

How far did the toppling of the Colston statue in 2020 impact upon primary history subject-leaders' curriculum decision-making in North-West England?

Ailsa Fidler

To cite this article: Ailsa Fidler (2022): How far did the toppling of the Colston statue in 2020 impact upon primary history subject-leaders' curriculum decision-making in North-West England?, Education 3-13, DOI: [10.1080/03004279.2022.2069841](https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2022.2069841)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2022.2069841>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 01 May 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1759



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

How far did the toppling of the Colston statue in 2020 impact upon primary history subject-leaders' curriculum decision-making in North-West England?

Ailsa Fidler 

Primary Education, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK

ABSTRACT

This is a qualitative research study which investigates the curriculum decision-making of four primary school history subject-leaders in the North-West of England. A grounded theory approach was utilised. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the subject-leaders and an audit of their schools' history curriculum completed. The curriculum was altered in response to the Colston statue toppling in three schools, the subject-leaders faced several challenges. Further research is needed to discover more about the role of primary history subject-leaders and the agency they can achieve as curriculum-makers. It is also argued that Black British history should be included in the History National Curriculum for England.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 11 April 2022

Accepted 15 April 2022

KEYWORDS

Primary; curriculum; subject-leaders; history; diversity

1. Introduction

The murder of George Floyd, in May 2020, triggered Black Lives Matter (BLM) demonstrations globally. These anti-racist protests focused attention upon the treatment of Black people in the past and present (Bracey 2020). The events were set against a backdrop of ongoing racial disparities in England: the COVID-19 crisis which has disproportionately impacted Black communities and the Windrush scandal of 2018, as examples (Runnymede 2021). The statue of Edward Colston was pulled down as part of a demonstration in Bristol; it became a focus for protesters because of Colston's involvement in the enslavement of African people as part of the transatlantic slave trade (Grey 2020).

These events raised awareness about the position of Black history within the English National Curriculum (NC) (Batty, Parveen, and Thomas 2021). Schools' Minister, Nick Gibb, in response to calls for the teaching of Black British history to become mandatory, stated that it can already be taught as part of the current History NC (DfE 2013b). The teaching of Black British history in English schools currently requires teachers to make the decision to include it.

1.1. The primary History National Curriculum

All maintained schools in England must follow the NC and those that do not should use it as a benchmark for quality (DFE 2013a). History is a 'Foundation Subject' which should be taught throughout a child's primary education (DFE 2013a).

CONTACT Ailsa Fidler  a.j.fidler@ljmu.ac.uk

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

Until the inception of the NC in England in 1988, history was often not taught in primary schools as it was considered inaccessible for young children (Cooper 2018). The introduction of the History NC ensured that earlier ideas about history's lack of accessibility have been discredited (Cooper 2006). Children enjoy learning about the past and can do so (Ofsted 2011). However, thinking about the subject, within the primary context, is still in its infancy, therefore research is limited.

The NC for History (2013) sets out aims and a purpose which are the same for all key stages. Its latest incarnation saw several changes being made during the consultation stage, due to widespread criticism (Boffey 2013). The aims of the final version outline that history teaching should enable children to acquire knowledge and understand how it is built within the subject, and aligns with Cooper (2006), who suggested that learning about how historians work is a vital aspect of learning history. This focus upon the disciplinary aspects of the subject goes beyond what the government of the time appeared to want from the dominant narrative of the proposed history curriculum.

That was a document which set out to tell the chronological narrative of 'Our Island Story' and end what government saw as the 'trashing of our past' (Gove 2010). The new version situated the national narrative within its aims, stating all pupils should, 'know and understand the history of these islands as a coherent, chronological narrative' (DfE 2013b, n.p). Moncrieffe (2020) posits it is Eurocentric and hegemonic, encouraging the reproduction of 'whiteness'. Black British history is absent. The Black Curriculum, an organisation which wants to see the teaching of Black British history included across the NC states it:

... systematically omits the contribution of Black British history in favour of a dominant White, Eurocentric curriculum, one that fails to reflect our multi-ethnic and broadly diverse society. (Arday 2021, 4)

However, whilst the content can be seen to be lacking, the purpose states (DfE 2013b, n.p):

History helps pupils to understand ... the diversity of societies and relationships between different groups.

The onus is on teachers to include different histories; their curriculum-decision making is key.

There has been limited work about the curriculum-decisions, and the challenges surrounding them, made by English primary history teachers; the research to date has related to secondary practitioners (Harris and Reynolds 2018) or has not been subject-specific. Woolley (2018) highlights the absence of research about the impact of the NC on history teaching in the classroom. Doharty (2019) has outlined the lack of research into the teaching of Black History in English schools.

This paper sets out to use the toppling of the Colston statue as a lens through which to focus on primary history subject-leaders' curriculum decision-making by considering the following:

- (1) What do subject-leaders perceive as the challenges to curriculum decision-making?
- (2) How did the subject-leaders feel about the position of Black History within the primary history NC before and after the toppling of the Colston statue?

2. Literature review

There is a paucity of research about the curriculum-making decisions of primary history subject-leaders or how Black British history is taught in schools. This literature review has therefore considered the discipline of history alongside Young's theories of Powerful Knowledge (PK) to briefly consider some elements of thinking about what the school history curriculum should be.

2.1. Curriculum

Curriculum is a social construct and practice enacted by humans who come to it with prior experiences (Unwin and Yandell 2016). It is organic (Ashbee 2021) and the 'very heart of education' (Spielman 2017). For this paper, curriculum will be taken to be the totality of the learning experiences that students have, because of school-based learning experiences (Priestley 2019; Kelly 2009).

