
Research article

Whose story should we be telling? An exploration of student attitudes towards, and perceptions of, the British history curriculum

Oliver Morgan^{1,*} 

¹ IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society, London, UK

* Correspondence: omorgan22@gmail.com

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Abstract

Amid a growing national debate regarding the current health and future direction of the history curriculum in Britain, there have been numerous calls for an examination of its roles and purposes, and questions have been raised as to how far it engages an increasingly diverse student body. This article examines the perceptions and attitudes of students towards the history curriculum within the context of one secondary school in south-east England through an exploratory case study. The findings draw upon research undertaken with Year 9 students, through 105 completed questionnaires, and through focus group interviews conducted with 12 participants. Thematic analysis suggests that, although students very much value learning about British history, they would prefer a curriculum with a wider focus which incorporates broader global studies. Although the environment offered by the case study is not particularly socially diverse, there is evidence that some groups of students desire greater curriculum reform and inclusivity. As a case study, the

results are not intended to be generalised outside of context, but merely to provide points of discussion regarding an area in which prior research has been somewhat limited.

Keywords history curriculum; diversity; reform; perception; nationalism; citizenship; narrative; skills; knowledge

Introduction

Since 1991 the National Curriculum has provided guidance about the subjects and standards used by British schools in planning and delivering their curricula, with a view to ensuring that students across the country have the same access to similar topics. The curriculum itself is split into Key Stages, with Key Stages 1 and 2 applying to primary school pupils (age 5–11), and secondary schooling being split between Key Stage 3 (age 11–14) and Key Stage 4 (age 14–16) (see Table 1). Naturally, this curriculum has undergone significant revision across many different subject areas in the years that have passed since its introduction. In spite of this, there is perhaps a case to be made that, with regard to the history curriculum, such changes have been very limited in both scope and scale, and have consequently made little difference to the content actually being taught in schools (Harris and Reynolds, 2018). This lack of change is likely to be caused by a number of factors.

Table 1. Overview of National Curriculum Key Stages (Source: GOV.UK, n.d.)

Child's age	Year	Key Stage (KS)	Assessment
3 to 4		Early years	
4 to 5	Reception	Early years	Assessment of pupils' starting points in language, communication, literacy and maths, and teacher assessments
5 to 6	Year 1	KS1	Phonics screening check
6 to 7	Year 2	KS1	National tests in English, reading and maths. Teacher assessments in maths, science, and English reading and writing
7 to 8	Year 3	KS2	
8 to 9	Year 4	KS2	Multiplication tables check
9 to 10	Year 5	KS2	
10 to 11	Year 6	KS2	National tests in English reading, maths, and grammar, punctuation and spelling. Teacher assessments in English writing and science
11 to 12	Year 7	KS3	
12 to 13	Year 8	KS3	
13 to 14	Year 9	KS3	
14 to 15	Year 10	KS4	Some children take GCSEs
15 to 16	Year 11	KS4	Most children take GCSEs or other national qualifications

Although the National Curriculum provides guidance for British teachers, it is important to remember that the document itself is inert, and has to be interpreted and enacted by teachers themselves. Since 2000, an increasing number of British schools have become academies, a status which, in theory, provides greater curriculum and budgetary freedoms compared to being under local authority control. In spite of this, in a Department for Education report, 95 per cent of 720 academy-based history departments indicated that they planned to continue drawing upon the National Curriculum when planning their own curricula (DfE, 2014). The same report acknowledged a survey which found that 45 per cent of new academies had made no alterations to their curricula since their change in status. Although

academisation has allowed British schools to make structural changes to their Key Stage 3 offering, the National Curriculum appears to retain much of its original significance, since as many as two-thirds of new academies do little to deviate from it (Finch et al., 2014).

A possible cause of this may be the reluctance that even experienced teachers have previously indicated to adapt practice to curriculum changes over time (Woolley, 2019). Such resistance to change may be strengthened by both internal and external pressures placed on British secondary school teachers. It is generally accepted that history is 'squeezed for time' at Key Stage 3 (Culpin, 2006; Freeman, 2005; Ofsted, 2018), with some schools even facing the need to reduce history provision to a two-year Key Stage 3 programme (Harris and Haydn, 2012). This puts particular pressure upon Key Stage 3 teaching staff, given that the majority of British students opt to drop the subject at the earliest opportunity, many at the age of 13 (Carroll and Gill, 2018). There are surely numerous factors that influence this, but it is unlikely that the situation is helped by the fact that some students have been found to have a poor grasp of why history is taught, or of the potential uses that skills developed through the subject might have (Haydn and Harris, 2010).

