the 'truth' about the past. They were particularly eager to know about such sensitive issues as the history of their country.

It is interesting that even after controls had been made for liking history in both regions (Oxford and Mid-Ulster) and for both cohorts (1996 and 2001) there was increased recognition of the important contribution that school history makes to learning about one's country, especially amongst older students. Teachers tended to under-estimate the extent to which young people are appreciative of the knowledge they get in history lessons at school. There is a message here for teachers: young people tend to enjoy their subject and they can be more confident in their approach to the subject.

Also those teachers do not need to be so concerned about sensitivity. Certainly by 2001 teachers in Northern Ireland were more confident about tackling sensitive issues; this is in contrast with earlier years when there was more overall hesitancy around

Some teachers were still dubious about the outcome of the changes but this could change with time. After all, it took government-imposed changes make a number of them tackle the sensitive areas in the first place.

Summary

The methodological framework for this thesis has been outlined by providing a rationale for the selection of research methods, which employed both qualitative and quantitative methods but were firmly anchored in the analytical procedures based on ‘grounded theory’. This was followed by a description of the participants and participating schools for the main study, with an emphasis on contextualising the research setting. The chapter continued with an illustration of the analytical decisions made at each stage of data interpretation, with a focus on generating categories both within a task and across different tasks.

The possible limitations of the thesis were exposed. They centred on an explanation of why students’ responses were seen to clash with teachers’ views. This clash was, however, also seen to be significant in my overall look at sensitivity and how students tended to be more relaxed than many teachers were in this area and find few problems with government-directed changes with which more and more teachers were also becoming comfortable

Chapter Five

1991: Teachers and Students

Part One

This chapter is divided into four parts: Part One comments on the views of teachers in Mid-Ulster based on semi-structured interviews; Part Two records the views of Oxford teachers based on documentary evidence; Part Three considers the responses of students I taught in Northern Ireland but who had left school at the time the questionnaire was circulated; Part Four concentrates on the responses of students I was currently teaching in Oxford.

Researcher Limitations

I am aware of the pitfalls of engaging in an enquiry to which I am not only central but am also emotionally involved. Bourdieu (1994) tried to avoid the problems of being a reflective researcher by insisting that the research is conducted with conscious attention to the effects of the researcher's own position, their own set of internalised structures, and how these are likely to distort or prejudice their objectivity. He believes that it is only by maintaining a continual vigilance that the researcher (in his case the sociologist) can spot their own biases.

There are further arguments against the feasibility of an insider carrying out any 'worthwhile, credible or objective enquiry' (Robson, 1993, p. 7). But I am convinced that a strong sense of audience and empathy is needed to guide the style, content and integrity of the interview. Knowing that 'even experienced teachers find it difficult to talk about or explain why they do certain things in certain ways' (Phillips, 2002, p. 6), I was convinced that if I was to discover 'the geological forces at work' (as Cathcart had recommended in a private letter written to me on 24th February, 1994), it was essential for me to encourage teachers to talk more explicitly about what may well have been an uncomfortable situation. In reporting the interviews I have of necessity been selective in

my choice of quotes but have reported the extract verbatim and have provided a context where appropriate.

My analytical framework for the semi-structured interviews with teachers is situated within Jenkins' (1980) framework (see chapter 4). When reporting the reactions of teachers and students in Northern Ireland and Oxford in 1991 to the teaching of sensitive issues in history I make comparisons between the perceptions and experience of teachers and students in both regions

The fact that I was the single researcher who conducted all interviews and that my presence may have resulted in subjectivity is acknowledged. There is also the question of leading/being led which relates back to how interviewers should keep people on the topic. A major problem against which I had to guard was having strong convictions about the Common Curriculum, especially the cross-curricular themes of Education for Mutual Understanding and Cultural Heritage. As recorded in Chapter One, I was convinced at the time that the new initiatives were counter productive.

I also found myself being reluctant to interrupt when the teacher gave me information that was interesting and informative in another context but was not relevant to the question asked. That also is a matter of judgment and a source of bias: what the researcher may see as off-topic may be precisely what the interviewee sees as important to it. What appears to be a red herring at the time can become very pertinent subsequently.

Evidence from Mid-Ulster Teachers regarding the Impact on the Classroom of *External Factors*

The prevalence of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland in 1991 remained vital in determining what was sensitive in the classroom. A large number of teachers I interviewed adopted the first option stated by Jenkins: defining schools as 'time-out' by keeping contemporary cultural and political issues off the curriculum. They took this

stand when they expressed fears of parental disapproval or even terrorist attacks such as the teacher in a controlled school who lamented 'We couldn't teach Irish history here - the school would be burned down!' or her colleague who agreed that 'We avoid Irish history because much of it is so emotive and in some areas might be interpreted as justifying sectarian views'. It was from this stance that I formed my typology of the lion, the fox and the mouse. A similar 'mouse'-like response came from various teachers in all schools but more typically from those in the Protestant controlled schools such as the one in which I worked and which I knew to be a genuine belief. Whether or not these fears were justified is not as pertinent as the impact they had on the unwillingness of a number of teachers to grasp the nettle of teaching Irish history.

Then of course, there was 'the issue itself' which at that time was not yet resolved; the outcome was then very unpredictable. The teacher, some felt, was intervening in a learning process which had already begun outside the classroom and was being shaped at home and by the mass media in ways beyond their control. Indeed, a few admitted to not having come to terms with the whole issue in their own heads. Is it any wonder that they said 'it is all best left alone'?

External social constraints such as the fear of disapproval by parents or by influential local interests were mentioned by nearly everyone at least once in the interview. For most it provided a reason for avoiding teaching Irish history. One teacher put it: 'Factional political traditions and the jargon of hard-line parents is given free rein and has intimidated others not as motivated as I am'.

Such teachers tended to be at the other end of the continuum. I labelled them 'lions' because they zealously advocated teaching Irish history in the classroom. They put the school 'up front' in the cause of understanding and eventual reconciliation; allowing cultural, social and political issues a place in the curriculum; encouraging teachers to see themselves as part of a possible solution rather than a part of the problem. A selective school teacher said that:

I personally consider it a matter of grave injustice to the pupils within all our care to steer clear of the politically sensitive issues of Irish history with the probable and potentially greater danger of abandoning ill-informed minds to simplistic interpretations or to the very formidable history of the streets.

This advisor was a former teacher in a large Catholic school where it was easier to demand that Irish history be taught because it reflected community wishes. She later became a leading exponent of conflict resolution strategies and Irish history teaching.

Many of the teachers interviewed remarked on the conflict between values expressed inside and outside the classroom by their students: a widely recurring fear was of inadvertently promoting sectarianism. Some teachers argued that the situation was made worse by providing students with half understood facts that could be used to stir the flames of prejudice and misunderstanding. They were particularly cautious about approaching the modern period; according to one it 'is still in the process of unfolding; we are dealing with open sores'. This contingent tended to adopt a local position which Jenkins termed one of modified sectarianism and whose wily approach I likened to that of a fox because most did not shy away from contentious issues like the mouse, unlike the lion they did not roar their views, rather they devised ways of navigating around the problem.

In 1991, it was certainly not the case that a few enlightened teachers were trail-makers and the others were reactionary and cowardly. The vast majority of teachers who avoided contentious issues did so for arguably legitimate academic or humane reasons. They did what Jenkins predicted and looked for 'compromise and an absence of internal conflict amidst general fuzziness, often without a cross-school policy'; or else they adopting a local position which might be termed one of modified sectarianism. In an atmosphere of bigoted tribalism, lives were being lost in tit-for-tat killings, done in the name of a 'historical' cause. Teachers were under pressure to 'stand up and be counted', to re-enforce community prejudices, to comfort the bereaved in their classroom. Not surprisingly, indeed maybe sensibly, topics with a contemporary resonance were considered too hot to handle.

From a theoretical standpoint the constructions, fears, and responses of teachers to government initiative and especially the dichotomy between what is reported by Protestant and Catholic teachers reflect not only the contact hypothesis illustrated by such as Allport (1954), Hewstone and Brown (1986) and Pettigrew 1982) and its more recent refinement, the social categorisation theory (SCT) (Turner et al, 1999), but also Kelly's contribution to the psychology of personality. They are all-powerful tools for the interpretation of sociocultural phenomena: the approaches are concerned with uncovering the conceptual frameworks people use to organise and to direct their actions. These consist of patterns of personally-created constructs each of which is 'a way in which some things are construed as being alike and yet different from others' (Kelly, 1955, p. 59).

The political and educational context of the interviews in 1991 also explains the disparity between the Catholic and Protestant teachers stance. It is not surprising that many Protestants believed that the new common curriculum with its compulsory teaching of Irish history was viewed as an attack on hegemony of British culture in the province: it reinforced their siege mentality. Conversely, most Catholic teachers regarded the greater emphasis on Irish history as a victory for Catholic Irish identity and welcomed the initiative. Indeed the new curriculum gave more momentum to an ongoing trend. By 1989, a dramatic increase was evident both in the number of schools tackling Irish history and in the prominence it was given at all levels in the curriculum, including A Level and GCSE examination options (NISEC, 1988). Nevertheless, not all schools took up these options or covered them in depth. These schools tended to be controlled (Protestant) ones.

My findings concur with the submissions made at the consultation stage where few were unreservedly optimistic about the new study units specified by the Common Curriculum. Those who were upbeat tended to be academics or curriculum administrators. Serving teachers nearly always expressed doubts about the wisdom of teaching Irish history as specified by the Common Curriculum. Many were decidedly nervous about it. Most were

concerned for practical reasons. Nearly all teachers complained about the amount of new material to be absorbed and expressed alarm about assessment and attainment targets. Complaints were made about the subject content of the HSUs and concerns expressed about moral and philosophical issues (NICC, 1988).

Although at the consultation stage, not many objections were made against the principle of including a large element of Irish history in the core units. However, the syllabus was considered to be too parochial in design: pleas were made for the inclusion of more international topics. The Working Group took the complaints on board and the final document contained more world history. Teachers were more willing to tackle these topics than teach about their own province based problems. They found the more contemporary period - particularly after 1925 - the most difficult to handle. In most ways my findings underpinned the evidence from the consultation papers. Nearly all teachers interviewed thought Irish history should be taught but nearly half expressed concern about doing it. Indeed teaching Irish history, particularly anything related to current affairs, was the only sensitive issue stated by all interviewed. Yet, despite their doubts, it was persuasively argued by nearly all the teachers interviewed that teaching Irish history was advantageous to the subject and to the community in general. But even those who welcomed change had reservations about the speed of educational reform and its prescriptive nature.

The History Proposals for the Common Curriculum also alerted teachers to the difficulty of unravelling the complexities of Irish history in such a way as to make issues intelligible to the average 14 year old. Consequently, attention was drawn to the HSU at KS3 on Ireland and British Politics in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Most sympathized with its inclusion on the grounds that many young people give up history at this stage and would miss the opportunity of knowing some modern Irish history. But teachers were gravely concerned about how to best present this highly charged period to immature minds: 'The concepts are too difficult..'; 'There is just too much to cover..'; 'It'll be a matter of getting through it all without any time to digest it or make it interesting ..'; 'I haven't a clue how to teach it'.

A common concern had apparently sound pedagogical basis in that it was held that children at KS3 were not capable of understanding abstract ideas; yet these fears were not vindicated by Schools' History Project (SHP); the Concepts of History and Teaching Approaches Project (CHATA), a project that explored different stages of pupils' thinking in relation to different elements of history. One of the key findings was that pupils' responses in history were partly dependent on the tasks that they were presented with (Ashby and al, 1997) and disputed Piaget's belief that construction of knowledge is seen as happening in discrete stages (Piaget, 1926).

In 1991 many teachers, who reflected the stance taken by both the lion and the mouse also expressed misgivings about the more explicit political purpose of history teaching inherent in the philosophy of the curriculum:

History teachers are trying to teach history, not use history as a Trojan horse for social engineering, civics, community studies or any other attempt however well intentioned, to use the classroom as a means of solving Northern Ireland's problems.

Another teacher who uncannily reflected my views at the time was convinced that:

Every schoolchild should know Irish history but the government is wrong to prescribe it. Teaching any topic should arise out of a different set of priorities - that of inculcating a love of learning because of its intrinsic merit - this does not feature in Thatcherite policy If the transmission of culture is approached with pragmatic objectives, then the end result is not education but political indoctrination.

The ambivalence or negativity felt by most teachers regarding the teaching of Irish history can also be explained by their ignorance of that topic area, lack of resources, especially suitable textbooks, and, above all, the fear of undue intrusion into the classroom caused by the proposed assessment policy. A frequent complaint about the Common Curriculum was the amount of 'new' material to be absorbed. An anxious teacher lamented: 'So much for the summer 'holiday', I'll have to spend it reading up the Irish stuff. Still, I like it'.

As regards assessment, this was something very new in 1990. The 'secret garden' of the curriculum had been intact before this but most of them were worried about assessment and attainment targets the details of which had not been finalised. Most teachers I spoke to complained about the possibility of people coming into their classrooms; of having to provide proof of progress made; of the publication of results. It was these factors that, reinforced by community sectarianism, contributing to the deepening of sensitivity in history lessons. Consequently, nervousness of being misconstrued or being considered disloyal or unpatriotic made teaching more problematical for many practitioners.

Conversely, a small majority of teachers I interviewed had already become enthusiastic about Irish history, particularly the study of localities which offered scope for document-based research and project work. They were enthusiastic about booklets such as 'The First Settlers in Ireland' which aimed to introduce children to the work of the archaeologist and to implement the new approach to the teaching of history as suggested in the NICED. Guidelines (Austin, 1985; DENI, 1986). Television programmes such as 'Ulster Landscapes' and Robert Kee's 'Ireland: a television history', had broadened the scope of the subject and made it more accessible to the general public. But, in the final analysis, it was, as some made clear, the teacher who had a crucial role to play. The changes introduced by the new curriculum facilitated the teaching of more Irish history, but 'its future will depend on how the teacher implements these changes' (Black and Macraird, 1997).

Evidence from Mid-Ulster Teachers regarding the Impact on the Classroom of *Internal Factors*

(i) Mid-Ulster Teachers' Perceptions of their Role

The only completely unbiased assessment of the evidence is probably that made by the Recording Angel and about his objectivity I suppose Satan must occasionally have his own misgivings (Magee, 1970, p. 6).

When asked about bias, not surprisingly no teacher admitted to indoctrinating their pupils. Yet most teachers voiced concern about bias in government policy. A tiny minority even suspected or 'knew of others less scrupulous - particularly from the "other

side”“. Personal experience had led me to doubt that intentional proselytizing or the judicious selection of evidence was widespread in the classroom and my interviews with teachers and inspectors confirmed this. Nevertheless, the fact that such suspicions and accusations were prevalent even amongst history teachers was more symptomatic of the degree of polarisation in the province than of the extent of unprofessional behaviour.

Most teachers agreed that the teaching of Irish history could advance the academic study of the discipline, although their suspicions of a political agenda afoot was also expressed in the claim that promoting the teaching of Irish history had become fashionable because it offered ‘a sop to Irish Nationalist aspirations’ or ‘an opportunity for Unionists to appear magnanimous’. Such sentiments, it was asserted, would do little to improve community relations and nothing for the credibility of history as an academic subject. Indeed, for a number the case against teaching Irish history was worthy of consideration.

Some (usually those I classified as mice) expressed concern about moral and philosophical issues undermining the integrity of the subject: ‘That way brings history itself into disrepute’. It was thought that ‘Being true to the discipline of the subject’, ‘presenting the evidence’, ‘examining it critically’ and ‘trying to lay bare the roots of the problem’ were the only ways to historical understanding. Such an understanding could only be brought about by strict adherence to the rules of the subject discipline, and ‘not by consciously selecting chunks to convey any value system’.

(ii) Teaching Strategies reported by Mid-Ulster Teachers

I inquired about the extent to which a specifically Irish content was beneficial: could not a project on chimney sweeps in London or children in coal mines in South Wales have produced similar results? The extent to which young people transfer knowledge from one topic area to another even when explicit connections are made is limited in my experience. This was the line taken by a teacher in a controlled school who retorted:

Maybe, but I doubt if our children could have had the same degree of empathy, or indeed enjoyed it so much: old photographs of ‘their’ school,

family and town have an immediacy and relevance that can't be found in another context.

All teachers saw the value of studying local history and, in their approach to the subject, they claimed to be objective and scholarly. Whilst there was some dispute about the extent to which history should serve social needs, an increasing number of teachers admitted to consciously trying to redress prejudice and bigotry. Intrinsic to this argument is the notion of conveying moral values and an acknowledgement of the constraints operating in schools and the local community. That it is advantageous to the subject and to the community in general was persuasively argued by most teachers interviewed including those who had reservations about the speed of educational reform and its narrowness.

The vast majority of teachers did think that it was better to teach Irish history than the Arab-Israeli conflict. For those teachers who would have preferred to arrive at the same destination of increased tolerance and mutual understanding through using the apparently parallel route of scrutinizing conflict areas outside the province, the most popular alternative was indeed teaching the Arab-Israeli problem. Another suggestion was Apartheid in South Africa.

My own experience had led me to doubt the efficacy of concentrating attention on other conflict areas before children had acquired factual knowledge of the Irish situation. In this vacuum it seemed unlikely that students could make the desired connections: vicarious empathy, I decided, was merely wishful thinking and, however much judicious cross-references are enlightening after studying Irish history, they can never provide an adequate substitute for it. Whether studying a remote foreign conflict serves as an analogy with the local conflict with which one is involved and thereby leads to new insights has been disputed by recent and ongoing research (Tosh 2008; Bar-Natan, 2003; Biton 2003; Lustig, 2003; Shechter, 2003).

The litmus test of teaching controversial issues, particularly about Northern Ireland, ought to be whether, after such lessons, pupils are more likely to question their own and

other people's assumptions and points of view. To reach this point young people would need to learn to critically diagnose information and evidence, ask awkward questions about the motives, self interests, preconceptions and assumptions of people who make public statements about issues, and recognise the various uses of rhetoric and emotive language including the use of false analogies and misleading appeals to the lessons of history.

The development of such skills requires more emphasis on enquiry-based learning and the development of a suitable classroom climate of discussion and questioning. This involves providing students with the space and security which they need if they are to face uncomfortable and painful challenges, specifically the challenge of 'unlearning', that is, realising that much of their current historical 'knowledge' is not factually accurate at all but is based on misinformation and bigotry.

Some teachers admitted to having ignored Irish history by taking the Arab-Israeli option instead of the modern Irish one for GCSE. Whilst this was acknowledged to be a viable alternative by some teachers, it was also berated as a 'cop-out' by others. Teachers from both sides of the religious divide were anxious for improved community relations but a number were convinced that exposing young people to the complexities of Irish history did more harm than good. One minority argument was that: 'A more constructive and much less divisive way forward is to examine similar conflicts in other parts of the world, e.g. Israel or Cyprus. By learning to empathise with others, peace can be made more easily at home'.

It must be remembered that the serving teachers themselves were the products of a school system which to a great extent ignored Irish history. Their knowledge was not improved by further education because, until the National Curriculum, History syllabuses even in Northern Irish universities, concentrated on Britain and Europe. I am a product of this system as are most of my contemporaries. One of my colleagues consciously ignored teaching the Irish history element in the O Level examination. When I asked her why this

was the case she admitted: 'it's not that I've anything against Irish history, it's just that I've never learnt it and I feel more comfortable with topics I know'.

As regards teaching strategy, nearly all interviewed said that, in various ways, they 'let the evidence speak for itself'. Teachers who voiced concern over the future of history as a discipline welcomed the opportunity offered by topics in the Irish history syllabus to consolidate good classroom practice. Most of these teachers had already experimented with the evidence-based approach in school-designed local studies. Their assignments (mainly for GCSE and coursework) drew on a range of source material, newspaper extracts, memoirs, photographs, ephemera, tape recordings from oral history work, as well as published works and extracts from related radio programmes. This approach not only inculcated a sense of empathy with the past and taught skills such as detecting bias but it also developed the ability to extrapolate relevant facts and narrate them succinctly and accurately.

Part Two

Evidence from Teachers in Oxford regarding the Impact on the Classroom of *External Factors*

(i) The Impact of the National Context on Oxford Teachers

I did not interview Oxford teachers in 1991 and although I came to know many who had taught in Oxford at the time, I decided not to use their testimony on the grounds that it would be tainted by hindsight. Instead I looked at Inspectors Reports of my targeted schools of the period and got access to the archives of the local weekly newspaper, *The Oxford Times*.

Before the introduction of the Education Act 1988, there were reports in Oxford newspapers of schools being used as a 'political football and as instruments of social

engineering' *The Oxford Times* (23 Feb 1989). Oxford teachers also appeared to be more concerned with being asked to do more work for less pay *The Oxford Times* (12 January 1990). The Secretary of Education, Kenneth Clarke, was then threatening teachers with performance tests to stay in jobs. Furthermore, he declared regular compulsory checks; the idea apparently was 'not to dismiss teachers but to effect change' (*The Oxford Times*, 20 May, 1990). Certainly teachers in Mid-Ulster were concerned about performance tests but hardly any mentioned salary; curriculum changes seemed uppermost in their mind. However, it must be remembered that the questions I asked dealt exclusively with teaching history and did not probe into concerns about salary.

Oxford teachers' comments are reminiscent of those made by teachers in Northern Ireland. The curriculum in schools they believed, is culturally determined. The scepticism shown by a minority of teachers in both regions is more in line with Althusser (1971) who has stressed the persistence of 'deep structures' that underlie all human cultures, leaving little room for either historical change or human initiative. In his theoretical writings Bourdieu analysis the processes of social and cultural reproduction: how the various forms of 'capital' tend to transfer from one generation to the next; for him, formal education represents the key example of this process.

(ii) The Impact of Educational Initiatives on Oxford Teachers

The National Curriculum ensured that the curriculum incorporated more topics on education for mutual understanding at all key stage levels. However, it was not until 2003 that these topics received a higher profile alongside citizenship education. Compulsion has the advantage of establishing areas of the curriculum that teachers wanted to explore but, without a mandate, were restrained from doing so. It must be noted that the majority of history teachers surveyed welcomed the inclusion of topics that had the potential to be sensitive into their own teaching but they were less positive about schemes that were not integrated into the history curriculum but instead featured as an additional subject.

Upheaval can also be detected in the educational system in Oxford. My first small survey in England was undertaken in 1991 before the National Curriculum guidelines and the impact of the new developments in GCSE and A Level examination Boards, promoting greater 'glasnost' in history teaching had sufficient time to infiltrate fully into the classroom. These initiatives brought new perspectives to the curriculum mainly by highlighting the importance of taking a more inclusive approach to Britishness, thereby officially acknowledging the changing complexion of society.

The debate on the nature of Britishness impacted on the increasingly diverse ethnic mix in schools, generating greater concern for a more sensitive approach to teaching history in the classroom. This phenomenon mirrored concern for healing community divisions that was reminiscent of what was taking place in Northern Ireland. The case study detailed below, although limited in scope by the size and homogeneous composition of the group, helps to illustrate some of the concerns of the early days of the introduction of the National Curriculum.

Evidence from Oxford Teachers regarding the Impact on the Classroom of *Internal Factors*

(i) Oxford Teachers' Predispositions and Teaching Strategies

Although individual schools had set in place policies to combat racism and social and international awareness, research was not undertaken into how a history teacher would respond to the inclusion of more sensitive issues into the school curriculum. A tentative suggestion of history teachers' attitudes at the time was indicated by a local survey. (Brighouse, 1980) A forward was written by Tim Brighouse, the Chief Education Officer for Oxfordshire, who suggested that:

Development Education, or education which takes seriously our interrelationship with a wider society and especially the 'Third World', is' I fear, an area often neglected by us all. I am sure it lies within the 'commonwealth' of the school curriculum: that is to say among areas of knowledge and skills such as careers education, health education, study skills, equal rights, multi-ethnic education, marking and homework. In short it is a subject on which there needs to be a 'whole school' policy to which

all have contributed. I believe therefore that the document will be especially relevant at the time of curriculum review (p. 34).

This development was typical of the growing emphasis on multiculturalism of the period. Multicultural policies were adopted by local administrations from the 1970s and 1980s onwards; important legislation in Britain includes the *Race Relations Act* and the *British Nationality Act*. Most of the immigrants had come from the British colonies especially the Indian subcontinent or the Caribbean. Provision had already been made in the history curriculum of many Oxford schools before the National Curriculum was introduced. I learnt from teachers interviewed in 1996 that the one-fit-for-all approach of the new HSU made the imposition unpopular.

Part Three

1991: Evidence from Questionnaires Circulated to Past Students in Mid-Ulster and Present Students in Oxford

(i) Design and Sampling of Questionnaires in Mid-Ulster and Oxford

The three small surveys presented here illustrate two central concerns in my present thesis: the extent to which what happens in the classroom reflects current political and educational trends and the ways in which the teacher/pupil and pupil/pupil relationships determine the nature of sensitivity. More precisely, the material explores: (a) how being a Catholic teacher teaching Irish history in a Protestant school at the height of the 'troubles' in Northern Ireland is potentially problematic; (b) the extent to which an Irish Catholic teacher teaching Catholic girls Irish history in England is also likely to be contentious; (c) reasons why teaching the origins and development of the Labour Party to the same girls required delicate handling.

External Factors

(i) Mid-Ulster Students' Comments on the Role of History

I taught these young people A Level history between 1974 and 1986 in a Protestant grammar school in Northern Ireland. Most of them were female. Out of the 26 questionnaires circulated in the summer of 1991, 24 responded.

In response to the question regarding the role of history in changing their attitudes, one boy insisted that education can be 'a major tool in breaking down the divide', and agreed that 'learning Irish history at school was very influential' for him. Such notes of optimism could be heard from others but were often coupled with caution and frustration. Nearly all students stated that as the A Level course developed they had become more interested in current affairs. One girl, for example, believed that learning about their province's history had 'made watching the news bearable' (she 'used to be bored with it before'.) Another girl said that she 'started to read newspapers for information about what was going on'. She added that she 'enjoyed discussing it with my friends, but we had some awful arguments'.

Table 1

Did studying Irish history make you more interested in current affairs?

Much more interested	13% (3)
Became a little more interested	38% (9)
Made no difference	50% (12)
I became less interested	none
I hated reading/watching/listening to "the Troubles".	none

Percentages are more than 100% because respondents were able to make more than one response

Whilst more than half admitted that after leaving school they did not consciously increase their knowledge of history, they sustained an interest in the subject and everyone had remembered at least something of what was learnt at school. For many, a world previously closed to them was opened; some claimed that they were able to channel the knowledge and skills acquired in history into other disciplines. Even when no Irish history was offered on history courses at university, one boy said that he referred to it when writing an essay on 'The problems of class and religion'.

This advantage of learning history was also emphasised by the Working Group when they looked at history and the whole curriculum:

As well as making a unique contribution to the curriculum, history links with the other areas of study and their contributory subjects in the school curriculum and bears a heavy responsibility in relation to.....Cultural Heritage and Education for Mutual Understanding. (Proposals for History in the Northern Ireland Curriculum, Report of the Ministerial History Working Group, 1990)

Although most young people recognised that learning Irish history had at least some impact on their thinking only a minority was convinced about its possible influence on others. Some recognised that its impact 'depends on the individual - some people are not willing to change'. Others were more sanguine. As one girl said: 'A lot depends on how set people's views are, which usually come from their family and friends, some people are always going to have biased views, others may change'. Another girl recognised it was 'difficult to understand people's thinking'.

Table 2

Do you think that learning Irish history changes people's attitude towards contemporary problems?

Makes some difference	38% (9)
Influences some people but not others	50% (12)
Do not know the effect	4% (1)
Make no difference	4% (1)
Depends on what is taught	4% (1)
Depends on how it was taught	4% (1)
It depends on who teaches it	None
Makes a big difference	None

Percentages are more than 100% because respondents were able to make more than one response

The past pupils agreed that Irish history should be taught at school. This was symptomatic of the growing awareness in the province that education can be, in the words of one boy, 'a major tool in breaking down the divide, and promoting mutual understanding'. A girl who thought it was very important that Irish history be taught commented that it was 'vital because people should know about their own country'. Not one student reported feeling uncomfortable with any topic learnt. Indeed, one boy complained about not being taught enough Irish history before A Level: 'Before your course, all I was taught was a few pages from the Hutchinson book 'A Short History of Ireland', 1000-1500, as far as I can remember'.

A further response highlighted the importance of family and friends. A girl emphasised this when she reported that what influenced her most was 'both my family background and my friends'. One boy simply stated that he derived most of his ideas from 'personal experience'.

A poignant reminder that many of these young people had direct experience of violence was that a number had close relatives in the security forces and on one occasion my class was interrupted to bring the sad news of a father who had been shot. Not surprisingly, such memories occasioned a deep feeling of resentment against the perpetrators.

The extent to which studying Irish history at school was perceived to be influential in forming political opinion was to become a major focus of my future research. The small survey I undertook in 1991 indicated that most young people thought learning Irish history was influential though only a tiny minority attributed their attitudes solely to that factor. One boy who felt very strongly that this was the case said that:

I found that the Irish history I learned at school really opened my eyes at the time and it still influences my thinking. That has been the main factor in my understanding of the Troubles.

Table 3

What has influenced your understanding of the troubles most?

