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Student teacher perspectives on history education: a comparison of primary and secondary student teacher thinking about the purpose of history at the start of their teacher education course in England

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Abstract

This study provides the first comparison of primary and secondary student teachers' perspectives on history education and its purpose at the beginning of an Initial Teacher Education postgraduate diploma/certificate in education in England. It aims to identify similarities and differences in the student teachers' thinking about history and its purpose as a school subject to foster discourse within the Initial Teacher Education community about how best to support their development. The findings are drawn from a small-scale inductive theory development study, conducted at a university in North West England. Qualitative data were collected from 35 participants, 19 primary Initial Teacher Education students and 16 secondary, using a questionnaire containing Likert scale questions and a

ranking activity relating to statements about the purpose of history education. Overall, the data revealed significant commonalities and some divergence between primary and secondary student teacher views of the purpose of history, particularly regarding knowledge, perspectives and empathy. Divergence seemed to occur due to history education level rather than due to choice of phase-specific teacher education route, thus highlighting a need for Initial Teacher Education programmes to provide specific input on the purpose of history at the outset of all teacher education courses.

Keywords purpose; history; primary; secondary; teacher education

Introduction

This study examines the perspectives of primary and secondary student teachers on the purpose of history education at the beginning of their teacher training programme in North West England. By comparing these views, the research aims to determine the extent of alignment between primary and secondary student teachers' perspectives, and to investigate how the level at which student teachers completed their formal history education influences their perspectives on the subject at the start of their Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) or Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE).

Research into student teachers' views on the purpose of history education is limited, with most existing studies focusing on secondary school students. This study addresses a critical gap in the literature by providing the first comparative analysis of primary and secondary student teacher perspectives on history education. It situates itself within the broader discussion on motivation to teach, and it contributes to understanding how prior experiences shape student teachers' beliefs and practices.

There is no single story or road to becoming a teacher (Bloomfield, 2010). Learning to teach is a complex, multidimensional process that requires consideration of the prior experiences that student teachers bring with them (Flores and Day, 2006). Student teachers arrive with a set of values and beliefs, and a sense of identity, which evolve during the training course (Furlong, 2013). Understanding both the 'how' and 'who' of teaching is essential, as even the concept of a 'teacher' is influenced by past experiences (Lanas and Kelchtermans, 2015; Lortie, 1975).

For pre-service teachers, critically reflecting on any negative preconceptions about a subject – in this case, history – is crucial, as these views can impact future teaching and their students' perspectives on the subject (Turner-Bisset, 2001). Even if pre-service teachers have positive views of history, and studied it at undergraduate level, which is more commonly the case for secondary history teachers, it should not be assumed that those with history degrees have received explicit instruction on the nature of the discipline. Therefore, it is essential for students on Initial Teacher Education (ITE) courses to reflect on their learning in history, as their beliefs can influence new learning, their teaching practice and potentially their students' motivation and engagement (Haydn, 2005; Turner-Bisset, 2001; Virta, 2001; Wineburg and Wilson, 2001).

In England, ITE providers must align their curricula with the Department for Education's (DfE, 2019, 2024a) Core Content Framework (CCF), which will transition to the Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Framework (ITTECF) in 2025. These frameworks apply to all student teachers and early career teachers (ECTs), but the ITE provider must adapt the curriculum for specific subjects, phases and age ranges (DfE, 2019). The generic nature of the framework has been criticised for discouraging subject-specific teacher education, essential for effective teaching in subjects such as history (Historical Association, 2021).

The ITTECF (DfE, 2024a) comprises 'learn that' and 'learn how' statements, based on evidence from England and worldwide, and endorsed by the Education Endowment Foundation. These statements focus on general teaching skills and behaviours, rather than on developing subject-specific motivation or attitudes. This poses a challenge for integrating subject-specific purpose within the framework. Furthermore, the current ITE context in England is marked by stringent policy controls, with increased teaching practice hours limiting time for subject-specific development (Ellis, 2023). As Rowe (2023, as cited in Ellis, 2023: 109) argues, 'Providers of ITE (including universities) are being micromanaged by the

state', which could hinder student teachers' development of subject-specific understanding, especially in history, where government policies provide somewhat contradictory guidance on the subject's purpose.

The first 'learn that' statement, in Standard 1, mentions pupil motivation, while the second focuses on attitudes, values and the teacher as a role model:

> Learn that ...
>
> 1. Teachers have the ability to affect and improve the wellbeing, motivation and behaviour of their pupils.
> 2. Teachers are key role models, who can influence the attitudes, values and behaviours of their pupils. (DfE, 2024a: 11)

However, the corresponding 'learn how' statements, which allow for practice and learning from expert colleagues, mention little about developing student motivation or attitudes generally, let alone towards the subject, focusing instead on behaviour, effort and helping students master challenging content to reach long-term goals (DfE, 2024a). A generic approach to purpose and motivation within specific subjects is ineffective, as purpose must be rooted in a strong understanding of the subject itself. As the Historical Association (2021: n.p.) stated in critical response to the CCF:

> The generic nature of the Core Content Framework discourages subject-specific teacher education. This is a profound problem, as much at primary as at secondary level ... Teacher training should not and must not be separated from subject.

