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**Beyond the textbooks: Teacher perspectives,
pedagogy, and curriculum choices when
teaching History during Transition Year**

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**HIBERNIA
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Beyond the textbooks: Teacher perspectives, pedagogy, and curriculum choices when teaching History during Transition Year

Meghan Smyth

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the award of Master of Education (PME) in
Post-Primary Education.

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates teacher autonomy during the teaching of History in Transition Year (TY) in post-primary education in Ireland. Findings indicate that teacher autonomy to create curriculum in TY History impacts teachers' perceptions of their planning, motivations, students' interests, pedagogy, assessment, and influences of Junior Cycle (JC) and Senior Cycle (SC). Relevant literature is thoroughly reviewed to contextualise the aims of this dissertation. The research employs qualitative methods of three semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis. The dissertation concludes with a review of limitations and recommendations for further research including this dissertation's contribution to the field.

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- To the wonderful students I have taught while on teaching placements.
- To my partner, family, and friends for their constancy and support.
- Most of all, to the memory of my grandmother and the life lessons she lovingly gifted.

Thank you.

List of Acronyms

AFL - Assessment for Learning

BERA - British Educational Research Association

CBA – Classroom Based Assessment

CPD – Continued Professional Development

DES - Department of Education and Skills

EAL – English as an Additional Language

JC - Junior Cycle

LC – Leaving Certificate

NCCA - National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

PME - Professional Master of Education

RSR - Research Study Report

SOW – Scheme of Work

SC - Senior Cycle

SEC - State Examinations Commission

SLT - Senior Leadership Team

TY - Transition Year

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Origin of the Dissertation

The Irish post-primary subject History has been in serious contention. In the last decade, History has undergone significant transformation including a reformed Junior Cycle (JC) programme (DES, 2015) and with this, the decisions to revoke and then swiftly reinstate History as a core JC subject (NCCA, 2019). The controversial revocation led to intense media backlash; many stakeholders as far-reaching as President Michael D. Higgins (McGreevy, 2018) and others defended History's value for teaching vital skills such as critical thinking, empathy, and resistance against susceptibility to propaganda (O'Brien, 2019). This researcher concurs with these advocates for History because it develops crucial 21st century literacy skills in an era of rapid technological advances, fake news, and artificial intelligence. Furthermore, historical consciousness could be essential to navigate geo-political issues, for example Brexit, the Irish border, and the question of reunification. History has been embroiled by media debate about curriculum content; intense scrutiny of various issues includes comparisons between the teaching of morality in History versus Religious Studies (Humphreys, 2019), identity and sectarianism in Northern Ireland (de Souza, 2020) and campaigns to teach about the Magdalene laundries and Mother and Baby home scandals (McGuirk and Byrne, 2022). This research project was born of a desire to understand how within this contentious space, teachers curate and deliver curriculum content. The focus is narrowed to Transition Year (TY) because it is the only academic year in mainstream Irish post-primary education where teachers make these potentially controversial but certainly influential decisions.

1.2 Background to the Project

According to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), TY offers students time to expand knowledge, skills, and values without the burden of external state examinations (NCCA, 2022b). As part of the ongoing Senior Cycle (SC) review, TY is being audited and redeveloped (NCCA, 2022b). The existent programme guidelines are over 30 years old (DOE, 1993). The NCCA have published a draft TY Programme Statement for consultation (NCCA, 2024c). A published version is forthcoming (NCCA, 2024b) and eagerly

anticipated by media coverage from leading researchers (Jeffers, 2023). The Department of Education and Skills (DES) recognise that TY is one of the school-based programmes that captures student learning using a variety of beneficial assessment components (NCCA, 2022b). This dissertation explores how TY may offer students and teachers more freedom of choice, outside set parameters of curriculum and summative state written examinations like the Leaving Certificate (LC). Based on inspection reports, History in TY is a subject that requires 'more stimulating, relevant, and inspiring curricula...incorporating interdisciplinary, cross-curricula elements' (NCCA, 2022a, p.11). Consequently, this research utilises thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews to gain a qualitative understanding about teachers' perceptions of their TY History modules and whether they do or do not meet these curricula expectations.

1.3 Rationale

The dissertation investigates how content choice, pedagogical and assessment approaches may impact student engagement, critical thinking, and historical understanding in TY History. This research examines teachers' perceptions of the efficacy of teacher-designed modules in facilitating student learning outcomes and explores the challenges faced by teachers. This dissertation may positively impact student and qualified teachers' professional practice by offering insights into content selection, planning, effective pedagogical approaches, resource allocation, collegiality, and assessment methods. The research may also facilitate informed decision-making at the institutional level, influencing curriculum planning and professional development opportunities. Ultimately, this research could enhance teaching efficacy, promote student engagement, critical thinking and contribute to the overall quality of History education in Ireland and potentially globally.

1.4 Dissertation Layout

The dissertation comprehensively explores the research topic across six chapters:

1. Introduction contextualises the research origins.

2. Literature Review is a thematic, conceptual, and contextual framework and identifies gaps in current knowledge.
3. Methodology details the interpretivist research paradigm, qualitative design, sample, data analysis, rigour, limitations, and ethical considerations.
4. Findings presents the empirical data.
5. Discussion critically examines the findings in the context of the research questions and compared to existing literature.
6. Conclusion recapitulates the research objectives, summarises key findings, and offers insights into broader implications.

1.5 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the origin of the dissertation, project background, rationale, and layout. The research questions were formulated from the researcher's teaching experiences and observations during the Professional Master of Education (PME). The dissertation is a qualitative case study employing semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis. The researcher was inspired by a leading historian E.H. Carr, who contends "there is no more significant pointer to the character of a society than the kind of history it writes or fails to write" (1990, p.43). This dissertation applies Carr's concept to pedagogy, to ask what kind of history does our society teach? If history facilitates cultural transmission and forms national identities (Arthur and Phillips, 2000) what histories do teachers choose to teach in the absence of prescribed curriculum? How is this chosen content delivered under the unique TY programme? What are teachers' perceptions of these influential decisions? The following dissertation intends to contribute answers to these vital questions.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction - Literature Review

With a focus on TY History, this literature review aims to provide a thematic and comprehensive examination of the foundation of TY, curriculum choice, teaching methodologies, cross-curricular aspects, and assessment options. It aims to investigate how TY differs from traditional schooling and how this might impact TY History students. The review analyses a broad range of academic sources. However, TY has been given 'relatively little attention' from researchers and resultingly, policymakers have 'limited information' on which to base recommendations (Clerkin, 2020, p.110). Considering how TY is quite a unique educational experience in terms of global post-primary education, this literature review focuses on two of the leading researchers in this narrow field, Aidan Clerkin and Gerry Jeffers, who have both published extensively. This comprehensive literature review will contextualise the core research question: how does the freedom to create curriculum impact teachers' perceptions of effective pedagogy and assessment?

2.2 Foundation, Mission, and Global Context of TY

Introduced in 1974, the Minister for Education Richard Burke described TY as an opportunity to 'release the students from the educational pressures for one year so that they could devote time to personal development and community service' (Burke, 1974, cited in Eggleston, 2018, p.72). Burke's learning objectives were reflected in the TY guidelines' stated mission 'to promote the personal, social, educational and vocational development of pupils and to prepare them for their role as autonomous, participative, and responsible members of society' (DOE, 1993, p.3). Moynihan (2015) suggests that how TY promotes these skills and developments may be a leading factor in enrolment; despite significant economic downturns since TY's introduction including major recessions of the 1980s and 2008 these issues did not deter TY enrolment figures. This trend continues when we look at the latest DES statistics, 79.2% of students elected to study TY, which is a significant increase of 6.9% since 2018 (DES, 2024a, p.22 and see Appendix A for the DES 'LC Pathways' table). Considering both historic trends and recent data it seems that despite the impacts of Covid-19 and the current cost of living crisis, TY prevails as an extremely popular, elective learning

experience. Perhaps its enduring popularity is due to the programme's unique nature? Moynihan (2015) suggests that TY is distinctive and does not have a comparable international counterpart. However, TY shares some similarities with the French *Seconde*, though it diverges considerably because, at present, TY does not nationally prescribe core subject coursework (Smyth, Byrne and Hannan, 2004). Latest research suggests that South Korea's 'Free Year Programme' introduced in 2013 was at least partially informed by TY and shares the eudaimonic view of wellbeing (Clerkin, Jeffers, and Choi, 2022). As such, the success of TY may influence global education trends and this research investigates exactly which aspects of the programme may inspire policymakers and educators of international programmes.

