

*Beyond the subject - exploring content
decision-making of the Key Stage 1
history curriculum in England*

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Beyond the subject – exploring content decision-making of the Key Stage 1 history curriculum in England

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ABSTRACT

There is minimal research into history curriculum planning in the early primary phase. Given the extensive debates about curriculum for older children, this is a major omission and ignores the importance of this phase. Based on semi-structured interviews with five history subject leaders, this study shows that content decision-making is informed by both present and future aspirations for the child as a learner of history. Decisions are also informed by a desire for purposeful subject and phase connections. The study recommends closer attention is given to the distinctiveness of the early primary phase when constructing the history curriculum for young children.

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Introduction

The National Curriculum for primary history in England sets out some specific content to be covered (Department for Education [DfE] 2013). However, the programme of study is only detailed for older pupils in Key Stage 2 (KS2) (7-11 years). At Key Stage 1 (KS1) (5-7 years), there is no such prescription: just general criteria for children to learn about some significant individuals and events from the past, some local history and some periods within and beyond living memory (DfE 2013). The National Curriculum for KS1 history therefore provides little guidance for primary class teachers, with some perceiving this flexibility as a positive, others as too vague (HA 2025). Common to both stances, however, is the responsibility placed upon those who select the content that children encounter in the classroom.

Curriculum formation is the product of ‘multi-layered social practices’ which incorporate individuals, bodies and institutions (Priestley and Philippou 2019, 3). It is a political act in the way decision-making may reflect or reinforce dominant ideologies or norms (Priestley 2026). It is also temporal, drawing upon an interplay of beliefs held about the past, the present and the future (Pinar 2010). The National Curriculum in England is currently facing a period of review. Although indicating a move to provide great clarity for teachers and to strengthen the focus on disciplinary knowledge (the concepts and processes that shape how we make sense of the past), the government has signalled that there will be minimal changes to substantive content (DfE 2025a). The focus is to be curriculum ‘evolution’ rather than ‘revolution’ (CAR 2025). The battles over the content of the history curriculum in England have been well documented (e.g. Cannadine, Keating, and Sheldon 2012; Smith 2017). However, the overwhelming focus of these accounts has been situated within the later phases of education, with both the historical and current lack of prescriptive content in KS1 left relatively unexplored. Bage (2000, 69) argued that this lack of prescription has required

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primary teachers to engage in ‘critical mediation’, balancing both ideological and pragmatic factors to determine the shape of their history curriculum. However, there has been little recent research on what this curriculum mediation looks like in practice and how this may link to more recent debates about sites of decision-making and teachers as curriculum makers (Priestley et al. 2021).

Research on history curriculum decision-making in the UK has largely been conducted within the secondary phase (e.g. Harris 2021; Smith, Harris, and Burn 2025). The main subject association for history in the UK, The Historical Association (HA), does conduct a national primary survey once every two years (e.g. HA 2023). While these surveys do provide some details about which curriculum content is frequently taught in the KS1 phase, they do not provide the potentially more valuable information about what factors have influenced the selection of content.

The study intended to address this deficit with a focus on the following research question:

What are history subject leaders’ perceptions of the factors that influence decision-making in relation to the content selection of the KS1 history curriculum?

Literature review

Defining curriculum

The current definition of curriculum outlined by the DfE in England is technical, limiting curriculum to broad subject aims and content (DfE 2013). However, earlier conceptions of curriculum have foregrounded the child more prominently. For example, Dewey ([1915] 2001) argued that curriculum was best understood as a holistic and evolving process, one which should always be in dialogue with the child. Style (1988) proposed that a balanced curriculum is one focused upon the dialectic between the child and the world; the curriculum should, therefore, be a mirror to reflect the self and a window to reveal others. Such emphases on the learner may have particular importance in curriculum construction for younger children, given the need to consider the interrelationship between child development and the types of knowledge that may frame and constitute the subject (Anning 1995). However, given the lack of research in this area, it is not known how primary teachers translate their beliefs or conceptions about curriculum into subsequent decision-making for history.

Knowledge of history

The question of what kind of history should form the curriculum has long been associated with debates regarding the place, value and purpose of the subject at the school level (Lee 1992). Such debates have considered the interplay between public histories, collective memory, political interests and national identity (Barca and Nakou 2010). Debates have also centred on the respective emphasis given to substantive content and/or disciplinary processes (Smets and Savenije 2025).

