

# *English history teachers' views on what substantive content young people should be taught*

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## English history teachers' views on what substantive content young people should be taught

Public and policy discourse about the content of history curricula is frequently contested, but the voice of history teachers is often absent from such debate. Drawing on a large scale on-line survey of history teachers in England, this paper explores their responses to major curriculum reforms proposed by the Coalition government in February 2013. In particular it examines teachers' responses to government plans to prescribe a list of topics, events and individuals to be taught chronologically that all students would be expected to study. Nearly 550 teachers responded to the survey, and more than two-thirds of them provided additional written comments on the curriculum proposals. This paper examines these comments, with reference to a range of curriculum models. The study reveals a deep antagonism towards the proposals for various reasons, including concerns about the extent and nature of the substantive content proposed and the way in which it should be sequenced. Analysis of these reactions provides an illuminating insight into history teachers' perspectives. While the rationales that underpin their thinking seem to have connections to a variety of different theoretical models, the analysis suggests that more attention could usefully be devoted to the idea of developing frameworks of reference.

Keywords: history education; curriculum; history curriculum; secondary school curriculum

### Introduction

Developing a curriculum is a complex task, not least because of decisions about the nature and range of content to be included. In subject areas such as history this has proved particularly contentious (Grever & Stuurman, 2007; Nakou & Barca, 2010; Taylor & Guyver, 2012) because of the profound impact that people's awareness of their history is assumed to have on their sense of identity. Control over the content of the history curriculum seems to carry with it considerable influence over how individuals and groups perceive themselves and others. As Counsell, (2000, p. 61) claims, '[t]o decide what history is to be taught, at school, regional or national level, is to exercise phenomenal power'.

While issues of identity may explain why history curricula have proved particularly controversial, such debates also need to be located within wider theoretical debates about what constitutes the 'proper' basis for a curriculum. Muller (2009), in discussing the roots of disciplinary differences and their implications within higher education, draws a useful distinction in curriculum construction between concerns for conceptual coherence and concerns for contextual coherence. The former imply an emphasis on the internal demands of the subject to be taught; treating the nature of the discipline as the key frame of reference and ensuring that the ideas and knowledge that essentially define the discipline are built up systematically. The latter reflect an emphasis on considerations external to the subject, essentially derived from the context in which the learners are situated and to which the curriculum is expected to be responsive. Such contextual concerns tend to give rise to a more segmented approach with less respect for the internal coherence of particular disciplines as distinct forms of knowledge.

The difference between these two perspectives plays out in debates about the purpose and nature of the history curriculum. Lee (1992, 2005, 2011) argues that the purpose of the history curriculum is the development of young people who are 'historically literate', which requires an understanding of

the nature of history, and so reflects an emphasis on the conceptual coherence of the curriculum. In contrast Barton essentially endorses contextual coherence (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Thornton & Barton, 2010), arguing that the history curriculum should ultimately serve the broader educational goal of developing reflective citizens for democratic society. While Barton and his colleagues recognise that an appreciation of the way in which historical claims are made and verified can help to address that agenda, and so promote an 'analytical stance' that reflects some aspects of a conceptual approach, their ultimate emphasis is on equipping young people to participate in democratic society, which means that they locate history within a social studies framework and argue that the curriculum should reflect students' own questions about the past (Barton, 2009).

Although politicians of different persuasions may propose very different kinds of curricula from those advocated by Barton, much recent political and public discourse about the school history curriculum has been similarly driven by contextual concerns, based on assumptions about young people's needs in the modern world. As Grever and Stuurman (2007) argue, public debate, particularly in the West, has been shaped by fears of a weakening of national identity and a loss of a collective national memory, in the face of the forces of globalisation, migration and the diversification of society. In response to these phenomena, politicians in many countries have been keen to transmit a particular form of cultural identity, with a neo-conservative emphasis on the teaching of a patriotic national canon. The Australian education minister, Christopher Pyne, for example, criticised the history curriculum in his own country for 'not recognising the legacy of western civilisation and not giving important events in Australia's history and culture the prominence they deserve, such as Anzac Day' (Hurst, 2014). Michael Gove (2009), who became Secretary of State for Education under the Coalition government in England, declared his conviction that 'there ' is no better way of building a modern, inclusive, patriotism than by teaching all British citizens to take pride in this country's historic achievements'. It was in order to cultivate this pride that he promised to ensure that the curriculum taught 'the proper narrative of British History'.

This particular kind of discourse tends to emphasise a transmission model of historical knowledge, whereby a particular canon or body of knowledge is expected to be passed on. The most influential example of this perspective, strongly in evidence within the draft proposals published by Gove's department (DfE, 2013a), has been E.D. Hirsch's tightly prescribed list of the 'core knowledge' (of specific events and individuals) regarded as essential to achieving basic cultural literacy (Hirsch 1987). As Taylor and Guyver point out, those advocating the teaching of a specific body of knowledge, particularly with a view to promoting a particular kind of nationalistic feeling, tend to caricatured as 'traditionalists' and criticised for favouring 'a politically expedient, self-serving monoculturalism', seen as inappropriate in increasingly pluralistic societies (p. xii). In response, those who advocate a broader curriculum are attacked by their opponents for denying young people access to knowledge of their cultural heritage and undermining national sentiment.

Even if they are not always made explicit, claims about what should be studied in history – the specific substantive content proposed – rest on underlying assumptions about the ultimate purpose of the history curriculum and particular perceptions of how the historical knowledge is intended to be understood. Whatever conclusions are reached, however, the impact of those curricular decisions on the young people in whose interests they are officially made does not simply depend on the views of the policy makers. Implementation of the history curriculum – as with any other educational policy – 'get[s] caught up in the process of interpretation and translation towards the

particularities of the local context' (Kelchtermans, 2007, p. 472). As Davies and Hughes (2009) have observed: national policies are espoused at the state level, enacted by a profession (in this case, teachers) and experienced by a community (the students). While the intentions of the state in relation to the history curriculum are revealed in their curriculum proposals, the views of those responsible for their enactment are rarely made explicit or subject to detailed research, despite the considerable influence that they are likely to have on how those proposals are actually implemented. Indeed, within England at least, more research has been focused on the ways in which the history curriculum is experienced by young people (see, for example, Harris & Haydn, 2006; Harris & Reynolds, 2014) than on the curricular intentions and perspectives of their teachers.

It is in order to address this gap – to explore the views of the agents responsible for translating official curriculum policy into the classroom context (Spillane, Reiser & Reimer, 2002) – that we set out to examine the views of history teachers when they responded in unprecedented numbers to the publication (in February 2013) of draft proposals for a new national curriculum for history, issued by the Coalition government (DfE, 2013a). Although the original proposals were extensively revised following a consultation period, the teachers' reactions provide a fascinating and unparalleled insight into the views of those who would go on to shape students' experience of the curriculum that was eventually published.