Student teachers generally operate within the National Curriculum for history (DfE, 2013), which outlines a consistent purpose of study across Key Stages 1 to 3, spanning both primary and secondary education. As defined by the DfE (2013: n.p.), a high-quality history education equips students with a 'coherent knowledge and understanding of Britain's past and that of the wider world'. The discipline aims to inspire curiosity, develop critical thinking, foster an understanding of diversity and connections between groups and help students develop their sense of identity and navigate contemporary societal challenges. However, government policies and inspectorate reviews have increasingly emphasised the importance of knowledge, with the National Curriculum stating that it should 'provide pupils with an introduction to the essential knowledge they need to be educated citizens' (DfE, 2014: n.p.). The 'knowledge turn' in history education has been controversial. Thus, a focus on knowledge may not always align with student teachers' views of, or perspectives on, the discipline, underscoring the need for support from ITE providers to bridge these potential differences in thinking.

The research addresses the following questions:

- To what extent do primary and secondary student teachers' perspectives on history education and its purpose align/differ at the start of a PGDE/CE?
- How does the level at which a student teacher completed their formal history education influence their perspectives of the subject and its purpose at the start of their PGDE/CE?

Building specifically on the work of Chapman et al. (2018), this study shifts from the predominant focus on secondary students' perspectives on history (Harris and Reynolds, 2014; Haydn and Harris, 2010) to compare primary and secondary student teacher perspectives on history education. The study contributes to broader discussions on teacher education and the importance of understanding and addressing differing starting points of student teachers when entering the profession (Burn et al., 2003; Flores and Day, 2006). By examining the disconnect between student teacher beliefs and governmental views on the purpose of history education, it highlights how structural parameters of the National Curriculum may contradict student teachers' ideas of the discipline's purpose and value, potentially influencing their practice. By comparing the views of primary and secondary student teachers, it aims to find common ground within the subject area and to foster cross-phase discourse among ITE providers and policymakers. This is especially timely due to a change in government and the recent announcement of a curriculum review (DfE, 2024b).

Literature review

The literature on student teachers' perspectives on the purpose of history education, particularly at primary level, is sparse. Furthermore, little, if any, direct research exists about the perspectives

of both primary and secondary student teachers with comparisons made between the two groups. Consequently, the literature reviewed here draws on studies of school students' perspectives alongside relevant studies of the thinking of pre-service teachers.

Pre-service history teachers enter ITE courses with diverse backgrounds and different starting points related to ideas about history, teaching and education (Burn et al., 2003; Flores and Day, 2006). In England, primary (ages 5–11 years) and secondary (11–18) history PGDE/CE pre-service teachers must hold at least a second-class honours degree. However, while secondary history student teachers are typically required to have a history degree, primary student teachers are not mandated to have any formal qualifications in the subject. Their teacher identity, historical positionality (VanSledright and Kelly, 1998) and historical stance (Barton and Levstik, 2004), and ultimately how they view and approach history education, are shaped by familial, informal and formal learning experiences. History education, therefore, extends beyond the classroom (Barton, 2015; Husbands, 1996), encompassing the diverse ways in which pre-service teachers engage with the past, from documentaries and films to news, websites, and visits to historic sites and museums.

However, exposure to various forms of public history can complicate pre-service understanding of history as a discipline. Tosh (2019) argues that history often becomes synonymous with heritage, where the past is admired and consumed as fact, rather than analysed and challenged as interpretation. Lowenthal (1998) similarly notes that heritage sites may present a declared faith in a particular historical narrative, bypassing the testability and scrutiny central to academic historical enquiry. As a result, student teachers enter ITE programmes with diverse and sometimes superficial understandings of history. It is crucial, therefore, for them to engage in reflective practice and lifelong learning to develop the skills and confidence needed to teach history effectively.

Chapman et al. (2018) stress that pre-service teachers' beliefs about history and its purpose are formed early, often based on prior experiences and the cultural narratives they encounter. These beliefs may include misconceptions about history being solely about factual recall or the dissemination of a singular narrative of the past. Without intervention, these beliefs could be passed on to students in the classroom. Consequently, Chapman et al. (2018) argue that it is essential for teacher education programmes to address any such beliefs early in the training process. Pre-service teachers can then develop a more nuanced understanding of the purpose of history as a dynamic, interpretive discipline that requires critical engagement with multiple perspectives. Indeed, Turner-Bisset (2001) and Virta (2001) highlight that early reflection on pre-service teachers' beliefs about history is vital to ensure that any misconceptions about the purpose of the subject are addressed before they enter the classroom. As Barton and Levstik (2004) suggest, emphasising critical thinking about the purpose and value of history may be just as important – if not more so – than focusing solely on pedagogy in teacher education. For example, if a student teacher believes that history is about transmitting an agreed upon body of knowledge, they may be less likely to foster the critical, enquiry-driven approach necessary for effective history teaching. Therefore, teacher education should focus on helping pre-service teachers develop a clear understanding of the disciplinary nature of history, engaging with the subject in ways that go beyond memorisation to support them in fostering a sense of curiosity and critical thinking in their future students.

Addressing misconceptions early in teacher training is key to professional identity development. Ensuring that pre-service teachers understand the purpose of history education will better prepare them to engage students in meaningful and motivating ways. By critically examining their own historical positionality and life experiences, student teachers can develop more sophisticated, reflective practices that will inform their classroom practice.