Research into substantive content selection has, however, not focused on KS1 history. It is not clear why the absence of prescribed content has warranted less scholarly attention, especially given that this very lack of prescription places arguably greater responsibility on decision-makers at the school level. For example, decisions about content selection, by definition, also involve decisions about deselection. Too great a focus on the present, selected curriculum can fail to acknowledge the potential effects of the null curriculum on pupil engagement in history (Wilkinson 2014). Content decision-making is, therefore, a highly complex process, which can engender both planned and unplanned consequences.

The disciplinary nature of history has a well-established emphasis in England. First influenced by the work of the Schools Council History Project (SCHP) in the 1970s, this has been more recently reaffirmed by the concept of powerful knowledge (Young and Muller 2010). This social realist approach to the theory of knowledge posits that knowledge has some independence from the contexts of its production; it draws upon disciplinary traditions, it is specialised, and it differs from

everyday knowledge. However, although powerful knowledge has been presented as a compelling curriculum rationale in the secondary phase (Chapman 2021), it may have less relevance when applied to an early childhood context. Its emphasis on specialised knowledge may marginalise the real-life experiences that help younger pupils make sense of the formal curriculum (Barton 2025; Catling and Martin 2011).

The current iteration of the National Curriculum in England aims to foster pupils' curiosity about the past and develop their substantive knowledge and understanding of aspects of British and world history (DfE 2013). The curriculum has a disciplinary intent to develop children's understanding of historical concepts and the processes of historical enquiry, but there is also a stated emphasis on developing pupils' understanding of their own identity and diversity within society (DfE 2013). In theory, therefore, the current curriculum outlines a range of purposes which could be described as both intrinsic and extrinsic to the subject. However, it is not clear how these aims may translate into decision-making at the school level for the KS1 phase.

A recent survey of twenty-five schools in England (Ofsted 2023) found that curriculum content in KS1 history can lack detail and is often based on existing practice or easy access to resources. This suggests that decision-making is pragmatic, with little engagement in subject aims or purposes. Some topics do seem to be commonly taught in the KS1 phase, often those that are suggested by the DfE as part of non-statutory guidance. For example, the HA (2023) primary survey reported that the Great Fire of London was taught by 78% of survey respondents. The way that some content becomes enshrined in school curriculum plans was a finding of research conducted in secondary schools by Harris and Reynolds (2018). However, given the lack of research in the KS1 phase, it is not clear whether the teaching of particular topics can be attributed to positive teacher approval (and on what basis) or more passive maintenance of existing curriculum norms. Curriculum mediation is evident (Bage 2000), but the nature of the decision-making processes underpinning this remains unclear.

Knowledge of children

Content decision-making may also respond to beliefs about the child in relation to the study of the past. History for young children should connect with their formative experiences (Cooper 2013) and focus upon people and their everyday lives (Levstik and Barton 2015). Such views seem to build upon earlier seminal studies of child development, such as Dewey's (1938) emphasis on the importance of experience as essential to a good education and Donaldson's (1978) research that showed how young children can best demonstrate their understanding in contexts known to them.

Knowledge of children may also extend to the deliberate inclusion or avoidance of specific historical content. For example, Bracey, Jackson, and Gove-Humphries (2011) found that teaching sensitive or controversial historical content needs to be carefully scaffolded for younger primary pupils. This attention to pupil age seems to differ from similar research conducted in the secondary phase, where decision-making tended to be based upon topic relevance or engagement (Harris and Clarke 2011) or the social utility of proposed content (Kitson and McCully 2005). Considerations relating to sensitive histories are perhaps most pressing in KS1, given the absence of any specific statutory content to guide decision-makers. Again, however, there is little recent research on the extent to which this does, or does not, present as a curriculum concern at the school level.

Knowledge of the KS1 phase

Given a mode of curriculum delivery based upon a class teacher, there are also questions about the extent to which content selection in history should relate to the rest of the KS1 curriculum. While the National Curriculum in England is organised around separate subjects, there is no prescribed template for curriculum design. Schools may opt for discrete subject teaching, discrete subject teaching with cross-curricular links, or integrating history within a thematic/topic approach. Both Ofsted

(2023) and the Historical Association (2025) have reported a move away from topic-based approaches in recent years, perhaps as a response to the ‘knowledge turn’ in education in England (Chapman 2021). However, integrating historical study within other fields may provide a more authentic real-world context for learning (Barton and Ho 2021) and be more aligned with how young children make sense of the world around them (Eaude 2025).