2.2. Knowledge and the discipline of history

Young (2018) posits that the primary concern of a school, through their curriculum, is access to PK. The social realist theory of PK, that knowledge which is empowering and enables those who have it to question it, has been influential in the development of recent English curriculum policy (Young and Lambert 2014).

Lee (2017) proposed that without an understanding of history as a discipline, one which supports the development of a conceptual framework with which students can understand how historical claims are made and can be tested, there is no point in studying history. Cooper's work established that children aged 3–5 were capable of 'embryonic historical thinking' which can be built on in structured ways in KS1 and beyond (2002, 38). Harnett (1993) found that children from 5 upwards were able to identify differences between the past and present, thus engaging in disciplinary thinking.

The study of history should involve both substantive and disciplinary aspects, 'each is meaningless without the other' (Ofsted 2021, n.p). The History NC's purpose and aims across all key stages (2013) have both disciplinary and substantive aspects rooted within them. PK relates here as it can give pupils the capacity to recognise statements about the past as knowledge claims and the tools with which to question them thus becoming an 'enabler' (Counsell, Arthur, and Phillips 2000).

For Young, it is the responsibility of the specialist teacher to translate the knowledge developed in academia to their pupils within their subject and so their choices are vital (Puustinen and Khawaja 2020). The subjects, Young argues, must be taught by subject-specialists who are acting within a community of practice (Young and Lambert 2014). Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson (2015) insist that for teachers to achieve agency they must participate in professional dialogues at all levels of their development. Without such dialogues, it is difficult for teachers to achieve agency in enacting their beliefs in settings that are driven by accountability. Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson (2015, 1) establish teacher agency to be teachers', 'active contributions to shaping their work and conditions – for the overall quality of education'. It is something to be achieved through the interaction between individuals' capacities and their educational, cultural environment.

Access to a strong community of practice for history is part of teacher agency. Smith (2020) analysed history teachers' resistance to the 2013 curriculum reforms, and found that history has such a community, in secondary at least. Primary school teachers are generalists and therefore subject-specialists and community dialogue are not always available. Opportunities for primary history teachers to come together are also more limited; the annual School History Project's conference, as one example, has no primary strand and there is no primary alternative. It should be noted that Young never discusses primary education, possibly because he is a sociologist and so interested in the function of schools as specialised institutions.

2.3. Primary history

2.3.1. Marginalisation

The NC secured history's position in the primary school whilst the introduction of results-based school league tables in 1996, led to 'subject marginalisation' due to increased accountability (Caldwell et al. 2021). The 'core' subjects took precedence because the children were tested in them and the resulting data was used to create league tables and to form judgements about individual schools by Ofsted (Parker and Leat, in Priestley et al. 2021).

This marginalisation of Foundation subjects extended into Initial Teacher Education, (ITE), Catling (2017) raised concerns that practising teachers may not have strong subject-knowledge, due to lack of training. Barnes and Scoffham (2017) also suggest that misconceptions about the Foundation Subjects may be perpetuated due to a lack of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opportunities. It is not surprising that subject knowledge for teachers of primary history continues to be identified as a potential issue (Ofsted 2021).

2.3.2. Organisation

Whilst PK highlights subject-specificity, the primary curriculum is often delivered in a manner which includes two or more subjects (HA 2020). It is unclear who makes this decision within the school. Harnett (2000) suggests one reason for this method of delivery is efficiency in terms of time, particularly as subjects became marginalised. Percival (2020), who researched the efficacy of the differing approaches within primary history, posits that this approach gives a context for learning and can be done well. Teacher expertise, however, is important, potentially more so when subjects are combined. Ofsted (2011) identified that this approach can be problematic if not done well. Again, subject knowledge is vital but knowledge must be rooted in history as a discipline, something teachers themselves identified as a CPD need in the HA survey, 2019.

2.3.3. Ofsted

Schools have historically responded to Ofsted documentation. Parker and Leat (in Priestley et al. 2021) suggest that school leaders 'dissect' new inspection frameworks. As an example, the History for All (2011) document established the teaching of chronology as an area for development and by 2021 Ofsted were impressed with pupils' understanding of it in some schools (Jenner 2021). There is, however, no research available about how schools do this, given the lack of training for teachers.

In 2019, Ofsted acknowledged it had given too much weight to outcomes as part of the inspection process and not enough to the curriculum (Spielman 2017). The new Education Inspection Framework (EIF) for schools (Ofsted 2020) has seen a refocusing upon the curriculum. This is mirrored in the new inspection process for ITE providers (Ofsted 2020). Schools receive 'deep-dives' into subjects, during which the subject-leaders must explain the curriculum and its rationale and as a result schools have been updating their curricula (HA 2020). This new focus of inspections may be problematic given the long-term issues with subject-specific teacher education in primary education. It may also lead to a risk-averse approach to curriculum-making as has been evidenced in secondary history when there are high-levels of accountability (Harris 2021).

The recent Ofsted review of research in history education proposes that, 'Pupils from KS2 will also begin to learn disciplinary knowledge' (2021, n.p) suggesting this is not required in KS1 where the focus appears to be general concepts and an early understanding of chronology. Whilst the history NC can be seen to be rooted in the discipline this potential focus on mainly the substantive, in the early years of a child's education, may fit more closely with Hirsch's core knowledge approach (1988). He proposed schools should deliver a curriculum which sequences core, national/cultural knowledge, focusing on vocabulary and stressed the importance of this for younger children (Hirsch 2016). However, this absence in developing children's understanding of history as a discipline in KS1, beyond chronology, seems to go against the very nature of the subject, as well as the NC itself. No reference is made to Cooper's (2018, 13) idea that, 'to begin to understand the past children must learn, from the beginning, the questions to ask and how to answer them'.