What is the purpose of history education?

History education serves a crucial role in helping students understand not only the past, but also how to critically engage with the present and future. As Husbands et al. (2011) argue, it is a professional obligation of history teachers to make history matter to students. Motivation and engagement in a subject increase when students grasp its purpose (Barton and Levstik, 2004; Godsell, 2016; Haydn and Harris, 2010; Köse, 2017). Motivation, particularly intrinsic motivation, is key to learning. Research shows that motivated students perform better academically and are more likely to persist when there are challenges (Lazowski and Hulleman, 2016). Without motivation, both attainment and classroom management can suffer.

An understanding of the purpose of history education is directly tied to student engagement, which impacts both uptake and performance in exams. The 2023 report by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) highlights positive trends in history education, noting that the position of history in English schools is now more secure than it was a decade ago, when concerns about the erosion of history as a discrete subject were raised. This change is largely due to schools' hard work to reverse this trend and to offer students a 'broad and ambitious curriculum', with greater consistency between primary and secondary school history provision. The number of students taking history GCSEs has slightly increased since 2018, with 278,088 entered for GCSE history in 2021/2. Similarly, Advanced level qualification (A level) entries have increased in 2021/2, after a decline in 2019. Regarding student teachers, although recruitment for secondary ITE has declined in recent years, history and classics recruitment has exceeded targets (history, 119 per cent, and classics, 196 per cent) (DfE, 2023). Despite this, the Ofsted report still identifies significant variability in the quality of history education between schools, particularly in how progress is understood and assessed.

A key concern highlighted by Ofsted (2023) is the tendency of some schools to approach and assess student progress in history through checking the learning of isolated facts, rather than through understanding the disciplinary knowledge that underpins historical thinking. Curriculum designs in many schools were found to be lacking ambition, particularly in fostering students' understanding of how historians study and construct accounts of the past. Misunderstandings can be passed on to students, if those creating the curriculum lack subject-specific pedagogical content knowledge. For example, the report found that many students mistakenly believe that historians' primary task is to spot 'bias' and distinguish between 'secondary' and 'primary' sources to assess reliability – ideas that oversimplify the nature of historical enquiry and reduce history to a mere acquisition of knowledge.

This issue points to a broader debate within the field about the balance between substantive knowledge and disciplinary skills, and it is perhaps indicative of the move towards a knowledge-rich curriculum in both primary and secondary schools. The 2014 National Curriculum in England, influenced by the work of E.D. Hirsch (1988, 2016), emphasised the importance of cultural literacy and the acquisition of key knowledge to address what policymakers see as a knowledge deficit (Gibb, 2015). Worryingly, as Harris (2021) highlights, this led some schools to prioritise substantive knowledge acquisition as the primary goal of the discipline to the detriment of understanding the nature of history as a dynamic, contested discipline. While substantive knowledge is undeniably important, it is disciplinary skills that shape how historians engage with and interpret the past (Lee and Ashby, 2000).

In history education, 'fingertip knowledge' (Counsell, 2000) – the ability to recall key facts and examples – is essential for answering historical enquiry questions effectively. Yet the ultimate purpose of history is not for students to recall every minute detail. As Counsell (2000) suggests, it is the 'residual knowledge' that students retain – key ideas and concepts that endure beyond Key Stage 3 – that forms the foundation for broader, lasting understanding. As both Dawson (2008) and Grande (2023) argue, curriculum planning should focus on identifying key takeaways that students will remember long after specific details have been forgotten.

These takeaways should not be static. History is an evolving discipline, and the knowledge that students acquire must be understood as dynamic and open to revision. Historical accounts differ due to the questions historians ask, the sources they select and those they disregard, the weight they place on particular sources and the standpoint from which they view those sources. As Crookes et al. (2023) point out, many pre-service teachers, particularly those who did not study history at a degree level, may not have sufficient understanding of how historical enquiry works, especially in relation to archival research. This is especially true for primary education students, who may not have had any exposure to history learning since the end of Key Stage 3. As a result, student teachers enter teacher training with varying starting points concerning historical understanding, and gaps in understanding can influence how history is approached and taught in schools.

The National Curriculum provides little guidance on methods of historical enquiry, stating simply that students should understand 'how evidence is used rigorously to make historical claims and discern how and why contrasting arguments and interpretations of the past have been constructed' (DfE, 2014: 2). The six second-order concepts outlined – causation and consequence, change and continuity, similarity and difference, historical significance, historical interpretation and evidential thinking – are not universally agreed on as core principles of historical enquiry. For example, the concept of 'similarity and difference' in the English curriculum is framed as 'historical perspectives' in both Canadian and Australian curricula (for example, Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2015; Ontario, 2023). Notably,

the Australian curriculum includes 'empathy' as a historical concept, a term removed from England's history curriculum in 2014 due to concerns about its misuse and the risk of fostering unhistorical thinking, such as attempting to 'get into the heads' of historical figures (Lee and Shemilt, 2011). The contested role of empathy highlights tensions in how history is taught and understood. In contrast, Australia's curriculum also includes contestability as a concept, which encourages students to engage with the evolving and contested nature of historical interpretations. These differences highlight the need to provide student teachers with a robust understanding of the nature and purpose of history, particularly those without a degree in the subject, as their understanding will directly influence how they teach history to future generations.