A further consideration is the relationship between KS1 and other primary phases. The phase is positioned between the Early Years Foundation Stage framework (EYFS), which covers birth up to five (although at the school level, this is usually focused on 3–5 years) and the KS2 phase. The lack of continuity between a play-based EYFS curriculum, centred around broad areas of learning, and the more formal KS1 curriculum has been widely identified as an area of tension for effective pupil transition (e.g. Crowther, Blake, and Webster 2022; Fisher 2022). However, the focus of this tension has tended to centre on pedagogy rather than on curriculum continuity (Taylor-Jones 2021). In respect to later transition, it is not clear how effectively KS1 content can be mapped onto the more prescriptive programmes of study in KS2. Ofsted (2023) reported that schools have given very little consideration to overall curriculum coherence, and the HA (2025) subject survey has also highlighted phase transition as an issue.

In summary, although there exists some knowledge about what is taught in KS1, this knowledge remains at a surface level. Far less is known about why particular content is selected and what factors shape and guide subject leaders’ decisions. This research gap is particularly significant given the absence of specific statutory content in the National Curriculum, which leaves considerable space for interpretation at the school level.

Methodology

Research design

The study used a qualitative exploratory design focused on eliciting history subject leaders’ perceptions of KS1 curriculum decision-making. Adopting a constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology acknowledged the subjectivity of subject leaders’ perceptions. This also acknowledged that any interpretation of a prior curriculum decision-making process is retrospective and therefore filtered through both the lens of the present and the lens of the researcher (Creswell 2012).

Given the lack of extant research in the KS1 phase, it was decided that a focus on the ‘best’ schools could provide rich insights into the nature of exemplary curriculum planning at the school level. With no national benchmark for quality primary history, beyond generic school inspections, a decision was therefore made to focus on schools which had achieved the Historical Association Gold Quality Mark (QM) award. The sampling criteria were therefore both purposive and homogenous.

The Quality Mark is a criteria-referenced award that is valid for three years. Participating schools produce a portfolio of evidence across four areas: learning and teaching; leadership; curriculum; enrichment (HA 2018). An assessor, appointed by the Historical Association, reviews a submitted school portfolio and then conducts a school visit. Based on this evidence, a grade is awarded (either no award, Silver or Gold). The first author was a QM assessor and therefore had some ‘insider’ status, which facilitated the necessary connections to secure access and support for the research. Neither of the two authors was in the employment of the Historical Association or any of the participating schools.

Primary schools in England that had been awarded the Gold Quality Mark from January 2020 to July 2022 were identified as potential participants. This timeframe was intended to mitigate any issues in relation to potential staff mobility. Independent schools and federated schools delivering the same curriculum were removed. This produced a potential sample size of thirty schools, from which five schools chose to participate.

Ethical approval was granted by the researchers’ institution. Informed consent was obtained from the Historical Association, participating school headteachers and subject leaders. Pseudonyms were

Table 1. List of participating schools.

| Number | School name | Subject leader | Year of QM Gold award |
|--------|--------------|----------------|-----------------------|
| 1 | Ash school | Alex | 2020 |
| 2 | Beech school | Beth | 2021 |
| 3 | Elm school | Emma | 2022 |
| 4 | Fir school | Freya | 2022 |
| 5 | Maple school | Max | 2022 |

given for school and subject leader names (see [Table 1](#)), and other potentially identifying data (e.g. reference to local heritage sites) were redacted from interview transcripts.

KS1 encompasses two years (Year 1: 5–6 year olds and Year 2: 6–7 year olds). At four schools (Ash, Beech, Fir and Maple), curriculum content is different for Year 1 and Year 2 pupils. At Elm school, due to a fluctuating pupil roll, the curriculum is organised on a two-year cycle (cycle A & cycle B) with both Year 1 and Year 2 classes taught the same curriculum. For an overview of content at each school, see [Table 2](#).