2.4. Whose history?

The Royal Historical Society reports that 93.7% of staff in university history departments in Britain are white (Atkinson et al. 2018). In 2018, 85.9% of teachers and 92.9% of Heads in England identified as White British (DfE 2020). In Liverpool in 2014, there were only 18 Black teachers, when 90 would have represented an equitable pro rata (Boyle and Charles 2016). These figures contrast with 2020 figures from the DfE, cited in Choudry (2021, 92–94), which show that more than a third of the primary school population were from minority ethnic backgrounds. If PK is created within academia and translated to the classroom by teachers, then it is worth questioning whose interests are being represented, who they are being presented to and the impact this has on curriculum-making.

Primary history subject-leaders in England must ensure that the NC is covered within their schools although, due to a lack of research, it is unclear how much agency they achieve. Bracey (2016) suggests they are less likely to attach importance to Black History than secondary subject-leads. Their own life experiences and values may impact upon their approach; ITE may play a part. Callender (2019) outlines the importance of student teachers developing an understanding of their own racial identity, stressing they need to be supported in doing so by teacher-educators who have undergone similar self-scrutiny and see themselves as advocates for race equality. Her small-scale study found that some ITE departments practised 'racialised myopia'.

Black History has not been identified as important by policymakers, particularly within the 'Island Story' narrative of recent governments (Mohamud and Whitburn 2016). Harris and Reynolds (2014) suggest that the government focus on the 'island story' to develop social cohesion can lead to a limited and simplistic view of history which can alienate some people and groups. The NC (2013), according to Bracey (2016), has made teaching Black History more challenging as diversity is only mentioned in the aims and there is no specific requirement to include Black History; the attitudes and decisions of the teacher are therefore key to innovative practice.

When Black history is taught in schools, it can have a negative impact upon Black students and perceptions of them (Traill 2020). Doharty (2019) found pupils of Afro-Caribbean descent felt Black history teaching often contained micro-aggressions and subtle racism. Traill, suggests that delivered in certain ways the curriculum can become a 'breeding ground for narrow-mindedness' (2007, 36) and that some teachers are oblivious to this.

Levstik (in Stearns et al. 2000) found damage can be done in the 'silences'; those things that are not said or taught. Some teachers avoid discussing the alternative and controversial aspects of the past because they have not been trained to understand them; this can be seen, by pupils, as them being complicit in the injustices of the past. Huber and Kitson (2020) found that secondary history students do not want tokenistic gestures; they want to critique the narratives they are taught. Levstik (in Stearns et al. 2000) suggests teachers feel there is 'safety' in silence. But it is that very silence that many pupils are interested in. Whilst that study was American, in a UK study, Wilkinson (2014) states these absences in a curriculum can impact upon educational attainment. He proposes that reform of curriculum is not just about modifying what is present but also about removing significant absences. Lidher, McIntosh, and Alexander (2020) posit that such absences and distortions dominate Britain's understanding of its migrant past. They emphasise the importance of schools in tackling myths around Britain's national story, but highlight there is no way of knowing if dominant myths are being reinforced.

To conclude, there is a dearth of evidence relating to the curriculum-decisions made by primary history subject-leaders or the teaching of Black British history in schools, therefore more general literature has been drawn upon for this paper. Primary history has been marginalised due to a high accountability education system supported by Ofsted inspections which has led to gaps in teacher confidence and knowledge for the Foundation Subjects; their subject knowledge has been highlighted as an issue (Ofsted 2021Ofsted). This exploratory research has been conducted at a time when a new EIF has been put into place and schools have been reconsidering their curricula as a result (Parker and Leat, in Priestley et al. 2021). The events surrounding the toppling of the Colston statue in the summer of 2020 highlighted the position of Black British history in the curriculum: its inclusion is reliant upon teachers' decisions. This research has attempted to begin to explore those decisions against the backdrop of long-term subject marginalisation.

3. Methodology

This is a small-scale, exploratory, qualitative research study which investigates the curriculum decision-making and its challenges, of four primary school history subject-leaders through the use of semi-structured interviews as a survey method.

The research participants were in North-West England; however, no generalisability is assumed. The area was chosen as it was convenient, and I had a pre-existing understanding of the context of the schools.

Three subject-leaders worked in age 3–11 schools within the same Local Authority with one catering for ages 7–11. Three of the schools have above the national average number of children who are eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) which is currently 19.7% (Gov.uk 2021, n.p). The school contexts are varied and so care must be taken, again no generalisability can be assumed. All schools follow the NC.

I wanted to find out how and why the subject-leaders made curriculum-decisions and what they saw as the challenges. The research was rooted in grounded theory – generating theory from the collected data (Urquhart 2013).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted; the intention was to allow the subject-leaders to have the opportunity to speak, in order to gain an insight into their thinking (Punch 2014). The interview questions were pre-determined, pre-ordered and largely open-ended to encourage more detailed responses (Creswell and Creswell 2018).

Prior to conducting the interviews, the overview history plans for all of the schools were collected and analysed, using descriptive coding (Punch 2014). Initially, it was intended to compare the current year with the previous one, however, three schools indicated there had been little change due to the global pandemic and so only the current plans were considered.

Each interview was transcribed and then coded, using Charmaz (2014) as a guide. The interviews were analysed before interviewing the next participant so that the coding and data analysis were adapted as new data was gathered, as part of an iterative process (Urquhart 2013). This allowed the development of general ideas as the data was collected and analysed, building on them throughout the research process.

BERA (2018) guidelines were followed, aiming to do no harm to the participants or researcher.

4. Findings

4.1. *What do subject-leaders perceive as the challenges to curriculum decision-making?*

Teacher subject-knowledge was identified as the main issue by three of the subject-leaders. This was tied to a desire for CPD and for time to embed subject specificity within the curriculum:

We've got to the point where we understand what needs to be covered, the challenge sometimes is the whole CPD issue and time constraints making sure that the skills are so implicitly embedded and taught so history doesn't become another opportunity just to write an extended piece of writing.