Research by Haydn and Harris (2010) suggests that while policymakers and teachers may have clear ideas about the purpose of history, these ideas often fail to filter down to students. Teachers should prioritise helping students understand why they are studying history – not just making lessons interesting. Subsequent studies (Harris and Reynolds, 2014; Morgan, 2023; Van Straaten et al., 2015) show that while many students enjoy history, many younger students often struggle to see its value beyond external goals such as exam performance or meeting curriculum requirements. In contrast, A-level students are more likely to appreciate the intrinsic merits of history, recognising its relevance for understanding the past and present, and for envisioning future possibilities (Nuttall, 2021). As Van Boxtel and Van Drie (2018) argue, when students find history relevant, it enhances their thinking and reasoning skills, allowing them to engage with the discipline in a deeper, more meaningful way.

The value of understanding the purpose of history education

Wineburg and Wilson (2001) found that ECTs who lack a deep understanding of the disciplinary nuances of history were less effective, as their preconceptions about the discipline hindered new learning. Donovan and Bransford (2005) support this view, highlighting that individuals' prior experiences often lead to misconceptions which act as barriers to learning. Consequently, Priestley et al. (2015) argue that teacher education must actively encourage reflection and challenge student teachers' preconceived notions about teaching. This process is crucial for developing teacher agency.

Teacher agency, particularly in the context of teaching specific subjects such as history, remains poorly conceptualised. While an extensive analysis of this topic is beyond this article, an ecological approach provides valuable insight into the connection between a teachers' subject knowledge and their ability to exercise agency in the classroom (Priestley et al., 2015). Agency involves independence, and the capacity to act within given cultural, social and material contexts, and it is closely linked to a teacher's mastery of subject matter and pedagogical knowledge (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). Secure pedagogical content knowledge – understanding of how to effectively teach topics in a way learners can understand – enables teachers to exercise their agency (Ball et al., 2008; Shulman, 1986). As Britzman (1991: 8) notes:

> Learning to teach is not a mere matter of applying decontextualised skills or of mirroring predetermined images; it is a time when one's past, present and future are set in dynamic tension. Learning to teach – like teaching itself – is always the process of becoming: a time of formation and transformation, of scrutiny into what one is doing, and who one can become.

Reflective practice and continuous professional development are essential for deepening subject knowledge and enhancing agency (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999; Schön, 1983). By critically reflecting on their preconceptions about the purpose and nature of history, student teachers can strengthen their agency, leading to increased confidence and effectiveness in the classroom (Biesta and Tedder, 2007; Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). This self-awareness ultimately fosters greater student engagement and more effective learning environments (Borko et al., 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2000).

This underscores the critical link between secure subject knowledge, teacher agency and student engagement. Teachers who possess a deep understanding of history are better equipped to convey its intrinsic values to students, exercising their agency to create meaningful learning experiences. Therefore, it may be more beneficial to focus on nurturing student teachers' understanding of the purpose of history – particularly its intrinsic value – rather than solely emphasising pedagogical theory in teacher training. This approach may strengthen a student teachers' agency and help them foster a more engaging and relevant learning environment for their students.

Negative perspectives of history's value and a lack of engagement with the subject have adversely affected its appeal at advanced levels, particularly among Global Majority students (Atkinson et al., 2018). Key factors contributing to this disengagement are the history curriculum's limited scope and its potential to foster narrowmindedness and feelings of alienation (Harris and Burn, 2016; Traille, 2020). Moncrieffe (2020) argues that despite DfE claims that the history national curriculum is 'broad and balanced', it presents a hegemonic, Eurocentric view of the past. Starting from Key Stage 2, pupils encounter a curriculum dominated by an Anglocentric narrative that completely neglects the contributions and experiences of non-White communities in shaping Britain's development. Wilkinson (2014) argues that these omissions can hinder educational attainment and should be addressed. Even in schools with limited demographic diversity, students have expressed dissatisfaction with the curriculum's narrow focus, calling for more inclusive historical perspectives (Morgan, 2023). Huber and Kitson's (2020) work with secondary students reflects this, and potentially goes further, finding that young people seek opportunities to critically engage with historical narratives. However, literature underscores that curricular reform must be accompanied by teacher development. Teachers need support to teach diverse curricula confidently (Alexander and Weekes-Bernard, 2017; Fidler, 2022), and to avoid the microaggressions highlighted by Doharty (2019). The perceived difficulty of the subject is another reason some students dislike history at school. Morgan (2023) found that the image of history as a 'hard' subject, particularly due to extensive examination writing and prescribed GCSE content, led students to drop the subject. Additionally, a lack of understanding of the relevance of certain historical topics may influence student decisions not to pursue the study of history at higher levels. Studies have shown that secondary students, regardless of background, enjoy local history (Harris and Reynolds, 2014) and consider topics more significant based on their temporal proximity and contemporary links (Morgan, 2023). Due to this, Van Straaten et al. (2015) advocate making the relevance of history explicit to students through objectives and teaching strategies that connect the past, present and future. Highlighting the relevance of historical topics is vital because if students find the history curriculum irrelevant, they are less likely to engage with it. This issue becomes problematic if those disengaged students later become teachers responsible for delivering or mapping the history curriculum for an entire key stage.