## **Context**

In the UK, up to the 1990s, choice over curriculum content was largely at the discretion of the classroom teacher; as Cannadine, Keating and Sheldon (2011, p. 6) explain '[m]inisters could suggest; permanent officials could outline; inspectors could report: but their power to influence what went on in particular localities, specific schools and individual classrooms was rarely all that great.' While this context would imply considerable freedom and scope for individual variation, there was generally a strong focus on British history (Cannadine *et al.*, 2011; Sylvester, 1994), and choices were as much influenced by general social and political trends, as by developments in academic history (Cannadine *et al.*, 2011). The establishment of a national curriculum in England in the late 1980s signalled intense government intervention in curriculum issues, which has resulted in increasingly heated arguments about the specific nature of what should be taught (linked more or less explicitly to questions about why children should be taught history and how these purposes could be best achieved).

The National Curriculum in England first came into force in 1991. Introduced by the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher, it had been modified on three previous occasions: in 1995, 1999, and 2007. The first version of the National Curriculum for history identified a series of study units, mainly focused on British history, that had to be taught in chronological order, as well as specifying a number of different historical concepts – organising concepts within the discipline – and processes of enquiry and communication, which should shape students' learning and demonstration of their knowledge and understanding. This curriculum was strongly criticised on a number of grounds, one of which was the excessive amount of prescribed content. Subsequent versions reduced both the number of units and the detail of the prescription, instead outlining periods or themes that had to be studied. By 2007 the curriculum was framed as a series of key themes in British and world history, with very few named events or developments specifically prescribed (although this only applied to students aged 11-14; primary schools were still expected to work with the 1999 version of the

history curriculum). Those that remained were the British Empire, the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, the two World Wars and the Holocaust.

In contrast, the draft proposals for the National Curriculum published in February 2013 were far more prescriptive and detailed. They most closely resembled the approach adopted in the 1991 curriculum, but went even further in their degree of specificity. Pupils aged 7-11 would be expected to cover 14 topics, to be taught in chronological order, encompassing British history from the Stone Age to the early eighteenth century, with a focus on 36 specified individuals, events or issues. Pupils aged 11-14 would be expected to study 20 broad topics, from a British perspective, covering the eighteenth to the twentieth century, and encompassing 52 specific elements (including 33 named individuals). While the important organising concepts and enquiry processes were retained within the statement of the curriculum's aims, they featured far less prominently than in the preceding versions and the new proposed programmes of study were dominated by the extensive lists of compulsory content.

Haydn (2014) argues that the proposals were the result of a decade of increasingly intense argument about history within England:

A polarization of opinion [developed] ... between politicians and history education professionals, with the former determined to resurrect a traditional form of school history, and the latter committed to keeping much of the 'territory' which has been gained over the past two decades in terms of the incorporation of 'New History' ideas and methods into school history. (p. 17)

In particular he notes three key areas of contention:

- the extent to which it is possible to define and teach a single, celebratory view of the past, which is simply 'received' by students;
- whether history should focus on issues perceived as 'relevant' as opposed to a more 'traditional' story of 'great' events in Britain's past; and
- whether there should be a focus on the national story, promoting a sense of 'Britishness' and national identity.

It is against this background that the views of secondary school history teachers in England were collected by the Historical Association, in order to inform its response to the consultation launched by the Coalition government.

### **Literature review**

As already highlighted, a key area of debate in the construction of any curriculum is the question of knowledge, with decisions to be made not merely about the selection of the substantive content, but also about the extent to which learners are to be inducted into the processes by which it has been constructed – its status and structure as knowledge. Within history this manifests itself in debates about history as a body of knowledge, or a form of disciplinary knowledge. Since the inclusion of particular periods, topics, people and events in history tends to confer on them a privileged status, and imply a disregard for those that seem to have been excluded, decisions about substantive knowledge tend to assume considerable political significance, even before consideration

is given to how that knowledge is intended to be deployed and the ways in which its presentation may facilitate its use.

*What type of knowledge is considered 'desirable'?*

*i. History as a body of knowledge*

The idea of history as a body of knowledge is usually linked to the notion of a particular canon that needs to be transmitted, although this can be elaborated with varying degrees of prescription and specificity. In America a number of states have adopted Hirsch's (1987) idea of core knowledge as an entitlement, intended to secure a basic level of cultural literacy for all; a highly prescriptive model that gives very specific detail about what is deemed worth knowing.

While Hirsch argues that giving all young people access to specific items of factual knowledge, will empower them to make sense of and engage with public discourse, this approach to teaching history has been strongly criticised. Cain and Chapman (2014), for example, drawing on Wineburg's analysis of the ways in which historians make sense of unfamiliar texts, argue that knowledge of specific incidents or events is, in itself, of little value. Making sense of accounts of the past depends on an understanding of the process of historical thinking – thinking which Wineburg (2001, 2007) has characterised as counter-intuitive or 'unnatural'. Young and Muller (2010) advance a similar critique, on the basis of a social realist conception of knowledge - a conception, it should be noted, that echoes earlier works, such as Hirst's original definition of 'forms of knowledge' as 'distinct ways in which our experience becomes structured around the use of accepted public symbols' (Hirst, 1965, p128.). To explain their theories (which are further elaborated by Young, 2011, 2016), Muller and Young (2010) outline three different bases on which a curriculum may be constructed (known as Futures 1, 2 and 3). 'Future 1' represents those model in which the core purpose of the curriculum is to provide access to a given canon of knowledge, and is described by Young (2011) as 'knowledge of the powerful'. Young's critique of such models (among which he includes the draft curriculum proposals of 2013) is that they are essentially 'a curriculum of compliance', that fails to introduce young people to the criteria by which these particular claims have some to be accepted as knowledge or to equip them to contribute to its creation. In 'extreme cases' such curricula encourage 'little more than memorisation and rote learning' (Young, 2011, p. 267).

Wilschut (2009) also attacks approaches to creating a definitive list of what young people ought to know that derive from what he defines as a 'cultural' rather than an 'educational' approach to creating a history curriculum<sup>1</sup>. Cultural approaches that fail to consider the distinctive nature of history and what its study is intended to achieve for young people, and instead focus simply on the quantity, range and balance of the content to be included will, he suggests, always prove futile, since they remain open to attack from a range of political stances.