Teacher subject-knowledge was explicitly tied to the specific curriculum being delivered in each setting. It was linked to finding or developing appropriate resources and age-specific pedagogy for their curriculum:

It's nothing to do with the skills or content ... there's no issue with the content, it's finding a way to teach it to the children and finding the resources.

Two schools also identified that staff were not necessarily confident about the things they could and could not say when discussing diversity:

Some people struggled at times to understand what it is okay and not okay to say.

There was a general feeling from all the schools however, that staff were keen to engage:

Everyone wants to get involved so it is an exciting time.

Thus, the main issues related to staff confidence to approach diverse histories as well as schools having CPD and the time to do their own research and develop their own curriculum offer, although this goes beyond the remit of this paper to explore.

4.2. How did the subject-leaders feel about the position of black history within their primary history NC both before and after the toppling of the Colston statue?

All but one of the teachers displayed some level of awareness about the toppling of the Colston statue and the events surrounding it. Only one subject-leader said that the events made them return to school and change the curriculum.

I spoke to the head teacher and said our history curriculum is completely and utterly whitewashed ... when I designed the history curriculum I never for a second thought about diversifying it. It was just that's what's in the National Curriculum let's get it onto paper. On reflection, I felt like the National Curriculum is very white-washed and it feeds into the schools. It feeds into the schools then that our curriculum becomes quite white-washed. So, I started doing research.

Another subject-leader felt the events had a national impact:

Obviously from the BLM movement and the toppling of the statue, teaching Black history has taken a bit more priority than it has taken in the past in every school.

One teacher felt that teaching in school had not been impacted, although they said they had not been aware of the events. The remaining two teachers suggested there was no impact on their curriculum but went on to say that individual teachers did speak to their classes. I developed this point with one of them and asked if speaking to their class was changing the curriculum, to which they responded:

Yes, I suppose the Bristol thing we talked about it and explored it if that counts as changing the curriculum – the actual writing in the curriculum hasn't changed if that makes sense.

All the subject-leaders felt their schools had, or were developing, Black History within their settings, with two mentioning staff confidence in their delivery of it. All but one felt that the events surrounding the toppling of the Colston statue impacted on their curriculum offer. They all felt their schools were embedding diversity although none of them had any training or discussed the quality or impact of the elements that had been put into place.

5. Discussion

5.1. Curriculum-making

According to Priestley et al. (2021) curriculum is made in several non-hierarchical activity sites (Figure 1). This framework will be used as a tool to support the discussion.

5.1.1. Nano-site

When teachers react to an event, such as the toppling of the Colston statue, curriculum-making can potentially be situated within both the nano and micro-sites of activity at a school-based level. At the nano-site, curriculum decision-making can happen in the 'minute-by-minute' transactions that occur in classrooms (2021, 21).

Three subject-leaders spoke about discussing the Colston statue with their classes. They acknowledged that other members of staff, within their settings, also raised the events, although they were unclear about how many.

It was up to individual teachers to decide to include the toppling of Colston's statue within their curriculum, as has been indicated by the literature. However, this was not always acknowledged as curriculum-making. One subject-leader, when asked if the toppling of the Colston statue had led to a change in their curriculum responded, 'It didn't to be fair, no. We obviously looked at it and watched the videos and discussed it.' Parker and Leat (in Priestley et al. 2021) suggest that teachers lack the language and understanding with which to describe curriculum, proposing there is a lack of provision for this within ITE. Further research into primary history subject-leaders' or indeed teachers'

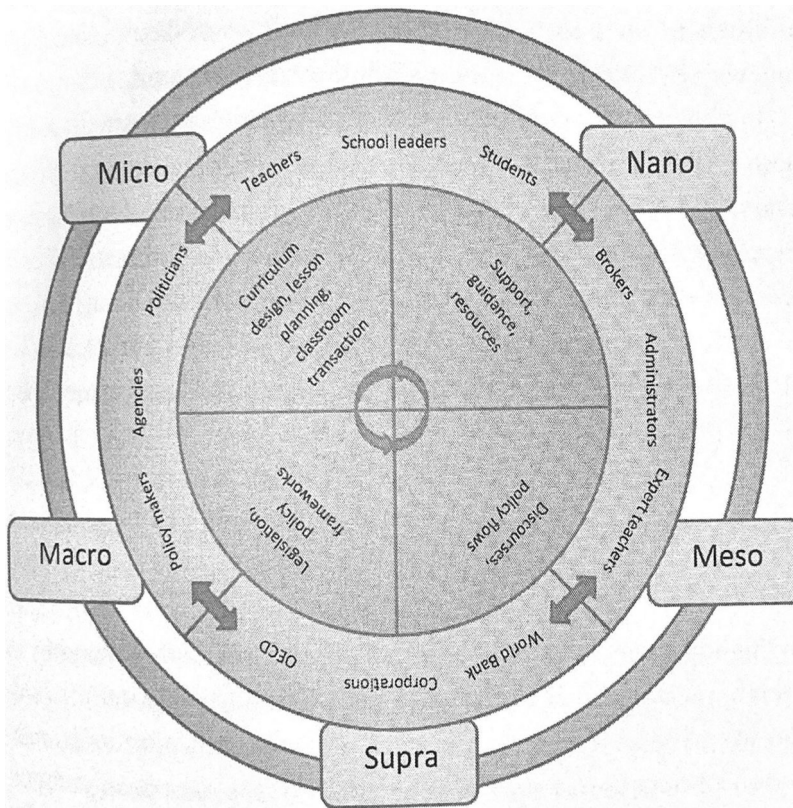


Figure 1. Sites, actors and activities (Priestley et al. 2021, 275).

perceptions of curriculum and curriculum-making and the impact this may have in school would therefore be pertinent.