2.3 Existing Research on TY – Clerkin and Jeffers

Two researchers have contributed significantly to this niche field. Gerry Jeffers was a National Co-ordinator of the Transition Year Curriculum Support Service, a role created under circular M1/00 (DES, 2000). In the past two decades, Jeffers has published research about TY including educational disadvantage (2002), contextualisation and development (2004), attitudes towards and factors contributing to increased enrolment (2007), role of school leadership in implementation (2010), stakeholders' views (2011) and current concerns and the future of the programme (2019). Similarly, Aidan Clerkin has contributed to several research gaps including TY's role in personal development (2012), equality of access for socio-economically disadvantaged (2013), positive impacts on SC homework and study behaviours (2016), development of 21st-century skills (2018a), invisible barriers to participation (2018b), factors affecting student perceptions (2019) and socioemotional development (2020). Although the work of these two important researchers will inform this dissertation, there is limited teaching-subject specific research available. There are a handful of studies exploring some teaching subjects within the context of TY including Physical Education (O'Brien, 2010), Science (Garner, Hayes, and Eilks, 2014), Mathematics (Prendergast and O'Meara, 2016), and Business Studies (America and Mallon, 2020). It appears that Clerkin and Jeffers have each contributed significantly to the wider field of TY but there is a significant research gap concerning History teaching in TY. This dissertation aims to contribute to this field.

2.4 Current Guidelines for TY History

The guidelines 'curriculum principles' describe the selection of content as entirely subjective depending on the individual school's decision when acting in accordance with the guidelines, needs of pupils and views of parents (DOE, 1993). The guidelines emphasise, with capitalisation, that TY 'is NOT part of the Leaving Certificate programme and should NOT be seen as an opportunity for spending three years rather than two studying Leaving Certificate material' (DOE, 1993, p.3). Instead, the guidelines' appendix suggests sixteen 'possible areas of experience' including Civic, Social and Political Education, Personal and Social Development, Health Education, Guidance, Religion, Philosophy, Aesthetics Education, Physical Education, Languages, Mathematics, Science Studies, Environmental and Social Studies, Information Technology, Practical Studies, Business and Enterprise Studies, Preparation for Adult and Working Life (ibid., pp.8-15). Though non-prescriptive in the content of these sixteen areas, clearly TY is designed as a broad educational experience. Historical studies is a subheading located within the 'Environmental and Social Studies' section and grouped with Geographical Studies, Science Studies, and Civic, Social and Political Studies. The guidelines advise that this area of learning should be interdisciplinary, thematically organised, and potential areas of focus may include 'local history, history of arts and crafts, archaeology, architecture, classical studies, social history, heritage studies' (ibid., p.13). Cross-curricular approaches are a well-established, valuable, and international pedagogical approach (Voogt and Roblin, 2012; Gleeson, J., Klenowski, V. and Looney, A., 2020). For example, Alexander, Walsh, Jarman, et al., (2008) investigated how English and Science intersect to produce both critically and scientifically literate students. The researchers attest that in an information-saturated society, people are swayed by 'media which are influenced by spin, propaganda and hype' (ibid., p.23) and as such, critical literacy is a crucial skill. Their statement echoes this dissertation's introduction which posits how the study of History may reduce susceptibility to propaganda. This research intends to evaluate the benefits of cross-curricular practices in TY History.

2.5 Curriculum Choice and Teacher Professional Judgement

Individual teachers make decisions and work within a composite web of stakeholders, including their students, colleagues, principals, parents, the Teaching Council, teachers' unions, and statutory governing bodies (Fullan, 2007). In mainstream post-primary

education, TY is the singular year where the subject department and by extension, the main classroom teacher, can entirely devise subject curricula. Jim Gleeson's research (2010, 2012, 2021 and 2022) traces the evolution of Irish curriculum culture, provides comparative contrasts with international education, and explores the role of teachers' autonomy. Similarly, Biesta (2015) finds that education is fundamentally a teleological practice wherein teachers require opportunities to exercise their professional judgements. The value of teacher autonomy has been debated on a global scale, for instance, in Scotland (Smith, 2019) and Australia where national curriculum policies were renegotiated and high-level policy-makers considered the importance and repositioning of teachers' professional authority (Gerrad and Farrell, 2014 and Gleeson, Klenowski and Looney, 2020). In contrast with Austria, where there had been elevated levels of teacher autonomy until recent reforms centralised and standardised examinations (Graß, 2017). Outside of mainstream education, the opportunity for individual Irish teachers to design curricula currently exists in home-schooling and 'second chance' schooling otherwise known as alternative school settings where marginalised students return to education. 'Second-chance' alternative school settings could pre-emptively engage early-school leaving students through innovative, student-led, flexible curricula programmes (Cahill, Curtin, Hall et al., 2020). Curriculum development in the latter study, originated from student interests and needs as opposed to external statutory bodies such as the NCCA, DES or State Examinations Commission (SEC). Instead, curriculum is malleable, thematic, and dynamic and this approach may boost student engagement and success in learning outcomes (ibid.). Additionally, the authors highlight how English as an Additional Language (EAL) can be supported through curricula flexibility (ibid). In addition to potentially improving inclusivity, freedom to choose curricula could be seen as a rejection of authoritarian forms of education. It may support Freire's (1970) critique of the banking model of education where students are "receptacles" and teachers "bestow" knowledge to mirror an "oppressive society" (p.72). Instead, Freire suggests "problem-posing education" where dialogue, critical inquiry and praxis are fundamental pedagogies (1970; 1973). This dissertation investigates how these theoretical positions about inclusivity, teacher autonomy, professional judgement and curriculum development intersect in TY History.

2.6 Pedagogy

There appears to be a significant gap in existent research about TY History pedagogy. To address this issue, the following is a review of pedagogy in History teaching and pedagogy in TY.

2.6.1 Pedagogy - History

Effective pedagogy in the History classroom according to the existent literature is varied. The utilisation of historical sources can promote historical enquiry, understanding and develop critical thinking skills (Smith, 2010). Primary sources such as music may hook students' interest in history (Turner-Bisset, 2001). Physical artefacts, for example, postcards, newspapers, photographs, clothing, or any other relevant objects is an effective historical and kinaesthetic activity (Murphy, 2005). Historical fiction may help students to recognise universal human experiences and empathise with people of the past (Crawford and Zygouris-Coe, 2008). Since the late 1960s, Hayden White, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and other theorists have examined the historiographical relationship between fiction and our understanding of History (Boehm, 2011). Effective application of active pedagogies in the History classroom has been examined by Dodwell (2016). Bage (1999) explores various co-operative learning strategies in the History classroom including groupwork, discussions, debates, and projects.

2.6.2 Pedagogy - TY

TY guidelines recommend varied teaching methodologies including “negotiated learning, personal responsibility, activity-based, team teaching, group work, project work, visiting speakers, field trips and work experience” (DOE, 1993, p.5). The efficacy of active and collaborative teaching practices is widely supported (Dewey, 1916; Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec, 1994; Petty, 2009a; Petty, 2009b; Peters, 2011; Tomlinson, 2014). Several statutory bodies offer resources to support teachers successfully implement active methodologies (PDST, 2017; PDST, No date; JCT, No date; The Teacher Toolkit, No date). The NCCA (2007) found that JC students favoured subjects with practical dimensions and activity-based learning; this NCCA research informed the recently reformed JC (DES, 2015). In addition to research and policy about active-teaching methodologies there is extensive research about TY and other pedagogies. Jeffers (2011) suggests that TY often facilitates learning

experiences outside of the classroom and TY pedagogies are more participative and democratic than other academic years in post-primary education. Moynihan (2015) finds that TY work experience might positively impact students' SC subject choices and long-term career choices. Bough (2023) provides a comprehensive examination of project-based learning and digital technologies in TY.

The qualitative interviews in this dissertation aim to uncover the pedagogies currently used by History teachers in TY and teachers' perceptions of their efficacy. The research will investigate how teacher autonomy in TY might affect teachers preferred pedagogical approaches.

2.7 Assessment Methods - TY and History

As above regarding pedagogy, there appears to be a significant gap in existent research about TY History assessment. To address this issue, the following is a review of assessment in History teaching and assessment in TY.

2.7.1 Assessment – History

History is assessed by summative written state examinations at the end of JC and SC. For daily teaching practice, extensive research affirms the efficacy of Assessment for Learning (AFL) (Black and Wiliam, 1998; Black et al., 2004; DES, 2012; Hattie, 2012; OECD, 2013; Wiliam, 2018). Regular feedback, AFL and self-reflective tasks in the History classroom may assist students to monitor their learning progress, obtain agency and identify areas of improvement (Philips, 2008; Smith, 2010).

2.7.2 Assessment - TY

Assessment should be “diagnostic” and “formative”; by the end of TY students are expected to have a completed “diary/logbook/journal” for personal evaluation and a “record of achievement” from the school (DOE, 1993, pp.5-6). Existent research indicates that TY teachers follow these guidelines and assess students using formative methods (Jeffers, 2004; Jeffers, 2011; Clerkin, 2016; Jeffers, 2019; Clerkin, 2020). Research indicates that summative assessment in the form of terminal written examinations might encourage teaching to the test (Smyth et al, 2006). Furthermore, preoccupation with written examinations like LC, may

lead to a biased emphasis on attaining examination results while rejecting the holistic impact of education on students' personal, cultural, and social lives (Gleeson and Ó Donnabháin, 2009). Datnow's (2002) concept of co-construction demonstrates how TY values could be diluted due to the looming LC examinations (Jeffers, 2011).