*ii. History as a form of knowledge*

The alternative conception of history for which Cain and Chapman (2014), Young (2011) and Wilschut (2009) are all arguing, is as a form of disciplinary knowledge, in which history is accepted as a social

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<sup>1</sup> Wilschut does actually support the teaching of a canon, but one derived from 'educational' principles that reflect the distinctive contribution of history to young people's understanding of the past rather than 'cultural' principles.

construct. However, curricula based on this conception have assumed different forms, depending on the extent to which attention is primarily focused on understanding how history is constructed, or also acknowledges and emphasises the distinctive features and value of that knowledge: history as a form of knowledge, as opposed to history as a form and body of knowledge.

Too much emphasis on how history is constructed, derived from an emphasis on the practice of historians, with the expectation that young people can work in similar ways, as mini-historians, tends to distract attention from the coherence of the content explored in this way. This is a powerful critique of the curriculum originally developed by the Schools Council History Project (SCHP) (later known as the Schools History Project or SHP) in England that went on to exert considerable influence on the development of GCSE specifications (Sylvester, 1976, 1994). As Counsell has observed, one conclusion that many have drawn from an emphasis on learning history as the development of an understanding of the second-order concepts that shape the nature of the discipline (concepts such as cause and consequence, change and continuity) and of the processes by which knowledge is constructed (through the use of evidence) has been that, since such understanding could arguably be demonstrated through any selection of historical topics, the specific content chosen is essentially 'unimportant' (Counsell, 2000, p.61). Principles for selection can therefore be derived from elsewhere (leaving open the question of whose perspective those choices come to represent).

Wilschut has been more trenchant in his criticism, arguing that an exclusive emphasis on enquiry methods and the construction of accounts fails to take into account history's unique focus on human development over time. The distinctive nature of the subject is lost in a preoccupation with what then become generic enquiry methods:

A lot of the methods of enquiry are not specific to history anyway. Critically evaluating sources in order to establish facts is a skill used by any academic in social and cultural sciences. And so is theorizing about causes and effects, and discussing different interpretations. (Wilschut, 2009, p. 127)

This critique echoes Young's (2011) concerns about what he terms, 'Future 2' curriculum models, in which the emphasis is not on acquiring specific knowledge (that others have defined as important) but on learning how to acquire knowledge and learning to think critically about it – learning how to learn. An exclusive focus on understanding how knowledge is constructed, without sufficient attention to the purposes that such knowledge serves – the power that it bestows as it is mastered – continues to leave young people powerless. History within this model has been reduced to little more than a generic set of competences. Young's critique of Future 1 and Future 2 makes clear why both models have been challenged as the basis of a history curriculum: we face either 'the twin dangers of an authoritarian imposition of the prescribed version of the past, or an absurd and destructive relativism in which any version of the past, is assumed to be as valid (or invalid) as any other' (Harris & Burn, 2011, p. 257).

### *iii. Disciplinary knowledge: history as a body and a form of knowledge*

In response to these criticisms, Young and Muller's (2010) 'Future 3' - a social realist model of knowledge, offers a compelling alternative. This approach embraces the fact that knowledge is socially constructed, and that it is this very fact – the creation of knowledge by a subject community operating within agreed conventions and shared standards by which the authority of claims are



judged – that gives knowledge its power. However, respect for the distinctive nature of historical knowledge means paying attention to the parameters of different disciplines as they have been constructed by subject communities, recognising the particular value and purposes served by that kind of knowledge. Wilschut (2009) in the Netherlands, and Lee (2011) and Shemilt (2009) in the UK are among those who argue that the unique contribution of the study of history to the education of young people is its concern with the fourth dimension: human development over time. It is this dimension that distinguishes history from other social sciences. It is distance in time that makes historical thinking so ‘unnatural’ (Wineburg, 2001); that makes reading and interpreting historical sources dependent on more than just factual knowledge and different from critical reading of yesterday’s newspaper. More importantly in determining the content of the curriculum, it is only an appreciation of the process of change and continuity over time that enables young people to orientate themselves within a continuum that connects past and future. To achieve that purpose attention has to be given to equipping young people with a usable framework of historical knowledge – linking the past effectively to the present and so to the future.

### *Contested conceptions of frameworks of knowledge*

The notion of a creating a framework of knowledge is intrinsically tied to the question of how one expects young people to deploy their knowledge of the past. Establishing a coherent frame of reference through the carefully planned accumulation of knowledge has several benefits. A framework allows students to trace the interrelationship between events and thus to contextualise them. It allows students to generate analogies between different events in very different periods. Our understanding of similarities and differences across time, patterns of development and why things happen, according to Rüsen’s (2004) concept of historical consciousness, shapes the way we make sense of the present, and so influences how we see future actions, thereby giving students more nuanced and deeper insights into events, as well as possible future. Thus our knowledge of the past and the way we make sense of it becomes a central question for history educators (Lee 2005).

However, as the Usable Historical Pasts (UHP) project (Foster, Ashby, Lee & Howson 2008), showed few students have been able to construct a usable framework to orientate themselves in time. As part of the project 47 students, aged 14-16 from three London schools, were asked to outline the history of Britain over the past 2000 years. Few students were able to provide an explanatory or thematic account of this history, with the majority of them only able to express their ideas as a fragmented, episodic series of events rather than within any kind of coherent framework. Although this was a relatively small-scale study, it suggests that much more attention needs to be paid to supporting young people in developing a more coherent framework of knowledge. Yet there is debate about what actually constitutes such a framework and how it can be best achieved.

The draft curriculum proposals in England present a particular model of a framework; namely teaching a ‘coherent, chronological narrative’ (DfE, 2013a, p. 165), starting in the distant past and working forwards to more recent periods, but focused specifically on the national story. This offers what appears to be a straightforward and intuitive approach to developing children’s framework of the past by covering events sequentially. However this common-sense assumption has been challenged on the grounds that teaching children events in chronological order does not necessarily improve their sense of chronology, as Stow and Haydn (2000) have demonstrated. Rather than building knowledge in sequence, research has suggested that children actually ‘make sense of

historical time by comparing people, events, and periods to certain reference points' (Barton, 2009, p. 267). They therefore need a broad framework of reference to explore connections between and within periods of time.

Yet the nature of such a framework has been hotly debated. Rogers (1987), who regards it as essential to build up historical knowledge, argues for a 'patch' approach', picking on specific events that will illuminate the big issues - the political, economic and social trends that have shaped the modern world. In this approach the curriculum would need to focus on particular themes and their development across a sufficiently wide range of periods to allow for comparisons to be explored, and in sufficient depth to allow stronger insights to be gained.