Data collection

Given the aim to elicit rich and contextualised perceptions of curriculum decision-making, data collection was based on semi-structured interviews. While interviewer–interviewee dynamics are inherently unequal (Kvale 2008), participants held status due to the sampling criteria. The use of open questions, such as ‘tell me about your KS1 history curriculum. What do you teach and why?’ also provided space for participants to shape aspects of the discussion.

There is a statutory requirement for schools in England to publish information about the content of their curriculum (DfE 2024). While not constituting a formal part of data collection or analysis, this information was accessed prior to each interview. As a stimulus activity, it engendered familiarity with each school context and curriculum, freeing up interview time to focus upon content decision-making.

Pilot studies were conducted with two primary history subject leaders in other school contexts. These prompted a decision to send indicative questions to interviewees in advance of the interviews, both to help familiarise them with the focus of intended content and to hopefully engender richer responses. Interviews were conducted remotely using online software. This meant that audio recording was easily accessible and also helped to facilitate access to school settings across different regions of England. Voice recordings of the interviews were transcribed electronically, with nonverbal communication, such as hesitations, also documented to maintain participant authenticity. Transcripts were then shared with interviewees, with the opportunity for review, additions and amendments; this process of member-checking enhanced the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings (Silverman 2024).

Data analysis

Data analysis was broadly based on constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2014). This inductive approach to data generation was selected as it acknowledged the researchers’ role throughout and therefore aligned with the study’s epistemological stance. Due to the small data set, coding was conducted manually. A three-stage coding process was adopted that moved from low-inference initial codes to high-inference theoretical codes:

- Initial line by line coding to engage with and define data
- Focused coding to identify the most significant or salient codes and to develop analytical categories based on conceptual similarity
- Theoretical coding to develop relationships between analytic categories

(adapted from Charmaz 2014).

Table 2. Overview of curriculum content in each school.

| School Name | KS 1 curriculum | Y1 autumn | Y1 spring | Y1 summer | Y2 autumn | Y2 spring | Y2 summer |
|---------------|--|--|--|---|--|--|---|
| Ash | School-devised | How has transport changed in our local area? | What are our greatest or most ghastly events? | What was life like for children in the 1960s? | What makes someone famous? | What does it take to be a great explorer? | Why were castles so important to the Normans? |
| Beech & Maple | commercial (with some content selected or adapted at the school level) | What was life like when our grandparents were children? | Who were the greatest explorers? | How did the first flight change the world? Why were the Rainhill trials important? | Should we still celebrate Bonfire Night? Did the Great Fire make London a better or worse place? | How have holidays changed over time? | Who are our local heroes? |
| Fir | Multi-academy trust (MAT) with input at the school level | Stories from history: your community | Your community, Rags to Riches, | Explorers and Invaders: Important Documents | Rebellion of Important Women | The Stone Age: The Neolithic Revolution | Ancient Egypt |
| Elm | School-devised | Cycle A: How has [village] changed over time? Cycle B: How have toys and games changed over time? | Cycle A: What happened to London during the fire of 1666? Cycle B: Why should we remember Rosa Parks and Emily Davison? | Cycle A: How helpful were Florence Nightingale and Mary Seacole during the Crimean War? Cycle B: Was the seaside more fun a hundred years ago? | Cycle A: How has [village] changed over time? Cycle B: How have toys and games changed over time? | Cycle A: What happened to London during the fire of 1666? Cycle B: Why should we remember Rosa Parks and Emily Davison? | Cycle A: How helpful were Florence Nightingale and Mary Seacole during the Crimean War? Cycle B: Was the seaside more fun a hundred years ago? |

This approach provided a systematic means of analysis, with constant comparison enabling similarities and differences to be drawn within and across data sets. To enhance the transparency of the data analysis process, the relationship between the selection of initial, focused and theoretical coding is provided (see Table 3).

Four themes were identified from data analysis: **present-focused** decision-making, **future-focused** decision-making, **vertical connections** across primary phases and **horizontal connections** across other primary subjects.

Limitations

The small sample size and purposive sampling criterion mean that the subject leaders interviewed were, *per se*, atypical. However, representativeness was not an intention of the research, given that the aim of the study was to explore decision-making in schools where history is deemed to be best practice.

Findings and discussion

Present-focused decision-making

Present-focused decision-making started with the child. Four categories were identified here: the selection of content that related to pupil demographics, the selection of content that reflected pupil interests and the selection of content that reflected childhood experiences. The final category reflected interviewees' consideration of age-appropriate pedagogies and content when justifying curriculum choices.

