

Diversifying the history curriculum in England: a slow (r)evolution

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- AQ1: Please provide the appropriate closing quote for the opening quote given here.
- AQ2: Please check the edit made in the sentence ‘Yet their impact was...’
- AQ3: Please provide the expansion for ‘GCSE, STEM, BAME, UCL, and RHS’ in the first occurrence.
- AQ4: The reference ‘Ajegbo Report (2007)’ is cited in the text, but the details are not provided in the reference list. Please check.
- AQ5: The reference ‘Smith (2017)’ is not cited in the text. Please check.

CHAPTER 8

Diversifying the History Curriculum in England: A Slow (R)evolution

Katharine Burn^a, Richard Harris^b and Joseph Smith^c

^aUniversity of Oxford, UK

^bUniversity of Reading, UK

^cUniversity of Stirling, UK

ABSTRACT

This chapter provides a context for other case-study chapters in this volume that explore in more depth steps taken to provide a decolonised perspective in the history curriculum. The chapter first provides a brief overview of developments in recent years towards diversifying the history curriculum. It then focuses specifically on two surveys conducted by the Historical Association in 2019 and 2021, examining how history teachers have responded to more recent calls both to diversify and (from some) to decolonise the curriculum. As the surveys only provide self-reported data about any changes made (rather than allowing direct observation of teachers' practice), it is not possible to determine whether a genuinely decolonised approach is being adopted. There are, nonetheless, clear indications that small but significant steps are being taken in many school contexts to diversify curriculum content, seeking to address both an overwhelming Anglo-centric bias and a narrow conception of what constitutes 'British history'.

Keywords: diversifying; decolonising; history curriculum; secondary curriculum, curricular choices

Research Context

Fifteen years ago, the introduction of a new national curriculum for history (QCA, 2007) appeared to offer considerable encouragement to teachers' initiatives to diversify the content that they were teaching at Key Stage 3 (KS3). The Ajegbo Report into citizenship education, commissioned by the government in response to the 'homegrown' terrorist bombings of July 2005, had called for the addition of a new strand to the citizenship curriculum, 'Identity and diversity: living together in the UK' (Ajegbo et al., 2007, p. 12), recommending that it should be linked to more inclusive teaching of British history. The history curriculum that followed included a thematic unit on 'the impact of the movement and settlement to, from and within the British Isles' as well as an explicit injunction to teach about 'the British Empire and its impact in Britain and overseas, the slave trade, resistance and decolonisation' (QCA, 2007, p. 115).

These reforms proved short-lived, with the Coalition Government that came to power in 2010 immediately declaring its intention to restore a more traditional approach. The first draft of a new national curriculum, shared for consultation in February 2013 (Department for Education, 2013a), was widely condemned in terms which suggested that teachers were deeply committed to a less Anglo-centric, more diverse approach (Harris & Burn, 2016) and so strong was this opposition that the final version reframed virtually all the detailed content as optional elements (Department for Education, 2013b). Nonetheless, the government's emphasis on 'knowledge-rich' curricula meant that schools appeared to eschew opportunities to look at topics such as the transatlantic trade in enslaved people from a new perspective (including pre-colonial African history, of legacies of the trade, or decolonisation), persisting instead with more familiar approaches based on the 'triangular trade'. Those schools that wished to do so were able to retain a KS3 thematic unit on migration, but few appeared to **persist** with the kind of content choices that their complaints about the draft national curriculum had implied (Harris & Reynolds, 2018).

Literature

Over the next few years, individuals and campaigning groups made regular calls for the teaching of more diverse history, with new demands from some for a decolonised approach (see Alexander & Weekes-Bernard, 2017; Haydn, 2014; Mohamud & Whitburn, 2016). While the terms are sometimes used as though they are interchangeable, there is an important difference between them. For Moncrieffe and Harris (2020, p. 15) ‘Diversifying is simply adding different content. Decolonising goes deeper than that: it requires an awareness of “white privilege” and an appreciation that mindsets have created institutional structures that favour the white majority’. Decolonising the curriculum is a reflexive process that involves explicit acknowledgement of the colonial power relationships that have served to privilege certain forms of knowledge and seeks to ‘challenge those power relations in real and significant ways’ AQ1 (Decolonise Keele Network, 2018).

Important curriculum initiatives such as *Our Migration Story* (Runnymede Trust, 2016) sought to provide teachers with appropriate curriculum resources to begin to make changes. Yet their impact was essentially limited, as reflected in the findings AQ2 of the Royal Historical Society’s report on *Race, Ethnicity, and Diversity* (Atkinson et al., 2018), which drew attention both to the continued narrowness of the school curriculum and to the under-representation of Black and Minority Ethnic students studying history.

It was in this context, following the concerns raised by the RHS, that the Historical Association used its 2019 survey of history teachers in England (Burn & Harris, 2019) to ask about their perceptions of the subject’s take-up. Around one-fifth of the 278 schools that responded acknowledged that students from certain ethnic backgrounds, particularly Chinese, Asian, Black, and Roma students, were either ‘somewhat’ or ‘significantly’ under-represented at GCSE. At A-level, the proportion AQ3 of teachers reporting such under-representation was closer to a third. However, very few teachers took the opportunity to offer any explanation for this pattern. Those that were prepared to do so merely reported that Chinese and Asian students were

more likely to take **STEM subjects**, skirting round any issues of curriculum content.