In contrast, Wilschut (2009) argues for a much more structured approach, as exemplified in the current Dutch curriculum model (Kurstjens 2007; van Drie, Logtenberg, van der Meijden & van Riessen, 2009; Wilschut, 2009), which sets out ten prescribed periods (ordered chronologically), each with its own specific label to identify key developments (such as the title 'era of monks and knights' for the period AD 500-1000) and a small number (3-6) of defining characteristics. The lack of further prescription is intended to allow for flexible selection of content at the discretion of the teacher and/or students, while the shared over-arching framework is what makes orientation in time possible. While the curriculum has been criticised for its exclusive focus on Western European history (de Vos, 2009) Wilschut argues that this helps to provide it with its associative power for Dutch students. The framework of eras 'by using imaginative names could support the development of thinking in time, because it attributes different characters to different periods, thus articulating the amorphous mass of "back then"' (Wilschut, 2009, p. 134). Despite concerns that the examination structure (if not the curriculum itself) tends to encourage young people to accept the framework as given (van Drie *et al.*, 2009), Wilschut's hope is that it can serve as a 'scaffold' for future learning and not a cage enabling students to fill in the gaps for themselves as they start to make connections within and across time periods.

Lee (2007) and Shemilt (2009), however (from whom the phrase 'scaffold not a cage' is borrowed) (Shemilt, 2000) argue for much bigger, broader pictures than that envisioned in the Dutch curriculum. Shemilt (2009) advocates a focus on four themes (modes of production, political and social organisation, growth and movement of peoples, and culture and praxis), which would ideally cover the span of human history and have a global reach. Such frameworks would allow students to contextualise, organise and evaluate ideas and issues, and would serve as instruments for teaching rather than outcomes. For both Lee and Shemilt, these frameworks would be taught quickly as a starting point, establishing key thematic changes to be examined, with recurring questions to be asked at each new stage, related to the central theme of that framework. In looking, for example at changing power structures, Lee (2007) suggests that students would be encouraged to ask the same broad questions over time – questions such as 'Who rules?', 'What do they rule?', 'How do they rule?' and so forth in order to determine patterns of continuity and change over time, thereby identifying the dominant trajectories and most significant shifts within them. While these frameworks are intended to serve as 'provisional factual scaffolds' (Howson and Shemilt, 2011, p.73) – subject to challenge and refinement as the students explore specific developments within them – the assumption, as for Wilschut, is that they would help students to develop more sophisticated narratives of the past, appreciating the 'big picture', rather than perceiving the past as 'a formless collection of events' (Lee, 2007, p. 60).

Overall there seems to be a consensus that students need to develop a framework of knowledge. Yet the nature of such frameworks and how they should be developed remain open to debate. Lee (2007) acknowledges that it is difficult to know what kinds of historical frameworks are needed since too little is yet known about how students actually develop and use them. Howson and Shemilt (2011) sketch out the range of ways in which such frameworks could vary – according to their temporal scale (within a period, across periods, to the expanse of human existence), spatial scale (the local area, nation states, empires, civilisations and global matters) and human scale (sub-groups, to communities, cultures and humankind). While they advocate much more teaching using the very largest scale frameworks, they point out that very little research has yet been conducted exploring how effective such frameworks might be in equipping young people with usable ‘big pictures’ of the past and helping them to connect past, present and future.

#### *Teachers’ understanding of the ways in which students deploy knowledge*

Debates about the type of knowledge that students need and how they make use of it are starting to become more visible in the thinking of a few history teachers in England – partly in response to the revised history curriculum proposals, and partly in response to projects like the UHP. Some (for example Rogers, 2008; Nuttall, 2013) have focused specifically on the idea of frameworks and developing students’ historical consciousness, whilst others have been paying more attention to the role and importance of particular substantive knowledge (see, for example, Brown and Burnham, 2014; Fordham, 2016; Hammond, 2014; Palek, 2015). In the context of studying Nazi Germany, Hammond (2014) identifies both the types of social, cultural, political and economic knowledge upon which students could draw, and the contexts from which such knowledge might derive: not only from study of that particular topic, but also from an understanding of the wider context in which that period is located, or drawn from across a range of periods, bringing in parallels and analogous situations. This emphasis on developing a wider contextual knowledge, from within a period and across periods, to explore recurring patterns of human behaviour and to look at similarities and differences, has already inspired others to consider how they could help students to develop and apply such knowledge, and how it should be assessed (Brown & Burnham, 2014; Ford, 2014). Teachers have, for example, been exploring both the role that the construction of timelines (from memory) might play in this process (Carr & Counsell, 2014) and the ways in which students’ understanding of particular substantive concepts (such as ‘empire’ or ‘parliament’) might be expected to change and develop as they study a wider range of specific examples of the phenomenon in different contexts over time (Fordham, 2013).

#### *What do history teachers think should be studied?*

While this exploration of how knowledge can be built systematically over time has obvious implications for content selection and curriculum construction, there has, as yet, been little research into history teachers’ views of what should be taught within the history curriculum. Rather more is known about their views of the nature and purpose of the subject (see for example Clark, 2012; McCrum, 2013; Virta, 2001), but in relation to content, most attention has so far been paid to the views of politicians, academic historians, and the popular press (Haydn, 2012).

Husbands, Kitson and Pendry (2003) offer one of the few insights into the views of history teachers about curriculum content; as part of their study eight experienced history teachers in English schools were asked about a range of issues, including the substantive content that they thought should be

taught. Although the teachers, when pressed about content tended to opt for 'mainstream' topics such as the Norman Conquest, the Reformation, the English Civil War and the world wars, the dominant impression that emerged from discussions with them was of their disinclination to designate any particular content as essential: 'what binds them is their reluctance to be dogmatic about what should and should not be taught' (Husbands *et al.*, 2003, p. 120).

Given the limited insights we have of history teachers' views about what young people should know about the past, the data presented here, collected from a national survey sent to all schools in England, therefore provide a unique opportunity to examine the views of history teachers and what they believe would constitute a suitable range and type of content to include in a national curriculum.

### **Research design**

The study reported here draws on data gathered through an on-line survey sent to all history teachers in secondary schools in England, on behalf of the Historical Association (HA), a membership organisation for all those interested in history (both professionals and enthusiasts) with a strong commitment to supporting history education. Since 2009 the HA has conducted an annual survey of history teachers in secondary schools, asking a broad range of questions about history teaching to gauge the 'health' of the subject. This paper is based on data collected as part of the 2013 survey, sent to all schools in England. A range of questions was asked covering history teaching across the 11-18 age range, but one specific section focused on history teachers' reactions to the set of proposals for redrafting the history National Curriculum, which had been released some weeks earlier, in February 2013 (DfE, 2013a).

Teachers were first invited to respond to a series of statements about the draft proposals (Appendix B), using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. They were then invited to add 'any additional comments' that they wished to make about the proposed curriculum. The data presented in this paper draws upon some of the Likert scale responses where appropriate but it is mainly the unstructured, additional comments that constitute the data analysed in this paper.