This research aims to understand how TY History teachers assess their students. It investigates teachers' perceptions of assessment and whether teacher autonomy in TY affects teachers' preferred assessment methods.

2.8 Conclusion – Literature Review

This chapter has examined existent literature on TY, teacher autonomy, pedagogy and assessment in relation to History. This review has demonstrated that there is a gap in the literature regarding TY History as a subject and the impacts of teacher autonomy within this niche field. The decisions teachers make may demonstrate their “decisional capital” in the theoretical concept of “professional capital” by Hargreaves and Fullan (2012). This is the teachers' ability to make professional judgments and choices based on their expertise. In TY, teachers have the unique freedom to not only select pedagogy and assessment methods that they believe help them to achieve student learning outcomes but to create the entire curriculum. This dissertation aims to investigate how TY History teachers use this decisional capital and the impacts this may have. The following Chapter 3: Methodology outlines and examines the researcher's chosen methods.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Methodology - Introduction

The literature reviewed in chapter two suggests that there may be insufficient research about TY History. This dissertation aims to contribute to this research gap by evaluating how teacher autonomy affects curriculum choice and teachers' perceptions of effective pedagogy and assessment methodologies. As such, research questions were developed based on the researcher's personal teaching experience, teaching observation during PME study and upon reviewing the relevant literature. The dissertation is a single case study using qualitative methods of semi-structured interviews followed by thematic analysis. This chapter outlines the theoretical framework underpinning the research paradigm and design, justification of selected methods, population and sampling, data analysis, limitations, ethical considerations, and rigour.

3.2 Research Paradigm

A paradigm is the philosophical intent or motivation for conducting research (Cohen and Manion 1994). This case study's research paradigm, interpretivism, aligns with the researcher's beliefs of epistemology. Interpretivism aims to understand and interpret phenomena through what Habermas (1984) describes as 'double hermeneutic'; researchers strive to interpret an 'interpreted world' wherein subjects have their own views and interpretations too (Cohen, Morrison and Manion, 2011, p.31). Interpretivism is often linked to Max Weber's sociological term '*verstehen*' translated as understanding; as opposed to '*erklaren*', which is concerned with quantitative explanations of causality (Blaxter, Huges and Tight, 2010, p.72). This case study aims to understand the collected data through analysis and collation of its participants' interpretations.

3.3 Research Design

Qualitative data was collected through three in-person semi-structured interviews with TY history teachers. The interviews aimed to obtain their perceptions, experiences, and insights on the design, pedagogy, and assessment methods of their TY history modules. Questions

were designed to assess both teacher's views and their interpretation of student attitudes to TY history. Careful design of questions is recommended to obtain genuine participant responses and valid data (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). As such, the researcher carefully designed the questions as open-ended to stimulate conversation and the researcher considered potential researcher bias in the phrasing so that the questions were not leading the participants towards conclusions. The researcher followed multiple steps to prevent researcher bias. Firstly, a thorough review of existing literature on interview techniques and question design. Secondly, questions were piloted with a small group of colleagues to gather feedback on their phrasing and neutrality. Thirdly, the researcher used strategies such as avoiding yes/no questions, ensuring questions were broad to elicit detailed responses, and reflecting on personal biases that could influence question wording. Additionally, questions were reviewed and revised to eliminate suggestive language that might lead participants toward specific conclusions. The interview schedule and sample interview questions are available to view (Appendices B and C). The interviews were recorded as mp4a files using Zoom and the files were uploaded and transcribed using the automated transcription service available on Microsoft Word. These documents were password protected and saved on the researcher's password encrypted laptop. Any inaccuracies of transcription, spelling or grammar were rectified manually.

3.4 Justification of Research Design

Fieldwork during postgraduate studies, particularly qualitative interviews, can be an exciting and sometimes daunting process (Brayda and Boyce, 2014). However, interviews have been described as the best way to 'enter into the other person's perspective' (Patton, 2002, p.341). Corbin and Strauss (2008) reiterate that these qualitative methods permit researchers to see the world from their participants' point of view. While Merriam and Tisdell (2016) assert that of the various available qualitative methods, interviews are the most important source of data. In alignment with the research paradigm, the researcher decided to use semi-structured interviews so participants could explore their own ideas and speak widely on the issues raised (Denscombe, 2014). Participants were invited to speak freely about their experiences. During interviews, the researcher was consciously and continuously reflexive by adapting interview questions to further investigate emergent

themes and responding to social cues using eye contact and observation of body language (Silverman, 2000). Creswell (2013) concurs that when collecting qualitative data, the researcher observes the interviewee and reflexively asks open-ended questions. This has long been recognised (Cohen and Manion, 1994), as a tool to help the interviewer build rapport while also permitting the interviewer to manage any misinterpretations that could arise.

3.5 Population and Sampling Method

This study was conducted in the researcher's PME teaching placement school, a large urban mixed-gender post-primary school. The sampling methods were non-probability sampling, using a specific purposive sample from a convenience population. Participants were selected based on characteristics required but from a convenience sample rather than a representative one. This sampling method is useful for small case studies with a specific purpose (Denscombe, 2014). After obtaining ethical approval and principal consent, the researcher emailed colleagues in the school's History department to recruit them for the research (Appendix D). Participants were provided with a Research Information Sheet (Appendix E) and a Consent Form (Appendix F) was signed before any data collection commenced.

Inclusion criteria applied to participant selection:

1. Post-primary teacher
2. Qualified history teacher
3. The teacher has taught history to Transition Year students in the past 10 years.

The exclusion criteria applied to participant selection was:

1. Retired teachers
2. Teachers on secondment
3. Student teachers

3.6 Data Analysis

The researcher applied Clarke and Braun's (2013) six-phase thematic analysis to methodically examine transcripts. The researcher chose this form of thematic analysis as it provides clear and concise guidelines for qualitative research (ibid.). The six-phase process was achieved as follows:

Phase 1: Familiarise yourself with the data.

The initial process of reading, studying, and taking notes of the data.

Phase 2: Generating initial codes.

After initial data analysis, initial codes were allocated to the transcripts (see Appendix I for a sample of coded transcripts).

Phase 3: Searching for themes.

Quotes and initial codes were formulated into a table of potential themes in Microsoft Excel

Phase 4: Reviewing themes.

The themes were then sorted into codes on the transcriptions and a table of finalised themes were reviewed and examined further by the researcher (see Appendix J for a sample of coded transcripts in Microsoft Excel).

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes.

The distinct themes were finalised and defined by the researcher.

Phase 6: Producing a report.

The researcher has written a final piece of literature conveying all the themes identified. This is available in Chapter Four: Findings.

3.7 Limitations

The researcher recognises that this dissertation may have limitations including chosen methods and sampling. Bell and Waters (2014) suggests that interviews could incorporate bias through the researcher's unintended effects on participants. Nisbet and Watt (1978,

cited in Bell and Waters, 2014), posit that interviews ‘reveal only how people *perceive* what happens, not necessarily what actually happens’ (p.165). This research captures teachers’ perceptions of TY History but this may not be lived reality. Additionally, participants may react differently depending upon who is interviewing them, Denscombe (2014) describes this phenomenon as the ‘interviewer effect’ (2014, p. 178). The researcher may have unknowingly caused this effect. Seven qualified history teachers were identified among the staff. Hepburn and Potter (2004) caution how a participant’s specialised perspective could result in analysis of qualitative data that is more vulnerable to researcher bias. Another limitation is the relatively small sample size. The sample was conveniently gathered from the school wherein the researcher was completing their Advanced School Experience and Professional Practice as part of the PME. This dissertation focuses on a specific context, potentially limiting what Lincoln and Guba (1985, cited in Denscombe, 2014) term ‘transferability’ which is the research’s applicability to other schools or regions.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

The researcher prepared a proposal and received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of Hibernia College. Ethical considerations were rigorously adhered to, including voluntary informed participant consent, anonymity via pseudonyms, and data protection in consultation and full compliance with guidelines by British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018). The name of the school and participants are not mentioned in this dissertation. Gatekeeper consent was obtained; the school principal was provided with a copy of the Research Information Sheet (Appendix E), signed a Principal Consent Form (Appendix G) and Principal Letter (Appendix H). Each participant was provided with a copy of the Research Information Sheet (Appendix E) and signed a Consent Form (Appendix F). Participants were informed that any identifiable data was limited to this dissertation and that the data will not be used outside the scope of its original purpose. Before the interview commenced, participants were reminded that they may withdraw from the study without negative consequences during the data collection phase and up to one month after data collection is completed. Participants understand that they can access their data including audio recordings and transcripts upon request. Participants have been made aware that the research may be published or used for future conferences; however, all data including theirs

and the school's name remain anonymised using pseudonyms. The digital data is stored safely using password-protected and encrypted folders which the researcher has sole access to. All hard copies of data are kept in a secure location. The data will be deleted after three years in accordance with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) law under the *Irish Data Protection Act (2018)*.