Learning Irish history at school?	79% (19)
A combination of things	67%(16)
Personal experience	67%(16)
Friends	38%(9)
Television	38% (9)
Reading	38% (9)
Family background	21%(5)

Percentages are more than 100% because respondents were able to make more than one response

The History Working Group hoped that learning Irish history reinforced what they considered to be one of the values of the subject in the school curriculum: that it would 'prepare pupils for adult life, giving a framework of reference and thereby enriching many other areas of the pupils' experiences'.

I noted the fact that at least a few students became more sympathetic as a result of studying Irish history, if not to Unionism, then at least to the problems facing Unionist politicians. One who had previously distrusted Unionist politicians came to the conclusion that 'Perhaps it is not their fault - they are bound by their constituents' wishes and trapped by the need to maintain the status quo in the face of change and progress'. Another stated that 'Although it made no great difference, I became more aware of their beliefs and their purposes'. A girl then living in Scotland stated that her political views had changed as a result of 'moving out of the Province and being able to see the troubles from the outside'. She also admitted to being influenced by cross-community events. This response would have been greatly encouraging to the framers of the proposed cross-curriculum theme of Education for Mutual Understanding who promoted 'Projects between institutions, involving pupils and teachers from two or more schools and from both communities, meeting together for a common productive purpose' (NICC, 1988).

Table 4

Did your attitude to unionist politics change as a result of the study?

I understood and sympathised with them much more	33% (8)
I was more sympathetic	25% (6)
Made no difference to my attitude to Unionist politics	75% (18)
I sympathised less	none
I became hostile to Unionism	none

Percentages are more than 100% because respondents were able to make more than one response

It was extremely informative for me to have this record of the diverse ways in which my former pupils interpreted the course in Irish history that I had taught them. Half of the students decided that they understood the position of Irish nationalists better and most of them declared that they had become more sympathetic to them. As one boy admitted:

It made me realise that mainstream Nationalists were not necessarily anti-English but rather pro-Irish.

One girl stated that she understood that 'Britain in a sense was the invading country and not the other way round'.

Although increased sympathy was voiced for nationalist objectives, as a consequence of the course the students were unanimous in condemning violence. A boy who admitted that he could not be 'sympathetic with those who advocate the use of violence as a political weapon - whether they be Unionist or Nationalist' stated that he could now understand 'their frustration and feelings of impotence'. One girl commented that: 'It made me realise that agreeing with someone's cause and agreeing with someone's methods of pursuing that cause should never be confused'. Another even admitted that: 'Reading books on Irish history turned me into a Nationalist'.

Table 5

Did your attitude to nationalist politics change as a result of the Study?

I understood and sympathised with them much more	17% (4)
I was more sympathetic	38% (9)
It made no difference to my attitude to Nationalist politics	50% (12)
I sympathised with Nationalist politics less	none
I became hostile to Nationalism	none

Percentages are more than 100% because respondents were able to make more than one response

Many found their history a useful base for informed conversation. As one commented, 'Being in Scotland, people tend to ask more questions about Northern Ireland'. These responses refuted the arguments that some teachers, including my Head of Department, used to avoid teaching Irish history. Students did not find it boring. And, it must be emphasised, the former A Level students came from a Unionist background where, frequently, Irish history was neglected or marginalized at school and, like their

Nationalist counterparts, they were subjected to tribal misconceptions at home. It also appeared to bear out the determination of the History Working Group to set key issues in Irish history into a broad historical and geographical framework because:

All pupils should develop an understanding of the community and society in which they live and should be equipped with a critical awareness of events in the past which have for many a significance and relevance today (NICC, 1990).

The working group admitted to being 'very discouraged in its work' because not all pupils would be required to continue to study history to the age of 16. They feared that 'pupils at age 14, however, lack the maturity with which to deal with the more sensitive issues' (NICC, 1990). In subsequent research, I considered the response of younger students to expose the extent to which it was possible to introduce younger pupils to the more delicate topics in history. But, in 1991, I concentrated only on A Level students.

In the proposals for History Northern Ireland Curriculum, teachers were advised 'not to hold back from dealing with controversial questions of morality or values which unite or divide people' (NICC, 1990). Not all teachers were keen to grapple with these issues. But how did their students react to being taught controversial questions: did they believe that their teachers should hold back?

The extent to which students enjoyed learning Irish history was remarkable. Without exception, all enjoyed learning it and the great majority enjoyed it very much. The knowledge that my students enjoyed the class came as no surprise, but the extent to which they found the subject interesting astonished me. This seemed to be in no small measure due to the importance attached to knowing about their heritage and the fact that the subject had such a high profile in the media. Indeed, many commented that: 'I found it very interesting to learn about the history of my own country and why Northern Ireland has ended up the way it is today'.

An expatriate student agreed that Irish history should be taught 'as long as it's unbiased'. I wondered if this comment was directed at me. The same girl was one of the two

students who stated that my teaching was very biased in favour of the Unionists and weighted against the Nationalists. If this is true, in her case it seemed to have done no irreparable harm because she also stated in response to other questions that learning Irish history helped her to understand Nationalist politics much more and that her attitude to Unionist politics did not change much as a result of the study!

Overall my Protestant students tended to regard Irish history as being the history of the people of the Republic of Ireland and far enough removed from their own history to be less contentious than contemporary Northern Irish history.

Evidence from Students in Mid-Ulster Regarding the Impact on the Classroom of *Internal Factors*

(i) Mid-Ulster Students' Opinions of their Teacher's Stances

The extent to which my students perceived bias in my lessons was crucially important to my interpretation of how our history lessons were communicated and understood. Despite having strong political preferences I was convinced that I did not communicate them to my students. As far as I consciously followed a pedagogical line, it was that of a neutral chairman. Deference bred by Northern Irish cultural norms prevented them from challenging me directly about my political stance and the same inbuilt caution forbade me to take an overt stand. I found this pose came naturally and it did not act as a barrier to personal relations. In fact it was advantageous in that we were able to view controversial issues more dispassionately thereby overriding any possibility of uneasiness in the classroom.

The vast majority agreed that my presentation was impartial which did not surprise me but I was astonished to read, as indicated above, that a tiny minority of girls thought that I was very biased in favour of the Unionists and biased against the Nationalists. No-one thought that I showed any partiality for nationalist views. I wondered if this could be

explained by the fact that in an effort to compensate for any tendency towards nationalistic political convictions. I was being too critical of the role of nationalism in Irish history. It also occurred to me that because I felt strongly that young people from a Protestant background ought to be well versed in their own tradition, I devoted more class time to teaching about Unionism. This disproportionate allocation may have given some the impression that I favoured the Unionist cause.

Table 6

Did you detect any bias in the way you were taught Irish history?

Cannot remember any bias	8% (2)
The presentation was impartial	83% (20)
Very biased in favour of the Unionists	8% (2)
Biased against nationalists	8% (2)

Percentages are more than 100% because respondents were able to make more than one response

Overall, I thought that my non-confrontational teaching style had produced the desired effect. If a Catholic teacher could teach Protestant students sensitive issues in history and be considered unbiased then my strategy was effective. There was only one occasion when I can remember any pupil asking for my opinion on current affairs and that was after watching the Anglo-Irish Agreement live during a history lesson. They appeared happy with my interpretation until the following day after a different version was proffered at home. Nevertheless, my opinion was not publicly criticised. Analysis of the past rather than the present continued to take precedence in our history lessons. If they viewed me any differently, I was not aware of it: the world of contemporary politics and history remained separate.

I certainly did not feel uncomfortable or inhibited in the classroom because of my Catholic background but I wondered how my students reacted to it. It was possible that the absence of confrontation was due in part to deference but also to distrust. Were my

students feeling frustrated because they couldn't express themselves openly and therefore religion was proving detrimental to the learning process? Their response to the question 'Did you feel uncomfortable/inhibited with my teaching because of my Catholic background?' confirmed that my Catholic background was immaterial. A tiny minority saw it as an advantage with only one of the boys also regarding it as being possibly disadvantageous. He said:

Giving two conflicting answers may be very "Irish" but I'll explain: at first I was "on my guard" as it were, presumably expecting bias, but I came to appreciate that your Catholic background gave a useful revealing perspective on the course! In the end I certainly felt that the presentation was as impartial as possible.

It occurred to me that, because at least two years had lapsed since I taught them, they had had time to consider, with the benefit of hindsight, the educational, if not the novelty, value a Catholic teacher might have on Protestant students and be prepared to view it positively or at least, as more sophisticated people, make the politically 'correct' choice.

(ii) Teaching Strategies Reported by Mid-Ulster Students

In response to the question about the way history was taught, one boy remembered: 'Looking at documents from the period, newspaper articles, etc., all very enjoyable'.

Another boy commented that:

I believe the two (the topic taught and the teaching strategy used) must be related - presumably you decided the manner of the course. If I can remember correctly, we were given the necessary background, then looked at various aspects, e.g. Unionists/UVF, IPP, Sinn Féin, and IRB etc. We were therefore able to concentrate on one area at a time. Your obvious enthusiasm rubbed off on me.

A third boy said that:

You worked us harder than Mr. X but that helped us gain the necessary background to appreciate the course. Your course (Irish history) was much more about people than merely events. It was therefore easier to become involved and interested.

Another girl, now living in England, commented on whether Irish history should be taught. She was convinced that:

Yes, of course it should. British history is never questioned in British schools although it is often politically embarrassing' (i.e. some aspects of the two wars); why shouldn't we learn from our mistakes?

One girl reflected the fears of the working group that 'pupils at age 14, however, lack the maturity with which to deal with the more sensitive issues' when she wrote that 'the more 'controversial history' should maybe taught at 15+ when maybe they can have a more unbiased view'.

But to what extent has learning Irish history influenced the students' understanding of the Troubles? It must be remembered that the course they followed ended in 1923, not 1969. As far as one girl could remember, 'Irish history stopped at about 1945. It would have been good to at least go till the conditions that led to the start of the Troubles. I'm still not sure why they started'.

Table 7

What period of Irish history should be taught?

Early Irish history	33% (8)
History from the Famine 1845 – 1922	100% (24)
Irish history since 1922	96% (4)
History of N. Ireland since 1922	42% (10)

Percentages are more than 100% because respondents were able to make more than one response

The fact that the respondents wanted Irish history from the Famine 1845-1922 taught is hardly surprising: that included the period they studied in part for A Level. Some also regarded it as being important for 'background'. Early Irish history was popular for the same reason and because it could 'engender a feeling of nationality among us Irish

people'. This was an interesting comment from a boy with a Unionist background because they usually regarded themselves as British rather than Irish.

A more puzzling response was that less than half of the young people surveyed advocated that the history of Northern Ireland be taught. Answers to other questions would indicate that they did not always favour shying away from contentious issues, so it is possible that they wanted to avoid being labelled 'parochial'; this could also be suggested particularly by the fact that all but one of them wanted to study Irish history since 1922. The one who wanted to avoid recent history altogether agreed that the period was very important but that 'Recent history is necessarily controversial and I fear in our situation the problem inherent in teaching it would be insurmountable'.

Evidence from Students in Oxford Regarding the Impact on the Classroom of *External Factors*

(i) Oxford Students' Comments on the Role of History

I did a small survey to explore the impact that my teaching had on the views on Ireland held by sixth form girls. Firstly, I took the opportunity to assess what they knew about Irish history and the Irish in general before I taught it. After the lesson, I circulated another questionnaire containing many questions that were similar to the ones I had used in Northern Ireland. Whilst some of my concerns remained the same as before, others reflected the changed cultural and political circumstances. My fascination with sensitive topics, teacher bias and student response remained a prominent concern.

Whilst all of the Oxford group agreed that at least some Irish history ought to be taught in English schools, most did not consider it to be part of their heritage; nevertheless, a majority thought that learning about it would be useful for broadening their understanding of history and acquiring an informed opinion on Irish affairs because it was so much in the news.

Table 8

What period of Irish history should be taught?

Early Irish history	none
History from the Famine 1845 – 1922	50% (3)
Irish History since 1922	50% (3)
History of N. Ireland since 1922	100% (6)
No Irish history	none

Percentages are more than 100% because respondents were able to make more than one response

In the months that followed, I made further attempts to gauge the extent to which the girls' interest in Ireland was maintained or their opinions had changed. Immediately after the lesson their responses, written and oral, suggested that only one girl thought that learning Irish history made no difference to her views. Half claimed to have become more sympathetic to the Irish in general but could see no way out of the present impasse; a large minority also admitted that their eyes were opened for the first time to the complexities of the situation. A minority stated that Britain had an impossible task and the matter should be resolved by the European Parliament or the United Nations.

Table 9

Did your attitude to Irish nationalists change as a result of the study?

I understood them much more	85% (5)
I was more sympathetic	50% (3)
It made no difference to my attitude to Irish politics	50% (3)
I sympathised with Nationalist politics less	none
I became hostile to Nationalism	none

Percentages are more than 100% because respondents were able to make more than one response

Once the topic was completed, I set an essay on why successive British governments failed to solve the Irish Problem 1885 -1914. Although the standard of their work on the whole was high, some of their weaknesses of interpretation were similar to errors made by Irish students: not everyone could distinguish between constitutional nationalists and the physical force movement; Home Rule was confused by some with republicanism. On the other hand, the strength of Unionist commitment to their cause was difficult for some English girls to comprehend. They argued that the British government should have forced the majority-backed Home Rule measure on the minority. (My Irish Protestant students had had no problem in empathising with Unionist fears and intransigence.) When we discussed current affairs, Ireland was rarely mentioned, I brought up the question of the recent Brooke initiative, but the subject was soon changed to whether John Major had a better chance of winning a general election for the Conservative party than Margaret Thatcher. Certain factual information may have been retained, but their interest was excited by subjects that were considered to be more relevant or with which they could more closely identify.

They all thought that Labour Party history should be taught in schools and that learning history probably changes people's views of contemporary problems. This conclusion was supported by the following comment:

I think that everyone, no matter what party their parents vote for, should be given a clear and unbiased opinion of what the main parties stand for. This does not necessarily have to take place in history lessons, but it is an essential topic.

Table 10

What period of British history should be taught?

British history 1500 - 1800	100% (6)
British history 1800 – 1945	100% (6)
The history of the Labour Party	83% (4)
The history of the Conservative Party	100% (6)

In 1990, the history of the Labour Party was the compulsory question on the British section of the Oxford Board A Level syllabus. Although I was doing research into how Irish history was a sensitive issue at the time, foolishly I had not anticipated any problems in teaching British history. The subject matter of the Labour Party was familiar and I had taught it in Northern Ireland without any difficulty; it therefore came as a surprise that the Origins and Development of the Labour Party occasioned bigoted remarks and even tension in the classroom.

The first indication I had that my lesson might touch on raw emotions was when, by way of introduction, I showed the class a video with an overtly Marxist view of Imperialism. On her way out one girl confronted me with the taunt: 'If my father knew that you were showing us propaganda for the Labour Party he would not approve'. There was no mistaking the partisan nature of the film and there was no mistaking that behind the apparent bonhomie of the remark lay the stark reality of the gibe. I felt uncomfortable, and my investigation of sensitive issues in teaching history had, for the first time, ceased to be purely academic.

Table 11

Did your attitude to the Labour party change as a result of the Study?

I understood much more	100% (6)
I was more sympathetic	34% (2)
It made no difference to my attitude to labour politics	50% (3)
I sympathised with Labour politics less	none

Percentages are more than 100% because respondents were able to make more than one response

I did not anticipate any difficulty in teaching the topic so I did not assess the extent of the girls' knowledge before the class or survey them to investigate attitudes; I circulated a questionnaire after we had completed the topic because by then it had become apparent that this was indeed the very first sensitive situation that I had encountered as a teacher at the school.

I had been so attuned to thinking solely about the contentious nature of Irish History that I was totally unprepared for the sensitive nature of other topics. I was also interested in the factors that my students thought had been more influential in their history education.

Table 12

What has influenced your understanding of history most?

Learning history at school?	100% (6)
A combination of things	83% (5)
Personal experience	34% (2)
Friends	17% (1)
Television	50% (3)
Reading	67% (4)
Family background	50%(3)

Percentages are more than 100% because respondents were able to make more than one response

Evidence from Oxford Students Regarding the Impact on the Classroom of *Internal Factors*

(i) Oxford Students' Opinions of my Stance

Shortly after teaching about Irish history, an opportunity arose for us to attend a Conference on Ireland organised by the Peace Movement in Oxford. At the event, no one asked a question or made a comment in the ensuing discussion time. Moreover, in class the following day, the students appeared to be more interested in the young lecturer's marital status than in the content of his paper! It is also pertinent that in the June examination, only one girl answered a question on Ireland. We had moved on to European history by that time and the Russian Revolution and Stalin were popular choices. Ireland for many was a thing of the past. Certain points of factual information may have been retained, but their interest was excited by other topics.

I asked, in the pre-lesson questionnaire on being taught Irish history, if the students thought that having a Catholic teacher from Ireland would make any difference to their understanding and enjoyment of the topic. A bare majority decided that my being Irish would enhance their understanding and enjoyment of Irish history, whilst a large minority thought it would make no difference. Half the girls reported that they were not sure about the extent to which I would be biased; a tiny minority predicted that I would be impartial, and a large minority anticipated that I would be biased. The direction in which my teaching was likely to be slanted got a mixed response: they were equally divided between my favouring Catholic/Nationalists, my favouring the British, and not knowing what to expect.

After the lesson on Irish history nearly everyone stated that my presentation was impartial. The exception considered that I was biased in favour of the British! Perhaps I had tried too hard to compensate for my nationalist sympathies by placing too much emphasis on the British viewpoint. Like the Irish survey which had pointed towards my even-handedness, the exceptions were persuaded that I favoured the Unionist cause.

Table 13

Did you detect any bias in the way you were taught Irish history?

The presentation was impartial	83% (1)
Biased in favour of the Irish Catholics	None
Biased in favour of the Unionists	None
Biased in favour of the British	17% (1)

Percentages are more than 100% because respondents were able to make more than one response

I invited the Headmistress to observe the lessons. Miss H's written report provided another perspective on my handling of potentially sensitive issues in the classroom (Conway 1991). Before the lesson I asked her to make comments taking the following aspects into consideration: (a) how the lesson was organised and presented, noting especially signs that I was uncomfortable or embarrassed; (b) the extent to which the substance was appropriate to my stated aims; (c) the response I elicited from the girls; (d) the extent to which my presentation was biased.

This report confirmed what the girls and I thought: our lesson worked well in that a substantial body of facts had been transmitted in an atmosphere of mutual trust energised by the collective will to enjoy, understand and learn. No friction existed between us that could retard the learning process and I was confidently and dispassionately presenting ideas devoid of any sectarian or nationalistic bias.

As regards teaching about the Labour Party, a tiny minority detected some bias against the Labour party in my presentation; the others decided that I dealt with the topic in an impartial manner.

Table 14

Did you detect any bias in the way you were taught the history of the Labour Party?

The presentation was impartial	83% (1)
Biased in favour of the Labour Party	None
Biased against the Labour Party	17% (1)

Percentages are more than 100% because respondents were able to make more than one response

(ii) Teaching Strategies reported by Oxford Students

As regards teaching strategy I wondered for the first time whether it was better to anticipate areas of contention and consciously prepare to confront them. Would I have handled comments better if I realised that they were coming, thereby preparing more adequately for confrontation? Or would cautious anticipation have created barriers that would be detrimental to the spontaneity of the lesson or, indeed, precipitate tension? In the event, I encountered attitudes towards the Labour Party every bit as bigoted as those held by my Unionist students in Northern Ireland. Ramsay McDonald for some was as much a villain as Patrick Pearce. I also felt more uneasy in a situation where there was no empathy with the trade union movement: it was too alien a mentality for me to handle easily

Summary

Both Northern Ireland and Oxford teachers were concerned about the impact of Government initiatives, the Common Curriculum and the National Curriculum. Identity issues were to the fore: questions of Irish history that impacted on the two communities and questions of Britishness. I used Jenkins' (1980) suggestions regarding possible responses of teachers to the ongoing violence in Northern Ireland and found evidence for all four categories but adopting a local position which might be termed one of modified sectarianism was the most common. I also categorised teachers according to my typology of the lion, fox or mouse and although all strategies featured the mouse was the most commonplace. Northern Ireland teachers were especially fearful of clear moves towards teaching Irish history: there was the threat of disapproval of parents and other local interests in a context of continuing violence around the province.

Few Irish teachers were optimistic about the new study units of the Common Curriculum. Worries were usually couched in terms of practical concerns rather than basic principles. What would be all right for the average 14 year old? Would resources be adequate? Would, indeed, Government policy be bias-free? Questions of good classroom practice were raised with moves towards more varied and more evidence-based approaches discernible.

The Oxford independent school students did not find Irish history at all contentious. Indeed, learning about the Labour Party proved to be more controversial. Both pupils in Northern Ireland (exclusively from a Protestant, and thus largely Unionist, background) and Oxford (largely English Catholics) agreed overwhelmingly that the teacher (the writer, a Northern Irish Catholic) teaching them history was unbiased. The Irish pupils enjoyed their Irish history and found it unproblematic; they were very positive about the role of history in changing attitudes, most saying that they had sustained an interest in it and generally approved of Irish history being taught at school. There was a marked contrast between the hesitant approach taken by teachers to teaching sensitive issues and the more relaxed attitude of their students

Chapter Six

1996: Teachers and Students

This chapter is comprised of three parts: interviews conducted with Mid-Ulster and Oxford teachers are examined in parts one and two; students who were surveyed in schools in Northern Ireland and Oxford are represented in part three. The data is interrogated using the skills of a reflective practitioner of history to identify and comprehend sensitive issues. The interviewees' responses are grouped according to whether they referred to factors external or internal to the classroom. The categorisation of teachers' reactions depends on their perceptions of their role and the strategy adopted to deal with potentially sensitive situations in history lessons.

Part One: Mid-Ulster Teachers

External Factors Impacting on the Teaching of Sensitive Issues

In 1996 teaching Irish history in Northern Ireland had been compulsory for five years. The major issue now for teachers was not whether Irish history ought to be taught but how topics, especially those involving the more recent past, were to be tackled. Jenkins' (1980) topography which informed the 1991 data was now anachronistic. Of course, individual teachers were adept at ways of circumventing the specified curriculum but schools could no longer hope to conform to the 'time out model'. In 1996, I was particularly interested in whether the fears expressed by teachers in 1991 had disappeared or persisted. My research was undertaken at a time when the role of the teacher in ameliorating community relations was receiving widespread media attention, I now had the opportunity to extrapolate from the data further insight into: the degree to which sensitive issues change over time and place; teachers' perception of their social role; the impact this had on their teaching strategies; the extent to which students shared their teachers' views and concerns. These questions were of paramount importance when the data was interrogated.

When devising categories, I found it more useful to note the extent to which they applied to teachers' practice. It appeared to me to be misleading to label an individual teacher. A teacher in her time (sometimes even lesson time) plays many parts: she may constantly move between positions on a continuum: of feeling at ease with the topic to being acutely uncomfortable. It was during an analysis of these interviews that I found the notion of the responses of a lion, a fox or a mouse useful.

My findings indicate that 1996 was a transitional stage for Irish teachers; they were not as fearful as in 1991 because they had the force of legislation to cushion them against community criticism and, added to (in most cases) five years of experience, there was the increased support of human and practical resources. Controlled school teachers tended to teach the less contentious earlier 1931-1949 period rather than the more contentious 1965-1985 period for GCSE. This would be particularly disappointing for many because, as my research indicates, students in these schools more than any other valued and liked history.

All teachers agreed that the Common Curriculum had a political agenda. It became clear to me that most found nothing wrong with this 'as long as teachers do not become persuaders one way or the other'. The idea that history had become a political football was expressed by one academic who stated that 'if the Government defines the curriculum by telling us that learning history makes us more tolerant, then the Department has a political agenda'. That the government was trying to improve community relations in Northern Ireland was the view most commonly held by teachers but not all accepted a benign intent. Some were fearful of an assimilation agenda: the apprehension was that people who belonged to the minority community were expected to lose their nationalist aspirations, a view certainly not correct.

I was also assured by another teacher in a maintained non-selective school that 'for the Northern Irish Protestant the problem was not only fear but also guilt'. He thought that teachers had a pro-British or pro-Irish agenda and that 'History is on the Catholic side;

Protestants are ashamed and find it difficult to justify what they did to us'. This interview with a history teacher who had recently become headmaster in the school was conducted hurriedly because he had another appointment. He knew me and had taught my younger siblings and felt at ease to express the triumphalism that was commonplace among middle-class Catholics. By 1996 they were convinced that they had wrung enough concession from Westminster and hard-line Unionists to be complacent about their future in the province.

Yet, when asked if they thought that government interference was a good thing, the majority of teachers agreed that it was. Many approved of the moral purpose in the initiative with its emphasis on children's own experience and its focus on local community. Nevertheless, the official expectation that teachers were going to rearrange society was described by one as 'silly' and another said that 'we can't mandate overall results, we can only facilitate co-existence'.

Finally, when I broached the complex question of the possible long-term impact on people's views of teaching Irish history, I was reminded by a teacher advisor that:

A lot has to do with initial teacher training. A lot of experienced teachers have taken early retirement. They have taken it because of all the changes and pressures. So you have a generation of schoolteachers coming in who know nothing except the Common Curriculum and they embrace a methodology that is skills-based.

This advisor, who had been involved in a regional conference for probationers in 1995, was quite impressed with the level of their debate, their flexibility, and their willingness to work.

Nearly all those who reported any degree of discomfort in teaching Irish history referred to factors peripheral to the classroom. Incurring disapproval from parents and/or colleagues was feared. Northern Ireland was similar to other communities felt to be under threat. History education was a contested area where assertiveness and conflict were obvious. There was a need to know neighbours, to know the rules of engagement in case the wrong thing was said. There was also awareness that to step out of line could result

in being boycotted by their community. I heard of teachers who were 'afraid of getting their tyres slashed' or 'worse' ('worse' being a euphemism for physical violence). In times of peace, one could afford to be relaxed but in times of strife to antagonise the 'wrong kind' could be fatal. Was this teacher being hypersensitive or were her fears justified? I had my car tyres slashed twice within two weeks of joining the staff of a newly amalgamated school. At the time it did not occur to me that there was anything sinister about this but the above report made me re-evaluate what I had previously seen as a coincidence. Does it matter who was right? More importantly our contrasting reaction to the 'troubles' reflected the interaction between events external to the classroom and a response elicited by our disposition or life experience.

Nearly all teachers I interviewed identified criticism from colleagues or parents as a major problem. Complaints ranged from having to cope with parents saying 'Why is my child coming home with this emotional stuff?' to having to cope with parental complaints that their children were getting either too many Unionist or Nationalist sources.

A major fear in teaching any period of Irish history was of parents objecting to their children being taught nationalist themes or ones that were not in accord with their own political convictions. There was overwhelming agreement that students' opinions were determined by parents though other factors were also mentioned. Although one enthusiastically admitted that history classes in school were 'by far the more important factor in determining her own knowledge of Irish history,' she insisted that most young people got their ideas from films. What's more, she continued: 'That is the tragedy. They get the wrong impression (of history) because of the films'. However, most pupils I surveyed disagreed with her and rated school history highly.

Differences were reported between controlled and maintained schools. A Catholic teacher said that she knew of 'one controlled school where even in religion classes there was great resentment to looking at other religions and there were rows and phone calls galore that this exercise shouldn't be given to their children'. She added that:

I have no fears about teaching about Unionist opposition or the Easter Rising or whatever it happens to be. I know that in some of the Protestant schools that is not the case. There are grave objections to nationalism being taught. I think it is important to look at both cultures.

Many teachers in all schools reported this experience of parental disapproval but it was perceived as being more prevalent in the controlled sector. Certainly there was an overwhelming belief (held by both sides) that Protestants were more sensitive to what their children learnt at school. A male teacher in a maintained non-selective reported that:

In all my years teaching there was only one boy who said that his parents objected to him learning about Unionism. This is very good because I am very friendly with a teacher in a local Protestant school and she says that she wouldn't get away with teaching Nationalism the way I get away with teaching Unionism.

This Catholic teacher had attended the Protestant school at A Level and maintained links with the school and the staff. My confidence in his version of the situation was confirmed when I interviewed not only the female teacher concerned but others in maintained schools who also spoke of parents (albeit a tiny but vocal minority) objecting because their children were taught nationalist themes. History advisors who had done in-service training and compiled classroom materials with these teachers, confirmed the above observation but emphasised that there were problems with parents from all religious backgrounds. As one said:

There are teachers who have told me that a problem arose when things were taken out of context when the pupil was doing homework. Some parents, and they're more likely to be a Protestant, may happen to glance at an exercise on the Union Jack or the Tricolour and it sends them off on a tangent.

On the other hand, despite their difficulties as regards teaching Irish history, it appeared that most Protestant teachers were 'getting into it', but the evidence seemed to suggest that they were suffering from greater parental and school constraints than their Catholic counterparts.

Teaching history in a conflict situation in Northern Ireland meant that teachers and children were living through it and that even events in the distant past were contemporary history, or current affairs. In the words of a male teacher trainer: 'We are getting current issues put up front'. He had done research into the reaction of teachers to the Common Curriculum and understood the extent to which teachers were acutely aware that students had strong political views, even associations with paramilitaries. A female teacher in a maintained selective school thought that this was true especially of the older boys she was teaching whom she knew had had some 'involvement'. One male teacher in a maintained non-selective school had experienced half his fifth year class leaving to join demonstrations during the hunger strike and coming back after lunch in an Army Saracen tank.