In total, 544 history teachers currently teaching in English schools responded to these questions about the draft curriculum proposals. Of these 544 provided responses to the Likert scale statements, while 389 teachers gave more detailed comments to the open-ended response. Of the 544 who responded to the Likert scale statements 251 were history teachers in state maintained English comprehensive schools (controlled by local authorities); 209 were in newer style academies (former comprehensives that had converted to academy status, now funded directly by central government, freeing them from local authority control); 26 were in older style academies (deliberately established in areas of low socio-economic status, and regarded as being in 'challenging circumstances'); a further 46 were in independent (private) schools; and 11 in grammar (selective) schools; with one response from a special needs school. This equates to approximately 15% of older style academies, 10% of independent schools, and 8% of grammar schools. Given the number of schools switching rapidly from comprehensive to academy status it is difficult to calculate exactly what proportion of these types of school responded to the survey, but the figure for their combined responses represents approximately 15% of the combined total of comprehensives and new academies. Of the 389 who provided additional comments 166 were teachers in state-maintained

comprehensive schools, 131 from newer style academies and 12 from older style academies. In addition ten responses were received from grammar schools, while 36 came from independent schools. The remainder of respondents either did not provide details of their school or were from other sectors, such as sixth form colleges. Responses were received from across the country, but the North West and Yorkshire and the Humber regions were somewhat under-represented, as were the East and West Midlands. While the North East region and the East were more accurately represented among the respondents, the southern regions – particularly the South East – were over-represented (based on statistics from the ONS, 2013).

While some of the 389 comments were only a sentence or two in length, many of the respondents felt so passionately about the nature of what had been proposed that they wrote at considerable length, with five responses of more than 750 words, the longest of which ran to 1351 words. In total the data amounted to just over 45,000 words, with the mean length of each comment being around 110 words. In analysing the data, we addressed two central research questions:

1. What do their reactions to the proposed prescribed content knowledge reveal about teachers' views about what young people should be taught;
2. What do teachers' reactions reveal about their understanding of the nature and purpose of history?

This paper reports on teachers' responses to the first of these questions.

While the content of the comments was almost certainly influenced by the nature of the previous statements (Appendix B) teachers were free to write about the issues of greatest concern to them as they explained and elaborated their previous judgments. In this regard the draft proposals (Appendix A) provide the main context for understanding the respondents' comments, which are obviously far from being simple or explicit statements about what history teachers believe pupils should learn; they are very clearly a reaction to a specific set of proposals. While they do include some explicit statements about what should be included, inferences about the respondents' views of what would be appropriate can also be drawn from their rejection of certain elements as unacceptable.

The two researchers were both engaged in analysis of the open-ended comments (using the software programme NVivo), which essentially followed an inductive approach. We independently read through the first 40 comments (10% of the data) selecting those elements that seemed to be relevant to our focus and forming initial codes, as closely related to the data as possible, by which they could be identified. It was decided that all comments would be assigned a code, and the unit of analysis focused on discrete phrases or sentences. At that point we came together to compare our selections and the codes attached to them, refining the scope of our interest, modifying terms and beginning to identify emerging themes. Having identified a provisional list of codes, we separately sought to apply them to another 40 comments and an inter-coder reliability check showed an average 80 per cent agreement for the codes reported in this paper. Further discussion of the few discrepancies was used to clarify and confirm the codes and their definitions and thereafter we worked separately with one researcher focused exclusively on the teachers' consideration of the substantive content to be included within the curriculum and the other dealing with the more explicit comments made by the teachers about the nature and purpose of history. Any uncertainties

about the inclusion of particular data or the code to be assigned to it continued to be resolved together. The following codes were assigned to teachers' comments about the substantive content:

- Relevance: teachers' perceptions of the extent to which students would find the specified content relevant to understanding the world in which they live today
- Geographical spread: reference to the study of any particular region (either the history of Britain – or its constituent parts – or of other regions of the world (in general or as specified regions)
- Positioning: reflections on the particular stance or position from which the proposals seemed to have been constructed. e.g. the assumption of a patriotic view of British history
- Perspective: reference to particular dimensions or types of history. (This reflects the requirement in previous versions of the national curriculum to study history from various perspectives: political, economic, religious, social and cultural.)
- Specific nature of the content: the degree of specificity with which the content was expressed
- Quantity: the extent of the prescribed content in terms of the number of elements to be included.

As part of the analysis responses were considered in relation to school type, but as this revealed no particular patterns, the findings are set out under the codes that were identified, and illustrated by comments from the full spectrum of school respondents.

## Findings

Overall the reaction to the proposed changes to the curriculum was hostile; indeed only four responses suggested that they welcomed the proposals.

### ***An analysis of history teachers' views on appropriate substantive subject knowledge***

#### *The relevance of the proposed content*

In total 61 comments were coded in relation to the issue of relevance and none of them endorsed the suggested content selection as relevant to young people. Although the vast majority of responses were undeveloped, simply commenting that the proposed content was irrelevant and uninspiring for students, around a third gave an explanation for the views offered. Of these explanations ten focused on the lack of ethnic diversity within the prescribed curriculum and its consequent lack of relevance to students living in a multicultural society or to those from a minority ethnic background:

Modern-day secondary students in a multi-cultural nation will not benefit nor even engage in such content. *Teacher 86, State-maintained comprehensive school, South East, rural setting*

For many students with connections to the rest of the world how will this proposal be relevant to them? *Teacher 188, State-maintained comprehensive school, West Midlands, major urban conurbation*

Seven teachers felt that the proposals were so content-heavy that they would lack the flexibility to choose topics they felt would be of local relevance to their students. A handful of teachers argued that there were several topics highly relevant to students that had not been included among the list of proposed topics – topics such as the Civil Rights Movement in the USA or the attacks of 9/11.

In part the concerns were based on the assumption that the content list would become a diet of dry factual information, as well as on the view that it represented an old-fashioned notion of what events and individuals are worth studying. It was on these grounds that the value of studying the Corn Laws, Wolfe and the capture of Quebec and Clive of India were questioned.

### *The geographical spread of the proposed content*

One of the main emphases within the proposed history curriculum was the study of key events in British history. Two of the statements for the Likert scale responses focused on this issue (Statements 7 and 8 in Appendix B), asking explicitly whether respondents thought there was an appropriate amount of history focused on Britain and an appropriate proportion of European and wider world history. In both cases there was a strong rejection of the proposed curriculum, with over 77% indicating they disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that there was an appropriate proportion of British history and 85% regarding the proportion of European or wider world history included in the proposals as inappropriate.