The outcome of this is that, for most students, it seems likely that the Key Stage 3 curriculum that they are taught remains remarkably similar to the version delivered to students nearly 25 years ago (Harris, 2013). This presents the very real danger that the curriculum being taught in many schools has not kept pace with the social change that has occurred within an increasingly culturally and ethnically diverse British society (Burn and Harris, 2012; DfES, 2006). Available evidence suggests that this may be one of the reasons why minority ethnic students are particularly vulnerable to feelings of disengagement from the subject (Mohamud and Whitburn, 2016). Arguably, it is the narrowness of the school-based history curriculum which causes Black and minority ethnic students to suffer from a significant attainment gap compared to their White peers, making them significantly more likely to drop the subject. This may contribute in part to the fact that the ethnic profile of both staff and students within UK university history departments remains disproportionately White (RHS, 2018). Despite Barton's (2015) contention that we should expand rather than constrict the history curriculum for all students, there is still much work to be done in this regard. Questions remain over what British history is, who gets included in the story, and how best to engage young people in increasingly diverse classrooms (Runnymede Trust, 2015). If it is true that the curricula being delivered to students today are still extremely similar to those being delivered decades ago, do today's students relate to what they are being taught, and might their perceptions potentially affect their engagement with school history?

Context

Despite the existence of a National Curriculum for history in England, 'little is known about what specifically is taught in schools, and therefore what impact this has on young people who are required to study the subject' (Harris and Reynolds, 2014: 467). This study is informed by a desire to provide rich qualitative data which offer an insight into a very specific context. The school in which the research was conducted is a high-achieving girls' grammar school in south-east England, with a student body consisting primarily of White, middle-class, high-attaining students. At the time the research was conducted, the history department within the school delivered a curriculum that was predominantly White in nature, with limited links to more diverse global histories beyond the British 'island story' (see Table 2). Although the school is an academy, the curriculum being taught largely mirrored the National Curriculum, thereby providing a suitable environment in which to assess student attitudes. For example, did students tend to conform to more traditional interpretations of British history centred upon concepts such as the glory of empire, or were they likely to affirm a multicultural approach by identifying with the growing plurality within an increasingly diverse society? Theoretically speaking, the curriculum offered only limited levels of diversity and inclusion, but was this recognised by the students themselves? Moreover, in an environment which seemingly offered only limited levels of diversity, were students capable of explaining what this concept actually meant?

Table 2. Curriculum map for case study school (Source: Author, 2023)

Year Group	Term 1	Term 2	Term 3	Term 4	Term 5	Term 6
7	<p>Topic: Historical skills</p> <p>Assessment: Creating a hypothesis – What happened to Elizabeth Brown ... and why?</p>	<p>Topic: What were the consequences of the Norman conquest?</p> <p>Assessment: Was William of Normandy (William the Conqueror) a good king from 1066 to 1087?</p>	<p>Topic: How much did people's lives change during the Middle Ages?</p> <p>Assessment: How much did the Black Death change people's lives?</p>	<p>Topic: How did state and people respond to religious change?</p> <p>Assessment: Why do people have different interpretations about the consequences of the English defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588?</p>	<p>Topic: Did Britain have an empire to be proud of?</p> <p>Assessment: End of Year 7 test</p>	<p>Topic: What legacy has the British Empire left behind?</p> <p>Assessment: Source analysis – How has the British Empire been portrayed?</p>
8	<p>Topic: What caused the English Civil War?</p> <p>Assessment: Was Charles I solely to blame for the start of the Civil War?</p>	<p>Topic: Why did the Industrial Revolution transform Britain?</p> <p>Assessment: 'Working conditions for children in mills and factories during the Industrial Revolution were awful.' How far do you agree with this view?</p>	<p>Topic: Black Peoples of America – How important were Africans to the Atlantic Slave Trade?</p> <p>Assessment: Source analysis – What was the experience of slaves during capture and the Middle Passage?</p>	<p>Topic: Black Peoples of America – In what ways did the civil rights movement succeed? What made those successes possible?</p> <p>Assessment: Did Martin Luther King or Malcolm X have a bigger impact on the American Civil Rights movement? Why?</p>	<p>Topic: 'Deeds not words' – How did women get the vote in 1918?</p> <p>Assessment: End of Year 8 test</p>	<p>Topic: How has immigration changed Britain?</p> <p>Assessment: What factors have been most significant in encouraging migration to and from Britain?</p>

