

History for All? Teaching Diverse Histories in British schools

Policy background

Incorporating diversity into school based curricula is not a new development. Educationalists, academics and teachers have argued for the inclusion of diversity into an array of subject areas for many years. Whether posited as a means of fostering positive self-esteem and increased engagement for minority ethnic and migrant pupils, or as enriching existing, often mono-cultural lessons for all pupils, school based material developed to focus on the multicultural diversity within society has been taught in schools since the 1980s. Legislative advances - within the Race Relations Amendment Act (2001) requiring the active promotion of race equality in schools, and the current Equality Act (2010) – have provided legal support to arguments for the teaching of a culturally inclusive curriculum for all pupils. These historical processes have themselves been accompanied by much political and popular dissent¹, but many teachers in schools have nevertheless drawn on a wealth of educational resources to support the teaching of diversity, and specific organisations such as the Black and Asian Studies Network and the Schools History Project provide much professional support to teaching staff with this work.

Proposals launched in 2011 by the then Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove to reform the entire National curriculum, brought many of these ongoing debates directly into the centre of public scrutiny following a series of controversial plans for changes to methods of assessment and content. The proposals for the school history curriculum in particular generated huge public discussion, largely in view of the involvement of influential historians and academics on the group tasked with undertaking the review. The broadest concerns about the proposed changes to the curriculum centred on the prescriptive nature of its scope – a requirement for chronological content, showing the development of the ‘island story’ to be followed sequentially by pupils aged from 5 years until 14. We detailed many of these issues in a Perspectives paper published in 2012² but raised our particular disquiet about what a reviewed curriculum, with increased emphasis on the British story, could potentially omit: ‘.. [h]ow does ‘Our Island Story’ engage with centuries of migration

¹ Tony Sewell for example has noted that the teaching of Black history to pupils does little to engage or support them but can instead reinforce ‘victim status’. Sewell, T (2010) “Masterclass in victimhood” *Prospect Magazine*, October <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/features/black-boys-victimhood-school>

² Alexander, C., Chatterji, J., and Weekes-Bernard, D. (2012) *Making British History*

to and from its shores, and how does the focus on a seemingly simple 'linear narrative' ... account for different histories which intertwine with, and challenge, this dominant teleological account of national destiny?"³

The content of the draft national curriculum was subject to two periods of public consultation during 2013 – between February and April and again during July and August. Prior to both of these periods of consultation, an online petition, gathering over 36,000 signatures was launched by Operation Black Vote in response to a 'leaked' briefing suggesting the names of key individuals that should not be included within the draft curriculum. Mary Seacole, a famous nurse who tended injured soldiers during the Crimean War and Olaudah Equiano, an abolitionist were the names of two that were not part of the list generating much uproar among activists, historians and at least 72 MPs who signed the subsequently posted online petition. The discontent of those signing this petition was combined with that of notable historians and demonstrated widespread concern about the mono-cultural definition at the basis of the reviewed curriculum.⁴

Points for discussion

The new history curriculum along with all other subjects to be taught to children in maintained schools from Key Stage 1 – Key Stage 3, has been in force now since September 2014. The history curriculum for key stage 4 or those studying GCSE come into effect from September 2016. Given that teachers have largely begun to adapt their teaching to the new guidance, there is an assumption that there is little more that can now be said about the curriculum. A number of issues however are worth noting at this juncture. Firstly that concerns remain with elements of the curriculum with regards to content and scope. Secondly, and a major element of our *History Lessons* project, is that it is necessary to focus now on *how* this material is taught:

Curriculum Content

- The content of the new curriculum provides a number of points at which teachers can focus on diversity, with the greatest opportunity available in the programmes of study for Key Stage 3. In the programmes of study for primary schools, the ancient civilisations and early non- European society studies provide good opportunities.