Even if student teachers possess a deep understanding of historical thinking and belief in the subjects' value, this does not always translate into increased teacher agency and effective classroom practice. Stuart and Thurlow (2000) highlight that student teachers often struggle to challenge established norms during their school placements. This difficultly can lead to an uncritical acceptance of the curriculum and delivery that does not reflect their own views on the purpose of history. Similarly, Blevins et al. (2020) argue that for student teachers to convey their beliefs about history effectively in the classroom, they must understand their role and influence within the broader educational context. They emphasise that developing a critical pedagogical approach, and the agency and ability to navigate contextual realities in schools, requires political and ideological clarity, alongside a secure understanding of historical thinking and pedagogical context knowledge.

Therefore, it is crucial for ITE courses to offer both primary and secondary student teachers substantial opportunities, especially early in their programmes before starting school placements, to reflect on and develop their understanding of historical thinking, pedagogical content knowledge, their thoughts surrounding the purpose of history and their role within the educational system. This approach will help student teachers to effectively communicate their understanding of the discipline, prevent the transmission of misconceptions or disengagement towards the subject and enhance student engagement. Additionally, it will provide student teachers with the confidence and skills to navigate the complexities and constraints of teaching contexts, allowing them to create a practice consistent with their views about the subject, potentially helping in their achievement of agency.

Methodology

This is a small-scale inductive theory development study, conducted at a university in North West England.

Methodological approach and methods used

The intention of this study was to explore the views of individual participants, acknowledging their different world views, as well as our own; we did not set out to establish a full and certain picture

about their thinking, nor did we seek an absolute truth (Robson and McCartan, 2016). A 'bottom-up' inductive strategy was adopted, whereby meaning was derived from the data (Blaikie, 2007; Cohen et al., 2018). The research was qualitative, seeking to understand the world through the participants' eyes (Scott and Morrison, 2006). All participants completed a group-administered cross-sectional survey which included three five-point Likert scales as well as an open-ended question, all of which related to the student teachers' perceptions of history. Thematic analysis was conducted for the open-ended responses. They were then asked to complete a ranking activity, with statements relating to the purpose of history education.

Ethical issues and mitigation

All the research participants were students on either a primary postgraduate ITE course or a history-specific secondary ITE course at the university. The university was chosen for convenience, as it is where both researchers teach, and so allowed ease of access to the participants. Following ethical approval, all participants were given information sheets about the research, and they signed consent forms agreeing to their participation. They were able to withdraw at any point.

We were aware that the student teachers might be reluctant to express their opinions openly at this early stage of the course, as relationships between the students and us as lecturers had not yet been fully established. The student teachers might have felt uncomfortable sharing their views honestly or participating in discussions within their peer groups.

Student teachers worked in groups of three to six, depending on where they were sitting in the teaching space. The choice of seat was left to them, with the assumption they would sit in developing friendship groups. However, while the student teachers discussed their thinking in groups, they were free to answer independently. This was particularly important for the ranking activity. Participants were given individual questionnaires to complete, which also included statements to rank. This ensured that student teachers' own voices could come through if there was disagreement and/or if they did not feel confident enough to contribute to the group discussion.

There was also the potential risk of a power imbalance, in that the student teachers may have felt unable to share honestly and openly with their new lecturers, who may mark their assignments or conduct school-based observations; as a result, responses were anonymised. We were guided on the use of elicitation techniques by Barton (2015: 199), who posits that they, 'are especially useful when researchers want respondents to talk about controversial topics or ideas, they have little experience discussing'. However, he also warns that although such techniques will not transform any power relationships, participants may still be concerned that their responses will be analysed, in this case, by their lecturers. Therefore, we remained aware of this potential power imbalance throughout, and we attempted to design the data collection to minimise concerns. During the data collection, the student teachers were left to complete the given tasks away from the lecturer administering them, so that they felt more able to talk freely. The student teachers placed responses in piles, rather than the lecturer collecting them, so that there was no way of knowing whose response was whose. Finally, the importance of honest responses, no matter what they were, was stressed to all participants throughout.

Research process

In total, 35 student teachers agreed to participate in the research: 19 primary and 16 secondary, with no students choosing to opt out. Their history education ranged from studying history at master's level to completing their history education at the end of Key Stage 3 (Table 1). Of the secondary student teachers, 87 per cent had a degree in the subject, whereas only 26 per cent of primary candidates were educated beyond GCSE level in history. As the study concerned the difference and alignment in the perspectives of student teachers on primary and secondary programmes, there was a deliberate focus on the highest levels of history education attained by the participants. While beyond the scope of this study, comparable analysis through a gender and age lens would add additional value to this area of research. The research was conducted with primary and secondary postgraduate teaching cohorts at the start of their first history-specific teaching session to capture their initial thinking prior to any course input.

Table 1. History education level of participant

Highest history education level	Primary	Secondary
Key Stage 3	7	0
GCSE	7	0
A level	2	2
Degree	3	13
Master's	0	1
Total	19	16

A group-administered cross-sectional survey was developed to capture the participants' thinking at a particular moment (Denscombe, 2017). The questionnaire began with five-point Likert scales, with the anchors *strongly agree*, *agree*, *neither agree nor disagree*, *disagree* and *strongly disagree*. The participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statements:

- I like history
- I liked history at school
- I think history should be a compulsory school subject for GCSE.