An important factor in teaching politically charged issues is not only where they are taught but when they are taught. I interviewed an education administrator who lived in an apparently 'safe area' two days after the Shankhill bombing in Belfast and he admitted to being frightened for the safety of his children because they went to school with the children of Joe Hendren who as the local SDLP MP at the time was a security risk.

Many teachers admitted to being afraid of tackling politically-charged topics in case it offended some of their students. Indeed, it was knowledge of and deference to their pupils' sensibilities that usually determined the extent to which the history teacher felt uncomfortable. A typical fear was voiced by a teacher who had a student whose uncle had been shot and he knew both of them:

It was the only time I ever felt uncomfortable because every time I tackled the modern stuff I was very aware of the impact it was having on the child. Was this bringing everything back? But I must say he handled it very well.

The vast majority of teachers agreed that the location of the school usually determined the nature of the problems they would have. A teacher from a maintained non-selective told me that if he had been teaching in a Belfast school it would have been a lot more difficult: 'My school here in a Mid-Ulster town is situated in an area where the two communities get on very well. In other towns contemporary Irish history would be a lot

more sensitive'. All the teachers in Magherafelt agreed that community relations were good but I was informed by teachers in Cookstown and Dungannon that their pupils lived in segregated housing estates and community relations could become very strained especially during the summer marching season. I noted that the extent to which a teacher felt comfortable in the classroom was often determined by geographical location.

Social class was offered by most teachers as an explanation for diversity. Pupils coming from more working-class areas where there were council estates that were segregated along religious lines were said to be more likely to cause problems than pupils from areas where the population was middle-class. Teachers in non-selective schools with a greater working class intake certainly reported more difficulties in teaching contentious topics in history than those in the middle class grammar schools.

Difficulties that reflected external conflict were reported to arise from attempts to bring the communities together through the compulsory programme of Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU). Although this was a cross-curricular theme, history was seen to carry the largest burden for delivering it. Most teachers thought that the EMU exercises were too superficial or contrived or were a waste of time. This was aptly illustrated by a Catholic selective school teacher who reported going on a thirteen week EMU course in 1990 and meeting a lot of interesting people such as a history teacher from a school in Armagh who had complained that: 'There was just going to be no way that EMU was going to be accepted there'. She was told that they 'weren't interested in the other side'. She was interested but she knew what the prevailing ethos was. The Armagh teacher referred to other schools in Ballymena where she knew that 'this wasn't on'. The selective school teacher added that: 'This Centre of Conflict Studies in Coleraine has just come out and said, "We think it's all very superficial" and I absolutely agree'.

Much was said by Catholic teachers about the reluctance of Protestant schools to grasp the nettle of sectarianism in their schools, not usually because they were ideologically opposed, but because they feared recrimination. A male teacher in a controlled school said that during periods of contentious political or military activity the ensuing

polarisation hardened attitudes and made EMU impossible. There were also cases of groups refusing to integrate on EMU trips:

I took a group to Limerick with a Catholic school in Belfast and a Protestant school in Belfast and they didn't mix, they just stayed in their own groups but again I don't know how you would do it.

Moreover, EMU exercises could accentuate sectarian and class differences:

I can think of one occasion where there was a joint exercise between my school and one in Derry and one of my pupils reacted so violently to one of the things that one of the girls in the Catholic school said that I feared that he was going to hit her and someone stepped in.

Another Catholic female pointed out that in any event for such exercises the school selects only 'the good ones'; the more troublesome pupils miss out.

Whilst this scepticism about EMU was widespread a determined minority saw integrated schools as the way forward.

Of course bias could intrude in all kinds of ways. Teachers in both controlled and maintained schools reported that, whilst it was common for their pupils to be unbiased in history classes, they let personal views surface in other subjects e.g. religious education and English. One GCSE English examiner referred to students responses in examinations to *A Passage to India*. He remarked that in this set text: 'The Protestants identified with the British and the Roman Catholics identified with Indians'.

As regards history itself there were now many teachers who found the new syllabus exciting as well as challenging, like the selective school teacher who argued that 'It has got the balance right, it is about developing skills, concepts and knowledge'. This comment coincided with the current skills versus knowledge debate which, although centred on pedagogical issues, had the spin-off of creating a climate of self-consciousness regarding the delivery of history in the classroom.

Some teachers, especially those in non-selective schools, commented that the new curriculum came with 'new programmes of study but no new materials'. What this

teacher omitted to say (and one of her colleagues did) was that it was departmental policy to deliver history in the form of dictated notes whilst the geographers had glossy textbooks and field trips. Such a fear of textbook imbalance rather than quality as expressed by a small minority of teachers was countered by one HMI as short-sighted. He argued that 'It is impossible to write a text book that is totally objective'. His advice was to accept and work with the limitations. Nevertheless, unlike those interviewed in 1991, no cases of ignorance of the subject were reported in 1996. Could this be attributed to better textbooks and help from advisors? Or could it be a ploy or a diversionary tactic to steer attention away from underlying fears that had more to do with the sensitive nature of the subject than lack of resources? Although the point remained that too few textbooks of any kind existed in the early years of the new curriculum, there had always a dearth of textbooks and conscientious teachers had always improvised.

I believe that it was not the complexity or unfamiliarity of the subject matter that worried a minority of teachers interviewed, rather it was how to communicate information that could well have been at variance with that received from community myths. Certainly advisers responded to the perceived problem and reported that matters had improved greatly by 1996. They explained how over the years they had got 'a great welcome' for their materials and that 'teachers like to go away with something in their hand and try to use it in their classroom'. Moreover, one advisor reported that:

Of the teachers that come looking for support the most were those that teach low ability pupils which is a broad span covering classes where pupils are difficult because they are disaffected as well as those who have learning difficulties. Teachers can take what we have to offer and make it their own. We have given some of them a starting point and they appreciate that very much.

The connection between low ability and difficulty delivering the curriculum was registered early in my data analysis. There was a remarkable correlation between teachers, nearly always those in non-selective schools both maintained and controlled, who found a particular group difficult and their students allegiance to an alternative history. Teachers who had problems for whatever reason in delivering the curriculum

explained or disguised the situation as either a management problem or one due to the ability level of the student or to the pupil's working class background.

This interpretation is sustained by the fact that overall most teachers were happy with the new resources. As one maintained non-selective female teacher explained: 'Materials? Yes some fabulous stuff but almost a surfeit. Look at those ring binders on Home Rule. But people will have to be very selective. I know that in my own teaching that Irish history stuff took up most of the third year'.

Most teachers found it very challenging to present the more recent history to younger non-selective students. Northern Ireland had selection at 11: qualifiers went to grammar schools; the majority went to secondary high schools. As one teacher whose brother was a political prisoner lamented, 'I would be inclined not to do the very recent stuff with the secondary pupils'. Many agreed with the selective school teacher who thought that 'as regards the Common Curriculum there is something to be said for earlier history for younger children'. When pressed to elaborate on this, the same teacher added that:

They are not likely to understand some of the concepts but if you can develop some of the skills then they could use it later in the 20th century. But it is always going to be a problem about things that impinge on their lives. It is a very hard thing for teachers to do but if the earlier teaching is sufficiently good and if you have looked at conflict situations then you could move into another situation. In Irish history a historic date can be 1690.

Internal Factors Impacting on the Teaching of Sensitive Issues

(i) Mid-Ulster Teachers' Predispositions

It is important to distinguish between teachers having to confront their own political biases and other pedagogical matters. One Catholic teacher stated forthrightly: 'We have a biased police force and look at Drumcree. Of course we have our own opinions'. Such remarks indicated the extent to which teachers were products of a divided society with their own prejudices and agenda. Distinctive cultural slants were present in the remarks

of this maintained selective school teacher: 'we have a new Principal now and I hope that she will hang on to some Irish culture'. This teacher taught in a selective maintained school and was the school representative for EMU.

There were even more reports of chauvinism existing among so-called liberals. A number of references were made to subjectivity and selectivity among teachers. According to an advisor, teachers were aware of having certain political reservations about elements of the subject matter they were presenting. Conscientious teachers reported doing much soul-searching. One teacher wondered what point of view she was expressing politically, especially when she was teaching about civil rights and the Troubles about which she had strong views. A retired controlled selective school teacher stated that 'The problem with Irish history is that it is full of myths and theories and stories and poems. Events are fictionalised and songs made about them. It is difficult not to come out prejudiced in favour of your side'. This reminds one of Bourdieu's (1977) analysis in his *Outline of a Theory of Practice* in which he uses the term 'doxa' to denote what is taken for granted in any particular society, a society's taken-for-granted, unquestioned truths. The point is to find out the sphere in which that may be openly contested and discussed. Encouragingly even in Mid-Ulster in 1996 that sphere was wide and getting wider: the overwhelming majority of history teachers did try to put prejudices aside and present as balanced a view of history as possible even of events in which they were personally involved such as the recent troubles.

It was this period, of course, that created most difficulty for teachers. As a colleague of the controlled school teacher complained: 'But it is so recent that it is hardly history. You need to stand back from it for a decent interval so that you are not entirely biased'. The only report of naked bigotry was from an experienced history advisor who talked about the case of a small country primary school around Crossmaglen whose teacher she invited to a course she was doing. She reported that:

First of all they didn't want to do the Victorians because that was a British concept. They were doing the famine. But the famine was very much presented as a holocaust. This was the deliberate lining up of who will eat and who will starve and I said, 'But you cannot talk to nine year olds like

that, you cannot present things in a total void as purely the British starving the Irish'. Seven, eight and nine year olds are all getting the same message: here is your starving woman with her begging bowl; here are the rich Brits. That is a very easy message to send out because that is all that they are getting of the 19th century: the Prods live in the big house.

Nevertheless, as already indicated, accusations of sectarian presentation were rare. One HMI assured me that he hadn't come across any bigotry. Most teachers thought that their colleagues were competent historians and skilled professionals. Even when teachers expressed a prejudiced opinion in private such bias was rarely evident in their lessons, as reports from students' questionnaires testify.

Most teachers reported feeling comfortable teaching all aspects of the curriculum. However, were they to be believed or was this stance merely a smokescreen to hide sentiments they were ashamed of having?

Only one teacher who taught in a mainly Protestant selective school admitted to not being able to deliver the full range of Irish history topics because he had Catholics in his class. He (and most other teachers in one way or another) defined sensitivity by the reaction of the class.

A common phenomenon was students wanting to get up to the present time and talk about what's happening now. They were disappointed when the syllabus did not bring them up to the hunger strikes and the Anglo-Irish Agreement. But how valuable would this be for all students? As one teacher in a boy's non-selective maintained school commented: 'The hunger strike is a long time ago for them; they were babies. Unless they had someone involved, they are not conscious of it that much'. This same teacher had been a leading member of the Civil Rights movement and for this reason felt obliged to assure me that he taught in an 'even-handed way'. What came through most starkly in the interview was his irritation at not being able to persuade his students to understand how momentous events in the 1970s were for Irish history.

This theme of teacher frustration was developed again by a history advisor who reported that teachers were fearful that in teaching Irish history they were actually doing more harm than good because pupils would take only what they needed to reinforce prejudices and ignore what didn't suit them. He recalled that:

One selective school teacher who had nationalist views and was teaching in a so-called nationalist school found the political standpoint of the pupils a real strain. It had got much worse over the past few years and she felt that she was reinforcing rather than educating against prejudice.

(ii) Mid-Ulster Teachers' Perceptions of their Students' Stances regarding Sensitive Issues and their Role in Teaching them

Many of these teachers voiced concern over what I'll call their students' 'cafeteria approach' to learning history; students of all abilities, but more often the highly motivated ones, were only taking from history classes whatever evidence they wanted to reinforce their own ideas. This teacher in a controlled comprehensive school comments: 'There is the selection of what you think is the truth and that is where you run into the problem. You might not be able to convince them. There are as many versions of the truth as there are people studying history'.

Most young people were reported by a number of teachers to be indifferent to mainstream politics. And those who were interested tended to be the students whose parents talked about politics at home, read newspapers and watched the news. Teachers, especially those in non-selective schools, told me that: 'you'd be surprised at how little they know'. Most teachers emphasised their pupils' ignorance: a typical scenario was re-enacted by a male teacher in a maintained non-selective when he said that:

The SDLP? What are they Catholic? Or are they Protestant? They don't even know the main Catholic/Protestant areas in Belfast and Derry. Some have no problem, others have never heard of it. *The News* is turned over to *Neighbours*.

The extent to which young people were ill-informed about current political leaders and parties was reflected in what many others stated: 'They certainly would not necessarily know the names of any politicians. They might know Paisley because he is on television

a lot'. Another male teacher in a maintained non-selective school added that 'They will maybe know that Northern Ireland is linked to Britain and the south is independent but not much more than that'. He continued:

They come to school with some ideas in their head. But many of them don't know about politics. They would know they are a Catholic Street and we support Celtic and we're a Protestant school and we support Rangers. They would know about the 12th July and the marching season. They would know the flags for example but outside of that it is at a very superficial level. I don't even think they would know the term Unionist is connected with Protestant or Nationalist connected with Catholic. It's at a very simple level.

Some teachers rejected elements in the syllabus as being irrelevant to them. I was told by a female advisor that they did a very interesting thing with war memorials which corresponded to the revisionist interpretation of the impact on Ulster of First World War:

It is really interesting; we were in a number of clusters around Derry. Initially teachers were saying, 'You know I'm teaching History in the Creggan, what's a war memorial to do with it?' But they listened politely; I think maybe a few saw that it had something to do with them. But that is a slow process and you'll not force people into it.

Many young people, especially those in non-selective schools, were said to be reluctant to express moderate views. One of their teachers explained: 'They take a very bigoted view like Protestant and Catholics, Unionists and Taigs. Much of this is because of peer pressure and they 'don't want to be the odd one out'. As this male teacher from a maintained boys' school continued:

Generally speaking they don't have a political thought in their heads. It's just when something comes up on the housing estate that they become Republicans. I don't think that politics enters their heads otherwise.

A number of teachers thought that the more intelligent the pupil, the more likely they are to see the subtleties: 'they can see how things happen and they would be in a position perhaps someday to make their own judgement but with the less able it's a bigger problem'.

Peers were considered to be instrumental in determining the extent to which a student responded in class. Whilst very few remarked that their pupils actually learnt history from their peer group, nearly all acknowledged that the tone of the class was regulated by inter-group or individual relationships. Young people were said by one female selective school teacher to be 'concerned about not saying something silly so others would laugh at them. Children are not concerned how they will appear to the teacher. They are afraid of someone in the class thinking: who does she think she is?'

The same teacher spoke of this natural reserve where they were afraid of 'anything that gives away a little bit of themselves. They don't give opinions: this is very frustrating as a teacher'. Moreover, the brighter ones were said to be less likely to speak out because they don't want to 'damage their reputation or they don't want to appear too clever'.

As regards the stated purpose of history, at one end of the spectrum were practitioners who saw a strong moral and/or social dimension in their work. This stance was expressed explicitly by some, such as the male teacher who taught in a controlled non-selective school before going into teacher education:

I would always be trying to justify what I'm doing for the sorts of pupils that I taught so I would very much see a social dimension to the history teaching that I have done. I would see it as having a very important role in helping young people work out where they are coming from and to get a clear sense of their own identity and where that identity has come from and to challenge some of the more obvious myths and misconceptions that in my opinion have helped to create the present conflict. So I would see a role in history teaching as at least helping us to try to understand why we have got into the mess we have got into.

There was also the stance taken by a female maintained selective school teacher: 'History is a moral study and you will have to accept the fact that an event can be studied in a whole lot of different ways but you should always be looking for what is right and moral'.

A female teacher in a controlled selective school expressed her position firmly when she said: 'The history teacher must be at the front line of attack on the bigotry which besets

our province'. History was acknowledged by a male teacher in a maintained non-selective to be a 'challenging subject'. He continued that it was 'A good subject in terms of making them aware of the country that they live in and that there is a wider scope than the world in which they live that they have to be aware of. It's good preparation for life'.

The views of those at the other end of the continuum who saw academic concerns as the sole function of history teaching were represented by a male teacher from a controlled selective school who considered that 'Genuine history teachers would not see the problem as that they are going to demythologise. They would say: let's look at the evidence from a balanced point of view and not try to be social reformers'.

Others feared that the teacher's own bias would 'come across depending on their background and what they had been taught themselves'. This male maintained school teacher continued:

Let's face it; there must be history teachers in the country with very strong political views. I think the most important thing is to preserve the integrity of the subject as a discipline. This social engineering doesn't mean that they are all coming out wonderfully tolerant, that all prejudices have been educated away. This is not our business anyway.

A female in a maintained school aimed to refute any claim that history teaching had to serve community relations. She insisted that this was not possible in history where teachers must strive to tell the truth. Yet when she spoke about 'the necessity to be strong on exploding myths which are the creation of the present' she revealed a social purpose, albeit one embedded in critical thinking, which positioned her in a more central position in the continuum. When invited to give her view on her role of the history teacher she stated that it was:

To encourage them to think independently for themselves. Children don't like grey areas but we must encourage them to think so when they are reading a newspaper or watching TV they can say: 'Hey, that's a very biased account. I don't agree with that'.

Apprehension of being seen to be biased in favour of a particular political view led many practitioners to adopt an avoidance strategy, that is, to refuse to state their views directly to their students. It was a case of 'the teacher can decide to declare who they are or what they believe or you can demonstrate it through your balanced approach'.

The scenario was further complicated by those who subscribed to the view that schools ought to be a haven from the troubles for young people: they didn't want to be confronted with 'murky street politics and prejudices' inside the classroom. I heard of one teacher in a big nationalist school in Belfast who didn't teach Irish history because 'they got too much of it on the streets'.

However, this was not the view taken by the majority of teachers. According to a history advisor:

On a positive note, there is good being done because most teachers realise if youngsters are not faced in school with hard issues they are left to find them out on the street corner. These things are best not left to the public domain, to the media. There are many positive good efforts being done in many schools and it is a major responsibility and I think an awful lot of history teachers embrace it and embrace it professionally.

This was certainly the forthright stance taken by the male teacher in a maintained non-selective who said:

It is important to tell the truth. You must not omit anything. If you are teaching twentieth century Irish history you must teach it, warts and all.

Another history advisor wanted to bring to centre stage the ways in which Irish history was being taught. She saw the key questions as being:

Not necessarily what or when or who's doing it but how it's being approached and if the contemporary stuff is being taught at all. My idea is to equip them to look at all situations and ask all sorts of questions.

The vast majority of teachers did not try to keep politics out of the classroom but many aimed to be as neutral as possible in their presentation. They claimed to 'stick to the facts' and to 'let the evidence speak for itself'. These teachers were determined not to get emotionally involved and usually they avoided teaching the more recent period of Irish

history. A minority went further and ideologically positioned themselves as first and foremost a critical practitioner who felt that the teacher's role was to present a totally impartial political view. For some of them teaching contemporary issues were inadvisable because these events were so recent that 'it is hardly history. You need to stand back from it for a decent interval so that you are not entirely biased'.

Students valued their teacher's even-handedness. I noted the confidence with which this student from a controlled comprehensive school stated that:

I ask my history teacher about politics and we sit and argue about it. He never is biased; he was there to play the devil's advocate, he never let it be one-sided. Even if issues are sensitive you just can't say the majority of the class aren't going to like that side so I'll just forget about it.

Taking the role of the devil's advocate as the student put it is not the same as avoiding the issue. According to an advisor:

Many teachers who appear to be doing a lot of soul-searching are starting to say, am I giving them a balanced view? Am I capable of giving a balanced view and a sense of audience when I'm aware of pupils and other teachers and parents and that the situation is still going on?

His own opinion was that:

Teaching history has got to be sensitive. We have to be very careful because every person has their own personal opinions but I think that history is a subject where you have to stand back a bit from your own private opinions and present a very balanced view of things.

A small number of teachers (mainly those who placed most emphasis on developing critical thought but who also had an eye to healing the rift in community relations) thought that education for mutual understanding was best approached obliquely rather than confrontationally. For this reason they preferred to teach about other conflict areas such as Nazi Germany or the Arab-Israeli conflict rather than contemporary Irish history.

A few teachers found teaching Irish history difficult because they were teaching different points of view. As one male from a maintained non-selective said:

It's ok teaching different points of view if you're doing something like the Arab-Israeli conflict. There are two sides. There are two sides here but the children are identifying with one of them and this is very obvious if you put something on the video and maybe when they are being shown violence and processions they would start drumming on the Table

Teachers said that the strategy they adopted depended on the age, ability and composition of the class. As regards less able pupils, it was according to another male in a controlled non-selective school, very much:

A matter of getting them to understand what is going on. But there are certain factual things that they have to know (for example, the Norman Conquest). You have to understand the chronology of the events. Again, for the less able ones, that's difficult, but we do certain exercises to reinforce a body of facts. I don't push them to know it because you'd drive yourself spare trying to get them to do it. I'm happy that they have a basic grasp of what was happening even if it's not factually accurate.

Teachers often reported that pupils were 'trying to suss you out'. They asked: 'What do you really think?' Or: 'Do you really think the same as the ones in the paramilitaries?' Unprompted, most teachers I interviewed claimed to have moderate political views which made them uneasy when trying to communicate with students who held more radical viewpoints: This position was expressed by a male teacher in a maintained non-selective school:

One of the problems you have from a teacher's point of view is that you are always very wary of not giving the pupils your own point of view. You always have to try and present them with it in such a way that they are able to look at it from a historical point of view.

Others, such as this male teacher in a controlled selective school, were blunt: 'the teacher cannot let the pupils know their opinions. Never'. Yet it was difficult to keep current issues out of the classroom when the teacher was a known activist. This was the case of a male teacher in a maintained non-selective school:

The one thing they would ask me about is the period of civil rights where I was personally involved as an activist and it was very interesting to hear the spin they would put on things and what I would remember. That is not the way it was, this is the way it was and so on. And actually they do end up with a fairly good understanding of it and they like to hear me talking about

it but I'd be very loath to put my own view on record. I try to be as objective as possible.

The 'stated commitment' approach in which teachers openly express their own views from the outset, as a means of encouraging discussion, during which pupils are encouraged to express their own agreement or disagreement with the teacher's views, was adopted by a minority of teachers. A typical stance was taken by the male teacher in a maintained non-selective school:

I'm a teacher who would declare before I started teaching any of the issues (say Home Rule) that I'm a constitutional nationalist and I don't believe in violence. I felt I had to make this position clear before I went into it..... I think Irish history should be taught but handled sensitively.

Most teachers' own experience of learning history was, according to a selective school teacher, 'of the old school where you opened your textbook and you started at page such and such, date such and such, and you just worked your way through; or where the teacher opened a notebook and dictated notes and corrected spelling mistakes'.

The emotional demands on the history teacher should not be underrated. Some teachers embraced confrontation either because they enjoyed the intellectual challenge or because they were convinced that empathy formed an important engagement within a topic which encouraged understanding. One educationalist stated that he would argue very strongly that 'unless teachers with their peers have got very emotionally involved with these issues then they are not going to be in the position of being very effective in dealing with controversial issues with young people'.

Some teachers also mentioned their fear of losing control in the classroom. According to one experienced advisor: 'At the best of times teaching was very stressful. Bringing politics into the classroom adds another strain; kids have no qualms in being disruptive they quickly pick up on your discomfort'. This male teacher advisor spoke of teachers, who confided in him their fear of loss of control that 'Matters would get out of hand in a disciplinary sense'. This, he said, was true of both selective and non-selective school teachers.

Although there was unanimous acceptance of having to teach at least some Irish history it remained the most sensitive issue reported and, almost always, the only issue that teachers found potentially contentious. Where concerns existed they frequently arose because in one way or another teachers had emotional associations with the period taught. This encouraged some to be determined to confront it and others to shy away from certain topics. As I was reminded by a female teacher, 'Teachers themselves have lost loved ones'. Another admitted: 'I haven't the skill of a counsellor'. This was especially the case if there happened to be marches, ceasefires, truces or a particular horrific murder or massacre. History was of great immediacy in their world. A male academic explained it thus: 'Teaching Irish history will always be a sensitive issue'.

(iii) Teaching Strategies used to tackle Sensitive Issues in the Classroom

Taking the role of the neutral chairperson was the strategy favoured by the majority of teachers. Most felt that as far as possible they had to play down the dominance of their own role. It appeared to be an unwritten contract that when potentially sensitive issues were being discussed everyone got a chance to voice his/her own opinion. The ground rules in the classroom were to allow people to express different points of view but also to recognise that their opinions were going to be challenged both by their peers and by the teacher. The classroom atmosphere was seen to be crucial to these teachers.

Most schools had done work on earlier periods prior to the Common Curriculum but not the later. Consequently, the twentieth century caused most concern especially the period post-1969 with civil rights and the sectarian conflict. However, teachers in the schools doing it were said to benefit because 'it has a contemporary resonance for pupils and they are interested in it'.

Concerns were expressed about other periods of history. Some teachers considered sixteenth-century Ireland in the context of Britain and the Reformation difficult. Others were uneasy about the plantations or the Williamite Wars. A few had trepidations about dealing with the Normans in Ireland but more mentioned the Famine and the land question as being contentious.

Nearly all teachers agreed that they enjoyed teaching Irish history, many enjoyed it very much. As regards teaching objectives, great emphasis was placed on 'the lively history teacher who can challenge the kids to think'. A history advisor who had taught in a controlled non-selective school added that 'History is a subject where there is a lot of activity and a lot of fun. Also, the reverse of that can be page-filling and an awful lot of churning out of material'. I found evidence to substantiate this claim, mainly from non-selective teachers who had to deal with less able students. One reported:

It can be very difficult with less able classes. Keeping them occupied. As a last resort I'd give them colouring in a picture from a battle etc. I'd be a bit more traditional but I'd accept newer methods such as visual aids, and television and computers now and again.

This contrasted greatly with what most teachers and their students agreed was the case in 1991 where they looked at evidence and drew conclusions. Strategies were changed by the new evidence-based approach. However, this has been accused of inviting more unease in that it could lead to more confrontational situations. Teachers explained how, when they taught contentious issues such as about the 1916 Rising, they took it from the perspective of both sides. One teacher reported how the last time he did the period they did a role play on the blood sacrifice of the Somme and Dublin, 1916, and tried to have some understanding of the passion and the hurt on both sides. He added that: 'If you ask the children they are glad we are going to study the Troubles. They believe that people need to know where we're coming from'.

All teachers agreed that with all topics but especially with more serious issues such as teaching the holocaust or Irish history that it was important to provide the children with

several pieces of evidence so that 'children from the first year are given different viewpoints of the same events'.

The majority of teachers admitted that when they had to deal with sensitive issues they 'would tend to be more formal initially and then let the children explore them, for example in role play. A teacher in a controlled comprehensive school said that she tended to give them the facts quickly and see how they reacted and then take it from there. In her words:

I tend to plough on. I never avoided an area of Irish history because I thought it was sensitive. I think one of the most difficult situations I had was not about Irish history, it was quite a number of years ago and it was tied up with Darwin's theories. I must have had a child who was of some particular persuasion and who was quite argumentative about it and again I tried to present the balanced view and left it fairly rapidly and again tried not to get involved in a debate where I was taking sides at all and that was a difficult one.

History is a good story was a recurring theme. Emphasis was placed by many on the teachers' ability to 'latch on to personality' and 'tell wee stories'. There was also the widespread belief that teachers confronted sensitive issues in the classroom by questioning myths. A male teacher from a maintained non-selective explained how he did it:

Whenever I start on a topic e.g. the American West, I'll ask them about their perceptions of Americans and they always give me the Hollywood version. I tell them that those weren't the first Americans, those are white Americans. Some talk about the blacks because of sport but none would mention the natives.

The same teacher showed how he tied this in with sensitive issues in Irish history:

The Ulster Scots see themselves as not being Irish or English, that is their perception of themselves. We are going to look at the situation over the past twenty or thirty years here and we're going to act as historians. You may have your own particular viewpoints and family viewpoints but I want you to be very professional about this, which is what a historian has to do.

Teachers were divided over the impact of the new evidence-based approach on helping them to cope with sensitive issues. On the one hand, some teachers accused it of inviting more unease in that it can be more confrontational. The old didactic approach removed the need to engage in discussion over uncomfortable issues. Yet when teachers no longer merely talked, read or dictated notes, the student was encouraged to think critically and to challenge established orthodoxy. Despite the approaches being increasingly more document-based, most teachers admitted to still using 'chalk and talk' and to 'dictating notes' to students.

There were also ways in which the new evidence-based approach made tackling sensitive issues easier. The teacher could present a selection of documents or oral or visual evidence in an effort to consider as many factors as possible and become emotionally divorced from tough issues.

Sources can be used as props for the teacher to disappear behind as well as illuminating and informing evaluation. As one controlled selective school teacher explained: 'I think the beauty of history is that you can go back to the documentary evidence, to the objectivity of the subject and draw things back. When you are dealing with contemporary issues or raw issues that is the thing to do'. Furthermore, those teachers fortunate enough to become involved in conflict resolution strategies (developed at various cutting-edge centres in the province, particularly the University of Ulster) spoke of the value of mediation programmes and the need for a flexible and varied approach.

Increasingly, according to an advisor, 'we're getting the message across using Inspectors reports that they need to vary techniques'. The vast majority of teachers I interviewed reported that they used a variety of techniques. One non-selective teacher indicated how he taught Home Rule:

I'll give them a sheet with sources on them and I'll say, 'Using these sources here I want you to list the reasons why the Unionists were objecting to Home Rule'. I'll also use TV. We did a project on the Indians; I've a very good film on that. Some of them do model work for me. But again they get a month to do that and they come in with lovely work they have done at home. They do great tomahawks, tepees etc. I give out certificates

and prizes for that. I sometimes read chunks out of books; I try not to do that often.