3.9 Rigour

Ethical research must consider rigour in the design, conduct, assessment, and reporting of the research (Morrison, 1996, cited in Cohen, Morrison and Manion, 2007). The researcher has made every effort to ensure that the research process was rigorous, ethical, trustworthy, and credible. The raw data was captured effectively through audio-recording interviews and the auto-generated transcriptions were edited as *verbatim*. The researcher achieved this by listening to each interview multiple times and manual editing. Reflexivity recognises how researchers are manifestly part of the social world that they research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983, cited in Cohen, Morrison and Manion, 2007). The researcher was mindful of reflexivity and aware of their potential biases and aimed to keep these in check throughout the process. This was achieved by the researcher writing a reflective journal during the research process; this ethnographic method may reduce researcher bias (Delamont, 2016). Additionally, once transcripts were finalised, participants were invited to read the transcripts to confirm, challenge, or elaborate on the findings. Member checking helps to ensure that the participants' views are represented accurately and can add credibility to the research through respondent validation (Babione, 2015).

3.10 Methodology - Conclusion

The researcher determined that the most effective methodology was a single case study employing a qualitative approach due to several reasons. The aims of the dissertation were to gain an in-depth understanding of TY History. The nature of the research questions sought to explore complex, contextual, and nuanced aspects of teachers' perceptions of curriculum design, pedagogy and assessment methods necessitated a qualitative approach. The

sampling strategy focused on a small group of TY History teachers that could provide rich, detailed insights, rather than requiring a large, representative sample for quantitative analysis. The small scale of the research made a single case study manageable and practical, allowing for a thorough and concentrated examination of the data. The results of the data collection are presented in the next chapter, Findings.

Chapter Four: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter collates the data from the three semi-structured interviews is subdivided into six finalised themes:

1. Teacher Planning, Motivations and Choices
2. Students' Interests
3. Pedagogical Approaches
4. Assessment Methods
5. Influence of JC and SC
6. Teacher Autonomy

Participants are anonymised as A, B and C.

4.4 Teacher Planning, Motivations and Choices

This theme collates participants' perceptions of their planning, motivations, and curriculum choices for local, national, and global histories. In this school, TY History modules are timetabled for 16 teaching weeks.

4.4.1 *Schemes of Work (SOW)*

All participants discuss flexibility in SOWs; these were co-created by the History department but modified by teachers. Participant C states "there's generally a lot of flexibility".

Participant A found "flexibility in historical figures investigated week-by-week" while Participant B described "freedom to deviate from SOWs as teachers wish". Participant A's SOW is titled "Heroes or Villains" and evaluates historical figures; their selected figures is based on "research-oriented and student-oriented decisions". Their "primary aim was to challenge perceptions TY students had of different figures". They were conscious of students' familiarity with selected figures and they "try to vary it week-by-week to keep it interesting". Participant B also taught this SOW but "focuses on students' lifelong skills and appreciation of history". Participant C aims to develop diverse learning styles because "we all learn differently". They teach a SOW titled 'Days That Shook the World' and note their

colleague who devised this SOW “chose different historical events than I would have”. Participant C updated the SOW through “a combination of checking with colleagues, digital resources available already on Stacey Stout’s website, and checking with students”.

4.4.2 Local, National and Global Histories

Cognisant of multi-perspectivity, Participant A wants students “to use historical and research skills to challenge bias. What we learn about here regarding Famine and 1916 is completely different compared to GCSE curriculum”. Participant A purposefully “neglects local history” and instead focuses on “80% global and 20% national”. In contrast, for Participant B “local history would come first because if students relate, they’ll understand and engage...national would be second most important”. However, Participant B highlights the impact of class interests, “that might change annually... I’d base topics on the class”. Participant B is mindful of inclusivity, diversity, intercultural factors and EAL students because “it’s important to include different perspectives and backgrounds... every country has a history that we might not know about”. All participants share an awareness of recognising different value systems and histories. Participant A notes “people [students] may never heard of, might be very prominent in another nation’s history curriculum.” Participant C aims to “inspire or capture students’ interest by highlighting local or national issues”. However, the split between local, national, and global histories “wasn’t necessarily on my radar...more focused on the event itself rather than geographical location”.

4.3 Students’ Interests

All participants discussed the significance of students’ interests.

4.3.1 Student and Teacher Voices

For Participant C, “TY is student-led with a degree of ownership ...students aren’t just passive recipients, they’re actively involved”. Participant B echoes this sentiment, “TY is the year for student voice”. Participant B states “when you pick topics that you like based on the students’ interests, that’s a huge benefit”. Participant A recommends a similar quasi-democratic approach using “topics I find interesting, I let them vote and decide”. Participant C asks students to “identify days that shook the world from JC, then the teacher of course

narrows the field of study". Participant B finalises their SOW based on students' individual mini-research presentations because "they'll agree with peers more than they'll agree with teachers". Participant B similarly co-creates the SOW based on the class interest. Participant A desires to appeal to many students, "I've never sat down with the students and asked them individually what was their preference? I've been trying to cater to the group as a whole". Participant A wants to "keep them [students] fresh, keep them on their toes and keep them interested". The most memorable topics were often controversial human interest with comparisons between modernity and the past; Participant A recalls how Cleopatra's marriage to her brother was "the point that you're least expecting to get across is what's going to stick with them". Participant B notices how students focus on 20th century history, "I haven't had too many that would want to go back to ancient civilizations... maybe for students it's because 'I've heard of that person's name. I've heard their story from film or TV'". Participant C echoes this student interest in 20th century modern history and highlights events "that have an ongoing significance today... what's hard-hitting and thought-provoking".

4.3.2 Gender

In addition to students' preference for eras, all participants discussed gender. Participant A observes how "boys tend to like World Wars... the girls really enjoy the social side. So, civil rights movements and referendums". Participant B's observations are similar, "boys are interested in the horror, the gore in war... girls want storylines, the characters...it's interesting war versus social". Participant B noted how "males may be more adventurous in their topics" compared to how "females tend to stick together and they'll choose the same topic". Participant A emphasises gender balance when choosing historical figures and they "generally try to split it evenly". This appears to be a deliberate, considered choice based on personal experience, "we never really looked much in detail at female figures. So, I definitely wanted to bring in more women".

4.4 Pedagogy

Participants discussed various pedagogies:

4.4.1 Success Criteria

Participant C “always shares success criteria on the board or Teams so students know what standard they're aiming for”.

4.4.2 Lesson Starters

In Participant A’s typical lesson starter, “I put the figure’s name and picture on the board with 5 minutes to investigate their background”.

4.4.3 Homework

Participant A assigns “weekly homework activities to determine if they’re a hero or villain.”

4.4.4 Visual Stimulus

Participant C “regularly” uses “images as visual stimulus”. Participant A uses “creative resources, students draw or insert images on their iPads”.

4.4.5 Digital Tools

Participant C listed websites and digital tools: “iPads, PicCollage, Menti, Prezi, PowerPoint, Kahoot! and Quizlet”.

4.4.6 Trials and Debates

Participant A uses “mock trials, debates and in the lead up to the most recent referendum we looked at De Valera, the Constitution and its legacy today”.

4.4.7 Peer Learning

For Participant A, with peer learning “they can not only learn from me, but from their peers”.

4.4.8 Assigning Groupwork

Participant B considers students’ “strengths, interests and talents”; for group projects, “have one artist, have someone who’s really good at public speaking and another who can write because they can show off their talents”.

4.4.9 Primary Sources

Participant C uses primary sources like “passenger biographies and seating plans from 9/11”.

4.4.10 Historical Fiction

Participant C uses historical fiction to “capture their imagination” including “the TV series *Chernobyl*, novel *I Was a Boy in Belsen*, and Tomi Reichenthal documentary clips”.

4.4.11 Artefacts

Participant C discussed availability and storage issues of physical artefacts, concluding “it's easier to use digital artefacts”.

4.4.12 Class Discussion and Emotional Maturity

Participant C differentiates between JC and TY resources, “there's a degree of sophistication and maturity needed... sources like photographs of Chernobyl survivors were hard-hitting, showing real-world awareness of the impact of nuclear technology”. Participant C uses “verbal disclaimers” before sharing graphic images as historical sources. Afterwards, class discussions “help them name their emotions and empathy skills”.

4.4.13 Field Trips

Participant B recommends “to get outside the classroom”. Participant C recounted field trips to “Glasnevin or EPIC immigration museum” to study artefacts through immersive historical experiences with “a focus on all that makes it fun”.

4.4.14 Cross-Curricular

All participants discussed cross-curricular pedagogies. Participant A identifies how cross-curricular links vary depending on teaching qualifications, “because I teach Geography, I'd definitely be more inclined to bring that in...but in terms of liaising with the English department, I wouldn't have much experience”. Participant C identifies the “strongest links between History and English, my second subject”. Similarly, Participant B connects history projects with JC English media studies and public speaking. Participant B was the only participant to mention cross-curricular links between History and their non-teaching subjects, “Geography during field trips, obviously Politics and Society, and Art for creative classroom displays”. When asked if they see cross-curricular links with subjects outside Humanities, they responded, “I never think of how students do Construction or Home Ec...once you mentioned it, it's something that we could utilise more especially for

kinaesthetic students". Participant A proposed Continued Professional Development (CPD) with colleagues to identify, create and share cross-curricula resources because "it'd be very beneficial...save a lot of time" and they "needed to create my own newspaper template, maybe English teachers already had that".