The latter response was also framed as an open-ended question designed to support us in developing our understanding of the student teachers' perspectives on history and its importance within a school curriculum. Thematic analysis was conducted for the open-ended responses.

The student teachers were then asked to complete a ranking activity relating to statements about the purpose of history education. According to Barton (2015), such ranking activities can be useful in identifying central things that people find important. The statements offered for ordering were drawn from the work of Chapman et al. (2018), specifically their coding categories, which analysed discussions with a large cohort of secondary PGCE student teachers surrounding the purpose of history education.

The student teachers were asked to order the following statements:

1. It enables pupils to acquire knowledge about the past.
2. It is a way of promoting national identity and/or pride.
3. It promotes community cohesion and a commitment to democracy.
4. It helps us to learn from the past – how to avoid making past mistakes or to understand the impact of different kinds of action.
5. It enables pupils to see beyond their own experience and appreciate other possibilities and ways of seeing the world.
6. It enables pupils to master history-specific concepts and ways of thinking.
7. It enables pupils to understand time and living in the past, present and future.
8. It enables pupils to develop useful, transferable skills.
9. It is a way to establish the identity of particular groups and/or strengthen confidence and/or pride in them.
10. It is an instrument for promoting personal identity and/or pride in it.
11. It is a source of knowledge that enables pupils to make sense of the world in which they live.

Students were asked to focus their attention on their top two and bottom two choices, as Barton (2015) suggests that when faced with a large set of data, choices may become tedious for respondents. The participants were also offered the option to include statements that they felt should be on the list but were not. This prompted and supported discussion with the whole group, which then fed into the teaching session itself. Due to the relatively small number of research participants, data for the Likert scales and ranking activity were compiled into tables to identify key themes. To enable the comparison of like with like, numbers of responses for each were converted to percentages and rounded to the nearest whole number, as there were different numbers of primary and secondary participants. Secondary and primary participants' responses were considered separately by each of us, before bringing them together to make comparisons.

Analysis

The discussion considers each of the data collection methods alongside the student teacher responses, drawing out key ideas, as well as similarities and differences in thinking between the cohorts. Where relevant, thinking which appears to show trends between those participants with similar/different educational backgrounds relating to history will also be highlighted.

Likert scale response – personal feelings towards the subject

Of primary student teachers in the study, 79 per cent agreed/strongly agreed that they like history compared to 100 per cent of secondary student teachers (Table 2).

Table 2. Student teachers' responses to 'I like history'

Highest education level	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Neither agree nor disagree		Agree		Strongly agree	
	Prim.	Sec.	Prim.	Sec.	Prim.	Sec.	Prim.	Sec.	Prim.	Sec.
Key Stage 3					4		2		1	
GCSE							6		1	
A level							1		1	2
Degree									3	13
Master's										1
Total					4		9		6	

All groups, except the primary student teachers who were educated to A-level standard, were less positive when they were asked to respond to the statement 'I liked history at school' (Table 3). Of the primary student teachers, 68 per cent agreed/strongly agreed with the statement 'I liked history at school', which was an 11 percentage point decline compared to the 'I like history' statement; 50 per cent of the secondary student teachers agreed rather than strongly agreed that they liked history at school, which was a 50 percentage point decline when compared with the 'I like history' statement. While both cohorts showed a decline in their feelings towards the subject at school, those qualified to GCSE level had a mixed response, which included an increase in those who strongly agreed with the statement relating to liking history at school.

Table 3. Student teachers' responses to 'I liked history at school'

Highest education level	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Neither agree nor disagree		Agree		Strongly agree	
	Prim.	Sec.	Prim.	Sec.	Prim.	Sec.	Prim.	Sec.	Prim.	Sec.
Key Stage 3			3		1		3			
GCSE					1		3		3	
A level							1	1	1	1
Degree			1				1	6	1	7
Master's								1		
Total			4		2		8	8	5	8

These findings may potentially raise more questions than they answer. Clearly, school history was viewed less favourably than 'history' by many students, an idea which is not uncommon. As previously discussed,

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Morgan (2023) suggests that one reason that students dislike history is because of its reputation as a difficult subject. History outside of school may, as Tosh (2019) posits, be admired and consumed as heritage, rather than being analysed; thus, it may be perceived as less challenging – and so more appealing – than school-based history. It is a limitation of the study that the participants were not asked to explain this response; future research may be beneficial in this area.

Open question and Likert scale response – should history be compulsory at GCSE?

The open question asked the participants to explain their Likert scale response to the statement 'History should be compulsory as a GCSE'. Similar numbers of student teachers agreed that history should be a compulsory subject: 63 per cent secondary and 63 per cent primary. Similar numbers also disagreed: 19 per cent secondary and 16 per cent primary, with the rest neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

Those who deemed that history should be compulsory at GCSE cited:

- the importance of the subject for learning from the past
- developing transferable skills
- creating politically literate citizens
- helping individuals better understand their identity and heritage.

The following themes were evident from the student teacher comments:

- reservations about the compulsory nature of history due to its perceived academic nature
- history should only be compulsory if it is inclusive and decolonised
- history's lack of value as a subject
- freedom of choice.