5.1.2. *Micro-site*

The Geography Association (2012, cited in Catling 2013, 432), suggest curriculum-making is, 'the creative act of interpreting a curriculum specification or scheme of work and turning it into a coherent, challenging and engaging and enjoyable scheme of work'. Such curriculum-making is done on a medium-term basis; the interpretation of a predetermined scheme of work or NC document from the meso-site of activity into lesson plans or a sequence of learning for delivery within nano-sites of activity. Priestley et al. (2021) situate it in schools but outside of classrooms.

The subject-leaders within this study appear to view the micro-site as where curriculum-making happens, decisions are made which teachers can impact upon; it is where the curriculum is written down and potentially relates to the pedagogical approach taken, this supports Catling's (2013) study. It is a weakness of this research that how the subject-leaders made these decisions was not pursued further; this would be a useful area to develop in the future. There was a missed opportunity in the long-term plans, which were audited, being discussed directly with the subject-leaders, to establish how far they were able to make decisions about them that impacted across their schools. Instead, the overviews were used as a starting point to generate questions and an embryonic understanding of the schools' positions relating to diversity, more use should potentially have been made of them and this may be a useful future study.

5.1.3. Meso-site

Meso-curriculum-making activity includes materials and teacher development programmes which support curriculum-making in schools. This is the site, according to Priestley et al. (2021) that sits between official policy production such as the NC and school-based curriculum-making. In the recent Ofsted review of history (2021, n.p) it was proposed that at primary level:

High-quality resources, such as detailed curriculum plans, teaching resources or textbooks, may support the quality of education. These may be particularly important to support teachers who have gaps in their subject knowledge.

One school had recently purchased a commercially produced scheme of work which set out the key learning and lessons for history; it was written by primary history experts. The other three schools had written their own schemes of work, recontextualising the NC at this meso-site of curriculum-making, but only one of the subject-leaders had any involvement in writing it at this level; SLT had produced one and another had been in place for a long time and was monitored by the subject-leader to ensure NC coverage.

Whilst no generalisability is assumed from any aspect of this exploratory paper, it does appear that subject-leaders for primary history have little impact upon decision-making at this meso-site of activity beyond ensuring the NC is covered. In some schools, class-teachers may have more agency in terms of curriculum-content than the subject-leaders as they make the decisions about overall content at the micro and nano-sites of activity. This may be because, as Parker and Leat (in Priestley et al. 2021) establish, senior leaders themselves feel unable to exercise curriculum agency due to the pressures of accountability. Greany and Waterhouse (2016) posit that some SLT exercise curriculum innovation, but this is dependent upon their own belief system; their early findings suggested a strong and supportive network also impacted. The headteacher's perception of the Foundation Subjects was seen as pivotal by Barnes and Scoffham (2017). This may now be exacerbated in the Foundation Subjects due to Ofsted's new focus in their deep-dives during inspections, which have increased accountability for them (Ofsted 2019) but further research is again needed.

Alvunger et al. (in Priestley et al. 2021, 285), highlight the importance of the meso-site of activity for high-quality curriculum-making to support the development of 'teachers who are skilled and knowledgeable and able to ... modify the curriculum to meet their own ends and the ends of their students'. This meso-site includes teachers with a leading role who can move between sites to support context-specific curriculum development. This is where an organisation such as the HA can and does support both teachers and subject-leaders, Smith (2020) discusses its impact. Historically, Local Authorities (LA) also provided this level of support, but these opportunities have declined under current government policy (Barnes and Scoffham 2017) and this creates the danger of schools recycling errors in subject knowledge if support is not given.

Three of the subject-leaders spoke about the sessions provided for them by their local LA which still appears to be active. The subject-leader who seemed to have the most freedom in terms of decision-making at all sites, planned the school humanities curriculum, with the support of a subject-specialist from the LA.

It would be useful to further explore these communities of practice and how far they impact upon the curriculum-decisions in the schools which participate. The subject-leaders who were more recent to the role suggested the LA sessions discussed more generic issues relating to subject leadership, such as what to look at when monitoring books, thus there may have been a change in focus over time. This inevitably raises the question about what subject-leadership of history in a primary context involves.

5.2. Subject knowledge

Subject knowledge has been raised as an issue for primary history teachers since before the 2013 NC (Ofsted 2011) due to subject marginalisation because of high-stakes accountability. Primary history

has not been a priority for schools for decades and this has impacted across all levels of teacher education (Catling 2017). However, primary history subject-leaders are called upon to support teacher subject knowledge within their settings, despite their own lack of specialist training.

Subject knowledge support is available through the HA's publication, *Primary History* as well as its website and training offers; not all schools have access to this, and the subject-leader who mentioned it felt the costs were prohibitively expensive. Parker and Leat (in Priestley et al. 2021) suggest that there is a tendency for teachers to find resources and so potentially their subject knowledge, on the internet. This is supported by one subject-leader who stated, 'it's more gaining the subject knowledge ... it's finding a way to teach it to the children and finding the resources'. The relatively recent rise in social media support on Twitter and Facebook groups would also support this, but perhaps strays into a form of community of practice whereby teachers support each other and are supported by expert consultants.

Caution must be exercised with teachers and subject-leaders developing subject knowledge in this way. If subject knowledge is initially lacking then misconceptions may be perpetuated (Barnes and Scoffham 2017). This may relate to an understanding of the discipline of history as outlined in the literature review. It is also particularly true when Black British history is being included within the curriculum, given the problems which can surround how it is taught (Traill 2007). Lidher, McIntosh, and Alexander (2020) stress the importance of training teachers. The Black Curriculum has called for Black history in the curriculum to be embedded and to include more than the transatlantic slave trade and American Civil Rights Movement, yet the diversity audit showed some schools still focus on these areas.