4.4.15 Research Projects

All participants discussed individual/group research projects/presentations as both pedagogy and assessment, these are presented in the following theme.

4.5 Assessment Methods

In this school, TY modules are assessed by attaining 10 maximum credits from attendance, participation, assignments, and projects. Teachers award these credits without department or staff meetings. All participants describe formative and summative assessments.

Participant A uses "a lot of practical assessment elements, projects, presentations. It's not all essays, it makes it a little bit more fun". Participant B agrees "they're not going to be tested on it. They show their own personal research but keeping it quite structured with success criteria". Participant A designs summative assessment as "a personal research project on their chosen 'hero or villain' and a class presentation". Participant B praises how this assessment may "be the hardest thing to do, to speak in front of people your own age but it allows them to gain that confidence". Participant C links the TY summative project with the LC History Research Study Report (RSR) but highlights the importance of AFL throughout, "there should be continuous feedback, both on strengths and weaknesses, and they should be able to bridge that gap in their knowledge". Participant C highlights, "participation and engagement, it's not just written work or orally that you participate. It's a combination". For Participant C this combination of formative and summative assessment provides "focus and direction" for TY students and teachers.

4.6 JC and SC Influences

All participants explain how JC and SC impact TY.

4.6.1 Role of TY

Participant C views TY as “bridging the gap between JC and LC by taking those JC skills, like being discerning readers, questioning sources and developing while thinking ahead to LC RSR”.

4.6.2 JC Impact and Resources

Participant A purposefully selects figures that students “would have been familiar with from JC”. Participant C credits JC Classroom Based Assessments (CBA) as “laying the groundwork for groupwork and research”. Participant A describes how “JC style assignments like news reports engage students more than SC essays”; furthermore, SC resources were “challenging” and “students spent a lot of time dwelling on comprehension, whereas junior cycle-esque assignments and resources are to the point”.

4.6.3 SC Content

Participant B introduces SC History whereas Participant A “avoid SC figures and look at JC figures or not on either course”. When asked if this in compliance with NCCA or DES guidance, Participant A was primarily motivated to “avoid boredom” and keep students “interested and engaged with new figures”.

4.6.4 SC Essays and Exams

Participant A avoids essays because TY students “should just live life in the moment and take things as they come”. Participant C also “steps away from” essays because TY has “less time pressures, less demanding so it’s far more open, creative and free-flowing”. If Participant A includes prominent SC figures “I wouldn’t show them any exam questions, I wouldn’t like to worry them”.

4.6.5 SC Retention

Participant A believes “if students engage and enjoy TY, there's no reason why they wouldn't feel the same about LC”. Similarly, Participant C attempts to “capture the interest of the potential LC student through topics” but cautions against teaching “too much” LC content and balancing the “reality of what's coming down the line”.

4.6.6 Reforms

For Participant A, upcoming SC reforms could use “JC as a springboard”. Participant C recalled how President “Higgins spoke out, History was being diminished and sidelined” when History was no longer a core subject under JC reform.

4.7 Teacher Autonomy

All participants discussed benefits and challenges of teacher autonomy in TY.

4.7.1 Benefits

4.7.1.1 Variety

Participant A describes autonomy as “an opportunity for fresh learning, to keep it interesting in your own teaching rather than the same content over and over”. Participant A would not like to see a nationwide prescriptive curriculum because “I would be disappointed if it was a bit more structured because it's a class I look forward to going into because it's different”.

4.7.1.2 Enjoyment

Participant A positively describes that “I do feel like the TY history module has definitely given a lot of autonomy to the teacher. We really are in charge of deciding what is done on a week-by-week basis, which has been really enjoyable to be honest”. Participant B echoes this “I have the freedom to shape whatever course I want it to be...also building up resources for any topics in JC or SC and just enjoying it as well”. Participant A identifies professional development benefits because “personally, I find it interesting preparing for a lesson because I'm learning as well”. Participant C shares this perspective that autonomy “keeps it fresh, original, and interesting for the teacher and the students too”.

4.7.1.3 Workload

Participant C sees TY as beneficial “from a practical work perspective...for English and History teachers the workload isn't evenly distributed considering the extra time required for marking; it's maybe a lack of lived experience. If you don't teach those subjects, you don't know the amount of work and take it for granted that everybody's workload is the same”.

4.7.1.4 Resources

The creation of the teacher's own resources "makes it interesting" for Participant A and maintains their "interest in pursuing CPD for TY".

4.7.1.5 Subject Promotion

Participant B links the freedom of TY curriculum with student interest, teacher enthusiasm and SC retention that "if students can see the teacher enjoys TY History, then maybe that'll make them more inclined to pick History for SC".

4.7.2 Challenges

4.7.2.1 Student Perceptions

Participant C identifies student "perception that TY is doss year" as a challenge for some students; teachers "have to set the standard pretty early on" regarding expectations of oral and written work.

4.7.2.2 Absenteeism

Participant C also mentions irregularity in class sizes due to "TY extracurriculars, like the musical". Participant A believes student absenteeism due to other programme commitments is the biggest challenge to delivering the TY History module and Senior Leadership Team (SLT) could communicate TY timetable changes more effectively, "I would like a bit more notice because I didn't know they were going kayaking until that Monday morning in the weekly news email". Instead, Participant A suggests "an interactive school calendar" which could help them adjust their SOWs for reduced class sizes or missed lessons.

4.7.2.3 Teacher Preparation

Participant B mentions how especially for new teachers TY "can be a little bit of a challenge because it's not structured.... teachers' personality types, that may be inexperienced or lack of confidence, and if you're changing it up every year, it's a huge workload". However, they offer the solution of collegiality and students as resources, "I think lean on your department members for that and allow the students to do the research, to come up with resources".

4.8 Conclusion - Findings

This chapter has presented the findings as empirical data. The subsequent chapter analyses the findings and synthesises the literature reviewed in chapter two.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the results relating to the overall aim of the dissertation, which was to investigate the impact of teacher autonomy and teachers' perceptions of their planning, pedagogy, and assessment of TY History. The findings are analysed and synthesised in the context of the studied research in Chapter Two: Literature Review. The researcher acknowledges how it may not be possible to present all data (Denscombe, 2014) and as such, the researcher has prioritised the findings most relevant to the research questions. Six themes have emerged through thematic analysis (Clarke and Braun, 2013) of the data:

1. Teacher Planning, Motivations and Choices
2. Students' Interests
3. Pedagogical Approaches
4. Assessment Methods
5. JC and SC Influences
6. Teacher Autonomy

Correlations will be drawn between the above six themes and the following research questions as described in Chapter One: Introduction:

- What histories do teachers decide to teach in the absence of imposed curriculum?
- How is this chosen content taught and assessed under the unique TY programme?
- What are teachers' perceptions of these influential choices?

5.2 Teacher Planning, Motivations and Choices - Flexible and Diverse

Participants' SOWs were co-created by their history department colleagues; this planning practice aligns with current TY guidelines (DES, 1993). Each participant described adapting their SOW and positively referred to "flexibility". The SOWs invite students to evaluate historical figures as heroes or villains or assess momentous days in history. The design of these SOWs aligns well with Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of high-order thinking. These SOWs encourage historical enquiry and resonates with Freire's (1973) 'problem-posing education' that centres dialogue, critical inquiry, and praxis. Participants made their own decisions but

some described factors which influenced their choices including consultations with colleagues, seeking readily available digital resources and consideration of students' opinions. Teachers appeared to have diverse motivations in their selection of curriculum content. Participant A includes historical figures students are likely familiar with from JC as well as "new" historical figures. They emphasise increasing students' awareness of bias, especially across national curriculums for example how momentous events in Irish history like the Famine or 1916 Rising are taught in the U.K. in comparison to Ireland. Participant A's curriculum choices are "80% global, 20% national" and omits local history. Instead, they focus on exploring other nations' histories. Similarly, Participant B develops students' skills and historical appreciation. However, in comparison, their preference for history types is reversed, with local being favoured for its relatability, followed by national and then global. Participant B states this fluctuates based on students' interests because they aim to be inclusive, diverse, intercultural, and conscious of EAL students. Participant C aims to cater for diverse learning styles in a SOW focusing on significant historical days; geographical location of events and the split between local, national, and global perspectives were not "of significance" but global history "could be beneficial and more interesting". Postcolonial theorists including Homi K. Bhabha, Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak contend that history is constructed from several perspectives, challenging the concept of a single objective truth (Chakrabarti, 2012). The participants' collective desire to teach beyond the borders of Ireland and Europe exhibits a commitment to multi-perspectivity of History in TY. Participants demonstrated the impact of flexible SOWs and their diverse approaches to selecting curriculum content for TY History from local, national, and international perspectives.