³ Alexander et al *ibid*, p3

⁴ A number of esteemed historians signed a letter to the Observer noting their discontent with both the content of the first draft of the curriculum as well as the lack of proper considered consultation *before* it was produced. D'Avray, D., Eales, J., Fulbrook, M., McLay, K., Mandler, P., & Scott, H (2013) "Plan for History curriculum is too focused on Britain" Observer letters page, February <http://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2013/feb/16/history-curriculum-letters?guni=Article:in%20body%20link>

- With regards to the purpose and aims of the new curriculum however, there is less emphasis on diversity. Whilst the previous curriculum included as an aim a focus on diversity, specifically social, cultural and religious identity, the new curriculum does not mention this, focusing instead on pupils gaining ‘historical perspective by placing their growing knowledge into different contexts, understanding the connections between local, regional, national[,] international ...cultural, economic, military, political, religious and social history”⁵
- Opinion on chronological learning as suggested within the curriculum is divided. It can provide children with timeframes of understanding for easy reference as well as ongoing context for what they learn, but in view of the fairly prescriptive curriculum to be followed, some concerns remain about how much breadth and depth of learning can occur.
- Furthermore, this sequential emphasis provides challenges for those learning at primary school. The Key Stage 3 curriculum allows much modern history to be taught but children at the beginning of their educational careers (in key stage 2) see very little modern historical focus, unless teachers choose a local history study or the one other element of the curriculum enabling a study of British history beyond 1066.
- The local history aspect of the curriculum is certainly to be supported given that it enables children to become aware of the existence of the real lived history available to research immediately around them. It is particularly welcome as it allows teachers to talk to pupils about the way that different waves of migration can affect the historical changes and hence identity of a local area. While this provides an excellent opportunity to explore historical migration and local change, if individual teachers may believe the ‘local’ to be largely mono-cultural, there may be little willingness to incorporate diversity into this aspect of their teaching.

How should history be taught?

- The focus of debate during the curriculum review was quite obviously based on content. There is however an issue which relates to the extent to which teachers feel not only able to teach the new curriculum, but also to focus on diversity within it.
- It is clear that increasingly newly qualified teachers are feeling more prepared to teach in diverse classrooms as a result of the training they receive at Initial

⁵ Department of Education (2014) *History programmes of Study - Key Stages 1 and 2: National Curriculum in England*
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/239035/PRIMARY_national_curriculum_-_History.pdf

Teacher Training (ITT) institutions⁶ but together with how well training prepares them for teaching children who have English as an additional language (so either migrant children or children of recent migrants), these issues remain one of the least positively rated aspects of teacher training. This is particularly the case when it is considered that the quality of training NQTs receive is seen as being at least good by 89% of primary NQTs and 92% of secondary NQTs, a much higher proportion in comparison.

- It is not clear however if preparedness to teach pupils from all ethnic groups is the same as being able to teach about cultural diversity, or in this specific case, about diverse histories. For example, while some primary school teachers may feel excited by the prospect of teaching their pupils about ancient Egypt they may feel less able or prepared to teach about the early non-European societies also included in the primary curriculum. It is clearly important for children to learn about these subjects, however we have to ask how prepared are teachers to teach them and even more importantly, will they be able to teach this material well?
- Given the overall focus of the curriculum however it is even more essential that we are confident that teachers feel able and prepared to teach about diverse British histories. The stories of historical migration to local areas across the UK are as much about the story of British history as they are about individual histories.
- The responsibility for ensuring trainee teachers have the content knowledge to teach a new history curriculum (which some may perceive to still be a little prescriptive) that includes space for diversity remains with ITT providers and there may be scope here for influence. The support that can be given to those already working in schools is less clear. In-service training is patchy and the speed with which the new curriculum has been introduced may create difficulties for those adapting to it
- Ultimately the national curriculum is now only applicable to schools that are maintained by the local authority. Free schools, academies and independent schools can largely ignore it if they choose. Given that non local authority controlled schools are clearly on the increase in view of current government policy, how do we ensure diversity is included in what these schools teach? With such institutional diversity, it is likely to be harder, rather than easier, to promote cultural diversity and diverse histories to students.

⁶ In 2014 66% of primary trained NQTs were pleased with the training they received as regards being prepared to teach pupils from all ethnic backgrounds (up from 65% in 2013) and 57% highly rated their training to teach pupils with EAL. For secondary trained NQTs 73% highly rated their training to teach all ethnic groups, up from 66% in 2013, and 66% were pleased with the training they received to teach children with EAL.