Content that responded to pupil demographics was identified by three subject leaders, all of whom worked in schools that served ethnically diverse communities. Max, for example, included oral history in the Year 1 unit on Family History because: 'I think if the children see themselves reflected in the curriculum and just see, you know, like the history of some of these different backgrounds'. This did not present as a factor in the schools that served predominantly White British communities, suggesting these schools felt they could already 'see' their pupils reflected in the curriculum.

Two subject leaders identified that some curriculum content was chosen to reflect children's interests. Beth explained that the vehicles chosen as the focus for the Year 1 unit on Transport were left undecided: 'we're going to be building that around the children's interest in that particular cohort'. Emma explained that the retention of Rosa Parks and Emily Davison as significant individuals in cycle B would be contingent on pupil engagement: 'we're going to do that this year, and then re-evaluate, and see how the children find it, and if it's something that interests them'. In Beth's example, content within a unit was designed to be flexible to accommodate the interests of particular cohorts. In the example given by Emma, this flexibility extended to the entire focus of the unit.

Children's experiences also formed an important rationale for content selection. Alex provided this justification for the unit on 1960s Childhood: 'I think it's relatable in terms of getting them to speak about history; it's something they can go home about and talk about and, um, it's not so I suppose abstract for them in a sense'. His desire to make historical content less 'abstract' suggests a view that concrete experiences may be more tangible for young children. For Emma, the cycle A unit on the Local Area was also justified on the basis of pupil experiences: 'I think that it's important that the children do something that's relevant to them, that it is their local area'.

Curriculum selection was also justified with reference to early childhood pedagogies. This included continuous provision, sociodramatic play, sensory integration and storytelling. Beth identified the first Year 1 unit on Family History as an opportunity for learning through continuous provision: 'we still have a child-led centre in the corner of the room where they get to go and do role

Table 3. Relationship between initial, focused and theoretical codes.

| Initial coding | Focused coding | Theoretical coding |
|--|--------------------------------------|------------------------|
| Viewing diversity as positive Moving away from W/B/M curriculum Adapting SOW to make more diverse Choosing to include more women Choosing to include more women (non-W). Seeing tension between local and diverse history Using sig indiv for more diversity Choosing more diverse content (ethnicity). Linking diversity to school ethos | Intrinsic purpose for diversity | Future-focused |
| Addressing stereotypes (gender) Addressing stereotypes (ethnicity) | Extrinsic purpose for diversity | |
| Developing source work Developing substantive knowledge Developing disciplinary concepts Developing perspectives Developing inquiry | Intrinsic purpose of subject | |
| Seeing the purpose of history – debate Choosing people as role models – their dispositions | Extrinsic purpose of the subject | |
| Selecting content familiar to pupils' experiences Viewing recent past as more relatable Viewing recent past as more relevant Viewing locality as more relatable Viewing the locality as more relevant | Making content accessible for pupils | Present-focused |
| Selecting content based on pupil interests and selecting content based on pupil engagement | Making content of interest to pupils | |
| Wanting to link content to the pupil demographic. Aligning content with pupil demographic Adapting SOW to align with pupil demographic. Wanting children to see themselves in the curriculum | Responding to pupil demographic | |
| Viewing physical experiences as important Using multi-sensory pedagogy Viewing stories as a child-friendly pedagogy Viewing some content as fixed Linking pupil age to sensitive content, and Adapting sensitive content to pupil age | Acknowledging child development | |
| Making links with EYFS pedagogy – story Making links with EYFS pedagogy – child-centred Making links with EYFS – content | Backward connections | Vertical connections |
| Making links with KS2 – content Making links with KS2 – vocab Making links with KS2 – concepts Making links with KS2 – chronology Aiming for gender balance across KS1/KS2 Trying to achieve balance Avoiding repetition with other subjects | Forward connections | |
| Viewing xc as positive Viewing xc as negative Maintaining subject integrity | Views on cross-subject connections | Horizontal connections |
| Exploiting history for other subjects Exploiting other subjects for history Linking to English – story Linking to geog – content Linking to geog – skills Linking to geog – concepts Linking to other subjects | Making cross-subject connections | |

plays and explore their book corner with dressing up and toys'. Emma identified two units where the content made use of multi-sensory approaches to learning. For example, she explained how a visit to the local museum was valuable because it has: 'got toys and games in there that the children can go and look at, and touch, and hold'.