There is evidence that schools do not always teach these aspects of the past well (New Granada 2021); this is due to a lack of subject knowledge. One teacher reported that some staff were concerned about raising the issues surrounding events such as the toppling of the Colston statue as, 'I don't know whether or not with that sort of thing, that people feel comfortable to bring the subject up, in case, you know, a debate can go lots of different ways can't it ...'. This concern was raised by Barton (2019) who questions whether teachers worry about recrimination for deviating from the normative ideas regarding the curriculum when teaching about diversity.

The issue of subject knowledge would have been useful for me to explore further as part of this research. More data is needed in order to establish how and where teachers gain their subject-knowledge and the impact it potentially has, particularly upon the teaching of Black British history. The role of communities of practice is particularly interesting when considered alongside Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson's (2015) view that professional dialogue is a key element of teacher agency.

6. Conclusion

Mohamud and Whitburn (2016) consider how academics and teachers can do justice to Black history, categorising them as:

- Pugilists, who fight for diverse and inclusive history curricula;
- Diggers, who find the sources and stories to develop inclusive understanding in history;
- Choreographers, who bring Black histories into classrooms and explore it;
- Embroiderers, who mention Black History but don't explore it.

Only one subject-leader (teacher D) demanded curriculum-change at the meso-site and set out to find the relevant inclusive narratives for their setting. This subject-leader is a pugilist as they took the curriculum from a Eurocentric focus to embedding the histories of marginalised groups. Parker and Leat (in Priestley et al. 2021, 151) posit that, 'significant, bottom-up, teacher-inspired, curriculum development is as rare as a desert oasis'.

It would be useful to find out about the motivation and values-system behind subject-leader D's decision-making, as well as how they developed their subject knowledge. Exploring the outlook of their headteacher to discover how important they were in enabling the obvious agency this subject-leader has may also be useful. Finding other examples of such curriculum innovators would help to validate findings.

Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson (2015) suggests that teacher agency is activated through dialogue within a community of practice whilst Young posits such communities should be subject-specific. The secondary history subject community, rooted in the HA, has been identified as strong (Smith 2020). Given the issues highlighted with subject knowledge in primary, it should be questioned how the history subject-community is supporting primary practitioners. The HA has developed in terms of membership recently with overall numbers at their highest for 30 years (HA 2021) and works hard to support members, yet only one subject-leader mentioned it and thought it too expensive for their small school to be able to access.

Further research is needed surrounding how primary history subject-leaders can be supported by a community of practice to develop both subject knowledge and curriculum-making. Subject-leader D shows that innovation can happen; further exploration of the process will help to develop an understanding of how best to support other subject-leaders in their journey from embroiderers to pugilists. Subject-leaders need support with their subject knowledge for primary history as a matter of urgency, given Ofsted's (2019) latest focus on curriculum. This must be supportive and not just about schools being given schemes of work (Ofsted 2021). Bracey (2016) found that resources being available does not necessarily mean that they will have any impact. Primary school teachers have been shown to be innovative and indeed, the freedom to be so is part of achieving agency; research is needed about how best to enable this at all levels of teacher education; strong ITE may be key.

It may also be useful to consider how The Black Curriculum can support discussion and training within the primary subject-community. Black British history is a crucial element of the narrative of the past; it must be included and Bracey (2020) has made useful suggestions. However, it should reach further than this.

School leaders 'dissect' macro-sites of curriculum activity and decisions, be that documentation from Ofsted or NC policy documents. Given the outlined potential issues surrounding the inclusion of Black British history, it is vital that it is not left to individual teachers to decide to include it, as Alexander and Weekes-Bernard (2017) suggest, it is too important for that. Black British history must be embedded in the English history NC, as only then will all schools and teachers fully embrace it. This would have to be supported by the development of resources, training and understanding so that a gestural-superficial approach to diversity, as outlined by Moncrieffe (2020) is avoided. Research is needed to support best practice but developing teachers' subject knowledge through training, within a subject-specific community, appears to be crucial in supporting teacher agency in curriculum-decision making and avoiding the potential perpetuation of damaging misconceptions.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Associate Professor Arthur Chapman for his support with this work.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Ailsa Fidler  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1740-3810>