9	<p>Topic: What caused the First World War?</p> <p>Assessment: 'The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand was the main reason for the outbreak of the First World War.' How far do you agree with this statement? Explain your answer.</p>	<p>Topic: What were soldiers' experiences like during the First World War?</p> <p>Assessment: Source analysis – How useful is this poster for a historian studying why soldiers enlisted at the start of the First World War?</p>	<p>Topic: Why did peace eventually fail during the interwar years?</p> <p>Assessment: What was the main reason why the League of Nations failed to reach its objective of achieving world peace?</p>	<p>Topic: What was the turning point of the Second World War?</p> <p>Assessment: Was Operation Barbarossa Hitler's biggest mistake?</p>	<p>Topic: How should we remember the Holocaust?</p> <p>Assessment: End of Year 9 test</p>	<p>Topic: Introduction to History GCSE. AQA – Germany 1890–1945 Democracy and Dictatorship</p> <p>Assessment: Short GCSE-style questions: 4 marks, 8 marks, 12 marks</p>
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Literature review

Precisely assessing student perception of different school subjects is a complex task, as student attitudes can be affected by a multitude of different factors. Previous research has indicated that British students make their subject choices for GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) study based upon both their enjoyment of the subject in itself (Bardell, 1982; Hendley et al., 1996; Kelly, 1988; Reid et al., 1974) and upon their perceived notion of the subject's usefulness for future careers (Stables and Wikeley, 1997). With regard to student enjoyment of history at Key Stage 3, there does seem to be some cause for optimism. Harris and Haydn (2008) found that the majority of students sampled enjoyed history. This was to such an extent that history was voted the most popular academic subject. However, the study also produced evidence to suggest that student perceptions of the 'value' of history were more mixed. Of 1,500 comments about the purpose of history, 658 were defined as being underdeveloped or tautological assertions about the need to learn about the past. This correlated both with Harris and Haydn's (2006) previous study, and with research (Adey and Biddulph, 2001) which found that, although British students enjoyed their historical learning at Key Stage 3, they saw little purpose in pursuing the subject beyond this stage. Given the link between perceived subject usefulness and value and uptake for Key Stage 4 subjects (Vaughn et al., 1996), this perhaps explains, at least in part, the fact that the majority of British students elect to stop studying history as soon as they can.

Given that the purpose of this study is to develop an improved understanding of student perspectives on the curriculum, it is of course relevant to consider the forces which have shaped its development. Christine Counsell (2012: 61) has contended that to 'decide what history is to be taught, at school, regional or national level, is to exercise phenomenal power'. Perhaps this goes some way to explaining the ongoing debate regarding the state of the British history curriculum. The importance of a historical dimension in shaping a meaningful student understanding of citizenship has been argued previously (Lee and Shemlit, 2007), as has the importance of history in developing patriotism and national identity (Harris, 2013). There is some possibility that the notion of developing student identity and 'Britishness' is considered so appealing due to changing circumstances and external threats. Whitburn and Yemoh (2012) have hypothesised that, at least in part, the desire to develop a sense of Britishness in students stems from a sense of insecurity that has gripped British society since the terrorist attacks in London in 2005. Since the most recent revision of the National Curriculum, there is indeed a focus upon identity as a key requirement. However, this may not be as straightforward as it might seem. First, the very concept of 'identity' raises a number of pressing questions in itself. National identity is complex and variable, being subject to changing influences which make it fluid rather than fixed. In Britain, the context is more complicated, given that there are competing national histories within its collective past.

The current curriculum does, theoretically at least, offer opportunities for engaging with more diverse histories, particularly through the requirement to help students understand 'the diversity of societies and relationships between different groups, as well as their own identity' (DfE, 2013: 204). However, it is worth noting that some constraints remain, most notably in the homogenisation of, and distinction between, different national histories, and in the fact that comparatively little emphasis is placed upon the history of diverse social groups (Alexander and Weekes-Bernard, 2017). Although the National Curriculum prescribes the study of a significant society or issue in world history (DfE, 2013), there remains a focus upon the story of 'these islands' as predominantly a singular narrative. Given Britain's increasingly multicultural society, this creates the risk of teaching students topics within history lessons to which they may struggle to relate, as it is generally accepted that there is a 'tendency for students to perceive some topics as "theirs" and other topics as "belonging to someone else"' (Lee and Shemlit, 2007: 17). Moreover, both Hansen (2012) and Berger (2012) have been critical of an overemphasis upon the nation state as a means of teaching national history, and it has even been claimed that the current curriculum risks creating a nationalistic generation with little interest in international issues (Secret Teacher, 2018).