Where respondents claimed some success in persuading students from minoritised backgrounds to continue with history beyond KS3, they were encouraged to suggest reasons for their success. Just 15 chose to do so – focusing, in part, on the quality of teaching and, in part, on efforts to make history relevant to students' lives through content choices that reflected a more inclusive curriculum.

The 2019 survey also asked about any curriculum changes made during the past two years, specifically in response to the RHS report or, more generally, to improve the representation of a diverse past. Around a third of schools claimed to have made such a change. While the most common adaptation was to ensure that KS3 students learned more about the history of Africa than the devastating impact of Britain's forced transportation of millions of enslaved people, there was considerable variety among the responses. These included emphases on the study of India, China, and the Middle East, as well as a deliberate focus on Black British history.

These survey results suggest that even before George Floyd's murder in May 2020 and the resultant surge in support for the Black Lives Matter anti-racism movement, some significant – but relatively small steps – were being taken by teachers in England to create a more diverse and inclusive curriculum. Nonetheless, the galvanising effect of the Black Lives Matter anti-racism protests was profound, especially when combined with the effects of school closures in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The sudden increase in online lectures and seminars, giving teachers direct access to historians' expertise, enabled teachers not merely to call for more Black history and greater cultural diversity in the curriculum – as they did in the series of petitions which forced a parliamentary debate on the subject in June 2021 (Petitions Committee, 2021) – but also to create and share new schemes of work.

Objectives and Methods

With only an anecdotal awareness of the extent of these changes, the Historical Association decided to use its 2021 survey to identify the kinds of previously marginalised histories now

being taught and to determine what proportion of schools had recently taken action to make their curriculum more inclusive (Burn & Harris, 2021). We worked with Claire Alexander and Sundeep Linder (regular academic partners of the Runnymede Trust) to devise questions related to five of the most likely topic areas, asking both about their inclusion within the KS3 curriculum and the amount of time allocated to them. We also sought to elicit teachers' motivation for making changes, along with reflections on barriers encountered or valued forms of support.

Invitations to participate were sent directly to secondary teacher members of the association, and the survey was widely advertised via social media. Responses were received from 316 history teachers in England, working in 286 different contexts (including 214 state-funded, non-selective schools). In terms of the ethnic mix of their students, 11% of the schools were categorised as having a majority 'Black or other minority ethnic population' and 73% as having a majority white population, with the remaining 16% more evenly split.

Analysis and Findings

Teaching of Specific Topics

Reports of the extent to which schools were teaching five designated topics were analysed in relation to various factors including school type and the ethnic background of both the student population and the teacher. While space constraints preclude the full presentation of this analysis, the extent to which each topic was being taught is shown in Table 8.1.

Teaching about the *transatlantic trade in enslaved people* had clearly achieved a secure place within the KS3 curriculum, with at least 90% of all state-maintained schools teaching not just about the development of the 'triangular trade' and 'the experiences of enslaved peoples' but also about 'forms of resistance or rebellion by enslaved peoples' as well as other forms of opposition. Nonetheless, only 13% of respondents reported including any consideration of the 'legacies' of that trade.

Teaching about the *history of the British Empire* also appeared similarly secure, with 82% of schools teaching at least one specific unit devoted to it. There were only seven schools

Table 8.1. The Extent to Which Schools Reported Teaching Particular Topics.

Specific Topic	Percentage of Schools Teaching This Topic Within KS3 (n = 286)			
	In Some Way	As a Dedicated Topic	Just One or Two Lessons	Not at All
Transatlantic Slave Trade	98%	86%	12%	2%
British Empire	97%	82%	15%	3%
Black & Asian British History	81%	57%	24%	19%
History of a non-European society (independently of relations to Britain/Europe)	73%	42%	31%	27%
Migration to Britain	73%	40%	33%	27%

(all with majority white populations) in which students could complete their compulsory study of history without having learned anything about the British Empire. However, the periods most commonly taught were the 18th and 19th centuries (especially the latter), with a much smaller proportion choosing to tackle 20th-century decolonisation.

Black and Asian British history featured in some way in the KS3 curriculum of 81% of schools although most commonly with only one or two lessons allocated to it. The ethnic mix of the student population seems significant here, with 36% of those with a majority BAME population devoting a series of lessons to Black and Asian British history, compared with 23% of more evenly mixed schools and just 18% of schools with a majority white population.

Although 73% of schools reported allocating at least one or two lessons to teaching about the *history of a non-European nation*, less than half of all schools (42%) made it the focus of designated topic. It is also notable that schools with a majority white population were less likely to include a specific unit devoted to the history of non-European nations (38%) than schools with a majority BAME population or an even mix of students from different backgrounds (57%).