[Insert Tables 1 and 2 here]

This dissatisfaction with this element of the curriculum was also evident in the additional written comments. Eighty-nine comments were coded under this theme, four of which endorsed the proposals' emphasis on British history. However the majority of comments were critical, with 44 undeveloped comments suggesting there was far too much British history or that too little attention was paid to the history of other countries or cultures; the implied criticism being that the proposals' narrow focus on Britain presented a blinkered, inappropriate view of the past.

[It] promotes one view of world history – that Britain is at the heart of it and has shaped it. I don't mind a focus on British history and promoting cultural identities but I think this one story is not broad enough to engage many and it also is not accurate of our broad history and seems to ignore wider context. *Teacher 52 'New' academy, London, major urban conurbation*

An additional 18 comments made more developed points, highlighting an undue emphasis on British history but providing an explanation focused on the need for a broader view of the world, given the globalised nature of the society for which young people should be prepared:

It has a narrowly British focus. Surely there should be a bit of space for producing citizens for a European and global world, and who thus have some awareness or other societies and cultures? There is a sweeping and self-contradictory comment in the Aims about knowing and understanding the broad outlines of European and world history, but that is ridiculous in the context of the long list of British history that is specified. *Teacher 217, State-maintained grammar school, East Midlands, rural town*

This is a very Anglo-centric curriculum and surely this is a time for us to be thinking globally. *Teacher 270, Independent school (no locational information provided)*

A number of teachers went further in their criticisms. Not only were they concerned about the emphasis on British history, they felt that the choice of content presented a distorted view of the past:

Gove seems to have simply made the selection himself, and it is deeply political, highly biased selection. He has selected predominantly British, political events, and ones that glorify the elites, the military and the pursuit of Empire, using terminology that hasn't been used by serious historians for years. *Teacher 9, Independent school, South East, major urban conurbation*

The programme [offers a] narrow-minded and outdated analysis as seen through the eyes of former British supremacy - ignoring the realities of history and of modern Britain. *Teacher 41, 'New' academy, London, major conurbation*

In addition, there was a small number of comments suggesting that the curriculum should seek to develop students' knowledge of local or personal history, which would be of relevance to young people.

The comments about the geographic range of the proposed content suggest that many history teachers believe that the curriculum should allow students to develop insights into aspects of world history, now deemed to be relevant to those living in Britain, rather than simply focusing on Britain's past influence on others. There were no comments suggesting that students should not study British history, but there was a clear sense from the responses that the balance between British history and the history of other countries and cultures was not appropriate, and that the terms in which British history was presented essentially distorted current understandings of the past.

#### *The positioning of the curriculum*

There were 80 comments which made some reference to the position from which the curriculum had been framed, i.e. whether it was felt the content was chosen to present a particular perspective on the past. Generally the responses showed that teachers felt that the choice of content was exclusive, jingoistic, overly simplistic, politicised and/or elitist.

Most comments, 33 in total, focused on what was missing from the curriculum, namely the history of minority ethnic groups or women. The concern was that this would create a lop-sided view of the past, by omitting the rich diversity of experiences, with the potential danger of 'othering' those who did not appear in the curriculum:

Black and Asian people make no appearance in the primary curriculum at all and apart from glancing references only appear as slaves or as the Windrush generation in the secondary curriculum. This reinforces the dangerous sense that that non-white people are somehow 'other' and harks back to a mythical age of ethnic purity ... it is not just white Protestant male winners that matter: ordinary working class people, the marginalised, women, and non-white ethnic groups all matter as does



the full richness of human experience including cultural, economic and social experience. *Teacher 9, Independent school, South East, major urban conurbation*

The list of heroes and heroines clearly leans to the political right on the whole, with some token minorities included. *Teacher 217, State-maintained grammar school, East Midlands, rural town*

The concerns about adopting a jingoistic approach to the past are closely linked to the narrow geographical perspective highlighted above. Not only was there thought to be a narrow focus on British history, but it was felt this was deliberately slanted to focus on the 'glories' of Britain's past.

It speaks to me as a process of indoctrinating students into Michael Gove's ignorant and unrealistic idea of what it means to be 'British' in the 21st century. By Gove's idea of 'British heroes and heroines', I am unpleasantly reminded of Mussolini's education system of teaching Italian imperial history to indoctrinate his young people to follow his fascist ideals. *Teacher 205, State-maintained comprehensive school, London, major urban conurbation*

For some teachers, the draft curriculum appeared to adopt a celebratory 'Whiggish' view of the past, while for others it presented a right-wing perspective; in both cases the teachers seemed to feel the curriculum proposals were heavily politicised, and were little more than propaganda or political indoctrination, rather than a serious attempt to promote a critical engagement with the study of the past.

This suggests that teachers believe that the construction of the history curriculum should not only try to adopt an inclusive approach to content selection, to match the diverse nature of the contemporary classroom, but that the historical content for inclusion should present a nuanced view of the past, bringing in a range of perspectives and positions, and encourage critical thinking and reasoning; in total 23 teachers specifically mentioned the importance of teaching young people about historical interpretations or showing the range of views that exist relating to specific events and topics. Their fears if this did not happen were summed up by one teacher who said:

the focus on learning about the great and the good restricts learning to a one sided dimension which, as historians, goes against the rigour and enquiring nature of our discipline. *Teacher 293, State-maintained comprehensive school, East of England, urban town in sparse setting*

### *The emphasis on political history*

Earlier iterations of the history National Curriculum have required the teaching of a range of perspectives, which were defined as political, economic, religious, social and cultural aspects of history. Statement 9 addressed this point explicitly.

[Insert Table 3 here]

Over 80% of respondents did not feel there was an appropriate balance between political, economic, social, religious and cultural history. Analysis of the additional comments shows that the main concern in the responses was a perceived over-emphasis on the political dimension in the range of

topics proposed. Of 45 comments, 40 specifically reflected on the political nature of the topics chosen; and only one of these included any suggestion that this would be seen as a positive element. For some teachers the emphasis on political history would be exclusionary:

Narrow Anglo-centric curriculum with too much emphasis on political history of the British Isles and tokenistic approach to women. *Teacher 65, State-maintained comprehensive school, North West, urban town*

For other teachers political history was seen as having less connection to the lives of young people, presenting a 'top-down' approach to the past, whereas social history shows:

how people actually lived, which is popular with pupils in my experience, the 'real' history of people. *Teacher 172, State-maintained comprehensive school (no locational information provided)*

Some teachers also highlighted the seemingly arbitrary, and occasionally contradictory, political nature of the topics selected:

Secondly, the political bias of this survey is perverse. Gladstone and Disraeli, but no Palmerston? Thatcher, but no Blair? As a historian I try to show both sides of any argument. *Teacher 35, 4 'New' academy, East Midlands, urban town*

In discussing the predominance of political history, concerns were also expressed by a handful of teachers about the emphasis within this perspective on modern political developments.