Burn and Harris (2012: 220) have gone so far as to contend that 'within England the evidence shows that the history curriculum has limited appeal to students from minority ethnic backgrounds'. In making such a bold claim, Burn and Harris (2012) point towards a report for the Department for Education and Skills (DfES, 2006), which found that children from minority ethnic backgrounds frequently cited history as their least favourite subject. This is supported by detailed entry figures for public examinations showing that, in 2010, 30.9 per cent of White students elected to study GCSE history, compared with only 20.4 per cent of Black students. This gap becomes even more pronounced at A-level, where 11.6

per cent of White students chose to study history, compared to only 6.5 per cent of Black students (Gibb, 2011). Such evidence of student disengagement is corroborated by Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, the body responsible for inspecting English schools), who have reported that the role of history in helping students to understand and appreciate an increasingly diverse society has been 'insufficient' (Ofsted, 2011). Although there has been a renewed emphasis upon British history teachers making their curricula more inclusive and diverse in recent years, this remains far from straightforward. Mohamud and Whitburn (2014) have both long argued that teaching children about 'their own' history is far from straightforward, citing Traill's (2007) work showing that some topics intended to be 'inclusive' can instead lead to further generalisation and alienation. It is worth noting that not all researchers agree upon a straightforward link between ethnicity and student responses to national narratives. Hawkey and Prior (2011) have suggested that variations in response from different individuals remain likely, with family and community influences having a demonstrable impact upon students' perceptions. Harris and Reynolds's (2014) work also questions the link between student ethnicity and enjoyment of history, but similarly highlights a correlation between how engaged students felt with issues or topics and their sense of personal connection to them. For example, local history was noted as being enjoyed by all students, regardless of their background. Such a finding seems to lend credence to calls from both Evans (2011) and Kitson et al. (2011) for British history teachers to expand the curriculum, while considering the needs and backgrounds of local populations.

For the sake of international comparison, global studies have tended to rely upon relatively small sample sizes, thereby increasing the risk of overgeneralisation. However, it is worth noting that European and North American history curricula tend to rely upon national history, with little focus upon global perspectives (Grever et al., 2011). The Youth and History survey (Angvik and Von Borries, 1997) found that, across 27 European countries, young people found modern and ancient history more interesting than the Middle Ages. The precise causes of this are likely to be complex; however, Grever et al. (2011) point to Zerubavel's (2003) work in suggesting that students easily identify with both ancient and twentieth-century history because in many countries annual rituals and festivals support the mnemonic imprinting of these periods, through holy days and annual commemorations of liberation and national independence. Such a focus on personal connections has also been emphasised by Barton and McCully (2012) through their work with students in Northern Ireland, which identified a strong link between the history that students learn within their communities and the impact that this has upon their perception of historical issues. Outside of Europe, Epstein et al.'s (2011) work with US students also suggests that ethnic background and identity had a significant impact on the way in which topics or issues were perceived.

Research approach

The intention behind this research was not for it to be overgeneralised, but rather for it to gauge student voice within one specific context in reference to wider debates surrounding British history curriculum intent and reform. Specific research questions were as follows.

- Did students find the history curriculum engaging and relevant?
- Could students articulate reasons for learning about British history?
- Did students' identities link to their narrative construction of a 'British story'?
- What aspects of history did students think most clearly demonstrated British history (if any)?

Given that elaborate and detailed responses were desirable, focus groups were deemed to offer the potential to explore student attitudes with the appropriate level of depth. However, a questionnaire (see Figure 1) was first administered across a wider number of students, with the aim of generating a broader, and therefore more representative, range of responses. In designing this questionnaire, previous surveys (Adey and Biddulph, 2001; Harris and Haydn, 2008, 2006) of student attitudes were used as a model. The first page of the questionnaire used a combination of closed and open questioning to gain an insight into the respondents' broader attitudes towards school subjects. Specifically, students were asked to identify those subjects that they enjoyed the most/least, and to provide justifications for these preferences. By asking broader questions initially, the intention was to familiarise students with the questionnaire process while developing an understanding of how history might fit into the wider curriculum in their eyes. The next stage focused more specifically upon attitudes towards school history, with students using a measurement scale to indicate their responses to hypothetical statements. For

the final stage of the questionnaire, the focus shifted to asking broader open-ended questions. The justification for the inclusion of these was that they allowed for a greater variety of responses (Harrison, 2007).