Inter-personal relations were considered to be the secret of success in dealing with sensitive issues. Nearly all teachers spoke about the importance of having a classroom where young people were able to express their own views rather than the views they thought others would like to hear. This was the advice given by a female in a maintained selective school: 'I think that it is vital that you build up a classroom atmosphere of trust, so a lot of thought has to be given by the teacher to responding to comments made by pupils in such a way that they do not feel put down'.

Another teacher in a controlled non-selective also spoke about having a class room 'where young people are able to express their own views rather than the views that you would like to hear'. Moving from the present to the past seemed to many teachers to hold the key to success.

Part Two: Oxford Teachers

External Factors Impacting on the Teaching of Sensitive Issues

In 1996 there seemed to be a strong possibility of Labour coming to power. Nearly all teachers' interviews mentioned the consequences for education of the Labour Party being elected. Many teachers in Oxford also referred to other current affairs such as the possible impact on national identity of having separate assemblies for the Scottish, Welsh and Irish. Topics were considered likely to be more sensitive if they had a strong contemporary resonance such as the Arab-Israeli conflict. Most teachers made the case that the more relevant the issue was perceived to be the more students enjoyed it. This search for relevance involved tackling live or highly charged issues where the need to be emotionally involved was strong. An upper school female remarked: 'I make comparisons with what is going on in Bosnia today and in Rwanda. They find it interesting and disturbing, as they should do'.

Other teachers, especially those who taught in schools with large Asian minorities, thought that there was some merit in looking at problem areas such as India and Pakistan and the Middle East and tracing the origins of conflict because their students tended to be more interested in those things that were in the news. Another upper school teacher referred to the importance of 'tracing it back but also pointing out the intractability of it'.

Topics such as Irish history were said to be interesting, difficult and sensitive. The sensitivity arises because either the teacher or the students are emotionally involved with the subject matter. In the case of one male upper school teacher it was because of 'Personal experience. I've been to Northern Ireland and got relatives there'.

Teachers with an awareness of contemporary social needs tackled these contentious topics because they hoped to develop understanding of 'where movements like the IRA came from and why people felt driven to violence'. Most teachers agreed that concentrating on other conflict areas was less effective in consciousness-raising than teaching about contemporary issues closer to home like the Irish problem. The role of contentious issues was often seen as a positive one: 'You can look at something like the Irish question which is a problem in the present. You can look at the past to study how the past could happen'.

Marjorie Reeves, the author of the 'Then and There' series whom I interviewed on 4 December, 1996, was adamant that a distinction be made between what is sensitive to a community and what is sensitive to the children themselves. In the interview she states: 'They are really quite different. You have to watch out for community sensitivity as well as what is going to spark the children off'.

Teachers agreed that the controversy was not just about history as a subject, it was also about a changing society over the previous twenty or thirty years. A particular observation was the fact that society had become more litigious'. People take things more

to heart', said a teacher trainer, 'there are more citizens' charters and people are aware of rights'. Others spoke about greater accountability in education.

Nearly all of those interviewed agreed that sensitivity had come more to the fore because 'people get worked up about a whole range of issues or might take them further than they ever did before and certainly since the 1970s'. A major reason for greater self-consciousness in history lessons was considered to be the growth of parent involvement in education.

Some teachers reported that they were fortunate enough to have a supportive school environment and this made them more comfortable teaching all topics. There was an almost universal recognition that the high quality of history teachers facilitated the delivery of the more contentious areas of the syllabus.

An advisor reinforced the case for competence in history teaching:

History teachers may have been too radical ten or fifteen years ago but now history teaching as a whole is very strong. The graduates coming in to teach it compared to other subjects are a lot stronger than many other school subjects.

A lower school teacher praised his school for allowing all kinds of debate. He reported having being able to say things to certain classes that he 'would have been very sceptical about saying in the past'. Nevertheless, he complained: 'With some classes it was very difficult to have a whole class discussion. The kids are quite dependent on being controlled. Freeing them up is easy but it definitely puts a lot of pressure on the teacher'.

An upper school teacher reflected on the demands made by teaching in a school where some students came from communities that had strong opinions on Irish politics:

It's immensely demanding here. It was easier when I was teaching English middle-class children. There are more problems in dealing with Irish history, for example, because we have a few strong Irish

communities. I hope I got them to understand where movements like IRA came from and why people felt driven to violence.

Certainly the most controversial issue in the History National Curriculum was the extent to which British history should be taught in schools in England (Phillips, 1998). Nearly 40% of all Oxford teachers highlighted the increase of English nationalism. They said that they came across awareness about ethnic origin in multicultural schools from comments made in class. A female teaching in a girls' independent school was challenged by a Year 9 student about why they were doing the history of black people instead of English history. This teacher saw such comments as being media-led and she said that she 'couldn't believe it happening years ago'.

Student knowledge was thought to be underestimated by many teachers. This was explained by a lower school teacher as being, 'like an iceberg: a whole lot of knowledge is deep down and you hone it very carefully, hopefully you get the emphasis right'.

All teachers talked about the influence of television and film on young people. This medium was said to be responsible for changes ranging from a decrease in reading to an expansion of their range of experiences. A few teachers spoke about revising what they thought their students ought to be able to understand because they were so much more knowledgeable as a result of watching television. Nevertheless, teachers generally felt that their pupils needed to be 'freed up from social pressure, especially from their peers'.

Geographical location was also either directly or obliquely referred to as a factor that determined how comfortable the teacher was during a history lesson. Teaching in Oxford was thought to be more problematical by all teachers who had also taught in London. One upper school female was clear on this:

In Oxfordshire it is more monocultural. It is so much harder to get somebody to the position where they can think about somebody who is different in an equal way. Yes there is racism and prejudice in London but there is also a great deal of breaking through all that. In London there was more openness about teaching sensitive issues than I have experienced in Oxfordshire and feistiness about lessons: things were tackled in a particular way.

Assessment appeared less onerous than it had in 1991 because it had been confirmed that there were no Standard Attainment Tests (SATs) in History at KS3. Some teachers saw this as an advantage in that it gave them more scope to explore potentially sensitive issues. Such a sentiment was expressed by the following upper school teacher: 'the danger to me is that if you go back to a static or safe or purely exam-led knowledge base, you'll cut out sensitivity but you'll also cut out any real discussion of issues at all'. There were also reports that the GCSE coursework syllabus was good: it allowed many teachers to undertake empathy exercises that attempted to look at sensitive issues.

The National Curriculum was considered by many teachers to be a compromise between the 'traditional' and the 'New History' approach. The majority of teachers approved of what they considered to be the revolution in history since the late 1960s and 1970s with the Schools Project and much more evidential work based on sources and on different interpretations. The Schools Council history with its emphasis on balance was considered to have been very good at raising questions that could lead to sensitive situations whereas the more static formal presentation of history tended to close down discussion.

Although nearly a third of the teachers interviewed were cynical about 'empathy' as a means of making children aware of sensitive issues, others were more appreciative of the skill. One lower school teacher was clear about her own views: 'Being aware of the strengths and weaknesses of evidence and being prepared to empathize with the past is important. Empathy was a bit of a dirty word recently but, if done properly, it is an excellent skill; if done poorly it is incredibly naïve'.

Many teachers expressed concern about the English history bias in the National Curriculum: it was feared that there was a political agenda behind it. Nevertheless, this concern was expressed mainly in terms of reluctance to be tied to any narrow curriculum policy whether it was English, European or any other history.

Complaints were made against the narrowness of the history content in the GCSE and A Level examinations. An independent school teacher who had retired three years previously was surprised when he went back to school to find that 'The A Level syllabus was very narrow indeed: it is based on about 60 years of history with emphasis on the twentieth-century'.

Chronological or thematic approaches were also challenged. It was reported by an upper school teacher that, although there was less emphasis on a chronological spread, 'we now have to teach discrete skills where content is always incidental to methodology (for example on how to approach documents)'. Another upper school teacher reported that she agonised over doing 'Medicine through Time': 'I think I really decided against it because I think chronology matters'.

Although the revised National Curriculum with its new-found breadth and flexibility was widely applauded some teachers were not very happy about it because they thought that the kind of people who were likely to be in charge of decreeing what they taught tended to be people who were likely to have a very conservative view. The perceived swing back towards narrative was, however, considered to be positive especially because there was a feeling that document examination, according to an independent school teacher, had gone a bit too far on small pieces of sources: 'I think it is swinging back to getting the story in balance with the sources. This is a much better balance; there is a happier medium now'.

The holocaust was specified by the National Curriculum. Schools usually dealt with it in Year 9 when they tended to cover the twentieth-century world. Nearly all teachers mentioned it because they were conscious that a number of students gave up history then. However, the topic was likely to be covered in more detail in Year 11, especially by those who opted for Germany as an in-depth unit in GCSE.

Yet there were still struggles. State school teachers, particularly those in lower schools, spoke about having to 'fight your corner as a historian'. Even in the independent sector

there were complaints: 'We had a mathematician as the headmaster and we had to do history in relatively few periods'.

A lower school teacher complained that supporting history as a separate subject was 'a running battle'. He explained that in his school from the following year history and geography would become known as 'humanities', a decision he deplored because it devalued both subjects. This awareness of the vulnerability of their subject encouraged teachers to take risks to convince their students that history was valuable, accessible and relevant. Topics such as Hitler, Northern Ireland and the Middle East were selected because they were high profile. However, this strategy of avoiding traditional constitutional history and opting for the controversial, the contemporary and the sensational brought with it higher risks of giving offence to some pupils.

Internal Factors impacting on the Teaching of Sensitive Issues

(i) Oxford Teachers' Predispositions

There was the whole question of Britain and Ireland; more broadly it was Britain and the Empire. Teachers with Irish connections felt that they had to be careful when handling the Irish Question: 'I'm half Irish; my mother comes from a particular religious background. I'm aware of that. Kids know about things like that. I just have to be careful not to impose any views on them. I know I'm biased personally'. This male initially stated that he never felt uncomfortable teaching any topic.

Important issues for Oxford teachers, and not mentioned by any Irish teachers, related to gender and rights. Nearly all teachers traced the rise of feminism back to the 1960s and considered it to be part of a slow process linked to all kinds of values. A retired female teacher from the independent sector confided that: 'My daughter was going through a heavy feminist and political phase which was extremely useful because she picked me up not just on things which were not only feminist but were racist as well'. She continued:

‘I had no idea how to do that, the syllabuses were incredibly limited and one had no awareness that 51% of the population were women. And that they were just presented as spinning and sitting in the kitchen’.

A male middle school teacher complained that: ‘as soon as I mentioned that women were in the possession of their fathers until they were married and were handed over to somebody else, the immediate reaction of some of the boys was to say ‘good’ and ‘just as well’ and make a joke of it’. The same teacher found dealing with a woman’s role to be, ‘more sensitive than a black issue because I see it as my job to make sure the girls don’t feel pressurised by the boys’ reaction’.

It seemed that if an issue came up about which the students had a preconceived idea it could be contentious. According to another middle school male teacher, once women’s rights were raised he knew that ‘they are going to start to shout and scream about it’.

The majority of independent school teachers felt wary about raising a number of issues relating to the rights of the disadvantaged. It was thought that particular measures such as the right of employment for disabled people led their students, according to one female teacher, ‘to believe that their noses have been put out of joint’.

The selection of appropriate language also challenged the history teacher. Offence (albeit unintentional) may be given by using a value-laden word that has contested political or ideological connotations. For example, when talking about the events in Ireland at Easter in 1916, the participants could be acclaimed ‘revolutionaries’, ‘rebels’ or ‘insurgents’. However, ‘rebel’ need not always be pejorative: a nationalist sympathiser can endorse its usage by linking it with heroism. On the other hand, ‘traitor’ nearly always has negative connotations.

The teacher requires great skill when handling terms that have the potential to confuse or give offence. Various shades of opinion in Ireland between nationalists and republicans are characterised by the use of judgemental terms such as ‘terrorist’ or ‘freedom fighter’,

‘paramilitary’ or ‘loyalist’. Therefore in Northern Ireland, care is taken in dealing with all aspects of Unionism and Nationalism. In Oxford a different set of problems colour language.

An independent school teacher in Oxford who was also aware of the power of language stated that: ‘getting the right word is the sort of thing you have to watch all the time. On the other hand, the whole thing is dead without the contentious’. There was wide agreement that that you had to treat both sides fairly and carefully employ certain terms but which one was more correct sometimes caused concern. This was felt by an independent school teacher who ‘used to talk about “coloured people” then “blacks” then “African Americans” or whatever’. He went on to say that ‘I hope no-one would accuse me of being racist but I find it difficult to keep up with the latest politically correct term’.

The extent to which sensitivity was reflected in the employment of particular language was explained by an upper school teacher: ‘If I’m teaching a particular topic that I know is likely to cause offence in the lesson for any reason, then I will look at particular words which as far as I can judge will help me to avoid offending anyone’. Another added that she tries to ‘avoid emotive language’. Naturally bias is an issue also associated with language. An independent school teacher stated that: ‘you have to be aware of not doing obvious things like talking about ‘man’ and ‘mankind’ and so on’.

Analysing language was also seen as a valuable teaching tool. One upper school teacher referred to an analysis he did about the origin of the Irish joke and how he linked that in with the history of Ireland. He said that ‘It helped to bring it out (racism) and then deal with it’.

Weight was also given to the extent to which indoctrination should be avoided. The same teacher continued: ‘A certain view of history tells you what to believe or at least what not to believe in *The Daily Telegraph* or *The Daily Mail*. We should aim to keep our critical facilities alert and stress that there are two or three sides to every story’. The role of a history teacher was said by the vast majority to: ‘stimulate pupils’ imagination’;

‘fascinate them with the differences between past and present’; ‘give them the means to examine evidence and draw conclusions from it’; and ‘develop their critical judgement as far as possible’. The notion of balance appeared in most teachers’ thinking.

(ii) Oxford Teachers’ Perceptions of their Students’ Stances regarding Sensitive Issues and their Role in Teaching them

Nearly all of the teachers agreed that the sort of response they got in the classroom depended on the background, age, disposition and ability of their students. I was warned by an upper school teacher that, given the nature of my research, unless I targeted the entire age range (which I had) I’d get a very distorted view of what was going on in schools. She stated that in a school like hers: ‘Their experience of history depends on their going through all the years. They are building on things. So, really, we’d expect the most complex answers from the more sophisticated older ones and from those who had done particular topics’.

The problem with the curriculum in Britain was that it was hard for the teacher to decide what was appropriate to include and what to leave out. Consequently, the process of selecting what was appropriate touched on the intellectual and emotional realms. A female teacher in an upper school had a different experience. She found that in an ethnically mixed environment it was easier to teach slavery with black kids in the class. She believed that: ‘It’s easier to do this than in the white Highlands where I taught before coming here. The kids here are so very aware and articulate about it’. This teacher found it ‘easier to be apologetic for ancestors than to be feeling something at the receiving end’.

Teachers were conscious of the impact of other areas of imperial history on their students and of the importance of their particular school ethos. This concern was apparent in dealing with India’s relations with the empire. ‘Today we were talking about Indian Independence and Gandhi and all that. Kids did know a lot about what was happening

and talked about it easily but in the school I was in before (a state school in a working class, white area of London) I would not have brought the subject up'.

Other teachers distinguished between their discomfort and that felt by their students. A female teacher in an upper school admitted that, 'they brought up the Irish joke and I thought it very tricky. I was uncomfortable with some of that'. An upper school male teacher remembered an occasion when he was teaching seventeenth-century Irish history to an American student who could 'barely sit in her chair. I had to say, "I'm not excusing, I'm explaining what happened", but the immense emotion was a real eye opener to me'.

Irish history was considered to be important because it concerned people in England:

It's a really good issue to do because they get really involved. When we studied Bloody Sunday they wrote about who fired the first shot and whose fault it was. When we get to the stuff about the Ceasefire, they discuss how it is likely to break down. It is one thing that really sparks them off a lot more than, say, local history, which they find rather bland.

Irish topics were also picked because many teachers thought the whole experience of the problem of Ireland was one that raised emotionally evocative issues which were not necessarily religious ones but had an ethnic origin going back to the seventeenth century. In the same way as teachers in Northern Ireland thought they could approach divisions in Northern Ireland by teaching the Arab-Israeli conflict instead of Unionist-Nationalist history, teachers in England were using the modern Irish conflict to illustrate racial and ethnic issues.

Race figured more prominently in issues brought up by state schools. When it was mentioned in history lessons, it was in the context of issues that involved 'rather complex controversies with a good deal of history behind them in colonialism, racism, history of the empire'. The issue was very important because insensitive handling would result in giving offence and alienating students. Nearly all teachers favoured frankness. For instance, one teacher recounted his approach to the whole idea of what image the British Raj projected and whether this was always a bad thing or whether there were good

aspects: 'If the issue is avoided, the pupils are not going to learn and it's terribly important that they should get aware of the wide world and what makes people tick'. Racism took a modern twist with the contemporary troubles in the former Yugoslavia. Teachers who felt uncomfortable teaching certain topics could exploit the situation to ensure that it became a positive teaching experience. This was the case for a female teacher in an upper school: 'It doesn't have to be a black/white issue so I haven't felt awkward. I think one of the things is discussion in groups'.

The degree to which teaching the holocaust was deemed sensitive depended on whether or not the school had a large Jewish community. It was reported that young people could be moved by and were sympathetic towards or even angry about the treatment of the Jews. Young people were said to display a great deal of interest and were intrigued about the notion of scapegoats, about how such a thing could happen and the way people behaved. One experienced independent school teacher described how rewarding her experience was of teaching the holocaust in the years before the National Curriculum when fewer schools taught the subject. She described the sense of achievement she felt when the lesson produced a productive discussion:

I remember the first time I taught Nazi Germany we had a tremendous discussion on why the Jews were unpopular throughout the ages. I changed the syllabus to get them to do things they ought to be doing like Nazi Germany.

Another female who had wide experience teaching the holocaust in schools admitted to feeling disappointed even 'appalled with some classes' reaction to an explicit video. She reported that 'some see a funny side in it; others are as truly upset about it as I am'.

Conflict over religion did not feature prominently in any of the responses as a sensitive issue. When it was mentioned it was rarely in a Protestant versus Catholic context. On the few occasions religion was mentioned it was applied mostly to the Muslim community and then more in the context of the position of women in society.

There were considerable differences between the types of issues reported in independent and state schools. Those mentioned by independent teachers tended to deal with class; state school teachers mentioned race or gender more frequently. An independent school teacher remembered the first time she taught about Cecil Rhodes and the Scramble for Africa. There was a girl in the class who was descended from the de Beer diamonds family. Thus awkwardness can arise for some teachers when confronted with the conqueror class as well as with the vanquished.

The same teacher remembered that when she started teaching she couldn't actually mention the word 'trade union' without everybody rolling their eyes; these were 'the lowest of the low sort of thing'. Class politics can make life difficult for teachers with left-wing convictions who were teaching in a well-heeled middle-class set up where there was a lot of prejudice against trade unions. This teacher felt that: 'It was terribly important for them to understand what poverty meant in the 19th century and how the attitudes grew out of that'.

Democratic rights were perceived as contentious. An upper school male referred to Mills and Rousseau and the battle over majority and minority rights as not necessarily being sensitive but 'it became so when it was felt that their own rights were curtailed or trodden upon'. He also spoke about problems with 'political correctness'.

When asked why they taught history teachers responded in a variety of ways. A small minority of 'purists' stated that they looked at the past for its own sake: 'History should remain as such and not become heritage'. The majority favoured a more instrumentalist approach to promoting educational excellence by passing on critical or life skills and/or helping to 'stimulate right attitudes in students'.

A small majority of teachers was conscious of what they considered to be their responsibility to transmit their values to young people in their care. Teaching sensitive issues gave them an opportunity to cultivate a set of what was usually termed liberal

values. A leading exponent of this viewpoint was Marjorie Reeves who assured me that I had 'got an awfully interesting subject' and that the more we talked about it the more she saw the inside of it and 'the more I could see how it could help stimulate right attitudes' adding that 'When I said right attitudes I have made a moral judgement but you can't help that'.

It was the ambition of nearly all teachers to inculcate various values: 'Seeing things from different points of view'; 'Learning to respect others'. Responses reflected the multitude of demands placed on teachers. There was the acknowledgement that we as educators must be more dispassionate, objective and balanced whilst exercising compassion and promoting an ethical stance. An upper school teacher considered the role of the history teacher was to make sure that history was not used as 'a political tool'; however, he did not think that was likely to happen in a democracy although 'we have seen that in Soviet and Nazi History'.

History was seen to be interesting because it dealt with people and gave them a perspective on life. The subject provided the means by which 'a practical wisdom could be developed'. Teachers generally concluded that difficult topics were the most worthwhile. Some also acknowledged that they had to be careful about 'not being too crusading'. A practising teacher thought that there was 'a limited role for making pupils aware that certain causes of action in politics are liable to have certain consequences'.

All teachers saw it as their role to make young people aware that different people may hold different views on historical events and they need to judge these. Most favoured the strategy of the devil's advocate because, as one upper school teacher said, 'it is much more likely to get someone to think about it than if the aim is to get somebody to change their mind'.

A teacher trainer interviewed thought that when it came to expressing your own views: 'I suppose history has more ethical and spiritual content than most subjects. But you can't

dictate; you encourage pupils to think for themselves. I don't believe in preaching, in crusading, from in front of the classroom, partly because it doesn't work'.

A recurring dilemma for most teachers was the extent to which they made their political views clear to their students. An independent school teacher didn't think that she could make her views absolutely clear to the pupils. She said that her views were likely to unfold as she was discussing issues: 'At the end of the day you should state your beliefs if somebody asks you clearly. But, if it is a sensitive issue, you should form your answer in a certain way that would not offend somebody'.

Teachers welcomed the chance to have a free and open forum in the classroom where their role was to ensure rational discussion. Another independent school teacher remarked: 'Airing prejudices is OK, it's real, it's out there, it's happening, it's what kids do. It's what adults do. Get things out. The skill of the teacher is to handle it. Positive things will come out of it because a view is being put forward'.

Many practising teachers commented on the importance of being direct with young people about their feelings: 'This is how I feel, how do you feel? Why do you think I feel like this and you feel like that'? For many 'It is like all good teaching, you have to establish yourself, there has to be the conscious relationship between you and them'. Even those who thought it their duty to further the young person's ethical education agreed that they should 'guide' but not 'force' their political opinions on their students. Another teacher spoke about how some teachers show their lack of confidence or ignorance by provoking debate: 'Prejudices can then get bandied around'.

An essential ingredient for countering prejudice was knowledge. An independent school teacher was pleased with her experience but put her success down to competence with the subject matter: 'I know the periods I teach and my extensive knowledge helps me to deal with possible problems ... I don't need to compromise with hot air and provocative views. I'm prepared and less afraid of confronting them'.

Some teachers made interesting comments on the impact learning history in school had on young people. There was no consensus in their responses. Possibilities ranged from 'It may change people's perceptions' to 'History doesn't actually teach you anything'. One independent school teacher added that: 'Kids can box things into categories and you learn nothing other than the teacher thinks this'. One view was that 'not enough people do enough history in enough depth to be aware of it'. while another was that 'Learning history may raise an awareness of certain (sensitive) things that you could choose to accept or reject, so history can teach lessons about the past - only people learn different lessons from it'.

Most teachers favoured a dispassionate objective strategy. As one upper school teacher put it:

We don't do ourselves any favours by pushing a particular line like some of the earnest crusading teachers. Young people might tow the line in class but it takes more commitment to be dispassionate about it.

A state school teacher suggested that when it came to a very sensitive issue, it had to be dealt with as sympathetically as possible to both sides. She said that:

There is no good avoiding the emotion because it is a very evocative issue and the only way to tackle it is to be as sensitive as possible to both sides. I think that nationalism is a very dangerous weapon when it gets out of hand. But you have to balance that with one the reasons why we teach history which is to know where we came from. Know thyself is one of the important things about maturity and history does help us with that.

(iii) Teaching Strategies used to tackle Sensitive Issues in the Classroom

The National Curriculum specified knowledge and understanding but it also emphasised interpretation at all Key Stages. These regulations, which encouraged discussion, analysis and argument, opened up enquiry into more sensitive areas.

Many teachers identified that the practice of an enquiry-based approach was conducive to probing into and interpreting sensitive areas.

Often potentially tricky topics such as the Holocaust at KS3 were prescribed without any instructions on how to teach it. This flexibility left individual teachers free to approach and interpret issues to their pupils. The strategies to be employed in the handling of these sensitive issues were left to the teacher's own discretion. Most teachers welcomed the challenge but a minority, such as this lower school teacher, were intimidated by it: 'I don't think I have the skills to teach a subject where my pupils feel uncomfortable I think we should have more guidance. But the union is pretty good on dealing with race issue'. The majority of teachers welcomed the interpretation part of the National Curriculum at all levels because it meant that: 'You can start looking at issues of sensitivity in a more reasoned and discursive way about but within some sort of framework'.

Whilst certain strategies cultivated a climate of pupil involvement by heightening interest, they also brought the possibility of tension in the classroom. Traditional didactic approaches such as note-taking, dictation and emphasis on the narrative were less likely to muddy the waters because the teacher was directly in control of the structure of the lesson. The strategies that made pupils active instead of passive learners such as discussions, using evidence or role play had a much greater potential for introducing a variety of sensitivities into the history lesson.

A minority of teachers, mostly in state schools, complained that they could not teach lessons as they would have liked because of organisational problems, especially class control. A lower school teacher thought that it was easier to keep young people on-task if the students were focused towards the front. He said that 'Any time I try to put my classes into small groups I give up unless they get the support teacher in to help me and they can take a small group out'.

Another lower school teacher explained how difficult it was for him to engage his students in a discussion of issues. He commented on how they loved to just sit and copy:

They'd think that was a good history lesson because they had something to show for it; they are proud of their neat and tidy work. If I spent forty-five minutes in discussion with them they say it's boring, a waste of time; we didn't learn anything.

Another experienced teacher said that she 'honestly couldn't remember dealing with history in a sensitive way'. Her lessons used to be very note-based. She explained that:

You took down notes on various things. No bottom up: 'what did the natives think of these issues?' Nothing was brought out in discussions about what the natives felt partly because of the way the teacher teaching it and also because of the nature of the old O Level which relied on factual recall.

Part Three: Students in Mid-Ulster and Oxford on Sensitive Issues

(i) Students Perception of the Relevance of being taught Sensitive Issues in History

The vast majority of students in Northern Ireland and Oxford agreed that history was very relevant to life. Those in controlled (Protestant) schools who were most positive about history's relevance tended to specify its importance in shaping religion and politics: 'History tells us a lot about our country's past life and issues concerning religion'. Another Year 8 pupil from the same Irish controlled school saw history as being relevant: 'Because you can find out where your relatives come from'. One of her classmates thought that: 'history helps us to understand why people act in certain ways about religion'.

Table 1

Agree that history has no relevance to life

<i>Region</i>	<i>Type of school</i>	<i>percentage</i>
Mid-Ulster	Catholic (maintained)	11%
	Protestant (controlled)	6%
	Selective (grammar)	8%
	Non-selective	10%
Oxford	Independent	14%
	State	16%
Average		11%

In the above and following tables there are two kinds of category: schools can either be largely or exclusively Protestant or Catholic or they can be selective or non-selective. The selective schools were Protestant or Catholic grammar schools (one of the Protestant grammars surveyed did have a significant Catholic minority) and non-selective schools were Protestant or Catholic secondary schools.

Young people in both state and independent schools in Oxford tended to agree that history is relevant to their lives and they also were more inclined than their Irish counterparts to make more general comments about how history impacted on their lives and make very few direct references to religion.

One GCSE student from a large Oxford comprehensive who disagreed that history was irrelevant wrote: 'Some things might not be totally true but history is real and a part of everyday life'. A KS3 girl commented: 'history has an effect on us throughout our lives and if we were to think it was irrelevant no lessons would be learnt and there would be more prejudice and bitter feeling'. The tiny minority who saw history as irrelevant to life made comments such as: 'Most of it has nothing to do with you'. My survey suggested that those who liked history best were also the students who saw it as being most relevant to their lives.

Older students from Northern Irish selective schools tended to write more about history's cultural importance. Several maintained (Catholic) selective school girls wrote the following about its relevance: 'history is important for one's cultural heritage and it is important for future generations of people'; 'history has shaped our country'; 'It helps us to understand how the troubles started in Northern Ireland'; and 'Everyone should have a knowledge of their past. It should interest them and help them in the future'.

Table 2

Agree that it is wrong to teach sensitive topics in history because people might be offended.

<i>Region</i>	<i>Type of school</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Mid-Ulster	Catholic (maintained)	13%
	Protestant (controlled)	11%
	Selective (grammar)	7%
	Non-selective	18%
Oxford	Independent	12%
	State	11%
Average		12%

Interviews with teachers done at the same time as the student survey indicated their reservations about teaching contentious issues. The greatest difference of opinion was found within Irish schools. Here teachers in selective schools were more likely than those in non-selective schools to endorse teaching sensitive topics. The very positive response of students to being taught sensitive topics in school suggested that all teachers should take the risk. Only a small minority of students agreed that it was wrong to teach topics such as Irish history and the holocaust because people could be offended. A girl in Year 9 from an Irish selective maintained (Protestant) school stated that: ‘We all have to come to terms with our past, no matter what it is’. A sixth form boy from the same school wrote that ‘there’s a lot about the troubles that we don’t know and we need to learn about our own history’.