5.3 Student Interests – Balancing Teacher and Student Voices

All participants described how they intentionally include students in decision-making processes for selection of curriculum content. There is an interesting connection here with Freire's (1970) critique of the banking model, these TY History students are not "receptacles" but active contributors (ibid., p.72). Similarly, this connects with Dewey's (1916) advocacy for democracy in education (Mooney Simmie and Edling, 2019). Although there is a democratic approach, the participants also emphasise that students voted from a

narrow range of topics based on the teacher's interests and available resources. Participants observed and catered to students' strong preference for modern 20th century history. As well as students' preference for historical era, two participants examined how gender impacts their decisions. The literature reviewed in chapter two did not include research about the potential impact of gender when choosing curriculum content or catering to student preferences because this finding was not predicated by the researcher before the research was carried out. Two participants shared that in their experiences, generally male students prefer topics about war while female students are interested in social aspects of history. The participants were conscious of this gender divide and it impacts the chosen content. One participant explained that increasing the quantity of women studied in history was important to them because they note a gender imbalance in JC and SC prescribed curricula. Feminist and Postmodern theorists interrogate how and women are traditionally excluded from history (Hutcheon, 1988; Peach, 2007). The impact of gender is an interesting and unexpected finding, worthy of further research. Overall, alignment between teacher and student interests appears to be a significant motive for participants in their expression of teacher autonomy. This finding can be compared to the study by Cahill, Curtin, Hall et al. (2020) on 'second-chance' schooling where students' interests are also central to teachers' design of curriculum and achievement of student learning outcomes. Furthermore, TY History teachers' autonomy to consider and develop student interests aligns with Dewey's view of "progressive education" which rejects rote-learning of predetermined curricula in favour of student-led and inquiry-based learning (Dewey, 1938 in Johnston, 2010, p.106).

5.4 Pedagogy – Varied, Effective and Cross-Curricular

The pedagogical approaches that TY History teachers mentioned in the findings were varied, only some approaches were common to all participants. Research by Clerkin (2018a) explores how TY facilitates the development of 21st-century skills. This dissertation's findings suggest that TY History focuses on development of these vital skills. For example, using historical primary sources or artefacts to develop important historical enquiry and critical thinking skills. The use of Initial Stimulus Material such as images or artefacts as 'hooks' to engage TY students is also widely supported in existent literature (Turner-Bisset, 2001; Murphy, 2005; Smith, 2010). The finding that TY History teachers use historical fiction in the

form of novels, television and film clips supports preceding research that this pedagogy expands history students' empathy and their understanding of the past (Crawford and Zygouris-Coe, 2008). Additionally, this finding supports the historiographical relationship between History and fiction (Boehm, 2011). The finding that TY History teachers see TY as an opportunity to develop students' empathy and emotional maturity through visual sources and considered classroom discussions is supported by Clerkin's research on resilience and socioemotional development in TY (2020). TY History teachers' consideration of students' strengths and learning styles when assigning groupwork aligns well with Gardner's (2011) 'Multiple Intelligence' theory which has been recently updated to include nine intelligences: visual-spatial, linguistic-verbal, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinaesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalistic, and existential (Cherry, 2023). Teachers seem to use their autonomy in TY to target and appeal to these nine intelligences.

Across the spectrum of pedagogical approaches described, teachers frequently used active methods including lesson starters, peer learning, groupwork, class discussion, mock trials, debates, and field trips. The findings of this dissertation suggest that TY History teachers are compliant with the current government guidance because the guidelines (DOE, 1993) recommend implementation of active methodologies. The inclusion of field trips to historical sites and museums aligns with Jeffers' (2011) research that TY provides external learning experiences outside that classroom that are participative and engaging.

All participants discussed cross-curricular approaches in TY History. The reviewed literature proposes that cross-curricular approaches are an established, beneficial, and worldwide pedagogical approach (Voogt and Roblin, 2012; Gleeson, J., Klenowski, V. and Looney, A., 2020). The (DOE, 1993) guidelines suggest that schools devise curriculum based on interdisciplinary practices. Participants described how their teaching planning and practice sometimes used these cross-curricular methods but that it was limited to the Humanities and often based on their own second teaching subjects, Geography or English. This somewhat aligns with DES guidance (DOE, 1993); however, there is a notable absence of the guidelines' suggested interdisciplinary approach to include 'Science Studies' in the study of History.

A more comprehensive and comparative analysis of teaching pedagogies is unfortunately beyond the scope of this dissertation and its findings; however, it merits further investigation in future studies.

5.5 Assessment Methods – Formative and Project-based

The findings suggest that there is a uniform preference for formative assessment and project-based learning in TY History. Written terminal examinations were decisively rejected as summative assessment. This finding may refute Datnow's (2002) theory of co-construction and Jeffers' (2011) proposition that TY values are reduced by the idea of LC and impending written examinations. TY History teachers in this dissertation were not overly concerned with preparing students for LC; resultingly, they are not 'teaching to the test' as other teachers in JC or LC might practice (Smyth et al., 2006). Instead, TY History teachers focus on alternative formative assessments. In the place of written examinations, teachers assessed their students based on a combination of attendance, class participation, class and homework assignments, presentations, and projects. Participants shared the view that these formative assessments increases fun and student engagement with the content and subject as well as developing crucial skills like collaboration, communication, and public speaking. Formative assessment is a contemporary but evidence-based effective practice (Black and Wiliam, 1998; Black et al., 2004; DES, 2012; Hattie, 2012; OECD, 2013; Wiliam, 2018). One participant highlighted the importance of continuous feedback, structure, and success criteria within formative assessments. Reviewed research (Philips, 2008; Smith, 2010) suggests that feedback and self-reflective practices such as adhering to success criteria are valuable components of assessment in the History classroom. This is an area worthy of further examination because this dissertation's findings do not correlate this one participant's assessment practices with others.

5.6 JC and SC Influences – Resources, Retention and Reforms

The findings suggest that both JC and SC are considered by teachers and impacts their teaching of TY History. Teachers utilise JC resources in TY because of their easier

comprehension and literacy demands on students. Creative written assignments were described as “JC-esque” and deemed far more engaging than essays. The CBAs, introduced through the reformed JC (DES, 2015) are viewed very positively by participants for providing students with necessary skills for successful project-based learning, class presentations and groupwork. This correlates with recent research on JC CBAs (MacPhail, Halbert and O’Neill, 2018; Murchan, 2018; Gleeson, 2022). This finding also speaks to Jeffers’ (2019) research on how a reformed JC may positively impact TY.

The DES (DOE, 1993) guidelines explicitly and with capitalisation state that TY is not part of the LC programme and teachers should not use TY as an extension of LC. Findings suggest that TY History teachers largely remain compliant with this guidance but aim to promote LC History to interested, potential students. There is a focus on student enjoyment and as such, teachers tend to generally avoid LC content, pedagogies, and assessment methods. TY History teachers avoid assigning essays and written examinations which are standard assessment practices for LC History. The impact of JC reform and the impending SC reforms affect teachers’ perceptions of TY History and its role in meeting student learning outcomes and teaching historical skills.

5.7 Teacher Autonomy – Positive Impacts and Potential Challenges

All participants explored benefits and challenges of teacher autonomy in TY History. Teachers expressed how autonomy positively impacts their enjoyment of their subject and teaching practice. This finding is consistent with Biesta’s (2015) proposal that best teaching practice is teleological with opportunities for teachers to implement their professional judgements. The variety of content outside the prescribed curricula inspires teachers to plan lessons, develop resources, complete CPD and promote History for study in LC. Additionally, the freedom to assign and mark less essays and exams was viewed as a positive reduction of History teachers’ workloads for students in other academic years.

In contrast, the findings suggest challenges arise from the autonomous nature of TY. Teachers may need to offset student perceptions that TY is a derogatively named “doss year” by setting and maintaining clear expectations for students’ required contributions and assessment. The challenge of student and parent perceptions is explored in both Jeffers’

research (2007; 2019) and Clerkin (2019). Some teachers may find the lack of structure in TY challenging. Curriculum design and finding resources may be difficult depending on teacher personality type and experience. Teachers' agency and reaction to autonomy may be influenced by their personal qualities (Biesta, Priestly, and Robinson, 2015). Findings suggest that collegiality, CPD and resource-sharing may be a solution to overcoming this challenge. All participants expressed that frequent absenteeism in TY due to extracurricular commitments negatively impacted their teaching according to original plans. One participant suggested improved communication about adjusted TY timetables to potentially rectify this issue. Jeffers (2010) explores how successful delivery of TY requires strong leadership and there is a complex interrelationship of factors between SLT and teaching staff. The findings indicate that TY teachers are ultimately required to adapt SOWs on short-notice and autonomy was not discussed as either a benefit or challenge regarding absenteeism, so this finding may be more closely related to SLT and whole school planning for TY.

5.8 Conclusion - Discussion

This chapter analysed the data collected to critically discuss emergent themes related to the research question of the effect of teacher autonomy in TY History and teachers' perceptions of their planning, pedagogy, and assessment. The following Chapter 6: Conclusion offers conclusions, summarises the key findings, identifies limitations, and proposes recommendations.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Introduction – Conclusion

This chapter draws conclusions, recapitulates the key findings, recognises limitations and make recommendations based on the evidence presented in this dissertation. The aim of this study was to examine impacts of teacher autonomy and teachers' perceptions of planning, pedagogy, and assessment during the teaching of TY History. This was investigated through qualitative research methods using History teachers as participants in three semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis. Areas of interest that emerged in the findings include the following six themes:

1. Teacher Planning, Motivations and Choices
2. Students' Interests
3. Pedagogical Approaches
4. Assessment Methods
5. JC and SC Influences
6. Teacher Autonomy

The significant findings included in this dissertation are outlined below. Limitations are then detailed and these informed the recommendations of the researcher.