Reservations about the compulsory nature of history due to its perceived academic nature

Of all student teachers, 14 per cent (12 per cent of the total secondary and 16 per cent of the total primary) expressed reservations about the compulsory nature of history due to the perceived academic nature of the discipline and concerns over accessibility, with history being deemed as 'too much' for some school students by one respondent. This appears to echo Morgan's (2023) findings that some secondary school students dislike history because it is 'hard'.

History should only be compulsory if it is inclusive and decolonised

Of the total respondents, 6 per cent (6 per cent of the total secondary and 5 per cent of the total primary) stated that history should only be compulsory if the curriculum was meaningful, inclusive and accessible for all, arguing for greater efforts by the profession to diversify and decolonise historical topics taught. School students themselves, even those in schools with limited demographic diversity, call for an avoidance of tokenistic gestures within their history teaching, and express their desire for a more inclusive range of historical topics (Huber and Kitson, 2020; Morgan, 2023). The absences and silences in the curriculum can impact upon educational attainment and cause damage (Wilkinson, 2014). The student teachers' identification of the need for curriculum reform relating to diversity and inclusion is echoed in the literature, which also highlights the importance of teacher development alongside it (Alexander and Weekes-Bernard, 2017; Fidler, 2022). Student teachers' perspectives and experiences of diversity, inclusion and the decolonisation of history curricula in schools, would be useful to explore further.

History's lack of value as a subject

Of primary student teachers, 11 per cent cited history's lack of value as a subject as a major reason for it not to be compulsory at GCSE. This is an area where there is a clear difference between the primary and secondary cohorts, as no secondary student teachers referred to it.

The only student teachers who appeared not to see any value in history education ended their own at the end of Key Stage 3. One respondent stated that 'formal' history education did not 'offer enough' to students to make it compulsory, whereas the other expressed concerns over employment prospects

and the lack of 'history jobs'. This may explain why they chose not to continue studying the subject. Haydn and Harris (2010) in a large-scale survey of student perspectives on the purpose and benefits of studying history at school, posited that individual school departments might have been more successful than others in persuading students about the utility of the subject or might have potentially paid more attention to it. They also raised the question of the impact of parents'/carers' views. Further research would be useful into the possible origins of student teachers' perspectives on the utility of history, as this may impact their motivation to teach it and their approaches. Specific research into school student perspectives on the utility and purpose of history throughout Key Stage 3 may also be beneficial.

Freedom of choice

Of respondents, 49 per cent (19 per cent of the secondary student teacher participants, and 21 per cent of the primary) expressed the importance of freedom of choice. One secondary student teacher expanded on this, noting that while freedom of choice is important, history is a 'very academic' subject and would not 'suit' some school students. If history was a non-assessed subject, the participant argued, then all students should be required to study it. This viewpoint was shared by other respondents, and it underscores a possible tension between understanding the intrinsic value of subjects beyond academic assessment, while also being mindful of how learning is measured in the English school system and the examination pressures that students face.

Ordering activity – the purpose of history education

As mentioned, the student teachers were asked to order statements relating to the purpose of history education, which were based on the work of Chapman et al. (2018). They ordered them into a 'diamond nine' grid, discounting two statements. Individual responses were analysed. The responses to each statement were grouped as:

- positive: placed 1st or 2nd
- negative: placed 8th or 9th.

All the statements were selected by at least one student teacher from each cohort. General ideas were drawn from the student teachers' responses, which were:

- knowledge, with and without purpose
- empathy
- identity.

These correlate with some of the open question responses relating to the compulsory nature of history, which suggested that the subject was important for learning from the past and helping individuals better understand different societies, as well as their own identity and heritage.

History and the acquisition of knowledge

Knowledge beyond acquisition of 'facts'

There were two statements which related to knowledge acquisition and its purpose. The first of these was:

> *It helps us to learn from the past – how to avoid making past mistakes or to understand the impact of different kinds of action.*

This statement received the most consensus between the two groups of student teachers, with 54 per cent of all participants selecting it positively: 53 per cent of primary and 56 per cent of secondary. This contrasts with Chapman et al.'s (2018) study, in which only 20 per cent of participants referred to this use of history. However, 68.3 per cent of Nuttall's (2021) A-level students cited this as the main purpose of history; indeed, it was the most prevalent idea in his study. Haydn and Harris (2010), when researching Key Stage 3 students' perspectives on the purpose of studying history, also found that this was a prevalent idea (although not the most prevalent), which sometimes extended to there being a predictive aspect

of history. This lack of consistency in the findings may well relate to the differences in research methods; understanding where this idea comes from and how it impacts upon broader perceptions of the subject may be of use for the history education community.

The second statement to receive strong consensus was:

> *It is a source of knowledge that enables pupils to make sense of the world in which they live.*

Of secondary student teachers, 56 per cent selected this statement positively, and 16 per cent of primary student teachers did so. It should also be noted that 13 per cent of secondary and 11 per cent of primary student teachers rated this statement negatively, and therefore while it largely correlates with the findings of Chapman et al. (2018), with most being in favour of knowledge acquisition in history if it had a purpose, in this case using it to understand their world, not all agreed.

Knowledge acquisition alone

> *It enables pupils to acquire knowledge about the past.*

This statement was sixth in total responses, with no apparent correlations with education level. Table 4 shows that students largely ranked this statement negatively.