While politics was clearly seen as the most dominant aspect, there were also several comments that noted an emphasis in the curriculum on military history. There was some disagreement in responses reflecting on the amount of economic history that had been included; some teachers felt there was too much, others too little. However there was a clear consensus about a distinct lack of social and cultural history.

#### *The specific nature of the proposed curriculum*

What was striking about these proposals in contrast to all those developed since Dearing's 1995 review of the first National Curriculum was the extent to which they sought to specify the topics and events to be studied. The decision to adopt an approach that had widely been acknowledged as unworkable nearly 20 years ago was something that attracted a great deal of criticism, especially as one of the avowed aims of the review of the entire curriculum had been a commitment to reduce prescription for teachers. The introduction of very specific events and people attracted overwhelmingly negative comments while the reactions to Statement 6 show that over 95% of respondents regarded the amount of prescribed content as inappropriate.

[Insert Table 4 here]

This was also reflected in many of the additional comments. The majority of the 54 comments simply criticised the proposal for being too prescriptive without developing a response. Four respondents were clear that the degree of prescription undermined teachers' professional judgement, while nine were concerned that an emphasis on developing factual knowledge of such a wide range of events would make it difficult for students to develop more than a superficial understanding of any of them.

Five argued that this cramming of the curriculum would have a negative impact on pedagogy, with teachers resorting to 'chalk and talk' approaches to teaching:

Some of the more positive developments in terms of the evolution of the History National Curriculum over recent years have been the reduced emphasis on prescribed content and the greater stress placed upon interweaving depth studies and longitudinal surveys that give students a developing sense of the complexity of the discipline they are engaged with.

*Teacher 230, 'New' academy, East of England, urban town*

Although the introduction to the Key Stage 3 curriculum (for students aged 11-14) actually stipulated that 'the teaching of the content should be approached as a combination of overview and in-depth studies' (DfE, 2013a, 169), many respondents clearly took the view that the detailed specification of so many topics would effectively make it impossible to tackle any of them in depth.

Some teachers were also bemused by the rationale behind the choice of topics:

The list of topics and people is odd to say the least especially when we are supposed to teach students about historical significance but someone has arbitrarily decided who is and isn't significant. *Teacher 97, 'New' academy, North East, major urban conurbation*

Overall there was only one comment that was welcoming the introduction of specified topics, but even this was concerned about the level of prescription:

I welcome the addition of some topics, such as the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars, but there are too many individual topics that will inevitably lead to one off lessons that are incredibly dull – something we never currently suffer from. There need to be certain topics we have to cover, but with less dictation about what information/aspects of it need to be studied. *Teacher 116, 'New' academy, East of England, rural town*

#### *The amount of material expected to be covered*

The number of detailed topics, people and events to be covered attracted the greatest volume of feedback. In all 105 comments were related to this point, and three key concerns were raised. Alongside a general concern about the sheer amount of content, 32 responses highlighted the imbalance between the proposals for the primary and secondary school curricula; primary schools were expected to cover history from the Stone Age to the eighteenth century, whereas secondary schools would be expected to focus only on the period after 1745. This concern was also evident in the Likert scale responses to Statement 5. Nearly 95% of teachers either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that the amount of content to be covered in primary school would provide a secure foundation for history in secondary school.

[Insert Table 5 here]

Logistical concerns were raised by 35 respondents, worried about the limited amount of curriculum time that schools devoted to history, and/or the lack of specialist history teachers in primary schools able to teach this range of subject matter. A further 25 teachers argued that the lack of curriculum

time in relation to such an ambitious list of prescribed content would restrict students to a superficial understanding of history as there simply would not be the time to examine things in any depth, which would impede students' ability to contextualise events and make connections. Additional responses focused more specifically on the quality of learning:

The new curriculum seems to be focussed on students "learning stuff" rather than being educated. There is so much stuff to learn that critical thinking and interpretation of History will be driven out of the curriculum. *Teacher 251, 'New' academy (no locational information provided)*

In part this would impede students' ability to contextualise events and make connections within and across periods:

To teach Catholic emancipation in key stage 3 [pupils aged 11-13/14] relies on effective teaching of the Reformation in key stage 2 [pupils aged 7-11] where time is squeezed on the foundation subjects. *Teacher 8, state-maintained comprehensive school, South East, urban town*

#### *The chronological nature of the proposals*

One of the key features of the curriculum proposals was the intention to insist on a strict chronological approach to teaching. Although nearly 20% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that this would help young people develop a strong chronological framework of the past, more than 70% of teachers rejected this claim.

[Insert Table 6 here]

This lack of conviction about the value of teaching in strict chronological sequence was also evident in teachers' written comments. Twenty-five responses referred directly to the sequence of chronological topics and most were supportive of the claim that students need to develop secure frameworks or overviews of the past that would allow them to identify patterns of change and continuity or to determine the significance of particular events or developments. What they questioned was how such usable frameworks could actually be constructed.

The writers also appear ignorant of the difference between teaching chronology, and simply teaching things in order - They are NOT the same thing! *Teacher 319, state-maintained comprehensive school, South East, urban town*

The chronological approach of the draft is crass and produced with poor reference to the well-thought out programmes of study already being used. We ...teach Years 7,8,9 with respect to themes which allows us to teach chronologically from 1066-1950s in each year, constantly revisiting layers of knowledge within different themes, cross-referencing and looking from different cultural perspectives. We believe this is good history with a valuable use of chronology as a tool for giving a sense of place. *Teacher 297, 'new' academy, North West, urban town*

Its division of topics by key stage means children at best will learn some facts by rote, but won't be able to properly see the flow of historical events, or understand

the influence of earlier history on more modern events. *Teacher 6, state-maintained comprehensive school, South East, urban town*

## Discussion

### *Government response to the consultation process*

Following the consultation and the overwhelmingly negative reaction to the proposals, including the findings from this survey, which were shared with the government, significant changes were made in the final version of the National Curriculum (DfE, 2013b). One enduring element was the essentially chronological structure of the curriculum (although the break between primary and secondary history switched from the mid-eighteenth century to the death of Edward the Confessor in 1066). The vast majority of the content that had originally been prescribed was, however, now presented as optional topics for inclusion within an overarching heading, suggesting that the government had accepted arguments about the pressure on curriculum time and the inappropriate detail of the prescription, while remaining wedded to a chronological approach as the basis of any over-arching framework. New elements were also included focusing on local history and study of a significant society or issue in world history, broadening the potential relevance of the curriculum and its geographic range and implying some acknowledgement of teachers' concerns about the original proposals' narrow, and potentially alienating focus on that national story. Given the political rhetoric about the then Secretary of State's preference for a particular model of history education, the changes reflect a remarkable turnaround, and perhaps a recognition of the need to work more closely with teachers as agents of change (Spillane *et al.*, 2002).