Responding to ‘the child’ also included considerations of whether the selected content may be appropriate or inappropriate for pupils in KS1. Emma queried whether Emily Davison, a suffragette killed by a horse at the 1913 Derby, was appropriate content for KS1 pupils: ‘my worry about, um, Emily Davison, it’s quite vi- it’s quite violent, isn’t it?’ Interestingly, however, none of the subject leaders problematised the inclusion of Guy Fawkes (who also sought out violent means to effect change) in their school curriculum. Alex remarked: ‘I don’t think they’d [staff] forgive me if Guy Fawkes wasn’t there’. This suggests that some curriculum content is perceived as suitable for pupils based, in part, on long-standing practice.

Future-focused decision-making

The second theme was curriculum content selected to go beyond children’s starting points. Two categories emerged in relation to this theme: content to introduce pupils to history as a subject, alongside content to expose pupils to a more diverse curriculum. Subject leaders’ responses here often drew upon their beliefs about the value and purpose of primary history education.

Max explained how the unit on The Great Fire of London involved working with artefacts. For Max, this type of task distilled the intrinsic essence of the subject: ‘I think we, we try to kind of get our kind of children to think like historians. So we’ve been doing lots more of using sources, photos, kind of objects in the classroom’. Freya explained how the Year 1 unit (Explorers and Invaders) focused on comparing two historical figures: this content was selected to develop pupils’ understanding of different historical perspectives relating to invasion and settlement.

In contrast, some content selection was for more extrinsic purposes. Emma noted the importance of content that supported critical thinking and a desire to turn children into ‘people that can function in society’. Beth explained that The Gunpowder Plot was a unit that promoted debate: ‘... when they become older and they get, come into that real world, they’re gonna need that level of debate and discussion around history to be able to be those, you know, citizens that we would like in society’. Her association of the ‘real world’ is future-focused, rather than centred on pupils’ present experiences.

All five subject leaders explained how their selection of significant individuals involved a deliberate intention to diversify the curriculum. Emma explained: ‘We did think about Neil Armstrong, um, but ruled that out, because we particularly wanted to focus on women’. Max adapted the commercial scheme Year 2 unit on Explorers: ‘It’s pretty much a male kind of yeah. White. Yeah. British people, a lot of it. So we kind of tried to change it quite a bit just to make that topic more diverse’. Some content was selected to challenge stereotypes. Alex made a deliberate decision for teachers to teach about the astronaut Helen Sharman before introducing Neil Armstrong: ‘I thought the first person then they can encounter as a, as an astronaut, would be a woman, because typically they just think it’s a man’.

Vertical connections to other primary phases

The third theme to emerge was content selected to make backward and forward connections to past and future primary phases. However, whilst all four areas of the KS1 programme of study were linked with the EYFS framework, only two areas (‘significant events’ and ‘individuals’) were connected to the KS2 programme of study.

Several subject leaders used the word ‘build’ to describe substantive content connections from the EYFS to KS1. For example, Max explained: ‘They look at toys in Early Years and again, that’s almost like toys from the past. So I think we saw it as a good way of building on some [of that] as well’.

Alex explained how forward connections constituted a deliberate part of his rationale for curriculum content: ‘I kind of try to select things in KS1 that I felt would kind of make some link to KS2 somewhere’. He linked substantive KS1 content based on the Cadbury brothers, Pompeii and the Olympic

Games to KS2 content on the Maya, Rome and Ancient Greece, respectively. Some forward connections related to the use of historical terms and concepts. Max explained how the Year 2 unit on The Gunpowder Plot gave pupils an early encounter with the term ‘parliament’: ‘I mean, it’s such a, kind of a hard concept for them [pupils] to get around head around. So I think we kind of saw it as introducing it in Year 2’. Emma prioritised the teaching of women in KS1 as a way of achieving better gender representation across the whole school history curriculum: ‘We wanted to particularly focus on famous women [in KS1], because throughout our whole curriculum, a lot of what we do is about famous men’. In this way, the KS1 curriculum was utilised to address a perceived deficit in KS2.