The possible continued influence of the Ajegbo Report (2007) **AQ4** and the 2008 national curriculum (Department for Education, 2013b) can be seen in that some aspects of the history of *migration* to Britain were taught by 73% of respondents' schools. Although encouraging, the impression conveyed by this curriculum focus may not be entirely helpful, since the period most often taught was the 20th century, perhaps tending to obscure the diversity of British society in earlier centuries.

Recent Curriculum Changes and the Stimulus for Them

While the impression given by the range of content being taught at KS3 is, thus, not entirely positive, there was a very clear contrast to the 2019 data in terms of the proportion of schools that had begun to make changes to improve their representation of the diversity of the past. In 2021, the vast majority of schools reported having made 'some' (35%) or 'considerable' (48%) change in the previous two years. Although there was little variation in these proportions depending on the nature of the school population, it is perhaps notable that the 4% of schools which reported no change at all had majority white populations.

Among those who had introduced changes, the most important barriers encountered were reported to be lack of money for resources and lack of time. As Fig. 8.1 reveals, other prominent obstacles cited were insufficient subject knowledge and a lack of training or access to resources.

Fig. 8.2 reveals that in combatting these barriers, the main sources of support were found in teachers' own engagement

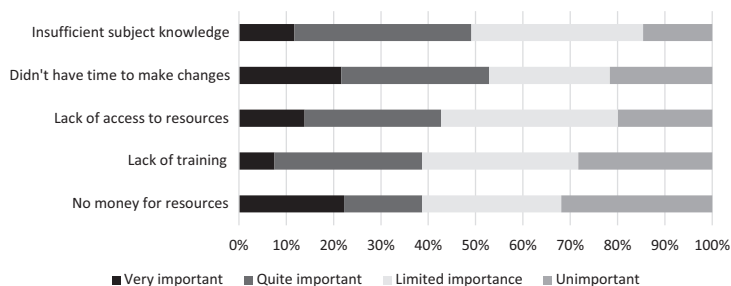


Fig. 8.1. The Most Frequently Cited Barriers to Making Change Cited by Teachers Who Had Done **So.**

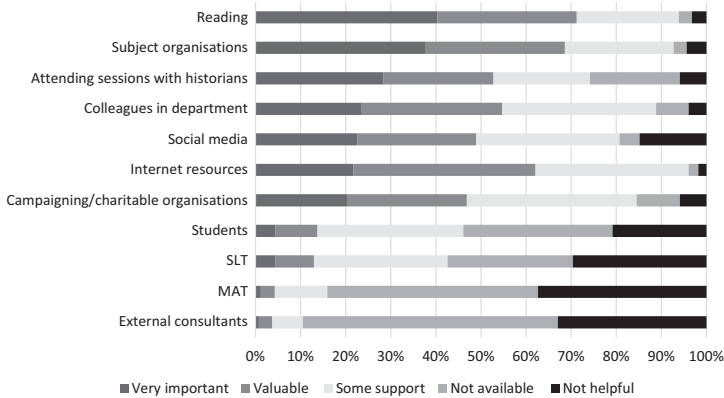


Fig. 8.2. Sources of Support Cited by Teachers Who Reported Having Made Recent Curriculum Changes.

with historical scholarship and in the work of subject associations. Hearing directly from historians (through webinars and online conferences) was also frequently cited as a very important source of support, confirming previous impressions about the impact of the pandemic in creating new digital opportunities for sharing expertise and resources.

Impact and Next Steps

Although demands for change within the history curriculum attract considerable media interest and fuel political debate, it has been difficult to make authoritative claims about what is actually being taught within KS3 (the last years of compulsory history education) because of the flexibility of the current National Curriculum. The significance of the surveys reported here lies in the detailed picture that they have begun to reveal of teachers' curriculum choices across the country and the extent to which declared commitments at least to diversity, if not decolonise, the curriculum have been realised in practice.

Despite the positive impetus for change revealed in the 2021 survey, the fact that lack of subject knowledge, lack of training, and lack of access to resources continued to be cited as obstacles to making changes (see Fig. 8.1) suggests that far more needs

to be done both to alert teachers to the sources of support that are available and to enable them to access them. The following chapters in this section help to serve that purpose. Lyndon-Cohen illustrates the kinds of work that pioneering teachers are now able to share with teachers seeking to make significant changes, while Branford and Todd demonstrate how new online approaches are enabling teachers to learn more effectively from academic scholarship.

The next steps **in** for this research are:

- To continue to map teachers' actual curriculum curricular choices and the kinds of support that they value. In addition to the Historical Association's work on this, the large-scale survey launched in 2024 by **UCL** and the University of Oxford as part of the 'Portrait of the teaching of the British Empire, migration and belonging' (<https://portraitemb.co.uk/>) will provide invaluable information as the basis for more effective professional development.
- To raise further awareness of the importance of decolonial approaches. These should not simply be adopted in response to diverse student populations in specific schools. Rather, the survey results suggest that such awareness-raising is even more urgent in all-white school contexts.
- To identify ways to share examples of leading practice more widely within the history education community.

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