### *Insights into teachers' understanding of curriculum content*

The teachers' reactions provide us with interesting insights into their views about the curriculum. In particular there is a clear rejection of any curriculum that resembles Young and Muller's (2010) description of a 'Future 1', or a Hirschian style 'cultural literacy' model. There is deep unease among these teachers about government attempts to prescribe in detail the events that should be included. Although a national curriculum has existed for over 20 years in England, prescribing a specific set of events and individuals was seen as tantamount to an imposed canon and triggered concerns about the curriculum being used as a political tool intended to promote a particular, celebratory view of the past. In this sense, the respondents to the draft felt that the government had over-stepped the mark – not only determining the view to be taken of events in such a way that content becomes 'dangerous' (Counsell, 2000), but also overloading the curriculum to such an extent that it eliminated any scope for critical reasoning necessary in understanding history as a form of constructed knowledge. It is not that history teachers dismiss the value of knowledge, rather that they see history as being more than a body of knowledge.

However, beyond a rejection of a prescribed curriculum, there is little theoretical clarity over the type of curriculum content that should exist. In some ways the calls for a broader more inclusive curriculum mirrors what Wilschut (2009) dismisses as a search for a 'culturally' acceptable curriculum, which is ultimately doomed to failure due to the impossibility of this task. There is also a sense that teachers want content that is seen as relevant or interesting to the students they teach, and that this should include a wider geographical range of topics, locating British history within a

broader context so that students can better understand the world in which they live today. While the desire to promote a better understanding of the contemporary world could be linked to an appreciation of history as the study of human development over time, these teachers' emphasis tends here to imply a stronger concern with contextual rather than conceptual coherence (Muller, 2009), while their focus on engaging with the interests of students implies a 'Future 2' curriculum model, in which 'market forces' (such as making the subject appealing to students) help to determine what is to be taught.

Yet in other respects these teachers appear to support a 'disciplinary' approach (Cain & Chapman 2014) or 'Future 3' model of the curriculum (Young, 2011, 2016; Young & Muller, 2010). Two of the teachers' main points of contention are the proposals' emphasis on a narrow, celebratory view of British history, and the use of a chronological approach to teaching the past. The teachers' responses revealed a deep-seated anxiety about teaching the former, rejecting the idea of a narrow, celebratory narrative. Instead they recognised that there are alternative ways of seeing the past, from multiple, potentially competing perspectives, which in turn may imply understanding why alternative views of the past exist. Indeed one of the innovations in the first history National Curriculum was the requirement to teach explicitly about historical interpretations, in order that students should understand both the different ways in which the past has been interpreted and why different interpretations exist. This requirement has continued in subsequent iterations of the curriculum, and it was actually preserved in the proposed aims of the new curriculum. These ideas fit into Lee's (2005, 2011) notion of 'historical literacy' which implies that students understand how claims in history are made, but also hold dispositions that make them open to questioning the validity of stories, and as such emphasises a 'disciplinary approach' to the study of the past.

The teachers in the survey also expressed concerns about the limitations of a simplistic approach to developing young people's chronological understanding, although these concerns were not as strongly held as others, and were certainly not universal. Indeed, around 20% of the teachers felt that the underlying chronological approach would be entirely suitable. In many ways teaching events in chronology order seems to be an intuitive way to develop a sense of flow through time, and indeed as Cannadine *et al.* (2011) have shown, this was the dominant model in history teaching through much of the twentieth century in England. However, as the UHP project (Foster *et al.*, 2008) revealed, few students seem to emerge from the experience of studying history in this way with a coherent framework of the past, which they can use to orientate themselves in time. This has led to some small-scale teacher experiments (Rogers, 2008; Nuttall, 2013) to develop students' 'historical consciousness' (Rüsen, 2004), but few firm conclusions have been established. While the 2007 version of the National Curriculum (QCA, 2007) offered secondary school teachers the opportunity to experiment with different ways of structuring a course, by offering a number of themes (rather than a chronological list of periods) which could be explored on different scales, the curriculum review immediately instigated by the Coalition government in 2010 meant there was little incentive for teachers to explore those possibilities or to evaluate alternative models. The SHP and subsequent GCSE specifications have, of course, made it possible to teach one particular theme over time (most commonly the history of medicine) with a focus on change and continuity, but this single theme is obviously quite specific and the examination courses have proved relatively limited scope to relate it consistently to the broader context and wider patterns in development. While many of the teachers responding to the survey clearly question the adequacy of a single chronological sweep through time in providing young people with a usable big picture of the past, they rarely suggest any

kind of developed alternative. There are few signs that teachers are thinking in terms of developing frameworks of knowledge, which is a matter of some concern given their emphasis on history as a tool for developing young people's understanding of the present. Given the central role that such a usable framework serves plays in what it means to be historically literate (Lee, 2011), teachers' apparent lack of ideas as to how this can best be achieved, prompts us to endorse Howson and Shemilt's (2011) argument that more research is needed not only into the kinds of framework that are most desirable but that actually prove to be teachable.

### *Final thoughts*

Although constrained by the specific proposals to which they were responding, this study provides a fascinating insight into the neglected perspectives of history teachers themselves and their understanding of debates about knowledge in the curriculum. Overall there is a clear sense of what these history teachers do not want in a curriculum, with some indications, but rather less clarity, about what they do want. It is apparent that much of the theoretical debate about the curriculum and its implications for content selection, particularly the role of frameworks, does not appear to be part of many teachers' conscious reflections. Consequently these teachers' views show a mixture of theoretical ideas, with elements both of 'Future 2' thinking, especially with regard to the need for relevant and interesting material, and of 'Future 3' in the emphasis on a disciplinary approach. This undoubtedly reflects more general developments in relation to school curricula, with significant shifts in national policy, particularly the drift towards Future 2 that characterised much of the thinking about the National Curriculum under the last Labour administration (Harris & Burn, 2011) and the lurch back to Future 1 embodied in the Coalition's draft proposals. There remain powerful tensions for teachers caught between trying to develop young people's understanding of history, while seeking to serve the more generic aims of school education. As Lee (2011) has argued, these do not necessarily need to be in tension, but it is only by properly respecting the nature and focus of history as a form and body of knowledge, that history can actually meet the wider aims of education and prepare young people for life in democratic society. Our research suggests, however, that this remains difficult to achieve while history teachers themselves have been given little encouragement or sustained support to explore the question of how young people could best develop a usable historical framework of the past.

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