Horizontal connections to other primary subjects

All subject leaders made explicit, horizontal, links between their content selection in history and other primary subjects. The rationales for these links were both pedagogical and pragmatic. In some instances, history was used to support learning in other subjects, while other subjects were also used as a conduit to maximise learning in history.

Cumulatively, the interviewees made links to all eleven subjects of the KS1 curriculum: art & design, computing, design & technology, English, geography, mathematics, music, PE, RE, relationships, (sex) & health education (often referred to as PSHE) and science. These links spanned all four areas of the KS1 programme of study. For Beth, this ability to make connections was self-evident: ‘obviously, lots of learning is very cross-curricular ... it’s that holistic view of the subject’. History seemed to act as a stimulus for other subjects or as an opportunity to embed or reinforce teaching points from other areas of the curriculum. Max explained: ‘so when they look at local heroes, they look at local artists, they kind of like do sketches and paintings in the local area’. Geography emerged as the strongest subject link: all five subject leaders made connections here, drawing on place knowledge, locational knowledge, map skills and shared substantive concepts such as settlement.

Connections with English drew upon both the pedagogical and the practical. Max explained: ‘If you do it in English, it makes it [history] so much easier’. Emma demonstrated a more pragmatic rationale: ‘I knew that I needed to get more time in the [history] curriculum’. Um, so that’s why we linked it to English, and that then raised the profile of history across school’.

A common emphasis was the importance of ensuring that any cross-subject links should be mutually purposeful. Freya explained: ‘We do make those links where it is appropriate. So we don’t just make them because we need to’. Max twice emphasised during the interview that any connections between history and other subjects should not be forced. Emma’s exploitation of the English curriculum to make more time for history content also involved: ‘making sure that they weren’t tenuous links’. Of all the interviewees, Alex was the most emphatic about this issue: ‘always making sure that the focus is on the history teaching’ ... [what] we didn’t want is, um, any sort of themes where we were kind of mashing things together and the subjects were getting lost’.

Summary of key themes by participant

Overall, there was generally a high degree of congruence across all five interviewees with respect to the four themes. All interviewees were both present-focused and future-focused in curriculum decision-making. All interviewees made vertical links with both the EYFS framework and the KS2 curriculum. And all made some horizontal links to the other subjects of the primary curriculum. However, in spite of this commonality, different factors were emphasised at the individual school level:

Ash school: there was a strong emphasis on decision-making based on pupils’ experiences, but Alex also placed an emphasis on the importance of including diverse representations of the past. Of all the interviewees, he seemed to be most cognisant of the dilemmas of negotiating decision-

making based on different factors. Alex strongly advocated for vertical links both backwards to EYFS and forwards to KS2. However, he was less focused on horizontal connections and gave the strongest critique of how subject integrity might be compromised by potentially extraneous cross-subject links.

Beech school: the strongest emphasis tended to be upon present-focused and future-focused decision-making. For the former, Beth's rationale for content selection seemed to be strongly influenced by beliefs about child development and the need to respond to children's interests. For the latter, there was a strong sense of how history should be utilised for extrinsic purposes to develop a set of desirable behaviours or skills that might equip pupils for the future. Horizontal and vertical subject connections emerged as less dominant themes.

Elm School: Emma's curriculum rationale emerged as the most present-focused and the most child-centred. She often spoke about the importance of considering how the child would 'experience' the history curriculum, perhaps a consequence of negotiating how the same content could be translated for pupils in mixed-age classes. Emma made the most connections to the other subjects of the KS1 curriculum and was also the most positive of all the interviewees about the value of such links.

Fir school: a future-focused curriculum emerged as the most dominant theme. This sense of looking forward was also evident in relation to the phase transition. Freya made more direct associations with KS2 content than with the EYFS framework. And while she did make some horizontal links to other areas of the curriculum, they were less apparent than for other interviewees. Overall, there emerged a strong sense of a KS1 history curriculum designed to prepare pupils for content in KS2.

Maple School: much of Max's rationale was focused on how the commercial curriculum adopted by Maple school had been adjusted or reframed to reflect pupil or local contexts. He strongly emphasised the locality of his school. Within the theme of future-focused decision-making, there was a stronger emphasis on the value of the intrinsic study of history and the importance of including diverse representations of the past, rather than the use of history as a conduit or vehicle for extrinsic purposes.