References

- Alexander, C., and D. Weekes-Bernard. 2017. "History Lessons: Inequality, Diversity and the National Curriculum." *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 20 (4): 478–494.
- Arday, J. 2021. *The Black Curriculum: Black British History in the National Curriculum Report 2021*. The Black Curriculum. Accessed August 6, 2021. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f5507a237cea057c5f57741/t/5fc10c7abc819f1cf4fd0eeb/1606487169011/TBC+2021++Report.pdf>.
- Ashbee, R. 2021. *Curriculum: Theory, Culture and the Subject Specialisms*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Atkinson, H., S. Bardgett, A. Budd, M. Finn, C. Kissane, S. Qureshi, J. Saha, J. Siblon, and S. Sivasundaram. 2018. *Race, Ethnicity and Equality in U.K. History: A Report and Resource for Change*. Royal Historical Society. London. Accessed April 18, 2020. https://5hm1h4aktue2uejbs1hsqt31-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/RHS_race_report_EMBARGO_0001_18Oct.pdf.
- Barnes, J., and S. Scoffham. 2017. "The Humanities in English Primary Schools: Struggling to Survive." *Education* 3-13 45 (3): 298–308.
- Barton, K. 2019. "Teaching Difficult Histories: The Need for a Dynamic Research Tradition." In *Teaching and Learning the Difficult Past: Comparative Perspectives*, edited by M. H. Gross and L. Terra, 9–25. Oxon: Routledge.
- Batty, D., N. Parveen, and T. Thomas. 2021. "Hundreds of Schools in England Sign Up for Anti-Racist Curriculum." *The Guardian*, March 26. Accessed August 6, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/mar/26/schools-england-anti-racist-curriculum>.
- BERA (British Educational Research Association). 2018. *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*. 4th ed. London. Accessed January 17, 2021. <https://www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/publications/ethicalguidelines-for-educational-research-2018>.
- Biesta, G., M. Priestley, and S. Robinson. 2015. "The Role of Beliefs in Teacher Agency." *Teachers and Teaching* 21 (6): 624–640.
- Boffey, D. 2013. "Historians Attack Michael Gove Over 'Narrow' Curriculum." *The Guardian*, February 16. Accessed August 25, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/feb/16/historians-michael-gove-curriculum>.
- Boyle, W., and M. Charles. 2016. "How Can Only 18 Black Teachers Working in Liverpool Represent a Diverse Teaching Workforce? A Critical Narrative." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 20 (8): 871–888.
- Bracey, P. 2016. "'Shaping the Future', Black History and Diversity: Teacher Perceptions and Implications for Curriculum Development." *International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education* 44 (1): 101–112.
- Bracey, P. 2020. "George Floyd Protest in Bristol: Colston Statue Toppled." *Primary History* 86: 10–14.
- Caldwell, H., E. Whewell, P. Bracey, R. Heaton, H. Crawford, and C. Shelley. 2021. "Teaching on Insecure Foundations? Pre-Service Teachers in England's Perceptions of the Wider Curriculum Subjects in Primary Schools." *Cambridge Journal of Education* 51 (2): 231–246.
- Callender, C. 2019. "Race and Race Equality: Whiteness in Initial Teacher Education." In *Race, Education and Educational Leadership in England: An Integrated Analysis*, edited by P. Miller and C. Callender, 15–35. London: Bloomsbury.
- Catling, S. 2013. "Teachers' Perspectives on Curriculum Making in Primary Geography in England." *The Curriculum Journal* 24 (3): 427–453.
- Catling, S. 2017. "Not Nearly Enough Geography! University Provision for England's Pre-Service Primary Teachers." *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 41 (3): 434–458.
- Charmaz, K. 2014. *Constructing Grounded Theory*. 2nd ed. London: Sage.
- Choudry, S. 2021. *Equitable Education: What Everyone Working in Education Should Know about Closing the Attainment Gap for All Pupils*. St. Albans: Critical Publishing.
- Cooper, H. 2002. *History in the Early Years*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
- Cooper, H. 2006. *The Teaching of History in Primary Schools: Implementing the Revised National Curriculum*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Cooper, H. 2018. *History 5-11: A Guide for Teachers*. 3rd ed. Oxon: Routledge.
- Counsell, C., J. Arthur, and R. Phillips. 2000. "Historical Knowledge and Historical Skills: A Distracting Dichotomy." In *Issues in History Teaching*, 54–72. Oxon: Routledge.
- Creswell, J., and J. D. Creswell. 2018. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches*. 5th ed. London: Sage.
- DfE (Department for Education). 2013a. *The National Curriculum for England: key stages 1 and 2 Framework Document* [online]. Last Accessed 15 August 2021. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/425601/PRIMARY_national_curriculum.pdf.
- DfE (Department for Education). 2013b. "History Programmes of Study: Key Stages 1 and 2." *National Curriculum in England*. Accessed April 18, 2020. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/239035/PRIMARY_national_curriculum_-_History.pdf.
- DfE (Department for Education). 2020. *Ethnicity Facts and Figures: School Teacher Workforce*. Accessed January 20, 2021. <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/workforce-and-business/workforce-diversity/school-teacher-workforce/latest>.