6.2 Summary of Significant Findings

Teachers are inspired and motivated by the flexible nature of TY History. Their SOWs demonstrate alignment with Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of higher-order thinking and Freire's (1973) problem-posing education. Teachers exhibited diverse approaches for selection of curriculum content with individual, contrasting reasons for selecting local, national and international histories.

All participants provide opportunities for student voice and quasi-democratic practices where students vote on a range of topics which have been narrowed by the teacher. The findings suggest that teachers positively perceive this balance between teacher and student voices because it boosts student engagement with TY History. The autonomy within TY supports teachers to make this democratic and participative opportunity.

The findings suggest that TY History students have a strong preference for modern 20th century history and TY may provide opportunities to nurture this enthusiasm. Additionally, the potential impact of gender on students' interests and teachers' decisions requires further investigation.

Similarly, pedagogical approaches are very varied and merits deeper analysis. Cross-curricular practices are prevalent but limited to the Humanities. The findings indicate that additional supports such as CPD and collegiality could be beneficial.

TY History teachers prefer formative assessment and project-based learning. Essays and written terminal examinations as summative assessments are avoided.

JC and SC may significantly impact teachers' decisions in TY History regarding resources, selection of content, pedagogies, and assessment methods. Some participants viewed TY as a chance to encourage SC retention and subject promotion.

Teacher autonomy benefits outweighed the challenges. TY provides an opportunity to curate curriculum and resources. Teachers appear motivated to pursue CPD, expand cross-curricular links and engage in collegiality. TY History teachers were positive about the variety and enjoyment they experience under the current free structure of TY. Challenges such as student perceptions, absenteeism and teacher preparation were discussed with caveats and participants offered solutions to these potential issues.

Across the six themes, TY History teachers evaluated their ability to practice decisional capital (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012) and the findings conclude that teacher autonomy in TY History is beneficial for professional development and best practices.

6.3 Limitations

6.3.1 Sampling

One limitation was the relatively small sample size examined. Results could vary from different demographics for instance single-sex schools in rural locations under another ethos and patronage. Future studies with larger sample sizes could expand or triangulate this dissertation's results. Convenience sampling was used due to the researcher's full-time

studies, small sample population and time limitations for data collection. However, the researcher posits that this dissertation was rigorous, ethical and produced significant findings. Denscombe (2014) reminds researchers that 'it is the rigour, rather than the size of the project, by which the research should be judged' (p.134).

6.3.2 Question Design

The researcher recognises that upon review of interview transcripts, questions could have been created and asked about specific pedagogical approaches. This could provide further comparisons between participants' views and pedagogies. Cross-curricular links were extensively discussed by participants and this was possibly due to the researcher's specific question about interdisciplinary practices.

6.3.3 Absence of Student Voice

Another limitation to this dissertation is the lack of student voice or representation due to the ethical guidelines as set out by Hibernia College, data could not be collected from students or persons under the age of eighteen.

6.3.4 Researcher Bias

Although the researcher intended to remain objective, it must be acknowledged that unintended bias could occur. Attempts were made to reduce bias through careful design of interview questions, ethical and rigorous research design, maintaining a reflective journal and reflexive conversations with a nominated critical friend and the research supervisor.

6.4 Recommendations

6.4.1 Future Studies

1. The researcher did not anticipate teachers' perceptions on the impact of gender for student interests and teachers' curriculum design. This is an interesting area worthy of exploration in future studies.
2. Similarly, further research about pedagogical approaches would be worthwhile.

3. The Introduction chapter of this dissertation questioned whether TY History teachers are currently meeting NCCA (2022a) expectations to provide “stimulating, relevant and inspiring curricula” (p.11). To answer this question, a study on students’ perceptions and experiences may be necessary.

6.4.2 Teaching Practice

Based on the findings, TY History teachers employ effective pedagogies and assessment methods for promoting student voices and boosting engagement with the subject. The participants’ positive experiences and attitudes towards TY, planning, resource creation, CPD, cross-curricular practices and collegiality could inspire teachers of other academic years in post-primary education to implement or improve upon the effective practices they describe.

6.5 Concluding Remarks

The forthcoming TY guidelines that will replace the DES (DOE, 1993) version could impact how teachers deliver TY History in the future. This topic is rapidly evolving and worthy of both further and continued investigation. Earlier this year, the Council of Europe produced reports (COE, 2024a; COE, 2024b) that suggest Irish History teachers within an international context are adversely affected by both a crowded curriculum and teaching pressures. These issues may present obstacles to the quality of History education in Ireland (O’Brien, 2024). From analysis of this dissertation’s findings, TY History may offer a unique opportunity to History teachers and students to escape these obstacles through teacher autonomy to choose curriculum, include students’ interests, develop their 21st-century skills, practice effective pedagogies and reduce pressure from summative written examination.

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Appendix A – Leaving Certificate Pathways Table

p.22 of Ireland. Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2024) *Education indicators for Ireland: March 2024*. [Online] Available at:

<https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/289186/f6c5f4cd-913e-40c2-9cc0-c48c6d566e14.pdf#page=null> (Accessed: 28 April 2024).

Leaving Certificate pathways

The total number of students taking the Leaving Certificate programme (across both 5th and 6th year) has levelled off at around 85,000 after seeing a sharp increase between 2018 and 2021, while the number of students taking the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme greatly increased between 2021 and 2022. The percentage of students doing Transition Year has risen from 72.3 per cent of students in 2018 to 79.2 per cent in 2022.

Ind.No	Indicator	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
B.33	Number of students taking Leaving Certificate established programme	83,909	86,347	88,872	91,408	85,584
B.34	% of students taking Leaving Certificate established programme	69.2%	70.0%	70.8%	71.1%	66.5%
B.35	Number of students taking Leaving Certificate Vocational	31,426	30,820	30,048	29,598	34,650
B.36	% students taking Leaving Certificate Vocational	25.9%	25.0%	23.9%	23.0%	26.9%
B.37	Number of students taking Leaving Certificate Applied	5,939	6,244	6,609	7,456	8,231
B.38	% students taking Leaving Certificate Applied	4.9%	5.1%	5.3%	5.8%	6.4%
B.39	Number of students doing Transition Year	45,916	48,268	47,544	48,025	54,927
B.40	Students doing Transition Year as % of previous 3 rd Year	72.3%	74.0%	72.9%	73.8%	79.2%
B.41	Number of students taking Repeat Leaving Certificate	811	655	235	87	140

Reason for inclusion: Providing alternatives to the established Leaving Certificate allows our education system to cater for the diverse needs and aspirations of our learners. Access to learning in applied and vocational skills are key factors in improving retention and strengthening pathways for learners through the education system and into the world of work.

Source: The Department's P-POD.

NOTE: Data is reported on an academic year basis, that is, 2022 means September 2022.

Enrolments for Leaving Certificate programmes are the sum of both 5th and 6th year students, while percentages are calculated as the per cent of both 5th and 6th year enrolments (excluding Repeat Leaving Certificate students). Transition year, as a per cent of previous 3rd year, may include new arrivals into the system, and so, be slightly higher than the direct transfer rate in other reports, such as projections.

Appendix B – Interview Schedule

Interview with Participant A – Wednesday 06/03/2024.

Interview with Participant B – Wednesday 13/03/2024.

Interview with Participant C – Friday 15/03/2024.

Appendix C – Sample Interview Questions



Sample Semi-structured Interview Questions

1. Can you share your perspective on the role of Transition Year in shaping students' historical understanding, and how it allows for flexibility in curriculum choices?
2. How do you approach the selection of historical topics or themes for Transition Year, considering the absence of a prescribed curriculum?
3. In your experience, what pedagogical approaches have you found effective in engaging Transition Year students in the study of history?
4. Can you describe a specific lesson or activity that you believe was particularly successful in fostering a deep understanding of historical concepts during Transition Year?
5. How do you balance the exploration of local, national, and global historical content within the flexible framework of Transition Year?
6. What challenges, if any, have you encountered in designing and implementing a history curriculum for Transition Year, and how have you overcome them?
7. In your opinion, how does the freedom to choose historical content impact students' interest and enthusiasm for the subject during Transition Year?
8. Could you share any innovative teaching methods or resources you have employed to make history more engaging and relevant for Transition Year students?
9. How do you assess students' learning and understanding of history in Transition Year, especially when the curriculum is not standardised?
10. From your perspective, what are the potential long-term benefits of allowing teachers the autonomy to design history curricula for Transition Year, both for students and the educational system as a whole?