Figure 1. Questionnaire to which student participants responded (Source: Author, 2023)

An exploration of student attitudes towards, and perceptions of, the British history curriculum.
Questionnaire

Class:

- Please record your class name at the top of the sheet.
- This questionnaire should take about 15 minutes to complete.
- There are no wrong answers! Try to answer all of the questions as honestly as possible.
- If you are unsure about what any of the questions might be asking you, please just ask for help.
- All of your answers are completely confidential and will not be shared with others.

1. Which of these subjects do you enjoy the most in school? **Tick three boxes.**

Subject			
English		RE	
Mathematics		Design and technology	
MFL		PE	
History		Drama	
Geography		IT	
Art		PSHCE	
Science		Music	

Why do you find these subjects enjoyable?

2. Which of these subjects do you enjoy the least in school? **Tick three boxes.**

Subject			
English		RE	
Mathematics		Design and technology	
MFL		PE	
History		Drama	
Geography		IT	
Art		PSHCE	
Science		Music	

Why don't you find these subjects enjoyable?

3. Please read the questions and complete the table below:

Tick one box to show how strongly you agree/disagree with each statement. Tick the uncertain box if you're not sure how you feel.		strongly agree	agree	uncertain/ not applicable	disagree	strongly disagree
A	What you learn in your history lessons is relevant to your everyday life.					
B	History lessons help teach you important life skills.					
C	Your history lessons have helped to develop your skills and understanding within other subjects.					
D	The topics that you learn about as part of the history curriculum are really interesting and engaging.					
E	It is important for everyone to have a good understanding of British history.					
F	Learning about British history makes you feel a sense of pride.					
G	Studying British history is a chance to recognise the diverse stories of different peoples.					
H	It is important to learn about global history as well as British history					
I	The history curriculum (set of topics) that you are taught should be regularly updated.					

4. Do you think that History should be compulsory until Year 9? Why/why not?

Yes	No	Not sure

Because:

5. Are you interested in History outside school (reading about it, watching history programmes on TV, exploring history on the internet)?

Yes	No	Not sure

6. Did you enjoy History at primary school?

Yes	No	Not sure

The inclusion of separate focus group interviews made it possible to explore the significance of student experiences in more depth (Kvale, 1996). Interviews were structured around several stages, with Barton's (2015) work providing the theoretical framework behind each semi-structured stage. Students first

completed a standard demographic form which provided an opportunity to define their own background, thereby establishing their broader sense of identity outside the context of the history curriculum. Following the model provided by Hunter and Farthing (2008), students were then asked either to draw an image or to construct a word map which they felt represented British history. This was intended to place them at ease, while making it easier for them to represent challenging concepts. Following a discussion of these, the third stage followed a similar approach to that adopted by Barton and McCully (2005, 2010). Students were encouraged to add to their 'ideal curriculum', thus constructing their own version of 'British history'. Semi-structured group discussion encouraged students to reflect upon what might have influenced their view, and why others might have reached different conclusions. Finally, students were provided with an opportunity for written comment, and to suggest whether they agreed with the group's decisions.

Research sample

As previously outlined, Year 9 students (13–14 years old) were selected to participate in this process. The reasoning behind this was twofold. First, as students who had almost completed their Key Stage 3 history education, it was hoped that they would be reasonably knowledgeable, while also being well placed to reflect upon their experiences. Second, within the context of the school, focusing upon Year 9 students provided a more varied pool of participants, as subjects could be drawn from a wider range of classes than at Key Stage 4, where numbers of students were comparatively lower, and the chances of gaining a representative sample seemed much reduced. The school in which the research was conducted is attended primarily by White British students, although the number of students on roll from minority ethnic backgrounds has increased within recent years. Overall, the numbers of Pupil Premium and EAL (English as an additional language) students were below national averages. With reference to the parameters of the study, the school's status as a single-sex grammar school means that any potential sample of students is likely to be narrower than that which would be offered within a comprehensive school environment. A specific issue considered in relation to this was Bell's (2001) assertion that history is more likely to be engaged with by high-attaining rather than by low-attaining students. Thus, within the groups of students participating, efforts were made to include not only high-attaining students, but also those of varying levels of ability, as would be considered typical within the school.