Discussion

The study has shown how subject leaders draw upon an interplay of factors relating to the child, the phase, and the subject when determining their KS1 history curriculum. This attention to the child or phase is not at the expense of the subject, but rather seems aimed at facilitating access to the subject. There is potentially a tension between a history curriculum that has the flexibility to respond to children's needs, interests and experiences, and yet also has sufficient agreed content to introduce pupils to the study of history, provide a stairway from one primary phase to another and also a bridge to other subjects. However, these themes did not tend to present as conflicting; rather, it seemed possible for them to coexist. Given a research sample based on Gold Quality Mark schools, this careful and considered weighting of different factors may signify good curriculum practices. Anning (1995) argued that the inception of the National Curriculum required KS1 teachers to balance subject-based requirements with their knowledge of young children's learning and development, and this balancing act still appears to remain central to effective KS1 practice over thirty years later.

Present-focused decision-making that reflects pupils' heritages, interests and experiences is a responsive curriculum-building approach (Bage, Grosvenor, and Williams 1999), which is perhaps more reminiscent of the EYFS framework (DfE 2025b). This suggests that some subject leaders are exploiting the lack of specificity in the KS1 history programme of study to construct a curriculum that is responsive to their understanding of children and their needs. In this way, there seemed to be an acute awareness of KS1 learners of history as young learners of history. The focus that the five subject leaders placed upon the 'personal' and the 'everyday' aligns with earlier research in

this field (e.g., Cooper 2013; Levstik and Barton 2015). This may also account for the references to pedagogies such as play and story to deliver the curriculum. The use of the latter was recently identified as good pedagogical practice in history (Ofsted 2023), although – distinct from this study – this was not directly associated with appropriate pedagogy for KS1 pupils.

Future-focused decision-making, designed to introduce pupils to the study of history, revealed some degree of engagement with longstanding debates about the purpose(s) of teaching the subject. Curriculum content afforded the opportunity for children to ‘think like historians’ as well as to produce ‘people that can function in society’. Challenging perceptions of a white and/or male and/or British hegemony in the curriculum seems to relate to an intrinsic purpose in relation to history, whilst preventing the formation of stereotypes seems to relate to a more extrinsic purpose. However, there was a predominant focus on gender and/or ethnicity. This does seem to reflect similar findings of the most recent HA survey (2025), which found that other aspects of diversity, such as disability or LGBTQ+ histories, are less represented in selected primary content. This absence may also reflect research by both Fidler (2023) and Stow and Burton (2024), who found that primary teachers can lack confidence to teach diverse histories. Given that the research sample was drawn from schools in receipt of a Quality Mark award, this suggests that a commitment to teaching diversity at the primary level may not yet be fully translated into broader curriculum enactment.

Ofsted (2023) reports that in most schools, there has been little consideration of content connections between EYFS, KS1 and KS2. While all subject leaders did make vertical connections, these links were strongest in relation to the EYFS framework. This is perhaps indicative of the flexibility of content in both curricula. In contrast, links with the KS2 curriculum were only directly associated with the KS1 requirement to teach ‘significant events’ and ‘significant individuals’. This may suggest the potential difficulty of achieving coherence between all aspects of the current KS1 and KS2 programmes of study. Achieving the balance between flexibility and prescription is an issue that may need to be considered carefully in the process of curriculum redrafting at the national level.

The emphasis placed upon ensuring history’s integrity as a discrete subject does seem to show the impact of the ‘knowledge turn’ at the primary level and reinforces the move away from more thematic approaches to curriculum design that have been noted by both Ofsted (2023) and the HA (2025). Interestingly, however, in its response to the Curriculum Assessment Review, the DfE has stated that it will maintain a curriculum based on discrete subjects but will now also show ‘links within and between subject areas’ (2025, 9). The findings of this study suggest that in the primary phase, subject leaders are already cognisant of such links and how to draw effectively upon them. This ability to make meaningful connections across both historical content and all subject areas may be a distinctive feature of primary professional practice that has been shaped by the class teacher model.

Conclusion

In a period of curriculum review, there seems to be no fixed template for the successful construction of the KS1 history curriculum. However, at a time when history education in England has been dominated by knowledge of the subject, this study perhaps emphasises that attention must also be paid to knowledge of the child and broader knowledge of the early primary phase. How the overall purpose and aims of the history National Curriculum are translated, mediated and enacted at the phase level may, therefore, warrant much closer attention.

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