Table 3**Agree that it is important to help people to know the truth about the past**

<i>Region</i>	<i>Type of school</i>	<i>percentage</i>
Mid-Ulster	Catholic (maintained)	63%
	Protestant (controlled)	76%
	Selective (grammar)	66%
	Non-selective	70%
Oxford	Independent	69%
	State	62%
Average		68%

When students commented on being taught sensitive issues, they often argued in terms of rights: ‘should know’, ‘need to know’, ‘it’s good to know’ were commonplace responses. This was particularly true of all types of Irish schools where the notion of students having ‘a right to know’ (or ‘people are entitled to know what went before’) featured prominently. However, there were some dissenting voices. A very small minority agreed that it was wrong to teach sensitive topics ‘if the class or school was mixed’ (Protestant/Catholic) or if things ‘were too disturbing’. Most of those who thought it was wrong to teach topics like the ‘Troubles’ appeared to fear giving offence and many recommended that their teachers ‘be careful’.

The idea of entitlement prevalent in many Irish responses was also evident in comments made by students in English schools. One state school boy agreed that it was: ‘good to teach issues that might hurt or offend people because it might help them understand and change their views’. There was widespread agreement in both regions about the importance of history in informing young people about the so-called ‘truth about the past’. A considerable majority of students perceived this to be the case with the greatest disagreement being between maintained and controlled schools in Ireland: controlled (Protestant) school students were the stronger advocates of the need to learn history to know the truth about the past. This conviction was apparent in the following statements written by sixth form girls in a selective controlled school: ‘I think that we have a right to

be taught about the Troubles'; 'I think we should know what has taken place in our own country rather than anywhere else'. It was also considered by one non-selective maintained school student to be 'good to learn whether Catholics or Protestants won battles and who was to blame for this happening and who started it'. Ultimately, however, the dominant voice can be encapsulated in the words of one English student who wrote: 'It is worse to be ignorant, than to perhaps be offended by the truth'.

The importance of being taught history at school was strongly endorsed by the vast majority of students everywhere. They also considered it to be the most influential factor in learning the history of their country closely followed by the influence of their 'family', 'watching TV' and 'reading history'. Despite the dominance of these factors, 'other school subjects' and 'newspapers' were also judged to be influential. My discussions with students in both regions revealed different interpretations of 'own experience'. In N. Ireland it tended to be equated with personal knowledge of victims or incidents in the current violence; Oxford students referred to visits to museums or National Trust properties.

Table 4

Factors that were influential/very influential in helping the students develop opinions about the history of their country.
(In rank order)

1996						
Region	Oxford	Oxford	Mid-Ulster	Mid-Ulster	Mid-Ulster	Mid-Ulster
	State	Independent	Catholic	Protestant	grammar	Non-selective
History Lessons	93%	92%	97%	94%	98%	93%
Books	77%	78%	89%	85%	90%	86%
Family	76%	76%	73%	76%	75%	74%
TV	77%	72%	65%	79%	77%	63%
Experience	52%	48%	56%	64%	54%	65%
Newspapers	53%	42%	55%	60%	60%	54%
Another subject	50%	48%	38%	46%	42%	40%
Friends	29%	27%	41%	40%	36%	46%

The finding that was most at variance with what teachers said was the lesser significance attached by students to the influence of friends when it came to learning about their country. Teachers thought that in most cases peers and home background had a greater influence on young people's thinking than history lessons in school.

Hardly any students wrote comments to illustrate their choice of response. Those who did tended to be from a range of Irish schools. Typical comments were: 'I think that I learned the most from history classes as you actually studied most in detail'; 'I think the most important would be reading history books because it tells you what you need to know'.

Teachers were wary about making extravagant claims for history generating greater tolerance; students were also hesitant about making this claim. On average just under half of the pupils thought that it had a positive effect; the most optimistic students were in Northern Irish controlled (Protestant) schools whilst those in English independent schools were the most cautious. Less than a quarter, on average, claimed that learning history increased prejudice but twice as many Irish students as English students thought this was the case. This marked contrast in thinking can be detected in the following comment made by an English independent school student: 'Bringing up sensitive issues in the classroom situation should make people think because the situation will probably be neutral'.

Such neutrality was not always possible in the more volatile Ulster context as this girl from an Irish maintained school exemplified: 'Hearing about the Unionists made me quite angry and bitter'. Male students in a neighbouring controlled school thought that: 'It's hard not to take arguments into the classroom from everyday life'; and 'It makes them more prejudiced because some people hear what they like to hear'. Many, however, were measured or cautious in their appraisals. These Irish girls from a selective maintained school were representative of those who were more tentative in their

appraisal: 'It can make some people bitter depending on their circumstances but by talking about sensitive issues it might make people more relaxed and open-minded'.

Table 5

Agree that bringing up sensitive issues makes people more prejudiced and bitter.

<i>Region</i>	<i>Type of school</i>	<i>percentage</i>
Mid-Ulster	Catholic (maintained)	35%
	Protestant (controlled)	29%
	Selective (grammar)	30%
	Non-selective	36%
Oxford	Independent	19%
	State	13%
Average		27%

Many students in Irish schools had experienced intolerance and bigotry in their communities. It is not surprising that these students were also more likely to agree that bringing up sensitive issues in the classroom makes people more prejudiced and bitter. Non-selective schools tended to have students from working-class areas and these students more than any other were less optimistic about the positive impact of being taught history. This thinking was more in line with the assertions made by the teachers interviewed. Nevertheless, as we have seen in interviews with teachers in 1996, they still tended to be more pessimistic than their students. Those students who were negative about sensitive issues being taught nearly always justified this by their reluctance to hurt anyone's feelings. A KS3 boy in a selective maintained school stated that 'we should not hurt or offend anyone for the sake of education because it isn't as important as other people's feelings.

Table 6**Agree that learning history makes us more tolerant of others.**

<i>Region</i>	<i>Type of school</i>	<i>percentage</i>
Mid-Ulster	Catholic (maintained)	44%
	Protestant (controlled)	53%
	Selective (grammar)	46%
	Non-selective	49%
Oxford	Independent	54%
	State	49%
Average		50%

History was a popular subject in all schools in both regions. When asked to give it a mark out of 5 (with 5 being high) the majority of all students gave it at least 4 out of 5. On this there was a high degree of agreement between all schools in all places. Furthermore, the extent to which individual students liked history was significantly related to the degree to which they reported feeling comfortable with all historical topics. The greater the students' liking for the subject the less likely they were to feel uncomfortable when being taught any topic. In Oxford, the history referred to was predominately British although schools also catered for ethnic minorities by teaching some Indian and African history. Irish schools concentrated on national history that was both British and Irish.

In 1996 teachers in Northern Ireland had stated in interviews that teaching Irish history, especially contemporary issues, could be problematical. In Oxford, fewer teachers said that any issue made them uneasy, but the difficult topics tended to be those related to race and nationality. My survey indicated that nearly three quarters of students in all schools in Northern Ireland and Oxford reported that they were comfortable being taught most topics. In this they appeared to be less sensitive than their teachers but, like their teachers, the Irish students were most likely to feel uncomfortable learning some aspect of Irish

history. Racial tensions such as those between the indigenous peoples and the settlers in America also made a very small number feel uneasy as did some religious topics.

In the case of English students, a greater variety of topics were mentioned, most of which related to national identity, but the holocaust was considered to be the single most unsettling topic (one specified that she was ‘annoyed and upset by slavery’). A tiny minority, mostly girls, admitted to feeling uncomfortable when learning about the changing role of women. One sixth former in an independent school claimed that she was ‘uncomfortable initially because of the amount of personal input needed’.

Table 7

The extent to which students felt uncomfortable learning history with at least one topic.

<i>Region</i>	<i>Type of school</i>	<i>percentage</i>
Mid-Ulster	Catholic (maintained)	32%
	Protestant (controlled)	29%
	Selective (grammar)	24%
	Non-selective	38%
Oxford	Independent	14%
	State	28%
Average		27%

It is highly significant that very few students reported feeling ‘uncomfortable’ in class when being taught any topic.

Although less than a third of the students in Mid-Ulster reported discomfort with any topic, there was some difference between the surveys conducted in Protestant schools and Catholic schools with marginally more Catholics feeling uncomfortable. However, there was a statistically significant difference between young people in Irish selective schools and Irish non-selective schools with the former reporting less discomfort than the latter. It

is interesting to note that teachers in non-selective schools were also more likely to be worried about teaching Irish history than those in selective schools. These teachers pointed out that their pupils often lived in ‘hard-line’ housing estates and were not as ‘academically able’ as young people in selective schools, therefore the more rigorous history that they learnt in the classroom contradicted the myths that circulated on their estate.

(ii) Students’ Opinions of their Teachers’ Stance regarding Sensitive Issues

Table 8

Agree that teacher is biased

<i>Region</i>	<i>Type of school</i>	<i>percentage</i>
Mid-Ulster	Catholic (maintained)	17%
	Protestant (controlled)	9%
	Selective (grammar)	10%
	Non-selective	17%
Oxford	Independent	19%
	State	17%
Average		15%

Only a small number of students in all schools perceived their teacher to be biased, with Irish students seeing less bias in their teacher’s presentation than English students. This reinforced what teachers had said in interviews when they appeared convinced that nearly everyone in the profession was even-handed in his/her approach. Maintained schools students were more in line with English schools in their perceptions whilst those in controlled and selective schools in Ireland were least likely to believe that their teacher was biased. Many of the students who commented (the majority made no comment) equated the version of history they got in the lesson with ‘truth’ or ‘fact’. One KS3 pupil in a controlled school stated: ‘My teacher tells the truth about various incidents’. A boy doing GCSE History in an Irish selective maintained school added: ‘My teacher was very

neutral and this helped me understand both sides'. A girl in his class confided: 'My teacher very rarely uses opinion, she teaches fact'. Another boy in the Sixth Form wrote an even more controversial statement: 'My teacher's opinion is not biased because history is not a biased topic'.

Similar messages emerged from KS3 pupils in maintained non-selective schools: 'He lets us make up our own mind'; 'You are given different views and are allowed to decide what happened for yourself'; 'My teacher is not biased. She says the same about both religions. She does not say hate Protestants. She does not say Catholics are brill'.

Oxford teachers, according to their pupils' perceptions, did not tend to express their own opinions openly. A KS3 student in an Upper school stated: 'My teacher does not express her own opinions a lot and when she talks over things, she talks about both sides so we can have our own opinion and there is no right or wrong'. I was interested to read the following comment from one of my own sixth form students: 'I think she is very aware that she might be biased and therefore makes a great effort to make sure that she is not'.

English students tended to more dubious about teachers' impartiality. One independent school boy considered his teacher to be partisan because 'he will always be patriotic'.

(iii) Students' Perception of the Teaching Strategies used to tackle Sensitive Issues

The discrepancy between the discomfort felt by selective and non-selective school students encouraged me to investigate whether there was a possibility of a link between feeling uncomfortable and the teaching strategy used. Ultimately it is difficult to say whether the strategy adopted was a cause or an effect of the sensitivity of the subject but certainly the connection was worth considering.

Table 9

The most common teaching strategies reported

Teacher looked at evidence often/very often

<i>Region</i>	<i>Type of school</i>	<i>percentage</i>
Mid-Ulster	Catholic (maintained)	61%
	Protestant (controlled)	71%
	Selective (grammar)	66%
	Non-selective	64%
Oxford	Independent	64%
	State	79%
Average		67%

Teachers agreed that they made ample use of evidence and discussion in history lessons. This claim was endorsed by their students in all schools in both regions. Most students reported that class discussion was a strategy used but there appeared to be rather less discussion in Irish controlled (Protestant) schools than in Irish maintained (Catholic) schools whereas the examination of evidence was a strategy reported by more students in controlled than in maintained schools. Although the majority of pupils said that they examined evidence in class, English state schools allegedly used history sources more frequently than other schools.

However, in Northern Ireland, dictated notes were reported to be the most commonly used strategy in selective schools. They were also important in controlled schools but not to the same extent. Dictated notes were not so widely used in Irish non-selective schools where little more than half of the students alleged that their teachers dictated to them at least sometimes. English school students also reported lesser use of dictated notes with independent schools having a greater tendency to give them.

Table 10

Teacher dictated often/very often

<i>Region</i>	<i>Type of school</i>	<i>%age</i>
Mid-Ulster	Catholic (maintained)	55%
	Protestant (controlled)	67%
	Selective (grammar)	79%
	Non-selective	39%
Oxford	Independent	32%
	State	22%
Average		49%

There was a tendency for teachers who felt uneasy about teaching a contentious topic either to adopt a didactic approach or to make ample use of sources but to be wary of undirected discussion. As regards looking at evidence, there was considerable difference in the perception of Catholic students and Protestant students. Fewer Protestant than Catholic students thought that their teachers often discussed topics in class.

Table 11

Teacher discussed topics in class. Often/very often

<i>Region</i>	<i>Type of school</i>	<i>%age</i>
Mid-Ulster	Catholic (maintained)	64%
	Protestant (controlled)	44%
	Selective (grammar)	49%
	Non-selective	64%
Oxford	Independent	67%
	State	57%
Average		57%

Only a minority of students claimed that their teachers used debate and role-play as teaching methods; these methods appeared to be more commonplace in English state schools than in Irish controlled schools.

Table 12:

Teacher used role play/debates often/very often

<i>Region</i>	<i>Type of school</i>	<i>%age</i>
Mid-Ulster	Catholic (maintained)	10%
	Protestant (controlled)	4%
	Selective (grammar)	9%
	Non-selective	6%
Oxford	Independent	12%
	State	8%
Average		8%

Worksheets were reported to be used widely by all schools; they were apparently used most frequently in Irish non-selective schools and less often in independent schools in Oxford. The frequency of use of these particular strategies appeared to be determined more by school tradition than by topic sensitivity.

Table 13

Teacher gave worksheets often/very often

<i>Region</i>	<i>Type of school</i>	<i>%age</i>
Mid-Ulster	Catholic (maintained)	46%
	Protestant (controlled)	49%
	Selective (grammar)	24%
	Non-selective	72%
Oxford	Independent	37%
	State	59%
Average		48

Summary

The majority of Irish teachers now agreed that the Common Curriculum was a good thing; it was seen to have the largely accepted political agenda of improving community relations. The fears of parental opposition were still real but were largely surmounted though Protestant teachers were thought to have more problems with parental (but also school) constraints. Problems could be worse in schools situated in deprived frontline areas.

There was little optimism for the outcome of Education for Mutual Understanding projects but the new Irish history materials were widely welcomed. There were issues over teaching what were felt to be difficult concepts to younger pupils and more general concerns about dealing with bias and myths on all sides. Most teachers were seen as adopting the neutral chairman stance, which it was felt students appreciated. The new evidence-based approaches were mostly liked amidst a recognition that a wider variety of approaches was being used. Good inter-personal relations were held to be crucial.

In Oxford issues of contemporary relevance were seen by local teachers as the ones to concentrate on. Study of the Irish problem was welcomed (it could link in with race issues) even it was still felt to be sensitive. Difficult topics, in fact, were generally held to be worthwhile. Overall, there was felt to be greater sensitivity around; gender was considered to be one issue and the use of appropriate language was thought to be an even greater one. There was also the continuing major issue of the amount of British history to be taught.

The breadth of the National Curriculum was, however, welcomed; the sections that dealt with sources and interpretations were approved of but one third of the teachers were critical of the approach to empathy. Inquiry-based approaches were popular. Values of tolerance and balance were to the fore though the devil's advocate role was adopted by most, though not all, of the teachers surveyed. There was some

uncertainty of the overall impact of the changes in an era when the take up of geography was presenting a different challenge.

In general, students in both Mid-Ulster and Oxford were highly positive about their history classes and about learning history with the older ones also stressing the importance of learning about one's culture. Teacher uncertainty about sensitivity was not matched by the students who, in the main, used need or entitlement justifications to support dealing with sensitive issues with only a small minority dissenting. Selective controlled school students in Mid-Ulster were more in favour than those in maintained schools; they tended also to be more positive on whether history lessons increased tolerance.

If Irish history topics were the sensitive areas in Mid-Ulster in Oxford there were the holocaust and national identity issues. That said, most issues were seen as being fine by most students who also were highly positive about their teachers finding them fair and neutral. There was much use of evidence and discussion with more use of role play in Oxford and more use of dictated notes in Protestant selective schools in Mid-Ulster.

Chapter Seven

2001: Teachers and Students

This chapter is comprised of three parts. As in Chapter Six, 1996, they are: interviews conducted with Mid-Ulster and Oxford teachers in parts one and two; students who were surveyed in schools in Northern Ireland and Oxford are represented in part three. The data is also interrogated using the skills of a reflective practitioner of history to identify and comprehend sensitive issues. The interviewees' responses are grouped according to whether they referred to factors external or internal to the classroom. The categorisation of teachers' reactions depends on their perceptions of their role and the strategy adopted to deal with potentially sensitive situations in history lessons.

Part One: Mid-Ulster

External Factors impacting on the Teaching of Sensitive Issues in Mid-Ulster

A key to understanding sensitive issues in history is to consider how teachers saw their role. Were they primarily or indeed exclusively critical practitioners, interested in what they conceived to be the intrinsic purpose of the discipline? Or, on the other hand, did they consider that the teacher also had a social or a moral role? How far do history teachers place emphasis on their role of promoting tolerance? To what extent are they willing to admit to their own particular political affiliations? What strategies do teachers favour when teaching sensitive issues? And finally, what impact do teachers' think they are having on their students? I used the model constructed in 1991 which classified teachers' strategies in coping with teaching Irish as having the characteristics of a mouse, fox or lion,

It would set up a false dichotomy if one categorised teachers as having exclusively either a moral or an academic purpose. That all teachers are concerned with the transmission of knowledge is axiomatic but not all teachers subscribe to the extrinsic or social aims of

History. Many would agree with Lee (Lee et al., 1992) that, although children may become better people as a result of having learnt history, this is incidental and not the aim of the subject. Nevertheless the majority of teachers in the Mid-Ulster cohort agreed that teachers, to some extent, had a social responsibility.

Four highly charged political and social issues emerged in the course of my interviews. There was the loyalist confrontation at Drumcree and there was the Holy Cross Primary School walk; one teacher referred to this as being 'a cry from the hard line ghettos'. A third sinister development was a death threat being issued to Catholic teachers; this, according to the same maintained school teacher, elicited '100% condemnation among all teachers of all religious persuasions'.

Finally, the terrorist attacks on 9 September 2001 that included the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York encouraged some (and nearly all Protestant) teachers to compare 'the way terrorism is being dealt with over there and over here' and to add that 'the hardliners say that terrorism is being placated over here'. These events also threw into sharp relief the ongoing dichotomy between the positive and negative repercussions controversial issues had on teacher/pupil relationships. A male teacher in a controlled secondary school summed the position up as follows:

There is a lot of thinking among young people and I would say a lot of frustration and confusion which has made teaching sensitive issues very enjoyable because we have great discussions. But when they retreat into a ghetto mentality it is very difficult.

A female teacher in a similar school, just after a car bomb apparently planted by the Real IRA exploded in Omagh on 15 August, 1996, killing 29 people and injuring dozens of others, illustrated the highly emotionally-charged impact of terrorist attacks:

I taught three of the victims of the Omagh bomb; one of them was my best student. On the day of her funeral she got a university offer. Can you imagine going back into the classroom after that, when a fellow pupil has been killed in such circumstances?

She drew my attention to the extent to which community prejudice permeated through to the classroom:

Certainly those who have lost parents and indeed teachers themselves who have had links with terrorism are very bitter. A German told me that he visited a class and was told by a boy that he had never met a Protestant and never wanted to meet one and the German said you have met one because I'm one.

In 2001 the appointment of Sinn Féin's Martin McGuinness as Minister of Education led to loyalist demonstrations which brought politics directly into the schools when, young people were more directly involved in political demonstrations. The reaction of one teacher in a controlled comprehensive school reflected what many teachers considered to be the ability divide:

Let me say that none of them came from my class (either A Level or O Level). Those I saw there wouldn't know Stalin is dead. I don't pay much attention to those on that demonstration because the amount of Irish history they would have had between their ears is very little

A majority of teachers insisted that even in selected schools in more privileged areas it was more difficult to teach. One teacher even confided that: 'since the peace processes have come about children have become harder'.

One head of department involved in the pilot scheme to promote citizenship revealed that there were reservations about teaching recent controversial events at a junior school level. This experienced, controlled-school teacher revealed that there was a rise in the number of young men joining loyalist paramilitary groups. He confided that:

Superficially, there is a feeling that everything is hunky-dory, we are all moving forward. In fact there is great resentment and the old prejudices are still very much there and it will take a long time to work through the system.

The impression expressed by the vast majority of teachers was that their pupils were a lot more aware of the political scene than in the past. Many claimed that popular films played a role. They had the impression that films such as *Michael Collins*, which was very popular on both sides of the border, and *Some Mothers' Sons* had brought their pupils to a greater awareness of Irish history. One secondary school teacher in a

maintained school explained that his students preferred it to Medicine or the American West.

All teachers emphasised the important role played by external forces, particularly the family and peer group. A maintained school teacher remarked: 'I had a wee girl in First Form with very strong views and I knew where she was coming from because I taught the mother'. The majority of teachers argued that the best way to change attitudes was for young people to grow up together and to mix more. This was seen to be an argument for integrated education, an approach to education that was gaining in popularity at the time.

Lack of discipline was such a common complaint that, in several schools I approached, mention was made of entire days being devoted to promoting positive behaviour. The majority of teachers spoke about a general lack of respect that was exacerbated by the political situation. An experienced teacher from a Protestant background spoke about changes in his (and my) home town:

Well, you and I know Cookstown. Fundamental evangelical Protestantism would have had a fairly tight grip on people. When I first came to work in Cookstown that was the prevalent culture and that has been progressively abandoned and has not been replaced by anything of greater substance.

We agreed that there were structures under the old system which, although not particularly attractive in that they cultivated fairly rigid parental attitudes and a narrow approach in children to what they were being taught in school, at least had created some structure: 'I just have to compare the current situation to what I came into in the 1960s. A lot of the change is due to the crumbling away of the old evangelical families'.

Although there was a certain amount of optimism attached to the peace process that was not the case in regard to other social problems. Even in selective schools I found a teacher who admitted that: 'I have a family and it's difficult keeping them focused on their schoolwork, there are too many distractions'. The same teacher was reluctant to use the term 'underclass' but he confided that: 'In the past, we knew what people meant when

people used that term - the small shopkeepers, the small farmers - but they had definite standards'.

In fact many teachers confided in me that discipline was not as good as in the past. One secondary school teacher was convinced that this was the case:

Oh without a doubt. You would have Year 7s as difficult now as Year 13s were a couple of years ago. All youngsters are much more difficult to motivate, much more difficult to get work from I'm still not convinced that the curriculum is geared towards the lower band pupil.

Others concurred that school discipline problems were part of a general trend in society. They spoke of the diminishing respect for authority as a phenomenon that was not peculiar to Northern Ireland but true of the whole of the United Kingdom. Some emphasised that they were witnessing 'a changing society and increasing secularisation'.

In terms of Northern Ireland another controlled-school teacher thought:

[Northern Ireland] is ten to fifteen years behind where England is. And church control and moral identity are being questioned. Also it's the increased divorce and marriage break-up situations which lead to a lack of stability in family units.

Most teachers considered social background to be the most influential factors in determining the views held by young people. This conviction was strongly held by a teacher in a controlled school who said:

There is an over-emphasis on the idea that we can change attitudes in two hours or so a week. That's unrealistic. I would defend the idea that you should try but at the same time I don't think you can achieve miracles.

Another male teacher in a maintained school endorsed this stance: 'Teach them the facts; let them see different perspectives on things, but at the end of the day they return to their area and family and society which already has the mould made as it were'.

As before (in 1991 and in 1996) the most common reason for the teacher feeling uneasy was having pupils in the class who were affected by the Troubles by having lost a close

relative. Their presence was said to generate an interest but also to make it difficult to handle because it created a lot of bitterness.

The extent to which teachers should have a choice or be compelled to follow government initiatives or be 'social engineers' was less contentious than it had been in the 1980s or early 1990s. Having a statutory element in the curriculum (such as Irish history in the early 1990s) was no longer seen as being unreasonable, inadvisable or even as threatening as previously. However, a teacher advisor still showed ambivalence about prescription:

I wanted to teach Irish history but I'm not sure about making it compulsory. If you want to teach it then you can do it pretty well but not if you do it grudgingly. But I have no evidence that there is anybody with any problem with teaching Irish history - even those from the controlled sector who expressed reservations when the Common Curriculum was introduced - seem to do it without complaining.

Another advisor remarked: 'Making it compulsory doesn't do any harm providing it is done in an objective way'. Most admitted that they would have been teaching it anyway. But for some: 'It's a question of people coming on board of their own free will and making it statutory, compelling people to do it, is silly'.

However, teachers, especially those from the Protestant tradition, had come to appreciate the advantages of a prescribed curriculum. For some, it provided an opportunity to become fully conversant with Irish History for the first time:

Strangely enough I [had] avoided it completely. I only came to Irish History when I started teaching A Level and then, of course, with the curriculum changes I had to. I had been an ancient and medieval historian and did some Modern European and British and didn't do any Irish History. My perception of it was that it was very boring and dry and that's why I didn't do it at university. I had the option not to do it but I now I find it interesting.

It transpired that Irish history was still the only sensitive issue mentioned by the majority of teachers. All of Irish history was reported to be problematical by at least some teachers, but the specifically mentioned aspects before the twentieth century were as

follows: the Reformation Church Settlement; the confiscation of Catholic land due to plantations, wars and Cromwell; the rebellions in Ireland in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; the Williamite Wars; the 'Glorious Revolution'; the Penal Laws and the Irish Famine. Most considered political history to be more contentious than economic.

All of the twentieth century proved touchy for a small minority, particularly the period after 1965 with the struggle for Civil Rights and the onset of the troubles, the Hunger Strike and the Anglo-Irish Agreement. A minority of teachers also reported having difficulty in dealing with the earlier option of Home Rule and the Easter Rising with the formation of the UVF and IVF, Partition and the Protestant Ascendancy in Northern Ireland. However, on the whole teachers commented that Irish history was a popular option with their pupils and across both communities. The fewest complaints by far came from the Catholic maintained sector.

The values promulgated in Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) and Cultural Heritage (CH) were being moved from the periphery of the curriculum to the very heart of it. They were in the process of being written into the various objectives in the curriculum and one of the main carriers of these values was to be citizenship education. EMU and CH as such were scheduled to disappear because 'as everybody knows,' according to a teacher advisor, 'they aren't working'. Insufficient funds were said to be a reason why they had fallen by the wayside.

According to my informant, about twenty five schools involved in the Citizenship pilot programme. Some, she claimed, 'were teachers of history, others of geography'. My attention was drawn to the 'damning EMU report' produced two years earlier which had concluded that EMU was not working and the process needed revision.

I heard that the introduction of citizenship as a subject would entail teaching the Troubles to Second Form. Teachers are very uncertain and uneasy about this: the syllabus seemed very 'political' in content and there were concerns about the less able kids not being able to cope. I was told: 'At the moment they have in Third Form 1800-1921 including the

Famine. The less able don't like it'. That citizenship was a very difficult and unrealistic political programme to use with thirteen-year-olds was an almost universal pronouncement. One teacher advisor severely criticised this programme for being 'Out of step with reality: the pupils are too young'.

Another hotly debated topic was curriculum change at KS3 following the 'Cohort Study'. History teachers were also eagerly awaiting the outcome of the 'Burns Report' which they thought proposed great changes in education.

Internal Factors impacting on the Teaching of Sensitive Issues in Mid-Ulster

(i) Mid-Ulster Teachers' Predispositions

All teachers spoke in their own way about teaching objectively and trying to introduce different perspectives. Even though there was a large degree of ambivalence regarding the possibility of personal, political or religious bias influencing teachers of all backgrounds, nearly everyone expressed confidence in the professionalism of history teachers. There was also a large element of curiosity about the stance taken by the 'other side'. When I spoke to Protestant teachers they wondered how Catholic teachers taught political topics. The same was true for Catholic teachers: 'I'd love to know how it is taught in state schools. One hears rumours but I don't know'.

Teachers often accounted for their discomfort in terms of the period being more modern or closer in time to the present. The problem was said to be greater now because it 'becomes current affairs'. The opinion of a male teacher in a controlled school was that the: 'The 1970s and 1980s are not really history because they [pupils] would have their own preconceived ideas. It was difficult for them to see the two sides'. Another male teacher in a controlled school, speaking at time when the Catholic area around Drumcree in Portadown was claimed by Orangemen as part of their legitimate territory during the marching session, explained that:

We cover areas like the Boyne and so on which are still traditionally celebrated here and that's controversial. That has a Drumcree thing connected to it.

Although only a few teachers mentioned topics other than Irish history being problematical, difficulties were said to arise when teaching topics that impinged on the ethnic as well as religious background of the pupil. Teaching the holocaust was given as an example of this: 'We were doing a project on the Second World War and there was a Japanese student present so I had to be more sensitive but generally speaking the sensitive areas would be Irish history'. The holocaust was given more prominence because of what was said to be the narrower focus of the syllabus. Nazi Germany co-existed with elements of Irish history.