- Doharty, N. 2019. "I FELT DEAD: Applying a Racial Microaggressions Framework to Black Students' Experiences of Black History Month and Black History." *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 22 (1): 110–129.
- Gov.uk. 2021. *Free School Meals: Autumn Term*. Accessed August 24, 2021. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/free-school-meals-autumn-term/2020-21-autumn-term>.
- Gove, M. 2010. *All Pupils Will Learn Our Island Story*. Accessed July 21, 2021. <https://conservative-speeches.sayit.mysociety.org/speech/601441>.
- Greany, T., and J. Waterhouse. 2016. "Rebels Against the System: Leadership Agency and Curriculum Innovation in the Context of School Autonomy and Accountability in England." *International Journal of Educational Management* 30 (7): 1188–1206.
- Grey, J. 2020. "Bristol George Floyd Protest: Colston Statue Toppled." *BBC*. June 7. Accessed January 11, 2021. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-bristol-52955868>.
- Harnett, P. 1993. "Identifying Progression in Children's Understanding: The Use of Visual Materials to Assess Primary School Children's Learning in History." *Cambridge Journal of Education* 23 (2): 137–154.
- Harnett, P. 2000. "Curriculum Decision-Making in the Primary School: The Place of History." In *Issues in History Teaching*, edited by J. Arthur and R. Phillips, 24–36. Oxon: Routledge.
- Harris, R. 2021. "Risk Aversion in a Performativity Culture – What Can We Learn from Teachers' Decision Making in History?" *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 53: 659–674.
- Harris, R., and R. Reynolds. 2014. "The History Curriculum and Its Personal Connection to Students from Minority Ethnic Backgrounds." *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 46 (4): 464–486.
- Harris, R., and R. Reynolds. 2018. "Exploring Teachers' Curriculum Decision Making: Insights from History Education." *Oxford Review of Education* 44 (2): 139–155.
- Hirsch, E. D. 1988. *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. New York: Random House.
- Hirsch, E. D. 2016. *Why Knowledge Matters: Rescuing our Children from Failed Educational Theories*. Cambridge: Harvard Education Press.
- Historical Association. 2020. *Historical Association Survey of History in English Primary Schools 2019*. Historical Association. Accessed July 24, 2021. <https://www.history.org.uk/primary/categories/709/news/3823/primary-history-survey-report>.
- Historical Association. 2021. *Historical Association Annual Report and Accounts: October 2019 to September 2020*. Accessed August 24, 2021. <https://www.history.org.uk/ha-news/categories/455/news/3942/agm-2021>.
- Huber, J., and A. Kitson. 2020. "An Exploration of the Role of Ethnic Identity in Students' Construction of 'British Stories.'" *The Curriculum Journal* 31 (3): 454–478.
- Jenner, T. 2021. *History in Outstanding Primary Schools*. Ofsted. Accessed August 6, 2021. <https://educationinspection.blog.gov.uk/2021/04/27/history-in-outstanding-primary-schools/>.
- Kelly, A. V. 2009. *The Curriculum: Theory and Practice*. 6th ed. London: Sage.
- Lee, P. 2017. "History Education and Historical Literacy." In *Debates in History Teaching*. 2nd ed., edited by I. Davies, 62–72. Oxon: Routledge.
- Levstik, L. S. 2000. "Articulating the Silences: Teachers and Adolescents Conceptions of Historical Significance." In *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, edited by P. Stearns, P. Seixas, and S. Wineburg, 284–305. London: New York University Press.
- Lidher, S., H. M. McIntosh, and C. Alexander. 2020. "Our Migration Story: History, the National Curriculum and re-Narrating the British Nation." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47 (3): 1–17.
- Mohamud, A., and R. Whitburn. 2016. *Doing Justice to History: Transforming Black History in Secondary Schools*. London: UCL IOE Press.
- Moncrieffe, M. L. 2020. *Decolonising the History Curriculum: Eurocentrism and Primary Schooling*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- New Granada. 2021. "Dozens of White Students Learning What It Was Like to be African Slaves." Twitter. Accessed August 18, 2021. <https://twitter.com/NewGranada1979/status/1392605884530954248>.
- Ofsted. 2011. *History for All: History in English Schools 2007/10*. Accessed August 25, 2021. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/413714/History_for_all.pdf.
- Ofsted. 2019. *The Education Inspection Framework* [online]. Manchester: Ofsted. Accessed 27 April 2022. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-inspection-framework>
- Ofsted. 2020. *Initial Teacher Education Inspection framework and handbook*. Accessed July 24, 2021. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/986249/Initial_teacher_education_framework_and_handbook.pdf.
- Ofsted. 2021. *Research and Analysis Research Review: History*. Accessed August 28, 2021. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-review-series-history/research-review-series-history#progress-concepts>.
- Percival, J. 2020. *Understanding and Teaching Primary History*. London: Sage.
- Priestley, M. 2019. "Curriculum Concepts and Approaches." *Impact* 6: 5–8.
- Priestley, M., D. Alvunger, S. Philippou, and T. Soini. 2021. *Curriculum Making in Europe: Policy and Practice Within and Across Diverse Contexts*. Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Priestley, M., G. Biesta, and S. Robinson. 2015. *Teacher Agency: An Ecological Approach*. London: Bloomsbury.

- Punch, K. 2014. *An Introduction to Social Research: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches*. 3rd ed. London: Sage.
- Puustinen, M., and A. Khawaja. 2020. "Envisaging the Alternatives: From Knowledge of the Powerful, to Powerful Knowledge in History Classrooms." *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 53 (1): 16–31.
- Runnymede. 2021. *England Civil Society Submission to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination*. Creative Commons. Accessed August 6, 2021. <http://runnymedetrust.org/uploads/CERD/Runnymede%20CERD%20report%20v3.pdf>.
- Smith, J. 2020. "Community and Contestation: A Gramscian Case Study of Teacher Resistance." *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 52 (1): 27–44.
- Spielman, A. 2017. *HMCI's Commentary: Recent Primary and Secondary Curriculum Research*. Accessed July 18, 2021. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/hmcis-commentary-october-2017#:~:text=Authored%20article,-HMCI's%20commentary%3A%20recent%20primary%20and%20secondary%20curriculum%20research,the%20primary%20and%20secondary%20curriculum.&text=This%20is%20why%20exams%20should,than%20the%20other%20way%20round>.
- Traille, K. 2007. "You Should be Proud About Your History. They Made Me Feel Ashamed: Teaching History Hurts." *Teaching History* 127: 31–37.
- Traille, K. 2020. *Hearing Their Voices: Teaching History to Students of Colour*. London: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Unwin, A., and J. Yandell. 2016. *Rethinking Education: Whose Knowledge Is It Anyway?* Oxford: New Internationalist.
- Urquhart, C. 2013. *Grounded Theory for Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide*. London: Sage.
- Wilkinson, M. 2014. "The Concept of the Absent Curriculum: The Case of the Muslim Contribution and the English National Curriculum for History." *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 46 (4): 419–440.
- Woolley, M. 2018. "Experiencing the History National Curriculum 1991–2011: Voices of Veteran Teachers." *History of Education* 48 (2): 212–232.
- Young, M. 2018. "A Knowledge-Led Curriculum: Pitfalls and Possibilities." *Impact Magazine*. 4. Accessed January 20, 2021. <https://impact.chartered.college/article/a-knowledge-led-curriculum-pitfalls-possibilities/>.
- Young, M., and D. Lambert. 2014. *Knowledge and the Future School: Curriculum and Social Justice*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.