In total, four Year 9 classes were invited to participate in the research by completing questionnaires. Accordingly, 105 responses were gained from a year group of nearly 250 students. No two groups had the same teacher, in order to help limit the possibility of a specific individual's pedagogical approach generating discrepancies. This seemed particularly important, given that previous studies (Adey and Biddulph, 2001; Harris and Haydn, 2006) have identified a clear link between student engagement and the approach of specific teachers. Once the questionnaires were completed, 12 students were selected from the pool of questionnaire respondents to take part in focus groups. In order for this to meet the criteria for a representative sample (Barbour, 2007; Fallowfield, 1995; Patton, 2002), effort was made to ensure that participants included those of varying socio-economic backgrounds, attainment levels and behavioural records, proportionate with the broader student population within the school.

Discussion of findings

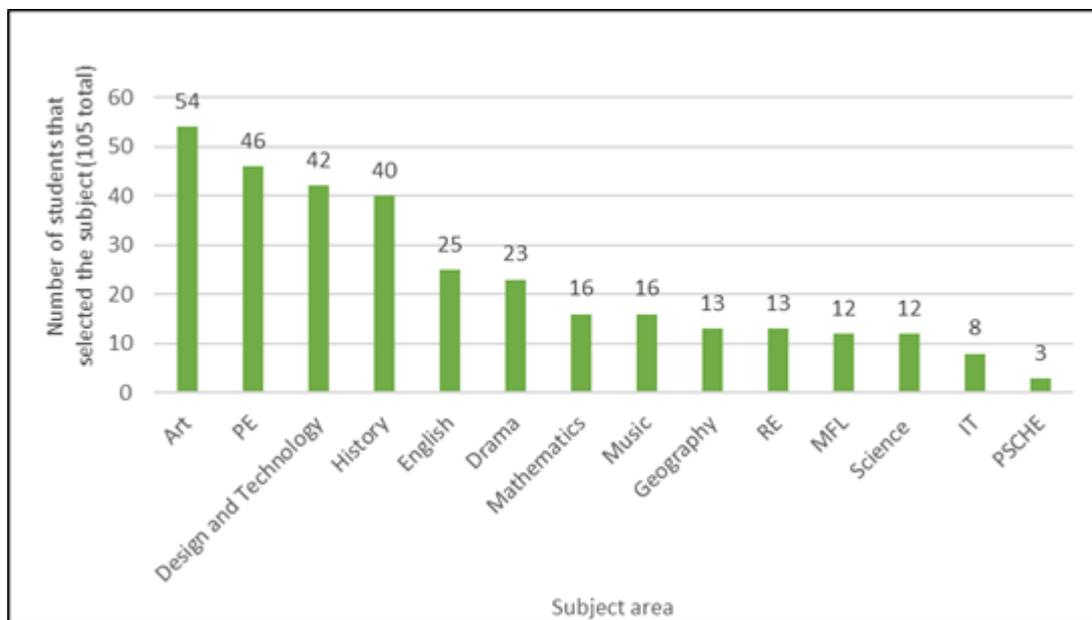
How did students perceive history in comparison with other subjects?

A key theme to emerge from the research was that, generally speaking, history was perceived reasonably positively by the students. Just over two-thirds of 105 questionnaire respondents either *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that they found the topics that they had learnt as part of the history curriculum engaging.

As shown in Figure 2, just over 40 per cent of students identified history as one of their three most enjoyed subjects. Interestingly, the three subjects that ranked more highly were all 'practical' ones, thus making history the most popular 'academic' subject. This is a finding which mirrors that produced by Harris and Haydn (2008) in their national Qualifications and Curriculum Authority survey, and it is one which would seem to be similarly positive regarding the progress that has been made in this area since earlier studies (Hargreaves, 1984; Schools Council, 1967). Perhaps surprisingly, only just over 5 per cent of student responses provided qualitative answers which linked subjects they enjoyed to any career path,

potentially challenging prior research suggesting that history has struggled because of not being closely aligned to potential career avenues (Adey and Biddulph, 2001). Despite the fact that higher attaining British students are statistically more likely to continue studying history beyond the age of 13 (Carroll and Gill, 2018), this was not replicated within this grammar school setting. Although the majority were happy with the quality of history teaching they had received in the school, 39 per cent still indicated that they had no plans to continue studying the subject to GCSE. Three-quarters of those dropping history explained that they felt that they were not as strong at history as at geography, and therefore considered themselves more likely to secure positive results studying the latter. Just under half of respondents who planned to drop history indicated that they had made their decision on the basis of there being too much examination writing involved, while 31 per cent cited the amount of prescribed content at GCSE. The latter point is perhaps unsurprising, given that three-quarters of history teachers themselves harbour concerns regarding the amount of content that they are expected to teach at GCSE (Hazell, 2017). At least within this school setting, the drop-off in students electing to continue studying history seems to be linked, at least in part, to practical considerations regarding difficulty or level of content, rather than to a lack of engagement or concerns over the quality of teaching.