All but two history teachers interviewed in 2001 claimed that it was right to teach controversial topics, even though some of them undoubtedly felt uncomfortable about certain issues. One female teacher in a maintained school typically reflected the approval of her colleagues: 'We consider it a very positive step to have a strong Irish dimension in the Programme of Study. In particular we value the cross-curricular themes of EMU and cultural heritage which sit so naturally with our subject'.

Nearly every teacher was enthusiastic about teaching Irish history, with the majority stating that they enjoyed teaching the syllabus 'very much', especially the A Level 1912–1923 period. A large number welcomed the 'new curriculum' as being 'the best thing that has happened to teaching Irish history in Northern Ireland'.

Most took it for granted that it was part of the syllabus. This position was held by the vast majority of teachers: 'I don't see how they could understand what is happening today, how they could take part in current affairs if they don't have a background in Irish history'.

Most teachers insisted that the reason why they or some of their colleagues found elements of the history course difficult was not attributable to their own prejudices but to

the fact that confronting emotions was a very difficult thing to do. Many (especially the older teachers) felt they hadn't been trained and had not the skills to deal with sensitive issues. One female advisor remarked:

I think some people misunderstand the situation; they take it for granted that if you are very balanced in your views, you are home and dry. But that doesn't prepare you for the resentment coming across.

Not surprisingly, it was hard to get evidence of bias in teaching: it's not something that anybody is going to come forward and provide evidence for willingly.

(ii) Mid-Ulster Teachers' Perceptions of their Students' Stances

The greatest discrepancies in opinions existed between secondary and selective schools as regards their students. The weaker students were reported, by most non-selective school teachers, as finding history (not only Irish history) difficult. A small minority said that this was also the case for the new AS and A2 examinations.

Some of these complaints were reinforced by a history advisor who referred to a conference organised by the European Council that she attended in 1997 on 'Teaching Sensitive Issues', including Irish history. The teachers (from places such as Cyprus, Belarus, the Czech Republic, and Albania) visited Irish schools, mainly in Derry. These overseas visitors were said to be 'taken aback by the lack of balance in the curriculum and the problems teachers had communicating with older pupils'.

Nearly half of all teachers, a large jump from the 1996 figure, complained about the use of documents, in particular that 'They take the enjoyment out of it'. There were other complaints about the curriculum: 'In the third year I have two units of history to do. The Nineteenth Century and the First World War, and I've no doubt that they prefer the First World War because there are social issues there like the role of women. I find it a problem that you don't get doing social issues; it's all political'. Another teacher in a similar school remarked that his pupils were 'not that keen on the Normans'. The majority stated that their pupils liked the nineteenth and twentieth centuries better than the

earlier period. All teachers were evenly divided between those that stated their pupils preferred political history to social and economic. A few were not overly happy with the Core Two (Rivalry and Conflict) which they thought was very long. One secondary school compensated by making models of features of the American West or watching films that 'go down well'.

A selective school teacher thought that the questions on Ireland were 'too subjective'. A teacher in a secondary school complained about getting access to young people that were more able: geography was proving to be a more popular subject. He feared that. 'With the groups I'm having now I can see the results going down'. It was also suggested by a few teachers that topic interest was divided along lines of gender:

When I taught the Irish option for GCSE I found the boys more interested than the girls. This was a secondary school, maybe it is different in a selective school.

Unlike the 1991 cohort, hardly any teachers complained about having to teach Irish history. A few of those that did considered the Northern Ireland syllabus to be either boring for them or that 'the youngsters didn't find it interesting'. Many teachers objected to the focus on Irish history at KS3 at the expense of European and particularly British History: 'it led to an unbalanced curriculum'.

There were no substantial differences between the responses given by Protestant and Catholic school teachers about the popularity of the syllabus taught but there were differences in the option taken by some Protestant schools for GCSE history. Some schools (mainly Protestant ones) had steered away from the more contemporary option because they thought that 'it was too controversial to teach'. One Protestant selective school teacher who admitted that this happened went on to say:

What we don't do is a contemporary Irish history course right up to 1985. As a school we choose not to do it and our reasoning was first of all the story hadn't finished and secondly we have pupils in this school that would be directly affected by the troubles and we felt very uncomfortable with that. Some schools have chosen to do it. The ones that have gone for the more contemporary period are in the Catholic, maintained sector. We are a co-ed selective with a mix of Protestants and Catholics: 30% are Catholic, 65% Protestant and 5% have no religious affiliation'.

A problem expressed by most teachers in 2001, especially those in secondary schools, was teaching Irish history to younger groups. They thought that at KS3 they are too immature to cope with it.

One teacher, who taught in a small rural town, argued that the impact teachers had on prejudice depended on where young people grew up: 'If they grow up in the country they are more likely to meet the other side of the same age and walk to the buses together but in the cities you don't get an opportunity to do this or you don't want to talk to others of a different persuasion'.

When teachers were asked about student sectarianism, most had only experience of teaching pupils who were either Protestant or Catholic. One teacher who taught mainly Protestant pupils in a controlled school that had some Catholic students said that 'There was no bother of any description. I never came across any sectarian abuse or anything like that'.

Others commented on the extent to which a sudden surge in violence or a sectarian incident, especially at a local level, influenced pupils of all ability levels. The following comment was made by a female teacher in a controlled school:

Things have now settled to an extent but when it is coming up to the marching season - April, May, June - there is a hardening of attitudes among KS4 pupils. I think that Drumcree confirms a lot about being part of the tribe.

So effecting change can be difficult. Nonetheless, nearly all teachers who responded to this question thought the more academic pupils to be more amenable to change, regardless of their former experience. They echoed the above teacher's belief when he said:

The young people that are the more intelligent are becoming more understanding of the society we're living inOthers are more inclined to just select what they want. Unfortunately you tend to reinforce existing prejudice particularly in lower streams. This makes discipline and control difficult. Few children change their ways/views, even when they hear reasonable logical arguments.

(iii) Mid-Ulster Teachers' Perceptions of their Role

Teachers offered a variety of reasons for doing Irish history. For the vast majority emphasis was placed on both ideological values ('because it is our own history') and practical educational benefits ('to give pupils the opportunity to explore the history of their country from all perspectives'). An 'appreciation of the past' was considered necessary to give 'a balanced view of our own history to break down myths'. Others spoke about the need not only to make pupils aware of the history of their country but also to develop good attitudes and values.

These mission statements were frequently placed within the context of a whole school policy: 'The need for young people to realise and understand the past in order to make sense of the present has always been recognised in our school'; 'We have always tried to make our young people aware of and have an appreciation of diversity in our community'. When I interrogated teachers about the extent to which teachers conscientiously tried to transmit values such as anti-sectarianism, the vast majority admitted: 'All the time when teaching history in Northern Ireland'.

A minority stated that they did not try to transmit values such as anti-sectarianism consciously but that they supported the idea of doing so. There was talk about using role-play in schools for things like creating empathy with the police but teachers were much divided in their use of empathy. Some were convinced that the classroom was not the best place for it: teachers needed training in the relevant skills and all too often, pupils needed to be taken down from the 'highs' engendered by role-play. Schools (especially those with a religious minority) did not like to be controversial, that is, stress divisive issues. However, they made it clear that they liked to critically examine issues. One teacher in a controlled school gave the example: 'When we do William and the Boyne in 1690 we like to bring in European perspectives, the Catholic Church too. This is a big shock for kids coming from a loyalist district'.

A teacher advisor approached the question of the possible change in outlook made by teaching Irish history through an indirect route such as by teaching about civil rights in America or the Arab- Israeli conflict. She asked me if I remembered the Uppsala Report that was derived from a peace and reconciliation initiative introduced by Uppsala University in 1992 because she was involved in it with her non-selective school and concluded that 'knowledge of Irish history (more than any other history) refines attitudes'.

Although it is very difficult to measure or, indeed, generalise about its impact, teachers suggested that their history teaching made a positive contribution to improving community relations. As one teacher from a maintained selective school commented:

Certainly within the school we tend to have good community relations as such but again what they are like outside is something else. The school itself is a very false environment because it is very secure and caring and they [pupils] may not necessarily be coming from that at home. We have rules here on conduct. But then when they get outside school we have no control; nor should we.

It was recognised by almost all teachers that the ultimate impact depended on many factors, that it was a very difficult question:

You don't know what they will turn out like: It's what AJP Stewart (a leading historian of unionism) talked about as being part of the myth. We do suffer from a national forgetfulness. We're selective in what we remember. I think the school has a function in that.

Finally many teachers remarked that people, even intelligent professional ones, did not see history as useful - unless you want to be a history teacher. School principals (unless they came from a history background) were thought to have the same view. There was therefore a major problem marketing history because:

There are a lot of people even in the education world who don't appreciate the extent to which history has changed in the last twenty years. They judge it on what it was like when they were at school: dictated notes, learning dates, and facts. They have no idea of all the skills we know about and no interest and that is a problem.

Now teachers were aware of having to market their subject better to guarantee its position in the curriculum: 'That is not to say that we should be all singing, all dancing but it is

talking about its usefulness in the market-place which is something the Historical Association is very interested in and it is also about teaching relevance’.

A teacher advisor reflected the position of the vast majority of history teachers when she said:

I disagree with the idea of vocational versus academic because people will assume that if a subject is academic that it doesn't in any way prepare you for the workplace; this weakens history's case in the popular mind. We are trying to get a curriculum here for less academic pupils and I say that is great because that was something that was wrong with the Northern Ireland Curriculum: all pupils should have the same one regardless of ability or skills.

(iv) Teaching Strategies reported by Mid-Ulster Teachers

I continued to apply the categories of the lion, the fox and the mouse to teaching strategies. As before, teachers constantly moved between positions on a continuum of feeling at ease with a topic to being acutely uncomfortable I was told that the way sensitive issues were being taught was changing for the better with the use of visual material, more talking, more active involvement by pupils, more card work, group work and empathy. All these strategies enabled students to enjoy history. Engagement and enjoyment were considered to be a crucial part of the process:

I don't think the way it is taught makes any difference to those from particular backgrounds steeped in certain prejudices You can present them with all the different points of view, options, show the video tapes and go through all the right approaches but some individuals will perform in a certain way for the sake of examinations and they will still come away with their own ideas.

One secondary school teacher elaborated on his technique:

I don't go straight into the narrative; I tend to spend a few lessons on perspectives. We use diagrams that could be a rabbit or a duck looking at the same thing and seeing something different. Certain areas I teach in outline, others in depth. I also do projects.

Teachers spoke about much more emphasis being placed on thinking skills rather than content. This was interpreted as meaning cutting back on factual information but the

system was more examination-orientated than before. On one occasion when I expressed a certain amount of scepticism one secondary school teacher went so far as to say that he had evidence to prove that he taught fewer facts by comparing files left by children in 2001 with those from 1996 and he was more examination focused than in the past.

This emphasis on examination technique rather than acquiring information appeared to be widespread. Teachers recognised that there was a balance between the two but thought that 'the fact that they have to analyse more is probably helpful'. Secondary school teachers in particular reported that their pupils found interpretation of evidence difficult: 'Our kids take the sources at face-value and find it hard to interpret beyond that. We are now spending more time on exam technique: thinking of ways of getting them to go beyond it'. Certainly this was borne out by my own experience in Oxford.

The use of ICT was becoming more widespread in history teaching and learning. Pupils were reported to go on the internet for information for assignments. Teachers were still struggling to improve their resources: 'We are putting up an argument for having an ICT suite to share with geography now that we are having a new school built but as yet we haven't managed it'.

It appears that more teachers in Mid-Ulster were feeling at ease with teaching Irish history than in 1996. My data threw up far fewer cases of mouse-like strategies being adopted.

Part Two: Oxford

1. *External Factors Impacting on the Teaching of Sensitive Issues in Oxford*

Nearly half of my interviews were done shortly after the September 11 catastrophe in 2001 when, despite the shock waves that rebounded across the United Kingdom, the full impact of the event could not, at this stage, be fully realised. History teachers, in all regions, because of their expertise, reported that they were expected by colleagues and

pupils alike to place the events within a historical context. Another consequence of its high profile was that Islamic topics became more sensitive in the classroom.

After the attacks on America by Al Quaida on 11 September 2001, schools were instructed by teachers' unions, Government directives and the press on how to tackle any possible friction (especially between Muslims and non-Muslim groups) in the classroom. One female teacher in an independent school who could not think of any other issue that caused unrest, mentioned that now, after 9/11, she was concerned about teaching the crusades: 'I have got Muslims in the class and they (especially the younger girls) don't understand the religious issues which have created a bit of tension in the past'.

I spoke to an American teacher in a state school about how her students, especially the Muslim ones, responded to her after the catastrophe: did they feel a bit uneasy with her? She replied that she was interpreting looks and the current of feelings that you get in the classroom and she wondered:

Is she going to react to me differently? That is why I almost instinctively did whatever I could to make them feel comfortable. Some had the courage to ask me how I felt and to express how sorry they were. Very few said anything but I could tell that the atmosphere was different for a few days.

Another state school teacher, where there was a sizable minority of Muslims in the community, reported not having any problem with her Muslim pupils. She said that in the classroom 'they explored it (the catastrophe) quite thoroughly but from a non-sectarian viewpoint. We've looked at it carefully but we've looked at people as individuals'.

The same was true for another large state school where there was a sizable proportion of Muslim students. A male teacher reported: 'I've not picked up any issues that I have difficulty dealing with any more than when I have black students in the classroom'. This teacher voiced what others had said when he mentioned that the situation could well be different in another state school which served some problem areas.

Most teachers were concerned about how relations in the classroom would ultimately unfold. They considered that it was too close to the events to say with certainty. One state school teacher, who had previously taught in London where she said there was a higher proportion of Muslim students than in Oxford reported that, on the whole, such politically contentious issues do not create conflict in the classroom but she added that that may say more about the apolitical nature of many of her pupils.

In the independent sector there was greater diversity of reactions reported. Some teachers stated that the attack did not impinge adversely on the classroom situation: they did not notice any difference in handling discussion in the classroom mainly because they had not got many Muslims in the school. Nevertheless, it was a teacher from an independent school who reported the greatest friction between Muslims and non-Muslims in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. She confided that:

There were arguments and tension around it. We had a lot of discussions about why it happened and some of the children didn't go along with the line that America should declare war on terrorism. We have a lot of children from the Islamic world and some of the children thought that [the events] were the result of American imperialism and as a consequence of what had been building up through American foreign policy. Other children were very pro the line the television and newspapers were taking so it was very heated.

However, she added that she didn't think that her school or her reaction was typical: 'I confronted the issue whereas other schools tended to brush it under the carpet. I knew the Head wouldn't go along with my line but he still spoke to the whole school about the fight against terrorism'. This teacher did not have to initiate the discussion because the students were talking about it anyway and some of her younger pupils were worried about what was likely to happen: 'It seemed right to talk about it so we did'. When I said that I'd heard about some teachers having problems she advanced the idea that it was easier for her in that particular school than anywhere else because:

They're very intellectual lefties/ arties and teachers are very good and very open as well. There were situations I've worked in that are a very rat race environment and it's difficult but I think that it's important that we aren't afraid of the tensions. But I do think it's hard, it's challenging.

In 2001 Ireland was still getting negative reports in the press as a result of the loyalist activity at Drumcree, the Holy Cross Primary School stand-off and an alleged IRA leader being Minister of Education (as already mentioned). None of the teachers I interviewed were Irish and they informed me that some history teachers are not very sympathetic to Ireland.

The intricate relationship between what is current and what is sensitive was emphasised by a teacher advisor who, in the 1990s, went with a group of history teachers to a Euro Clio project in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. She referred to her interest in talking to teachers who were just emerging from a time when history was controlled. These teachers had had to:

Teach a lie when they were under the control of the Communist Party and they were quite anxious about ways in which they could be more open, about how they could get the evidence. In the same way as I suspect happens in Northern Ireland there was a fear about what the consequences would be of addressing some of the things that had been swept under the carpet, so I've been made very aware of and can understand why they should be anxious about their role.

The greatest challenge most teachers admitted to facing arose out of the myriad representations of national identity within the classroom. Oxford had a growing multi-ethnic community, most of which attended state schools. In the largest state school I investigated, 38 % of the students were Afro-Caribbean or Asian. Nearly all the teachers interviewed were white British. According to the teacher advisor this was true of the teaching force overall in the city: 'there are a few non-whites and some overseas teachers but I'm not aware of any of them teaching history'.

Slavery was considered by a few state and independent school teachers to be particularly sensitive, especially if there was a minority of black students in the class. As one state school teacher put it: 'I have to be very careful that I don't provoke anti-British feeling, especially when I'm doing imperialism with years 12 and 13'. Another state school teacher was surprised to find that having black students in the class does not necessarily make teaching specific historical issues more complex or harder: 'I thought it would, but

it doesn't. I think because they are very aware of those kinds of issues and they are open to discussing it and they don't take it personally'.

I questioned one non-white British history teacher. I talked with her about her Asian British or British Asian identity and asked if she was conscious of showing any pro- or anti-British bias in her lessons. Whilst she appeared to be ambiguous about her national identity, she was very forthright about her teaching stance:

I say people believe this, that and the other. I distinguish colonial nationalism from liberal nationalism. I get them to distinguish what it means, what the different kinds of nationalism are. I do try to get them to think how it is used in different historic contexts. It makes a lot of difference if we are talking about Irish nationalism or British nationalism.

History teachers were generally convinced that the impact they had was less important than factors external to the classroom. The influences identified included: 'whether their parents were born here or elsewhere'; 'whether they have had the opportunity to visit other countries'; 'whether they have strong religious views'; 'the media'; role models; 'the political system'.

A number of teachers thought that other school subjects especially religious education were more decisive than history: 'I think prejudices are aired more in RE than they are in history and I don't think they are in politics either'. When I told one academic about students' responses to the same question of whether the history taught at school was the most important factor in informing them about the history of their country, she was keen to point out that students often don't recognise how much 'history' they bring into the classroom from the outside. She thought that if I asked young people whether they had ever heard parents talk about political things, they would be likely to say, 'Oh yes, but then that isn't history'.

One teacher agreed with nearly all interviewed about the role of the media, particularly films:

Another thing is they have seen it in a film so that is how it is and I think that one of the biggest problems that I have is that they might have read a story or seen a film. Today they were talking about *Shakespeare in Love*

and they were all talking about women being actors. They get these ideas from the media as well.

The extent to which teachers were unable to exercise any real autonomy was also placed within the context of 9/11. They, like the general public, had to struggle to make sense of the slant taken by the media. As one state school teacher put it: 'I think everybody is biased in their presentation. I don't think that you can ever take it out because it is intrinsic to your own background knowledge. You can try to be unbiased but I don't think that you can ever really succeed'.

All teachers appreciated the greater element of choice the 2000 curriculum revision introduced but many admitted to being overwhelmed by the amount of administration required for aspects such as the planning of progression: 'You have so many strands that you have to write into it that it sometimes takes away the story of history' was a typical complaint. Older teachers remembered the fact that they didn't like the National Curriculum when it first came out because some were teaching in a school which had 'a really interesting curriculum and there was far more scope to do things that children were interested in such as the Caribbean and Africa which was very relevant to the area that I was working in'. There were, however, frequent references to the syllabus being selected just because the topic is current. The Irish problem and others such as India and Pakistan and the Middle East were often tackled, according to some teachers, because of their contentious nature and current interest. Yet teachers spoke about the importance of tracing a conflict back to its apparent roots and pointing out the intractability of it.

Some teachers thought that history as a subject was being compromised by the functional approach taken by contemporary politicians and educationalists. They were sceptical about the idea that 'we can cure society's ills' by using subjects such as history with the teachers 'using the subject from a moral standpoint to improve community relations'.

As regards the introduction of citizenship, nearly all teachers thought that it was a good idea but many were not convinced that most history teachers were going to be affected by citizenship mainly because they were addressing it already: 'History teachers have

always taken an active role in it and I have supported them in that'. Another teacher who taught in a state school was optimistic that citizenship would 'lead to more conceptual ways of dealing with politics'.

2. Internal Factors Impacting on the Teaching of Sensitive Issues in Oxford

(i) Oxford Teachers' Predispositions

In 2001 teachers in the Oxford area were still diverse in their interpretation of the concept of sensitivity in history: definitions covered a wide spectrum of intellectual and emotional topics. There was a range of responses to the question of sensitive issues: national identity, religion, race and gender were the areas most often mentioned. The vast majority of teachers made it clear that they did not usually come across topics or situations that made them feel uncomfortable. The most frequently mentioned were different forms of nationalism, the spread of the British Empire, race, the holocaust, party politics, slavery, the crusades, Irish history, the apartheid system, religion, race and gender. These were topics that featured in the examples given by those interviewed in 1996. All issues, it seemed, could be contentious but topics touching on Muslims, such as the crusades, featured more prominently than before 2001. Changes in society, especially the perceived greater unruliness of students and a more litigious approach to rights, also put many teachers more on the defensive.

The holocaust remained the single, most frequently mentioned, difficult topic but teachers did not always agree on why this was the case. A state school teacher mentioned the ghoulish element of it. He thought that:

I often feel I don't convey it fully to the students; they don't take on board the magnitude of it. But then I'm not sure I can either, so it is too much to expect that from them and it is such a horrific event and such a recent one in history that people alive have lived through. Obviously it is all sensitive. There is another one, the extent to which the Germans supported Hitler, and the extent to which they benefited from Hitler. There were economic benefits after all.

Many other teachers showed concern about the way genocide was sensationalised. They stated that the historical issues were inadequately stressed and too much emphasis was placed on all the gory details. This made them feel uncomfortable

Race and class and religion were seen to be closely allied to ethnic origin and often an integral part of national identity. In a situation where classes were often made up of mixed cultures, the irrational basis of racism was said to 'need exploring and the result treated truthfully and analytically'. Racism was something that teachers declared to be potentially a very sensitive issue but very few admitted having problems of that nature in the classroom.

Ignorance about religion in general made the teacher's task more difficult. A few history teachers admitted to having a moral commitment that was born out of deep religious convictions. Many complained about how hard it was for them to explain the importance of Christianity because most of their students had not even been in a church. These young people had difficulty empathising with some of their classmates who belonged to a family where a faith was strictly followed.

An unbiased professional approach was, teachers maintained, the hallmark of their job, yet some argued that in developing the child they were 'an instrument of state educational policy' and that other teachers 'underestimated how much they are a part of the system that was politically biased'.

Attention was also given to the nature of history in constructing the past. One teacher saw the irony in the way that 'it is history that perpetuates things and it is history that decides what they choose to remember and forget'. To him it was the role of history teachers to make sure that 'history was not used to exercise control as it had been in the Soviet Union or in Nazi Germany'. This recently retired teacher had given me a similar response in 1996.

There were teachers who were cynical about the possibility of an unbiased professional approach with its claim to be developing open-mindedness in the child. Such aspirations to them 'underestimate how much they are a part of a system which is politically biased'. A discussion of the role of women in history, in certain circumstances, could, according to some, inflame passions especially if students had preconceived ideas on how things should be and on how women should be treated. Much depended on the gender composition of the class and the extent to which the teacher saw his/her role as increasing awareness. One state school teacher admitted dreading teaching about the suffragettes because a number of the girls as well as the boys thought that 'God had ordained that women should be modest, domestic and disenfranchised'.

It is strangely paradoxical that women's rights should remain contentious in a twenty first century Britain at a time when there were frequent comments in the press that the girls were forging ahead of boys in achieving better examination results and when there was a strong female presence in most of the professions.

A number of teachers spoke about the importance of political vocabulary. An academic referred to the inhibitions on political discussion. He said that:

What is happening is that our ability to conceptualise politically is being atrophied through disuse. Our vocabulary is shrinking and with that our capacity to discuss things is withering away.

Some teachers who reiterated this view that they and their colleagues cannot say things that to another ear might sound 'very politically incorrect, old fashioned and belonging to a point of view that is no longer acceptable' stated that they still didn't think that such scruples inhibited sixth formers. Further interrogation tended to produce the response that they did not think that the issue was really that important.

(ii) Oxford Teachers' Perceptions of their Students' Stances regarding Sensitive Issues and their Role in Teaching them

Teachers' views on the purpose of history teaching were multifarious. Generally, they encompassed at least one and in some cases all three of the following purposes that understanding history enhances: critical thinking; moral judgement; political awareness. All teachers expressed concern for developing critical thinking. They expressed it in the following manner. Studying history could: 'encourage pupils to think for themselves'; 'help them be unbiased'; 'stimulate imagination'; 'fascinate them with the differences between past and present'; 'provide the means to examine evidence and draw conclusions from it'; 'develop their critical judgement as far as possible'; 'develop an awareness of sequence and causation'; 'help them realise that history is not just information for information's sake'.

Most teachers were convinced that history had more ethical and spiritual content than most subjects. However, as one independent school teacher pointed out, 'Morality itself is not entirely objective'. She and others hoped that their students would: 'see conflicting values'; 'become aware that different people may hold different views on historic events and they need to judge these'; 'appreciate man's inhumanity to man'; but also 'appreciate the humane things about it as well'. However, a modified version of this was proffered by a minority of teachers who thought that: 'There is a limited role for making pupils aware that certain causes of action in politics are liable to have certain consequences'.

A small minority of teachers was keen to admit to having a political function (though this was always combined with an awareness of the need to develop critical thinking). One female teacher explained: 'I see [teaching] history as a political activity. I am going to challenge extreme right-wing views and I think that is my ethical responsibility'. She thought that 'This isn't what most teachers will say that teach history'. She was right in her assumption that few would concede this, although another independent school teacher did admit:

I find myself becoming much more crusading. Unless we have some sense of mission (and let's face it it's usually a political one), we become dry and trite and tied to a mythical past. There is a school of thinking that looks at us very scathingly and calls us social engineers but I quite delight in being a social engineer.

The ongoing nature of the debate about the teacher's role was referred to by the advisor who remembered that, when doing research in the 1970s, there was the debate about controversial issues and how teachers should operate in a value-loaded area:

Whether they should be seen to [be] promoting certain values because that seems to be working against the idea of an open historical debate and encouraging children to learn instead of saying this is what you should think.

The important thing she believed was:

To recognise where you come from and the baggage you carry with you and encourage children to do the same. History should engage wherever it can but we need to be explicit about that starting point. We are where we are because of things like our experience or gender and age and it is important that children know that.

She and others were convinced that:

History should operate wherever it can and wherever the issues are and not be too precious about our worries but be aware of them. But not to be dogmatic because that is the danger. I'm very keen for us to be right in the middle of wherever there is controversy or need or discussion or the need for rational debate using evidence.

Teachers were reluctant to be dogmatic about what the possible impact their teaching had in changing attitudes or in determining the way students thought about their country. Most occupied a more negative position on the spectrum of effectiveness such as the state school teacher who did not think that history teachers had 'a great input' into how young people felt about being British. Everyone thought that teaching the subject had some impact and a few were cautiously optimistic saying, 'we do change some things', and 'I don't think that it's a mass phenomenon or anything but we can make a difference', and 'I don't think that we could change the world by teaching history but I have seen changes in individuals'.

Yet few teachers spoke with confidence about the impact of their history classes. They were reluctant to over-simplify. Most concluded that being exposed to the school version of history would eventually have the effect of enabling young people to have a more liberal education which would inculcate values of awareness, tolerance and critical understanding.

When asked to comment on ways in which students may have changed since the mid-nineties, an independent school teacher who had taught in the state system commented on apparent differences between the schools' ethos. She remarked that:

There are some very lazy unmotivated children both here and in the state school but one of the things that struck me about here, and I think it's because it's the private sector, is the difference in results. Children with much less ability than those in state schools are getting much higher grades.

She and nearly all others in both school systems commented on the increased discipline problems, on there being less respect for teachers.

One independent school teacher complained about getting frustrated by students' lack of intellectual curiosity at times. She believed that the anti-intellectualism was due to changes in society: 'Parents have different ideas about how children should behave and kids see a lot more bad behaviour on television so the idea of respect is not as common as it was once'. A state school teacher echoed these ideas. Most of his teaching had been in a state school in the Isle of Man. Since he had started teaching in Oxford, he noticed a decline in discipline, particularly with the children that came into year 7 in the previous couple of years: 'They are much more confident and loud and more willing to confront. More children are willing to take on teachers. There is less respect for authority generally. It's still a minority but a large minority'.

He confirmed what other teachers had said about the importance of firing the students' imagination and teaching topics that resonate with their experience. Irish history, for example, was a hot issue in Northern Ireland, but it did not always appeal to English students:

When I teach it (Irish history), they aren't grabbed by it. It's not seeing Ireland as a colony because it is a white colony; it's not exotic or glamorous in any way. I don't think that there is a natural sympathy to it the way there is to slavery. I don't think that in G.B. there is recognition of the right to Irish freedom. They don't see their struggle for power as being on a par with the African struggle.

(iii) Teaching Strategies used to tackle Sensitive Issues in the Classroom

A common theme running through all the strategies adopted by Oxford teachers was their determination to inculcate a respect for evidence and balance, yet this was demonstrated to have certain drawbacks as an approach to tackling sensitive issues. Nearly all teachers stated that they thought it was vital to achieve a balanced approach but some admitted that it was a struggle to be always even-handed. This was especially the case when it came to teaching sensitive issues such as slavery when their instinct was to sympathise with the underdog. An ambiguity therefore often existed between the teachers' declared respect for a balanced dispassionate approach and their desire to promote liberal values. One independent school teacher explained her dilemma as follows:

I remember planning an empathy exercise which involved a slave and a slave owner but in the end I simply stated the case from the owner's point of view and didn't look at it in an empathetic way. I could not bring myself to let them write from a slave owner's point of view because I was afraid that that was what they'd take away with them.