Table 4. How student teachers ranked the statement 'It enables pupils to acquire knowledge about the past'

Primary/secondary	Positive (ranked 1st or 2nd) (%)	Negative (ranked 8th or 9th) (%)
Primary	11	32
Secondary	6	13

This may suggest that student teachers from both cohorts do not see history as a vehicle to only acquire knowledge. Chapman et al. (2018) found that 20 out of the 40 students (50 per cent) they studied argued for the importance of acquiring historical knowledge; however, the arguments in favour of the acquisition of knowledge were never presented as a sole purpose for the study of the past; thus, the findings are similar.

Empathy

> *It enables pupils to see beyond their own experience and appreciate other possibilities and ways of seeing the world.*

This statement attracted the most responses from primary student teachers, with 60 per cent of the overall group (primary and secondary combined) ranking it positively (Table 5).

Table 5. How student teachers ranked the statement: 'It enables pupils to see beyond their own experience and appreciate other possibilities and ways of seeing the world'

Primary/secondary	Positive (ranked 1st or 2nd) (%)	Negative (ranked 8th or 9th) (%)
Primary	79	0
Secondary	38	0

While this statement seemed to have broad appeal, regardless of the participants' history education level, it appears to be the most popular statement for those who had completed their history education at, or

before, GCSE level. Of the primary student teachers who ended their history education at Key Stage 3, 86 per cent selected this statement, as did 86 per cent of the primary student teachers educated to GCSE level. This suggests that history education as a vehicle for developing empathy is particularly important for those student teachers who did not study history beyond GCSE. As a result, it may be useful to build on Nuttall's (2021) work which highlighted that A-level students in England are more likely to value the intrinsic merits of history education, and to consider the differences between A-level students' and GCSE students' thinking about the purpose of history education.

Identity

The English National Curriculum for History (DfE, 2013) posits, in its purpose statement, that history helps pupils to understand their own identity. However, the only statement that no student teacher from either group rated positively, with some positioning it negatively (5 per cent of primary and 13 per cent of secondary) was:

> *It is an instrument for promoting personal identity and/or a pride in it.*

History may have been seen as a way of seeing the world differently, and less as being about personal identity, although perhaps the promotion of self which appears to be inherent in the statement, was off putting, or indeed the concept of pride:

> *It is a way of promoting national identity and/or pride.*

Of primary student teachers, 53 per cent rated this negatively, with only 5 per cent of primary students rating it positively. Of secondary student teachers, 13 per cent ranked this negatively. This suggests that the participants did not see history as a vehicle to promote national identity; they viewed the idea unfavourably.

Conclusion

Our findings largely align with those of Chapman et al. (2018). Like their students, our participants did not choose to rank any statement linked to history fostering a sense of national identity highly. This implies that they were against using history to promote patriotism and the 'our island story' narrative presented by Michael Gove (who was education secretary between 2010 and 2014) (see Boffey, 2013). History as an instrument of personal identity and pride was also viewed unfavourably by our student teachers. Instead, they valued history for its potential to broaden perspectives and to foster understandings of diverse world views. Notably, our student teachers, who had completed their history education at GCSE level or earlier, also particularly valued history as a vehicle to develop empathy.

Like Chapman et al.'s (2018) students, our participants appreciated historical knowledge acquisition when it served a clear purpose. They rejected the idea of knowledge for its own sake, instead favouring knowledge that helps to understand contemporary issues or to learn from past mistakes. As Van Straaten et al. (2015) note, this highlights a significant tension between educators' beliefs and governmental policies on history education. The history curriculum in England emphasises substantive knowledge as an end, while the concept of historical empathy is notably absent, unlike in other countries, such as Australia and Canada. This disconnect poses a challenge; as Chapman et al. (2018) note, student teachers will be required to implement these curricula, which may contradict their beliefs about the discipline. Such misalignment could lead to resistance or resignation, worsening the current teacher retention crisis in the UK.

Understanding student teachers' perspectives on the purpose of history education is a crucial starting point for history-specific aspects of an ITE course. Initial findings suggest that perspectives on history education and its purpose are similar across both primary and secondary cohorts, although differences emerge among those who ended their own history education at GCSE or before. Further research is needed to explore this across other cohorts and ITE providers, as it could influence how history is approached, especially in primary ITE, where history often receives less instructional time due to the demands of the many subjects which need to be taught.

The shared perspectives of primary and secondary student teachers underscore the need for ITE courses to facilitate more collaboration opportunities between these groups. This would allow

student teachers to reflect more deeply on the nature and purpose of history outside the pressures of school placements, where assessment targets and government policies often heavily influence teaching practice.

It is hoped that these findings may support discourse within the subject community about how to develop student teachers' perspectives on history as a school subject, and potentially to begin collaborations to support what this could and should look like. The differences in thinking related to student teachers' education levels warrant further investigation, as these may impact best practice in guiding future educators. ITE programmes should explicitly address the nature and purpose of history from the outset of the course, as a secure understanding of the discipline can support student teachers to motivate and engage their learners and confidently explain the relevance and value of the subject. Ultimately, this approach may empower them to achieve greater agency in their teaching.

Data and materials availability statement

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The authors declare that research ethics approval for this article was provided by Liverpool John Moores University ethics board.

Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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