Appendix D – Recruitment Email

Dear colleague,

As part of my Professional Masters in (Post-Primary) Education with Hibernia College, I am investigating how History is taught during Transition Year. The title of the research project is *Beyond the textbooks: Teacher perspectives, pedagogy, and curriculum choices when teaching History during Transition Year*. Classroom teachers are key stakeholders in this research.

I am inviting history teachers to partake in semi-structured interviews.

Please find attached for your perusal, a copy of the information and consent forms. Only those respondents who return a signed copy of the consent form will be selected to take part in the study.

Information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence and pseudonyms will be used to ensure anonymity. The school's name will not appear on any research findings. Interviews will be recorded, and the data will be securely held under Hibernia College Research Ethics guidelines.

I would appreciate your participation in the study.

Participation in the study is voluntary and you can withdraw from the research at any time. The results from this research study will be reported in my research project and may be disseminated through professional publication.

If you are interested in participating, please respond to this email.

If you have any queries or require further information on the research study, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours Sincerely,

Researcher: [REDACTED]

Appendix E – Research Information Sheet



Research Information Sheet

Researcher: Meghan Smyth

Organisation: Hibernia College Dublin, Block B, The Merrion Centre, Merrion Rd, Dublin, D04 H2H4, (01) 661 0168.

Title of Study: Beyond the textbooks: Teacher perspectives, pedagogy, and curriculum choices when teaching History during Transition Year.

What is the purpose of this research?

The purpose of the research is to complete small-scale study which forms part of the final year of the Professional Master of Education (Post-Primary) with Hibernia College Dublin.


Objectives of the project:

- This research project aims to explore TY (Transition Year) History modules, including their design, pedagogical approaches, and the teacher's choice of content.
- It investigates history teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of TY modules in facilitating student learning outcomes.
- The project seeks to understand how teachers think different pedagogical approaches and content choices impact student engagement, critical thinking, and historical understanding.
- The project could examine how the Junior Cycle curriculum impacts/interacts with the Senior Cycle curriculum.
- Additionally, it examines the challenges faced by teachers in designing modules that promote effective learning experiences and retention of students who elect to continue studying history for Leaving Certificate.
- The findings could inform recommendations for enhancing TY history module design and optimising student learning outcomes in the context of historical education.

What would I need you to do?

Your participation in this research project is greatly appreciated. This research project has received ethical approval from Hibernia College Dublin. If you agree to participate, you will participate in a semi-structured interview with the researcher. Any information you provide about your own identity or that of the school will be anonymous and confidential. Quotes from the interview may be used and may also be published in the research however your name and the name of the school will not be published. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed, and a copy of the transcript will be made available to you on request. This research will be used in a publication of a thesis for Hibernia College Dublin. It may also be used in conference proceedings or used in academic articles. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

Appendix F – Consent Form (redacted confidential information)


**HIBERNIA
COLLEGE**

Consent Form

Researcher: [REDACTED]

Organisation: Hibernia College Dublin, Block B, The Merrion Centre, Merrion Rd, Dublin, D04 H2H4, (01) 661 0168.

Title of Study: Beyond the textbooks: Teacher perspectives, pedagogy, and curriculum choices when teaching History during Transition Year.

Consent (to be completed by the participant – Please circle your answer Yes / No)

Have you been fully informed/read the information sheet about this study? Yes / No

Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study? Yes / No

Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions? Yes / No

Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from this study at any time without giving a reason for withdrawing and without your withdrawal having an adverse effect for you? Yes / No

Do you agree to take part in this study, the results of which are likely to be published or presented at a conference? Yes / No

Have you been informed that a copy of this consent form will be kept by the researcher? Yes / No

Are you satisfied that any information you give to the researcher will be kept confidential? Your name and the name of the school will not appear in the research report? Yes / No

Participant's name:
 (printed)

[REDACTED]

Date: [REDACTED]

(signature)

[REDACTED]

Researcher Digital Signature:

[REDACTED]

Appendix G – Principal Consent Form (redacted confidential information)



HIBERNIA
COLLEGE

Principal Consent Form

I have read and understood the Letter of Information provided to me by [REDACTED], I agree that in order to conduct research about Transition Year History in my school, she may request an interview with teachers and upon receipt of their consent may conduct interviews on school premises at times convenient for the teachers and the school. I understand that participation is voluntary and that there are no physical or psychological risks associated with the study. I know that all answers provided during the interview will be used for the purposes of the study only and that all responses will identify no individual or the school itself.

Principal's name: [REDACTED]

(printed)

[REDACTED] _____ Date: _____

(signature)

[REDACTED] _____

Researcher Digital Signature:

[REDACTED]

Appendix H – Principal Letter (redacted confidential information)



HIBERNIA
COLLEGE

Principal Letter

Principal's name & school address:

[REDACTED]

Date: **[REDACTED]**

Dear Principal,

As part of my Professional Masters in (Post-Primary) Education with Hibernia College, I am investigating how History is taught during Transition Year. The title of the research project is *Beyond the textbooks: Teacher perspectives, pedagogy, and curriculum choices when teaching History during Transition Year*. Classroom teachers are key stakeholders in this research. This letter aims to provide you with an introduction to the research project and to seek consent from you for the project to move forward in order to inform my future professional practice as a teacher.

With your permission, I would like to interview classroom teachers. The staff will be asked to partake in semi-structured interviews to gain an insight into the aims of the project. Please find enclosed for your perusal, a copy of the information and consent forms. Only those respondents who return a signed copy of the consent form will be purposely selected to take part in the study. Any data gathering will strictly be underpinned by the school's ethical code of conduct. No students will be interviewed. Information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence and pseudonyms will be used to ensure anonymity. The school's name will not appear on any research findings. Interviews will be recorded, and the data will be securely held under Hibernia College Research Ethics guidelines.

Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research at any time. The results from this research study will be reported in my research project and may be disseminated through professional publication. I would appreciate your cooperation in providing access to the staff at the school over the coming weeks. If you have any queries or require further information on the research study, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Researcher: **[REDACTED]**

Mobile: [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

This research study has received Ethics approval from Hibernia College Dublin. If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent you may contact: School of Education, Hibernia College Dublin. Tel (01) 6610168

Principal's name: [REDACTED]

(printed)

[REDACTED] _____ Date: [REDACTED]

(signature)

[REDACTED] _____

Researcher Digital Signature:

11 / 10 /
[REDACTED]

Appendix I - Sample of Coded Transcripts

Colour coding and related themes:

Planning

Student interest

Pedagogy

Influence of JC and SC

Benefits of Autonomy

Researcher: How do you choose content for TY History lessons?

Participant A: Like I would try to keep the students on their toes. For example, one week will be from centuries ago, whereas **the following week** I could do somebody in, say, modern history. So, we've done Cleopatra and then we went to LBJ. So, it was **nice to keep them fresh, keep them on their toes and keep them interested**. Maybe like **one student might really love** Cleopatra and Ancient Egypt and uh Roman civilization, whereas the **others might be very interested** in like the space race and American politics.

Researcher: Are you catering for individual preference?

Participant A: I've never listened like I've never sat down with the students and **asked them individually, like what was their preference in history?** I've just **been trying to cater** maybe to like **the group** as a whole cause I know for example like the **boys tend to like** World War One, World War Two. They like the physical kind of combat, whereas from a female perspective, I think **the girls really enjoy** learning about the social side of history. So, like the civil rights movement, uh, any referendum that comes up in Ireland. We've done a lot on the 1960s like the anti-war movement and they **seem very engaged** in that.

Researcher: Thank you. What pedagogical approaches did you find engaging for TY students and studying history?

Participant A: I do you think that like the **approaches that I choose would be very Junior Cycle**. Yeah, in **comparison to the Leaving Cert** where you **have to** write essays on end. I found the **students are most engaged** if you give them, say, an **assignment** in relation to a specific figure and they **have to** write like a **news report** on the figure after their death **and look at their legacy** and if they can **examine it from a positive or negative perspective**. Whereas I don't think they're that much that engaged in like the big, long essays. Like I've given them **resource packs** on Eamonn de Valera on some of the key events he was involved in, such as the Civil War, the 1916 rising that I would have gotten **from Leaving Certificate sources**, and I **found they weren't as engaged**.

Appendix J - Sample of Coded Transcripts in Microsoft Excel

	A	B	C	D
1	Participant	Quote	Initial Code	Global Theme
2	A	For example, one week will be from centuries ago, whereas the following week I could do somebody in, say, modern history	Chronology	Planning
3	B	It can be a little bit of a challenge because it's not structured.... teachers' personality types, that may be inexperienced or lack of confidence, and if you're changing it up every year, it's a huge workload	Structure, issues and workload	Challenges
4	A	I've never sat down with the students and asked them individually, like what was their preference in history?	Class discussion and choosing topics	Student Interest
5	C	There should be continuous feedback, both on strengths and weaknesses, and they should be able to bridge that gap in their knowledge	AFL	Assessment
6	C	Success criteria is shared with them usually on the board or on Teams, they know what standard they're aiming for	Resources and ICT	Pedagogy
7	A	A lot of practical assessment elements in it, freedom for projects, presentations. And it's not all essays, learn this, learn that.	Projects, presentations and essays	Assessment