The problem was also explained by a state school teacher who thought that providing evidence-based material made it possible to teach something like slavery sensitively but that this was 'in a dry way' and 'if you say this is the evidence for and against and detach history from ethics it becomes insensitive'.

Whilst nearly all teachers saw advantages in being a neutral chair, it was seen by a female independent teacher as follows:

I'm very drawn to the idea of the neutral chair but that is a naïve position because human beings are not neutral. I tell the children that there is no such thing as being unbiased and that they must feel that they can debate

with me and I don't want to impose my views on them. I don't feel I could teach history if it was just a factual approach. I think it has to be imbued with philosophical and ethical principles.

Most teachers I talked to had confronted problems if not directly, then at least circuitously. They established the ground rules for debating history but insisted that it is not a free for all, that they looked at evidence and respected other people's right to speak whilst they listened. Provocative topics such as the holocaust raised questions that needed to be asked openly. A large number of teachers were emphatic that the approach taken was determined by the composition of the class and that they tended 'to do a mixture of things like discussion and role-play'.

A tiny minority of teachers admitted to taking a more provocative approach, which they know had certain drawbacks. One teacher in an independent school admitted that:

In some ways they are less relaxed with me, there's a tension, there are a lot of arguments and people get upset with each other over things and frustrated and with me so it's not relaxed in that sense. But I think it is an environment where people are pushed and encouraged to say what they think. Even if there are disagreements I encourage that.

Nearly all teachers were convinced that when it came to tackling sensitive issues empathetic understanding was really important historically, politically, socially and culturally. However most admitted to finding it difficult, though important. As one state school teacher said:

Although I struggle with it I find it really useful - and they often do their most interesting work when I get them to write a diary - I think it is important to be critical of it as well.

Teachers were aware, however, of the danger of distorting history through inept empathetic exercises. The vast majority were convinced that properly used empathy had a role to play if used wisely. One state school teacher was critical of the 'cut and paste exercises'. He saw history as being 'far, far richer than that'. His stance was similar to that taken by an independent school teacher when she considered that:

There is the assumption that before the industrial revolution that children weren't exploited before but they were. Levels of rural poverty were very high and that's something that when we get to the empathy exercises we need to keep in mind. What are we comparing it with?

As well as empathy, most teachers were keen to talk about 'thinking skills', which they interpreted in terms of the content v skills debate of the 1990s. The vast majority of teachers were aware that generally more emphasis was placed on the utilitarian aspects of history than on content. They were aware that young people lost out on the content.

Another common thread was the necessity to establish a close personal relationship with the class and to communicate openly with the students. Teachers spoke of trying 'to put them at their ease', 'to let them speak without being worried that I'd look towards them differently'. Success was seen to come when 'You've built up that kind of relationship with the class where they feel more relaxed and inclined to say what is on their mind'.

Part Three

The Views Expressed by Students in Mid-Ulster and Oxford

External Factors

(i) The Extent to which Students saw History as being Relevant

As in 1996, the vast majority of students in 2001 agreed that history was very relevant to life with only a small number in all schools believing it to be irrelevant. In 2001 violence was still evident despite the Peace Agreement and even more students in Northern Ireland were convinced of history's relevance. This was the case particularly in selective and controlled (Protestant) schools in Mid-Ulster where one girl explained that 'we are formed from our past'. This sense of the 'need to know' was a constant refrain and the

most frequent reasons given were: ‘we only learn from our mistakes’ and ‘we need to know what went on in Northern Ireland’.

Table 1

Agree that history has no relevance to life

<i>Region</i>	<i>Type of school</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>2001</i>
Mid-Ulster	Catholic maintained	11%	11%
	Protestant controlled	6%	4%
	Selective	14%	6%
	Non-selective	16%	8%
Oxford	Independent	8%	9%
	State	10%	9%
Average		13%	8%

Another insight was given by a boy in a selective controlled school: ‘history is like life only in the past’. This statement was echoed by a student in an English state school who said that ‘history is life only that which has gone before’. Although there was a tendency for students in Oxford to emphasise the relevance of history because of the likelihood of ‘learning lessons from the past’, few specified what these lessons could be. A student at an independent school, however, astutely commented that it was ‘important to learn about the past before we can continue the future’.

(ii) Students’ Perceptions of the Importance of Learning Sensitive Issues in History

The 2001 students gave history an even greater vote of confidence: more young people liked their history lessons in all schools surveyed. History classes were rated on average 4.3 on a scale of one to five. Other similarities with 1996 were that almost all students considered history classes in school to be by far the most influential factor in helping them to learn about their country. Comments (when they were made) were nearly always about the influence the classroom had on their knowledge of the history of their country; a typical remark was ‘If it wasn’t for school I’d know nothing about the history of my

country'. Learning history at school was by far the most influential source, followed by reading history, learning from relatives and television.

Friends and other subjects at school once again were considered to be the least important source. On the other hand, family remained an influential source of information. There was a slight increase in their role reported by older Irish students and an almost equal influence felt by older English children. Not much had changed significantly since 1996 except for the greater importance of television.

Table 2

Factors that were influential/very influential in helping the students develop opinions about the history of their country

(Rank order of influential factors in learning about history)

1996	Factor	Rank Order	2001	Factor	Rank Order
	History lessons	95%		History lessons	96%
	Reading Books	84%		Reading Books	85%
	Family	75%		Family	80%
	Television	72%		Television	78%
	Experience	57%		Newspapers	61%
	Newspapers	54%		Experience	51%
	Another Subject	44%		Friends	41%
	Friends	37%		Another subject	39%

Table 3

Influences on students when learning the history of their country

<i>Region</i>	Oxford	Oxford	Mid-	Mid-	Mid-	Mid-
	State	Independent	Ulster	Ulster	Ulster	Ulster
			Catholic	Protestant	Selective	Non-
					(grammar)	selective
History Lessons						
1996	93%	92%	97%	94%	98%	93%
2001	95%	96%	99%	99%	90%	99%
Family						
1996	76%	76%	73%	76%	75%	74%
2001	87%	77%	78%	79%	80%	76%
Reading Books						
1996	77%	78%	89%	85%	90%	86%
2001	83%	76%	88%	88%	90%	86%
TV						
1996	77%	72%	65%	79%	77%	63%
2001	85%	76%	81%	71%	80%	73%
Experience						
1996	52%	48%	56%	64%	54%	65%
2001	53%	51%	52%	34%	50%	63%
News-papers						
1996	53%	42%	55%	60%	60%	54%
2001	69%	42%	61%	67%	65%	60%
Friends						
1996	29%	27%	41%	40%	36%	46%
2001	33%	25%	45%	49%	41%	54%
Another subject						
1996	17%	18%	14%	11%	10%	16%
2001	43%	51%	34%	36%	27%	45%

Although reading history was rated more highly by Irish students, it is interesting that there were marginally more younger students reporting it to be important than older students. There was also an overall increase in the extent to which newspapers were thought to be important; this was especially the case in state schools in Oxford.

The greatest discrepancy between Oxford and Mid-Ulster revolved around the extent to which Irish students rated the influence of their friends more highly.

The 2001 survey confirmed the enormous impact of school history teaching, but it also indicated a growth in the influence of films and television. This greater reliance on learning from films and television was not significantly different in the two regions although older pupils tended to regard it as being more influential. A possible explanation for this growth in the influence of television on younger pupils and on students generally was the popularity of 'history' films such as *Braveheart*, *Michael Collins*, *Schindler's List* and *Elizabeth*, to name but a few released at the time. High profile history programmes on television such as those presented by Sharma and Starkey may not have had a large audience from the school population but young people were aware of these broadcasts and they contributed to enhancing the reputation of television as a vehicle for transmitting culture.

Asked about the 1996 and 2001 student survey findings, I reported an Irish teacher in a selective school who said in 2004 that:

They were interesting in the context of the debate on the role of school history, but they nevertheless remind us that school history is only a part of the influence brought to bear on pupils. History may be enjoyed and objectively taught, but when pupils return to the tribal areas in which they live, our impact is lessened (Conway, 2004 12 November).

Students were more likely to acknowledge the greater importance of the community as is apparent in the comment made by a young person in a non-selective controlled school: 'I think my parents and relatives helped me the most in learning about the country's history but I also got help from our history teacher'. The vast majority of all students agreed that 'History classes help us the most'.

(iii) The Extent to which Learning History helps us to become more Tolerant

It is interesting to note that the majority of all students thought that sensitive issues should be taught in schools either for practical/instrumental reasons or because they were convinced that they had a right to know the truth about the past. However, there was some uncertainty about the extent to which teaching history reduces prejudices and promoted tolerance or indeed created bitterness.

Table 4

Agree that learning history makes us more tolerant of others

<i>Region</i>	<i>Type of school</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>2001</i>
Mid-Ulster	Catholic (maintained)	44%	38%
	Protestant (controlled)	53%	50%
	Selective (grammar)	46%	38%
	Non-selective	49%	50%
Oxford	Independent	54%	46%
	State	49%	49%
Average		49%	45%

The functional opinions in Northern Ireland that ‘History shouldn’t hurt people if the facts are true’ and ‘It helps you to develop a different view on your country’ were often written alongside the more moral standpoints that ‘It isn’t their fault so why should they be offended?’ and ‘it is possible to learn both sides, Protestant and Catholic, so you can understand your country’. Occasionally, a partisan note could be detected as in this maintained school boy’s comment: ‘it makes us realise how cruel some people were to us’.

The small minority who did not want to hear anything unpleasant or sensitive in lessons commented like this independent school girl that: ‘I don’t like hearing about slavery or the holocaust, it is offensive and I hate learning about the Holocaust because of what

Hitler did'. Her contemporary in a state school wrote: 'If they feel offended they should be given a choice to learn or not'.

A number of those who made a more qualified response pointed out, as this independent school girl did, that: 'The teacher should be sensitive towards particular students but they should teach it because you can't hide from the truth about the past'.

Table 5

Agree that it is important to help people to know the truth about the past

<i>Region</i>	<i>Type of school</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>2001</i>
Mid-Ulster	Catholic maintained	63%	60%
	Protestant controlled	76%	68%
	Selective	66%	61%
	Non-selective	70%	67%
Oxford	Independent	69%	70%
	State	62%	55%
Average		68%	64%

Similar sensitivity towards fellow students was shown by Irish girls who thought that 'usually the person has no reason to be offended because it's not them that did something wrong', and 'as long as they show some good sides and the people don't get too upset then I think it's OK to teach these things'. The latter went on to add: 'Also the pupils shouldn't say things to people who do get offended because it is not their fault that their ancestors were who they were'.

Table 6

Agree that it is wrong to teach sensitive topics in history because people might be offended.

<i>Region</i>	<i>Type of school</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>2001</i>
Mid-Ulster	Catholic maintained	13%	6%
	Protestant controlled	11%	9%
	Selective	7%	6%
	Non-selective	18%	9%
Oxford	Independent	12%	14%
	State	11%	2%
Average		12%	8%

Although the great majority of students thought that sensitive issues should be taught there were interesting differences between students in different schools and over time regarding the extent to which it was considered wrong to teach sensitive history topics. In 1996 students in selective schools were least likely of all schools to agree that it is wrong to teach sensitive issues. This stance is illustrated by a girl in a controlled selective school who thought that: 'Subjects should be approached delicately and without bias, pupils should be asked to express opinions in a manner which will not bring offence to others'.

Compared to students in Protestant schools and independent schools, students in Catholic and state schools were more likely to believe that history should be taught even at the risk of offending some people, but Catholic and state school students were also less likely to be optimistic about the ultimate impact of learning history. According to one maintained schoolboy, it was a case of 'we should learn history regardless but I don't think it makes certain people become more tolerant of others'.

By opting for an optimistic outcome the majority reinforced what students had said in 1996; nevertheless, ambivalence was shown by the large minority who were unsure about the extent to which learning history makes people tolerant of others. The tentative position was expressed by the boy in the controlled school in Mid-Ulster who admitted that he didn't know because 'it's difficult to say what way we are changed by learning history'.

Major differences between cohorts were also detected. In 1996 students were more likely to be negative about the impact of history teaching but in 2001 the response indicated greater sanguinity: students on the whole had fewer reservations about whether sensitive issues should be taught.

Most students agreed with the following comments all made by KS3 students in selective and controlled schools in Mid-Ulster: 'We need to know that history includes the nice and the not so nice'; 'There's no point taking these things off the syllabus just because

some people could be offended, they could be offended on the street'; 'We should learn about the troubles in Ireland'.

Their opinions were also held by students in maintained schools as is apparent from the following comments: 'It is definitely good to be taught what is going on around you'; 'We must be aware of mistake so we don't repeat them'.

Very similar views were held by English students. One state school girl was convinced that it was 'only by discussing these topics can we understand why and hope to instil the value of life in children so that such events may be avoided'.

Independent schoolboys also insisted that it was 'important that people know and learn about it so it doesn't happen again' and that 'people need to know these things'. And, as regards knowing the truth about the past, others in the same school insisted that: 'the truth is paramount whether embarrassing or not' and that 'you learn from your mistakes'.

Another student in an English state school advocated learning history to 'understand each others' cultures and why people react differently to each other because it's part of their history'. His female classmate also responded positively by writing that learning history was 'the only way to understand the life, culture and heritage and races of people'.

As in Northern Ireland, where the common agreement was that 'we should know all about the topics we want to hide', there was insistence in Oxford that 'people have to know what has happened but it mustn't be biased'. This idea of receiving unbiased facts was a recurrent theme in both regions and symptomatic of young people's yearning for what they believed to be the true, unsullied version of the past in an imperfect world. These comments made by both state and independent school students could just as easily been made by Irish students: 'If taught objectively, offence can be avoided'; 'We learn from mistakes and become better people;' and 'It's better to know'.

Table 7

Agree that bringing up sensitive issues makes people more prejudiced and bitter

<i>Region</i>	<i>Type of school</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>2001</i>
Mid-Ulster	Catholic maintained	35%	28%
	Protestant controlled	29%	23%
	Selective	30%	20%
	Non-selective	36%	33%
Oxford	Independent	19%	12%
	State	13%	14%
Average		27%	22%

Irish students in selective controlled schools wrote that: 'People should learn as much as possible about the past despite how they feel;' They need to know the truth;' 'They have to hear different views because they will come across different views in later life and they wouldn't be able to hide from them'.

Compared to students in Protestant schools and independent schools, students in Catholic and state schools were more likely to believe that history should be taught even at the risk of offending some people, but they were also less likely to be optimistic about the ultimate impact of learning history. According to one maintained school boy it was a case of 'we should learn history regardless but I don't think it makes certain people become more tolerant of others'.

By opting for an optimistic outcome the majority reinforced what students had said in 1996; nevertheless, ambiguity was shown by the large minority who were unsure about the extent to which learning history makes people tolerant of others. The tentative position was expressed by the boy in the controlled school in Mid-Ulster who admitted that he didn't know because 'it's difficult to say what way we are changed by learning history'.

Major differences between cohorts were also detected. In 1996 students were more likely than in 2001 to be negative about the impact of history teaching. In 2001 the response indicated greater sanguinity: students on the whole had fewer reservations about whether sensitive issues should be taught.

Further responses to the question about the impact learning history had on prejudice also showed Irish pupils feeling less confident than English pupils about the effect that learning history has on liberalising attitudes. Experience had taught some young people in Ireland to be more cautious: historical controversies were just as likely to inflame passions as to calm them. However, the great majority recognised the position taken by a boy in a selective maintained school that 'although the truth hurts, if people face up to the facts from history hopefully they won't make the same mistakes again.

On the whole teachers tended to be more pessimistic about learning history in schools having a positive impact; their students were more inclined to be either confused about the outcome or convinced about its ameliorating influence. Yet a small number of young people could be just as reluctant as their teachers to advocate teaching sensitive issues in history. One girl from an independent school warned that 'young people might be offended if they were a German or a Jew' and that 'slavery should be learnt about but not if people will become offended'. However, the vast majority agreed with the Irish girl who thought that learning history 'makes people want to talk more and to listen so we have to have it'.

Evidence from Students regarding the Impact on the Classroom of *Internal Factors*

(i) The Popularity of the Subject

Pupils in both regions reported liking history even more than pupils in 1996: almost all students gave it at least three out of five and the relationship between students liking history and reporting feeling comfortable with it remained positively skewed. The most marked difference was evident in Irish controlled (Protestant) schools where even more students reported liking history; teachers in these schools also reported liking teaching

Irish history more than in the past. It is noteworthy that teachers from this Protestant tradition had in most cases little opportunity to learn Irish history at school or university before the 1990s when the Common Curriculum had made it compulsory. In 1996, students in controlled schools were less likely to be learning about more contemporary issues than in 2001. More inter-personal teaching strategies were reported to be in place in controlled schools and this doubtless contributed to the students' enjoyment of the subject. It appears that even though Irish history remained sensitive those learning it enjoyed the challenge.

Table 8

Liked history

(Percentages of students who gave history at least 3 on a scale of 1 – 5 with 5 being high)

<i>Region</i>	<i>Type of school</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>2001</i>
Mid-Ulster	Catholic maintained	83%	83%
	Protestant controlled	83%	96%
	Selective	84%	92%
	Non-selective	82%	90%
Oxford	Independent	81%	91%
	State	86%	94%
Average		83%	92%

(ii) The Extent to which the Students felt Uncomfortable Learning History

It must be emphasised that only a minority on average reported feeling uncomfortable when being taught any particular topic and that a large majority of students in both regions in 1996 and in 2001 felt comfortable with all topics on their syllabus. There was a drop, on average, in the percentage of students feeling uncomfortable with the greatest decline reported in Irish controlled schools. Nevertheless, in the particular areas of Irish selective schools and English independent school students reported feeling somewhat less comfortable than in 1996.

Moreover, despite a change in the government in the UK with Labour coming to power in 1997 and in the peace process with the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, there were no significant changes in what pupils reported to find sensitive in 1996 and in 2001. Perhaps this finding can be explained by continuity in the content of the history curriculum in both areas. However, it must be noted that the 2001 questionnaires were circulated just before the events of September 11 challenged sensitivity towards the Muslim community in Oxford.

Similar topics remained contentious in the later cohort. Irish history was still the largest single topic that gave rise to unease in Irish schools with there being no significant differences between Protestant and Catholic schools. Although the holocaust remained the single most difficult topic for English students (with no significant differences between state and independent schools), there was a greater variety, from 1996 and from their Irish counterparts, in what they reported. All of this was in keeping with what their teachers said in the same period.

Table 9

The extent to which students felt uncomfortable learning at least one topic in history

<i>Region</i>	<i>Type of school</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>2001</i>
Mid-Ulster	Catholic maintained	32%	32%
	Protestant controlled	29%	24%
	Selective	38%	31%
	Non-selective	24%	27%
Oxford	Independent	14%	19%
	State	28%	23%
Average		28%	26%

(iii) The Extent to which Students Believed that their Teacher was Biased

An encouraging vote of confidence was once again given to history teachers in that very few young people considered their teachers' views to be biased. However, in controlled and selective schools in Northern Ireland there was an increase in the minority that

suggested that there was some bias in how they were taught. A possible explanation is that there was a change in the teaching strategies used in these schools.

However, the overwhelming response made by Irish students is reflected in a comment made by the following controlled selective school student that ‘our teacher is never biased, we always get both sides of stories’ and by another who wrote about his teacher that ‘He is very open minded’. This view was endorsed by a selective maintained school girl who said that ‘he always gives his opinion but he also gives other opinions as well’.

Of course, when it comes to making such a subjective judgement, the student’s own bias must be taken into account. As a result of Northern Ireland’s segregated school system most students came from a similar religious and political background to their teacher. This was not usually the case in the more heterogeneous English schools where, although most agreed that their teacher was unbiased, a greater degree of cynicism could be detected in their comments. One independent school student wrote of her teacher that ‘She teaches us her way so we don’t get any other way’.

Most students had confidence in their teacher; this was especially true of students in Northern Ireland who, like this controlled school student, thought that ‘If the teacher thought it was going to hurt someone they wouldn’t teach it’.

Table 10

Agree teacher is biased

<i>Region</i>	<i>Type of school</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>2001</i>
Mid-Ulster	Catholic maintained	17%	13%
	Protestant controlled	9%	14%
	Selective	10%	11%
	Non-selective	17%	16%
Oxford	Independent	19%	12%
	State	17%	11%
Average		15%	13%

(iv) What was the most Common Strategy Reported?

According to what students reported in both regions, the late 1990s saw a change in Irish schools regarding the teaching strategy used. The practice of dictating notes, the mainstay of the selective school teacher in 1996, had been greatly reduced over the five years researched and been replaced by more class discussion, worksheets, role plays and debates. Students in these schools also admitted to liking history more but feeling slightly less comfortable with it. This appears to confirm the tentative suggestions made earlier that these more open, critical methods of teaching lead to history becoming more popular, but, at the same time, to it becoming more sensitive.

Table 11

Teacher dictated often/very often

<i>Region</i>	<i>Type of school</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>2001</i>
Mid-Ulster	Catholic maintained	55%	61%
	Protestant controlled	67%	59%
	Selective	79%	60%
Oxford	Non-selective	39%	60%
	Independent	32%	32%
	State	22%	23%
Average		49%	39%

Table 12

Teacher gave worksheets often/very often

<i>Region</i>	<i>Type of school</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>2001</i>
Mid-Ulster	Catholic maintained	46%	61%
	Protestant controlled	49%	70%
	Selective	24%	50%
Oxford	Non-selective	72%	88%
	Independent	37%	46%
	State	59%	70%
Average		48%	58%

Table 13

Teacher looked at evidence often/very often

<i>Region</i>	<i>Type of school</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>2001</i>
Mid-Ulster	Catholic maintained	61%	69%
	Protestant controlled	71%	73%
	Selective	66%	68%
	Non-selective	63%	70%
Oxford	Independent	64%	74%
	State	79%	80%
Average		67%	73%

Table 14

Teacher discussed in class often/very often

<i>Region</i>	<i>Type of school</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>2001</i>
Mid-Ulster	Catholic maintained	64%	62%
	Protestant controlled	44%	50%
	Selective	49%	58%
	Non-selective	64%	63%
Oxford	Independent	67%	69%
	State	57%	72%
Average		57%	62%

Table 15

Teacher used role play/debates often/very often

<i>Region</i>	<i>Type of school</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>2001</i>
Mid-Ulster	Catholic maintained	10%	9%
	Protestant controlled	4%	6%
	Selective	9%	7%
	Non-selective	6%	8%
Oxford	Independent	12%	14%
	State	8%	16. %
Average		8%	10%

Further evidence for this comes from the fact that the trend in non-selective schools (which ran contrary to that in all other schools) was that there appeared to be fewer debates and role plays and more dictated notes than five years earlier. Teachers in these schools reported having more social problems during this period. Those Irish teachers interviewed in 2001 (after the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 had brought greater optimism to the province), like their English counterparts, were more likely to refer to the effects of family breakdown and the role of television and film as factors impacting more on formal education.. These complications – especially the issue of classroom control - were likely to affect the teachers' approach to teaching sensitive issues in the classroom.

In Oxford schools during the same period there was an even higher incidence of giving worksheets than had been the case in 1996 but there was apparently also an increase in the use of debates and role plays as a teaching strategy in state schools. Students also reported that their teachers favoured discussing issues even more than in the past and the use of evidence in lessons remained very high.

Summary

History was seen by the bulk of Irish and English students to be highly relevant for everybody as it was held to be good to learn about your country. History in school was by far most influential source (though many Irish students did say that community and relatives had some influence). Films, newspapers and personal experience were also more influential than before.

In both Mid-Ulster and Oxford the vast majority, more than in 1996, favoured dealing with sensitive issues but there were doubts over how much learning history reduces prejudice. A number in Mid-Ulster were concerned about the susceptibilities of fellow students, with some Protestants especially concerned about giving offence. In both places practically all had great confidence in their teacher.

More liked history than 1996; this was especially true for Mid-Ulster Protestants. As regards teaching approaches, there was a greater tendency everywhere for evidence and worksheets to be used and for more discussion and role play and debates in class. Whilst there seemed to be a greater dependency on dictated notes in Irish non-selective schools, students reported a move away from them in selective schools in Northern Ireland. In Oxford the practice of dictating notes remained low in all schools.

Oxford teachers welcomed the breadth of the National Curriculum in Britain; the sections that dealt with sources and interpretations were approved of, but one third of the teachers were critical of the approach to empathy. Inquiry-based approaches were popular. Values of tolerance and balance were to the fore though the devil's advocate role was adopted by most, though not all, of the teachers surveyed.

Irish teachers' experience of the Common Curriculum was not that different. There was some uncertainty in both places of the overall impact of the changes in an era when the take up of geography was presenting a different challenge.

As regards all teachers' views on the prescribed HSU, those of contemporary relevance were seen as the ones to concentrate on. Study of the Irish problem was welcomed (it could link in with race issues) even it was still felt to be sensitive. Difficult topics, in fact, were generally held to be worthwhile. Overall, there was felt to be greater sensitivity around; gender was considered to be one issue and the use of appropriate language was thought to be an even greater one. There was also the continuing major issue in Oxford of the amount of British history to be taught.

Chapter Eight

Discussion

My thesis compares teaching history in secondary schools in Mid-Ulster and Oxford from 1991–2001 to explain who or what determines sensitive issues in the classroom. The main findings of my work will be summarised in this chapter with particular emphasis placed on identifying possible links between government initiatives and increased sensitivity in history lessons. This will be followed by a discussion of particular findings that require further analysis. I make judgments about the role of formal history teaching on students' learning and examine the possible links between the teachers' declared aims and the teaching strategies they employ. I place my findings within the context of recent research. Finally, I suggest questions for further research before highlighting what is original in my thesis.

(i) The Reflective Practitioner: a Consideration of the Possible Links between the Teachers' Declared Aims and the Teaching Strategies they Employ

On an afternoon in November 1985 a Catholic history teacher in Northern Ireland was telling her Protestant A Level students about the treaty negotiations following the Anglo-Irish War 1919-1921. She reminded her pupils that the discussions between Margaret Thatcher, the British Prime Minister and Garrett Fitzgerald, her Irish counterpart, about an Anglo Irish settlement were being broadcast as she spoke. The teacher suspended the planned lesson and they watched the talks on television. After the programme, her greatly puzzled class asked her what the Agreement meant for them as Unionists; were they going to be forced into a united Ireland? They had nothing to fear, she explained, the Union was safe and could only be broken with the consent of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland. The girls went home happy, reassured not by what they had heard on television, but by a history teacher whose judgement they trusted.

During the following day's lesson, one girl confided that when she went home her father told her that it was 'a black day for Ulster and they were not going to sit back and be sold

down the river again'. The other girls nodded; they had heard similar comments at home. Their history teacher listened but did not repeat the assurance of the previous day. The voice of the tribe had spoken and it commanded greater authority than hers. Her instinct was to remain silent; in this atmosphere of heightened emotions her pupils would not be amenable to reason. Indeed, within days the 'Ulster says no' campaign was underway and she knew that at least two of her pupils were manning the barricades. A new, more vitriolic period in community relations was about to begin.

Was the teacher right in bringing current politics into the classroom in the first place by showing the televised Anglo-Irish Agreement to her class instead of the prepared lesson? Should she then have freely voiced her opinion about what they had heard? And then, on the following day, was she wrong not to challenge the very different views held by the community to which her students belonged? Once she admitted the sensitive issue into the classroom, should she not have continued to confront the issues? The teacher had started out as a lion but then continued as a fox and finally became a mouse.

I spent the following twenty years exploring the teaching of sensitive issues and still do not know the answer to this dilemma. Indeed, if I was confronted with the same situation again, I might well react in exactly the same manner. Other teachers may well have behaved differently. My research has indicated that some would not have been drawn into a situation redolent with such highly charged current affairs in the first place. Other more courageous, (or foolhardy?) teachers may have planned the lesson around the broadcast and not been intimidated by the students' biased stance. Who is right? Who is to say? I interviewed teachers and surveyed students in an effort to gain insight into these questions. In my coding of teachers' responses I identified three different approaches: 1. The lion takes a *crusading approach* waging a vigorous campaign in favour of a cause as fearlessly as a lion; 2. The fox takes a *conciliatory approach* avoiding direct confrontation; 3. The mouse *timorously avoids* sensitive issues.

In the 1980s I was the only Catholic teaching history in a controlled school in Dungannon, Northern Ireland. This was most unusual at a time when sectarian troubles

were rife. Then I was frequently asked about my relationship with my Protestant pupils and, particularly, about how I tackled the more contentious topics in Irish history. When, in 1989, I transferred to a Catholic independent school in Oxford, my difficulties in facing class and cultural differences in the classroom prompted me to ask questions about the nature of sensitivity in history teaching and how teachers can harness their own and their students' emotional crises to teach in a more inspirational and effective manner.

Rather than pigeon-holing teachers into different categories I tried to look at the different approaches taken overall and indeed by the same teacher. She can be a crusading lion in certain circumstances and a conciliatory fox in others as I reported in my account above of teaching my class in Ireland in 1985. I also found it more useful to note which trend is more dominant (see Table 7 p. 138). 1996 was a transitional stage for Irish teachers; they were not as fearful as in 1991 because they had the force of legislation to cushion them against community criticism and, added to (in most cases) five years of experience, there was the increased support of human and practical recourses. Controlled school teachers tended to teach the less contentious earlier 1931 -1949 period rather than the more contentious 1965-1985 period for GCSE. This is in spite of the fact that, as my research indicates, students in these schools especially valued and liked history.

(ii) The Factors Teachers and Students Identify as having a Causal Link with Sensitive Issues

In interviews over time and place teachers and students have identified the underlying problems which they believe have contributed to their finding certain topics 'hot to handle'. The stated factors external to the classroom are as follows: international and national developments; educational initiatives; and the demands of the community, parents and school. The internal factors responsible for heightened sensitivity relate to: the teachers' predispositions; their perceptions of their students' stances regarding sensitive issues; their role in teaching them and the teaching strategies employed. My thesis based on empirical evidence is that it although there was an inescapable inter-relationship between all factors, those external to the classroom largely determined the degree of sensitivity therein.

Without exception the teachers interviewed referred to factors outside the classroom as being important in the formation of the political views of the young, the different emphasis depending on when and where the interview took place, and what the teacher believed to be the role of history and the teaching strategy adopted. This is true of teachers in Mid-Ulster and Oxford and showed no change over the years 1996 and 2001. Nevertheless, teachers in Northern Ireland, particularly in the earlier cohort, were in varying degrees more cautious about the impact of their history teaching on prejudice reduction. They also demonstrated a wider range of responses: some credited young people with a high degree of political awareness; others were dismissive of their students' interest and knowledge of politics.

(iii) The Connection between Social Change and Sensitivity in History Lessons

Chameleon-like the nature of sensitivity in history in the classroom transmogrifies. The extent to which it is socially situated can be illustrated by subtle shifts in language. When I starting writing about contentious issues nearly twenty years ago, there were different terms to describe the concept. Then 'Controversial' was used almost synonymously with 'sensitive'; the current preferred appellation is 'emotional' history. This need for greater precision in language percolated through to the history lesson; it increased the teachers' and students' consciousness of the positive and negative implications of commonplace terms and concepts which were in constant need of updating. *Negro* became *coloured* became *black* became *Afro-American* or *person of colour*. There were not just 'two sides' to study in Irish history but a much more nuanced interpretation that acknowledged the various shades of nationalism and unionism was required. Teachers had to not only know their Henries and their Hitler; they had to watch their Ps and Qs in an effort to be PC. The issue of racism in schools became more hotly debated in the late 1990s when the economic contribution of ethnic minorities was debated alongside their rights as citizens.

Fears were voiced in 'Moral Evasion', published by the right wing Centre for Policy Studies (16 January 1999), that Britain was turning into a moral wasteland. The culture

of rights was said to coexist with a cynicism about the distinctions between right and wrong. On the more liberal side, part of the New Labour project was to emphasis responsibilities as well as rights. In another context, in Mid-Ulster there were also concerns that the prevailing ethos stressed individual rights rather than the common good and particular identities rather than commonalities.

There was an acute awareness by teachers in both places of the impact of social change. In Mid-Ulster this was attributed to the decline of traditional authority especially the church and the family unit and the rise in drug and alcohol abuse and common crime following the decrease in political violence. In both places there was an increase in the immigrant population and this led to an increase in racial tension. In 1996, just 3% of Britons had cited race as one of the most serious issues facing the country, but it was 19% in 2001. (www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk, 2001)

(iv) The Link between Social Change and History Teachers' Perceptions of their Role

As a consequence of having to justify their subject and think more about their social role as a teacher, a greater self-awareness developed. This coupling of ideology and utility created a self-consciousness that could be crippling or emancipating for teachers of history. It must be emphasised that teachers rarely see themselves as social engineers because the term carries too many pejorative connotations. Some teachers are prepared to declare their political standpoint to their students and be explicit about their value system because they believe it to be good educational practice.

(v) Possible Causes of Sensitive Issues Changing over Time and Place

In both regions there is a strong recognition of the impact of increased anti-social behaviour, the decline of authority, putative political correctness and litigiousness. The phenomena were much more manifest for teachers than for students which is not surprising given the age gap and a methodical approach which was largely qualitative for

teachers and quantitative for students. Over time a transformation was noted among Irish teachers for whom teaching Irish history was no longer to be avoided but positively approached albeit selective in content and strategy. Peace may not have brought immediate harmony to the province but it did reset the parameters for dispute. A shift in what is contentious in the classroom is likely to have occurred in Oxford after 9/11 and 7/7 when the crusades began to feature strongly on the syllabus.

(vi) The Responsibility of Educational Initiatives for Increased Sensitivity in History Lessons

Any fears that teachers and others had were exacerbated by the insecurity created by the Common Curriculum which prescribed the teaching of Irish history. The initiative was accused of inaugurating an era of insidious control and interference under the guise of raising standards through greater accountability and standardisation. This element of compulsion coupled with the threat of inspection appeared to undermine teachers' professional judgement and was seen by many as a vote of no confidence in them. Teachers' beliefs that the government had a political and social agenda underlying the new history curriculum fuelled uncertainty over how best to approach contentious issues

Educational proposals designed to facilitate inclusiveness, multi-culturalism and respect for differences took the guise in Northern Ireland of the cross-curriculum themes of Education for Mutual Understanding and Cultural Heritage and in England were areas such as holocaust education or black history. They were often criticised for their vagueness or inadequacy or potential to undermine the integrity of the subject. Indeed some teachers in Oxford as well as Mid-Ulster regarded the new curriculum as 'social engineering'; 'Is it really history'? inquired a controlled school teacher in August, 1990.

A number of schemes should be viewed as representative of a sea change of societal and government direction in the 1980s and 1990. Legislation and the media (in general) supported schools in Northern Ireland in coming together, whether through inter-community projects or by voluntary integration, as in the case of integrated schools. But

the majority of schools remained in segregated schools (Protestant and Catholic). This perpetuated the myth that behind closed history classroom doors there was a different and even hostile version of events in the past presented. My research evidence indicates that this was not the case, that teachers of all religious persuasions were, in the vast majority of cases, scrupulous in their effort to be even-handed.

History teachers in Oxford also welcomed the opportunities and the challenges brought about by the new developments: citizenship, in particular, gave them the chance to raise the profile of their subject. It is more a case of the teachers in Northern Ireland having moved at a greater pace along the continuum of acceptance. And it must be noted that they had been more negative than their Oxford colleagues in 1990 and 1996. Oxford teachers had also been encouraged to have greater awareness of the rights of minorities; this formed part of the rationale behind the Education Act of 1986 that forbade the teaching of partisan views. It did not lead to serious interference with history teachers but it tended to reflect widespread rumours about teacher bias. Complaints against certain schools were said to originate in Conservative party distrust of anti-racist campaigns by local councils (Kiered and Hennessey, 1988). But it was not until the 1988 Education Reform Act that history hit the limelight and occasioned more debate in the media than any other subject in the National Curriculum. Here fears of conflict between the various ethnic minorities and between them and the white majority played a major role in delineating the role the curriculum carved out for itself in an effort to accommodate itself to the New Britain. Oxford teachers many have been as conscious of the power of the community as their Irish counterparts but (at least until 2001) they had much less reason to be fearful and they knew it. Unlike teachers in Mid-Ulster they did not live under the shadow of the bomb and the bullet.

(vii) The Impact of the Curriculum on Changing Teachers' Views

Teachers in my earlier interviews reflected on the era of the 'secret garden' of the curriculum that was being uprooted and exposed to central control. They lamented the end of a laissez faire approach to history teaching and the introduction of prescription of

content, approach and rationale. As one teacher in 1991 from a maintained Mid-Ulster school put it: 'I am teaching in the midst of the media'. By 1996 these laments were more likely to be heard from older teachers. A new generation of teachers had entered the profession that more readily accepted government directives. These teachers were being better prepared to deal with contentious issues. One teacher on the verge of retirement in 1991 reminisced about her career in a controlled school:

It (pre-Common Curriculum), was a much more unconscious era. I did not feel that Big Brother was watching me so I could be comfortable in the secret garden of the classroom.

Moving to England we find that the rationale behind the new initiatives of the National Curriculum Working Group was explained as follows:

Increasingly the history curriculum placed emphasis on the promotion of the individual's emotional as well as intellectual needs. Personal fulfilment and fair play were encouraged by the National Curriculum Working Group identifying two purposes of history education: to help give pupils a sense of identity; and to assist an understanding of their own cultural roots and shared inheritance (DES, 1990).

Nearly all of those interviewed in Oxford agreed that sensitivity had come more to the fore because 'people get worked up about a whole range of issues or might take them further than they ever did before and certainly since the 1970s'. A major reason for greater self-consciousness in history lessons was considered to be the growth of parental involvement in education. Once the voice of the community is heard in the classroom it can insist, according to one middle school male, that 'I don't want my child taught this or that'. Teachers in England in 2001 were even more conscious of the community than in 1996. As in Northern Ireland, the majority was convinced that the impact they had was less important than factors external to the classroom. The influences identified included: 'whether their parents were born here or elsewhere'; 'whether they have had the opportunity to visit other countries'; 'whether they have strong religious views'; 'the

media'; 'role models'; 'the political system;' 'the extent to which they are motivated or less able'.

Although my research does not focus on the impact of ability grouping, teachers commented about the problems in teaching the less motivated students, particularly in non-selective schools in Northern Ireland. This links up with the whole Eleven Plus debate and would indicate the wisdom of Susan Hallam's conclusions that 'in the long term secondary education will need to become more flexible, offering more diversity in curriculum choice, with greater mixing of vocational and academic options' (Hallam, 2002, p. 94).

A number of teachers thought that other school subjects especially religious education were more decisive than history: 'I think prejudices are aired more in religious education than they are in history and I don't think they are in politics either'.

What also became clear was that the degree of composure felt by most Mid-Ulster teachers was in no small part due to the fact that they were teaching their co-religionists. Many teachers remarked that they would not have relished teaching Irish history in a 'mixed class'. With the growth of integrated schools more teachers were doing this but unfortunately these teachers were not included in my sample so I cannot comment on them. The relative homogeneity of Irish schools contrasts with the position stated by Oxford teachers who admitted to feeling uneasy when, for example, a minority of their students were Jewish.

(viii) Students' Perceptions of Sensitive Topics

Although secondary school students, like their teachers, feel comfortable studying most topics, issues relating to identity, particularly national identity, are the ones that they consider to be the most sensitive (TES, 5 March 2004). In Oxford some students I was currently teaching in 1990 became very irate when being taught about the Labour party. Overall, Irish history in Northern Ireland and the holocaust in England are, more than any

other topics, reported by young people to cause them at least some concern (Conway, 2004). Contemporary Irish history is the particular area that young people in Northern Ireland agreed is the most sensitive. In these contexts it is also interesting to note the extent of concurrence between schools and cohorts.

Students agreed that their teachers were unlikely to use debate and role-play often as teaching methods; this was especially the case in Mid-Ulster controlled schools. There was a small increase in the use of these methods by 2001. By contrast worksheets were reported to be used widely by all schools and became more popular over time; they were apparently used most frequently in Irish non-selective schools and less often in independent schools in Oxford.

The frequency of use of these particular strategies appeared to be determined more by school tradition than by topic sensitivity.

Based on my findings, the greater the students' liking for the subject the less likely they were to feel uncomfortable when being taught any topic in history. And pupils liked history: in a five point scale, they gave it at least three. There is also evidence of it becoming increasingly popular with all ages and in both regions.

The converse is also true: the more a student disliked history, the harder she or he found coping with potentially unsettling topics. Contemporary research into the state of school history illustrates the extent to which it has changed since 1964 when it was reported pupils had little affection for history which was said to be 'boring' (Bourdillon, 1994, p. 15). The extent to which it is still in danger remains inconclusive (Haydn et al., 2008); much depends on the criteria applied to it. Certainly, in general, the number taking examinations in history at GCSE and A Level has declined.

The 1995 revision of the National Curriculum created even greater ambivalence towards the subject by confirming that history would be an optional subject after the age of 14 and by placing a much stronger emphasis on vocational education post-14 than the 1989

version. Although teachers in all regions welcomed the greater flexibility in the programmes of study, they had to acknowledge that their subject had been demoted and they now had to convince their students that it was worth pursuing. This responsibility forced teachers to be more explicit about the purpose of history and to adopt teaching strategies that were engaging. Furthermore, the development of key skills and the requirement of schools to provide spiritual, moral, social and cultural guidance for pupils also had implications for the ways in which history is taught (Phillips, 2008, p. 24). The extent to which teachers were successful in both regions in engendering a sense of the relevance of history is borne out by the results of the surveys I undertook in 1996 and 2001.

(ix) The Impact of Formal History Teaching

Teachers are right to be concerned about the growing influence of the media, particularly television: this opinion was confirmed by the surveys I did with students. But it must not be overlooked that, for the majority of students, history classes in school were perceived to be by far the most influential source in the process of learning the history of their country. If teachers resist being a moral force (and I think we should not), we will surrender to the streets, or to the media, our opportunity to be the primary vehicle for the transmission of critical information and balanced opinions. We can compete with the lessons learnt from the home, the community and the tabloids.

Nearly all teachers agreed that, regarding the possible tension between versions of history given at school and at home, the two might be able to run alongside each other in tandem but if there are conflicting versions of the past and students have to choose between two versions of truth then that is going to be difficult. My experience recounted at the beginning of the chapter is that the community voice is more influential. On other occasions I am aware that young people compartmentalise: the history they learn at school is 'proper history' and appropriate for examination purposes but the story they get at home is accepted uncritically as a tribal truth and serves a different function from academic history.

When I told one academic about students' responses to the same question, she was keen to point out that students often do not recognise how much 'history' they bring into the classroom from the outside. She thought that if I asked young people whether they had ever heard parents talk about political things, they would be likely to say, 'Oh yes, but then that isn't history'. She surmised that:

They think that history is a nice tidy thing that you do from 11.15 a.m. to 12.30 p.m. on a Thursday when it isn't French or geography. History just by making pupils aware of different points of view doesn't necessarily make people non- partisan. It is a school thing whereas what my parents are saying it is something else.

This was the conclusion I reached regarding two apparently conflicting sets of data: the history of the classroom and the history of the street. Most of the young people I surveyed said that they learnt their history from the classroom; yet teachers emphasised the social element.

Certainly there are situations in which all issues can become sensitive and potentially sensitive situations where both student and teacher feel comfortable. Teachers and students could be placed on a continuum which ranges from hyper-sensitive to totally relaxed. It must also be recognised that there are degrees of sensitivity because situations and issues are constantly changing or evolving. As a consequence of having to justify their subject and think more about their role as a teacher a greater self-awareness was developed. This coupling of ideology and utility created a self-consciousness that could be crippling or emancipating for teachers of history. There is no doubt that tension will always exist, but instead of inducing paralysis, it can act like the irritant that creates the pearl. Teaching sensitive issues can enhance the quality of teaching and learning by developing critical thinking, empathy or emotional intelligence within the classroom and by raising the awareness of both the teachers' and the students' rights and responsibilities. Any difficulties encountered can be surmounted with proper training, resources and support.

The majority of teachers I interviewed in Mid-Ulster agreed that it was important to teach topics steeped in contention such as national history: they could provide the necessary corrective to sectarian myths thereby making some headway at least towards healing community rifts. But most were concerned about how this should be done. Many favoured a version of a neutral chair strategy; only a minority was prepared to make their political and ethical views more explicit. By contrast, it was the teachers in Oxford who tended to be prepared to declare their political or ethical stance. My research also indicates a close correlation in both areas between the teacher's ideology, the strategy adopted and the degree to which the teacher finds a topic sensitive. When a topic is felt to be emotional, teachers tend to rely more on the use of documents rather than on discussion.

Most teachers agreed that concentrating on other conflict areas was less effective in consciousness-raising than teaching about contemporary Irish issues. This is not the position favoured by Tosh who argues that schools should be less fixated on a particular historical problem associated with the present day relevance but rather should equip 'young people with a distinctive mode of thinking which can be critically applied to topics in the present' (Tosh, 2008, p. ix). Laudable though these sentiments are, my research indicates that students need to be taught a topic that is relevant to their situation because they do not always make the necessary connections. The Arab-Israeli conflict is no substitute for Irish history in Northern Ireland.

Although my research can offer no conclusive or quantifiable proof, it does point towards there being a connection between the perceived purpose of history and the approach teachers take in the classroom. Nearly all teachers interviewed held multi-purpose beliefs about the aims of history teaching. Unanimously they recognised the need to teach their students how to sift through evidence in a balanced manner as being a hallmark of good history teaching. They were conscious of their duty to encourage critical independent thought as well as persuading them to be good citizens. Moreover, I draw attention towards the underlying external and internal factors that encapsulate an emotional,

intellectual and social dimension and provide a psychological as well as an ideological understanding behind the teachers' reactions to particular topics that they teach.

All teachers said that they used documentary evidence but there was a tendency for some teachers to place more emphasis on this strategy than on discussion, debate or role play. Teachers who emphasised the intrinsic value of history tended to be those who used more traditional methods. The shift from didactic to evidence-based approach demanded by the 'New History' also cultivated a climate of confrontation of tricky issues: different sides could be seen to offer conflicting explanations in a situation where there was a need to draw conclusions.

(x) The Implications of this Thesis regarding Educational Initiatives

Why despite the shifts in social acceptability and the volatile political situation did more Mid-Ulster teachers report feeling more comfortable teaching Irish history in 2001 than they had a decade earlier and why was the need to teach at least earlier periods in Irish history unanimously accepted? Certainly some schools, particularly controlled ones, still managed to avoid the more contemporary topics involving the civil rights movement and the hunger strike and opted for the less contentious earlier twentieth century option. Irish teachers knew how to play the system and take appropriate evasive action.

They could also take, if they wished, 'confrontational' action. The greater commitment to tackling even contentious topics can be explained by the relative success of the series of government initiatives reaching back to the 1980s. Teachers explained that complaints from parents or colleagues could be countered by the statement 'it's on the examination syllabus or in the Common Curriculum, I have no option'. Even when they did have options, they were shrewd enough to hide behind the legislation to justify their choice of topic and line of enquiry.

Personal experience in the 1980s had led me to believe that certain history topics had become more sensitive in the classroom as a result of government initiatives to improve community relations. My research in the 90s led me to believe that, whilst legislation regarding curriculum change may have made life more difficult for many teachers by making heavier practical and ideological demands, it has, largely improved the quality of teaching, and enhanced the position of history in the curriculum. Therefore, compulsion is not necessarily the retrograde step I believed it to be in the 1980s: it gives teachers licence to teach sensitive issues. If a prescribed curriculum had existed in 1986 I would not have been forced to abandon teaching Irish history.

In 1990 only a few schools in Mid-Ulster dared tackle Irish history after 1922 but by 2001 all schools included at least part of this period on their syllabus. Government approbation and grants fostered inter-community projects and facilitated integrated education (though much more could have been done). Of course there were sub-texts in its agenda that remained suspect but this encouraged a healthy scepticism and encouraged teachers to question their own role in the classroom and in the community. Whilst teachers at least some of the time insulated themselves by selecting documents that provide a 'balanced' case the vast majority moved on to promote open debate on all topics.

History teachers in Oxford also welcomed the opportunities and the challenges brought about by new developments: citizenship in particular gave them the chance to raise the profile of their subject. The teachers in Northern Ireland had further to go in terms of accepting change but moved throughout the decade at a much greater pace than before along the continuum of acceptance being more negative than their Oxford colleagues in both 1991 and 1996.

I compared Mid-Ulster and Oxford to provide insight into the following hypotheses that are intrinsically linked with my overarching research questions on the theory and practice of sensitive issues in history.

- 1. When it comes to dealing positively with sensitive issues in history teaching, Government initiatives are counter-productive because they inhibit the free exchange of ideas between student and teacher.**

(My research has indicated that, contrary to my original thoughts, this is not the case in the specific instance of teaching Irish history in Northern Ireland.)

- 2. Certain issues are always sensitive regardless of the social context**

(I have distinguished between topics being controversial and topics being sensitive. My research indicates that sensitivity is always context-specific.)

- 3. Teachers are the naïve bearers of culture.**

(My research indicates that the vast majority of history teachers has clear aims in mind and there is widespread questioning of values and ideology.)

- 4. The role of the neutral chair offers a more productive approach to dealing with emotionally charged subjects.**

(My research indicates that the majority of teachers feel more comfortable in adopting the role of the neutral chair but, increasingly, more are prepared to challenge the students.)

(xi) Questions for Further Research

This thesis indicates that although there was general consensus in Mid-Ulster and Oxford as to what constituted sensitive issues in history, thinking about sensitivity tended to become more polarised in times of heightened political tension or insecurity regarding government initiatives. This was the case in 1991 but had become less so in 2001. Did such concurrence survive into the second decade of the century the attack on the twin towers, with its subsequent Islamophobia? When I interviewed teachers in Oxford in September 2001 in the aftermath of the attack, I was reassured that relations in class with Muslim students remained unaffected though there were reports of ‘incidents’ in non-contact time. Would the teachers in these schools make the same positive reports nine

years later? Would students in multi-cultural schools feel as ease with HSU such as the crusades or the empire?

How are teachers in Mid-Ulster adjusting to the vagaries of the peace settlement? How are they adapting to a history curriculum which, despite its flexibility, has elements of prescription such as the study of the impact of partition? How are teachers and students adjusting to the influx of foreign nationals especially into Dungannon schools? How have the presence of the new integrated secondary schools in Dungannon in 1995 and Magherafelt in 2002 changed the complexion of contentious situations and topics? What is the impact of the latest changes in the selection system?

Much has been written over the past few years about conflict resolution in divided or recently reconciled communities. Certainly it is a good time to revisit the other countries on my initial research journey. Much has changed in Oxford and Mid-Ulster but what can we say for Cyprus, Sri Lanka, South Africa and Israel/Palestine?

(xii) The Originality of the Research

So what is original about my work? Many of my findings about history's popularity, its importance for critical thinking and its value for social cohesion have been presented elsewhere, albeit in a different format, with a different perspective or methodological approach. However, no other research of such a longitudinal and comparative nature has been undertaken in the period 1991-2001 which involves both teachers and students in Northern Ireland and England. Also no other research has been completed from the position of a reflective practitioner.

I share some of the research concerns of Robert Phillips, Keith Barton, Alan McCully, Anna Pendry, Chris Husbands, Alison Kitson, Kay Taille Harris and Haydn et al but, despite similarities in our research area, there are frequent differences in the focus of the work and the methodology employed. Whereas Barton and McCully (2002) interviewed students and used a modified version of Kelly's repertory technique to investigate the

interaction between school learning and prior understanding of history, I conducted a survey among students and had broader concerns about students' perceptions of the role of history and the teaching techniques used by their teachers.

Pendry et al (2003), spent time with eight secondary schools in English exploring the expertise that informs history teachers' professional decisions. They and other researchers considered not only the ways in which teachers construct the history curriculum in their schools but they also examined the kinds of knowledge and understanding implicit in the teachers' approach. This kind of stance contrasts greatly with mine in its scope and approach but dovetails with my concern over teachers' preconceptions, especially of their role, and the teaching strategy they adopted.

Jason Nicholls and Stuart Foster examined school history textbooks from England and the USA to highlight their portrayal of the Soviet role in the Second World War in an effort to try to expose the effect these books have on students. I did consider textbooks as one of many factors that impacted on young people's learning but did not examine them in detail. Ultimately, I relied on empirical or archival evidence.

Despite our different emphases and methods I and other researchers have all been concerned that teachers' and students' prior conceptions as well as our own be taken into account. Personally, embedded in my approach is the stance of the reflective practitioner. I have tried to follow Phillips' (2002) dictat that 'teachers should become E and R', that is, effective and reflective.

My research reinforces the findings of many in Northern Ireland (Husbands, Kitson and Pendry, 2003; McCully, 2006; McCully and Barton, 2007; McCully and Kitson, 2005) and in England (Haydn et al., 2008; Husbands C and Kitson A and Pendry, 2003; Traille, 2006) that history is a popular, albeit contested, subject in both regions.

Table 1

Students, Views on History

Survey	Date	Enjoyable
QCA Schools Council Survey	1967	29%
Hargreaves Report	1984	53%
Conway	1996	66%
Conway	2001	68%
QCA Survey	2005	69.8%

(Compiled with the help of the research of Harris and Haydn, 2008)

I find that similar results to mine are presented by different researchers using different or indeed similar methods. Research has indicated that students from a variety of backgrounds share many of the basic features of historical knowledge and understanding (Brophy and VanSledright, 1997; VanSledright, 2002). However, these ‘understandings are not universal’ (Levstik and Barton, 2008, p. 335). The research of Epstein (1998) in the United States, Seixas, (1993) in Canada and my research in the United Kingdom (Conway 1991; 2004), have shown that the perspectives of students from varied backgrounds can significantly differ from their peers.

Furthermore, a topic taught to promote inclusiveness or command attention by being personally relevant can lead to student discomfort: it may leave a student feeling aggrieved because he or she feels put on the spot. Although changes in history since the National Curriculum have made it possible to teach in ways that promote personal self-fulfilment for all students, Traille surmises that it might be ‘counter-productive in promoting feelings of positive engagement in some students of colour because of the “victim focus”’. She contends that although personally relevant content might play a large part in gaining attention it cannot in itself be the whole answer to achieving more student engagement (Taille, 2006, p. 27). I have some anecdotal evidence from students that supports Taille’s stance but it is not conclusive.

Government initiatives and community tension worked in tandem to bring teachers into the front line. Recent research by Kitson with history teachers in Northern Ireland highlights the extent to which they responded to developments. She wrote that: 'The local community was by far the most commonly cited external influence in contrast to a similar study in England where it was hardly cited at all' (Kitson 2005, p.15). My research endorses this finding in Northern Ireland but not in England. I found great continuity in Mid-Ulster where my data was collected in the 1990s and in 2001. Certainly fear of antagonising parents or in some way bringing the violence in the streets into the schools inhibited many teachers from being totally frank in discussion or stating their political views. Unlike Kitson, I found that the English teachers I interviewed nearly always cited the community as a major factor.

A particular observation in 1996 was the fact that society has become more litigious'. People take things more to heart', said a teacher trainer, 'there are more Citizens' Charters and people are aware of rights'. Others spoke about greater accountability in education, in being wary about what the parents would say. I also discovered this in my first year of teaching in an independent school in Oxford where nearly all girls came from a Conservative supporting background. I felt uneasy about how I presented the trade unions and the Labour Party, something that was never sensitive in the provincial grammar school where I previously taught. Not that this was very new: even as regards the writing of the 'Then and There' series of textbooks in the 1960s, Marjorie Reeves assured me in December, 1994, that: 'You have to watch out for community sensitivity as well as what is going to spark the children off'.

My research strongly supports the influence of school history. This position is sustained by the students Traill interviewed and surveyed; they attested to the importance of school history in their learning (Traill, 2006). My survey with students highlighted the point that school history was by far the most important factor in providing information about their country. It was considered by students to be significantly more important than the family, the community or the media; friends and newspapers were considered to be

the least important source. This was generally the case for all students in all places in all cohorts.

Despite the strong endorsement from their students, it is apparent from interviews with teachers that they consider the impact of their classroom teaching to be limited and probably not as important as external influences. They insist that there is very little they can do to challenge deeply held beliefs absorbed from parents or from the community. They voiced opinions about pupils' ignorance of the facts of history and their susceptibility to sectarian prejudices.

Most teachers I interviewed agreed with Taille's surmise that cultural forces might already have shaped students' ideas before they encountered their secondary school history lessons. Among these forces in the UK she mentions black consciousness as one that is 'probably more influential among people of African-Caribbean descent' (Taille, 2006, p.162).

What I have uncovered is a surprising degree of similarity in the origin and operation of emotionally charged issues in contrasting areas of the United Kingdom. Specifically, I compared Mid-Ulster in Northern Ireland, a relatively hot, rather problematical region, with Oxford in England, a relatively cool, rather unproblematic area. Undoubtedly, there are significant contrasts in context, institutional structures, ethnic diversity and the expectations of teachers and the impact of the teacher of community pressures and educational initiatives. However, concerning the concept of sensitivity, these disparities are more notional than actual. As regards to who or what determines the nature of sensitivity, I have identified components that can be considered common to both regions at all times.

Sensitivity is primarily determined by factors external to the classroom. I have found that, as regards teaching history in schools, no topic is intrinsically problematical but has the potential to become so as a result of the teachers' and/or students' reaction to it. Although this response is mainly determined by macro events, educational initiatives and

key individuals, it is also shaped by the teachers' and students' predispositions, their interpersonal relationships, their opinion of the role of history and the strategies they have adopted. My thesis, therefore, asserts that sensitivity in history is a complex, dynamic, socially constructed phenomenon, which, as a result of being context-based, is located differently in place, culture and chronology.

(xiii) Conclusions: Inspiration

It is apposite that I allow the concluding remarks in this thesis to go to the men who inspired it. Frank Wright commented on the importance of institutional equality for mutual acceptance - 'new relationships are founded upon trust' - and taught us that interpersonal relationships in the classroom are paramount. Jack Magee reminded us that, whilst 'many of the facts learned in the history lessons at school will in time be forgotten, attitudes, enthusiasm and prejudices will remain'. Teachers should not underestimate their influence on young people. Finally, I hope that I have gone some way towards meeting Rex Cathcart's concern when he read about my proposed study that I might achieve more than 'reworking the surface'.

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