Figure 2. Questionnaire responses showing school subjects selected by respondents as one of their three most enjoyable (Source: Author, 2023)



How did students perceive the roles and purposes of the history curriculum?

The statements in Table 3 were provided to students in the questionnaire with the intention of breaking down their attitudes. Of respondents, 43 per cent agreed to some extent that history lessons were relevant to everyday life, while just under half felt that they helped teach important life skills. In both cases, this meant that a majority of the students sampled either felt uncertain or actively disagreed regarding the link between history and everyday skills. This is something which clearly replicates the results produced by aforementioned national studies (Adey and Biddulph, 2001; Harris and Haydn, 2006). Within the school in which the research was conducted, staff often emphasised broad purposes for history which linked it to other subjects or careers. This perhaps explains why 71 per cent of students felt that history lessons had helped them to develop skills and understanding within other subject areas. However, it seems that a consequence of this was that students appreciated history for more generic, extrinsic purposes, rather than valuing the subject for its own sake and for what a secure knowledge of the past would provide for them. Some, such as Counsell (2011) and Fordham (2016), have been critical of this kind of 'genericism', whereby too much focus is placed upon transferable generic skills, precisely for the

reason that students are encouraged to believe that the value of history lies outside the subject, rather than in what it can offer them in itself. Whether or not the attitudes of students in the case study were directly derived from 'genericism' alone, participants certainly seemed to focus upon the value of history in relation to other subjects, more than as a discipline in itself.

Table 3. Student responses to questionnaire curriculum statements (n=105) (Source: Author, 2023)

Questionnaire curriculum statements		Strongly agree	Agree	Uncertain/Not applicable	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No response
A	What you learn in your history lessons is relevant to your everyday life.	7	39	28	28	3	0
B	History lessons help to teach you important life skills.	11	41	28	23	2	0
C	Your history lessons have helped you to develop your skills and understanding within other subjects.	25	50	19	8	3	0
D	The topics that you learn about as part of the history curriculum are really interesting and engaging.	33	37	19	9	5	2
E	It is important for everyone to have a good understanding of British history.	21	49	23	11	1	0
F	Learning about British history makes you feel a sense of pride.	3	24	45	20	13	0
G	Studying British history is a chance to recognise the diverse stories of different peoples.	17	61	14	8	1	4
H	It is important to learn about global history as well as British history.	56	38	7	4	0	0
I	The history curriculum (set of topics) that you are taught should be regularly updated.	34	47	20	3	1	0

Another key theme to emerge from focus group discussions was the clear difference in student perceptions between the perceived value of history and geography:

I feel like that's [British migration topic] much more like geography. I know at the moment that in geography we're doing that for Nigeria and have been looking at why people migrate. (Student 3, Focus Group 1)

Geography just seems more relevant to today because you study things that affect us, like climate change. (Student 6, Focus Group 1)

Focus group participants also made much of contemporary links, with students referring to topics such as 'Conflict in the Middle East' being particularly 'relevant', and therefore more valuable. This perhaps in part links to Rüsen's (2004) theory of historical consciousness, and to students' desire to make sense of the past in order to construct expectations for the future. A potential solution would be to attempt to connect historical topics to unfolding current affairs; however, not only is this not always possible, but attempting to do so would mean adopting the 'presentist' approach, about which Harris (2013) and others have been so critical. Beyond the students' focus upon contemporary links, virtually no participants referred to the purposes of historical study specified in the National Curriculum, for example, by providing answers which referred to 'weighing evidence', understanding the 'process of change' or identifying

the 'challenges of their time' (DfE, 2013), thus replicating previous findings (Adey and Biddulph, 2001; Harris and Haydn, 2006). Within the case study setting, the history department had made a conscious effort to focus upon historical 'skills', earmarking their status within assessments and schemes of learning, largely reflecting the Seixas (2006) model. The most damning indictment of this approach was expressed during the second focus group:

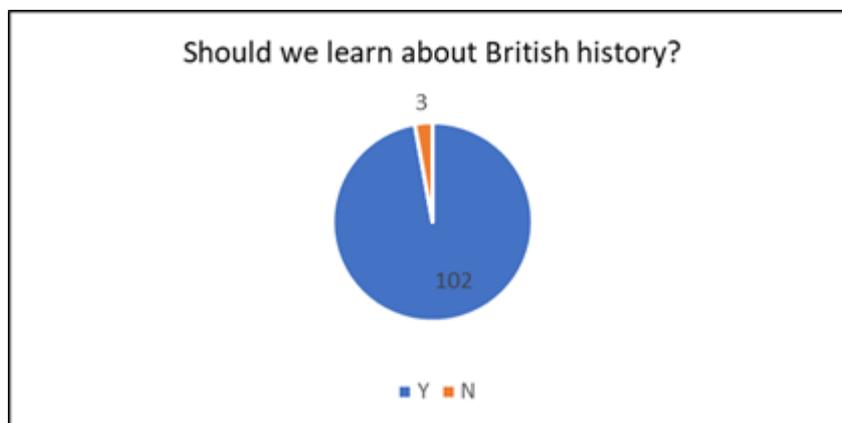
I don't care about historical skills. Year 8 was just PEE [Point–Evidence–Explanation] paragraphs all the time, and it was so boring. (Student 6, Focus Group 2)

Although only representing the view of one student, this would seem to reflect two different problems. First, despite the teaching of a curriculum that actively embedded the development of historical skills, students within the school were largely unable to precisely articulate what these were, or to explain how they might benefit them. Indeed, in several instances, student responses appeared to associate historical skills with broader written ones which might be applicable within any number of school-based subjects, returning again to the problem of 'genericism'. Both Hirsch (1987) and Williams (2016) have been critical of the academic value of thinking skills, while Gibb (2012) and Matthews (2009) have also suggested that it has led to a lack of focus upon knowledge and the value that this offers students. In view of the wider debate surrounding historical skills versus knowledge, Oakes and Reiss (2014) have contended that it should not be a case of prioritising one over the other. In this setting, at least, it seems that much more needs to be done to contextualise skills, while in turn also making greater links to the value of disciplinary knowledge which is unique to the subject.

How did students view 'British history'?

When asked what they felt best represented 'British history', focus group participants tended to draw upon nationalistic themes, such as the 'royals' or the 'empire'. However, many also cited topics such as the 'Victorians' or the 'Tudors', potentially reinforcing the importance of curriculum content in shaping their conceptions. Questionnaire responses indicated that an overwhelming majority of students considered it important to learn about British history, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Student responses when asked whether British history should be learned (Source: Author, 2023)



Over half of respondents justified this on the basis that they felt it important that young people grew up with a developed understanding of the country in which they lived, while one-quarter referenced the importance of appreciating national culture. This is interesting in so far as it would seem to reflect that the students themselves would consider this kind of knowledge to be 'powerful' (Bernstein, 1999; Young, 2012) in likening it to conceptions of citizenship. This kind of knowledge is deemed to be powerful in the sense that it would not be developed naturally through students' everyday lives, being at least very difficult to access without previously being taught in school. Despite this apparent emphasis upon cultural capital, it is notable that no responses referred to concepts such as patriotism or devotion to the

state. Similarly, although most students felt that learning about British history was important, it is worth noting that students were polarised in their reaction to Statement F (Table 3), which proposed the idea that British history made them proud. Of all the statements, this provoked the highest overall level of disagreement. Consequently, students seem to define themselves as being at odds with a curriculum that served only to teach about British victories and successes. Indeed, if anything, students appeared to prefer a more diverse focus than that which might be offered by a more singular 'island story'. This was reflected in the fact that Statements G, H and I (Table 3) proved much less divisive. Focus group participants seemed similarly keen to see a greater geographical range of topics:

The things that we have learnt about in Years 7–9 have generally been about how England was affected. It would be good to learn about other countries. (Student 1, Focus Group 1)

If anything, I don't want to learn about British history because it's signified [emphasised] a lot more than others [topics] and some are more interesting. (Student 3, Focus Group 1)

We should learn more about global countries as we're only very small. (Student 3, Focus Group 2)

In discussing specific topics, students in Focus Group 2 agreed that they felt it would have been beneficial when learning about slavery to spend a significant amount of time considering the long-term cultural impact upon African Americans, rather than, as they felt was currently the case, focusing largely upon the economic impacts for Britain. Huber and Kitson (2020) found similar evidence that some students in their study were disengaged with a 'happy ending' story of equality, while Mohamud and Whitburn (2014) have also articulated the dangers of failing to provide a more inclusive narrative. The fact that at least one focus group participant criticised more 'traditional' schemes of learning via the 'Black Peoples of the Americas' unit in this school would seem to lend further credence for calls to update such schemes with the aim of making them more inclusive.

What do students feel the curriculum should look like?

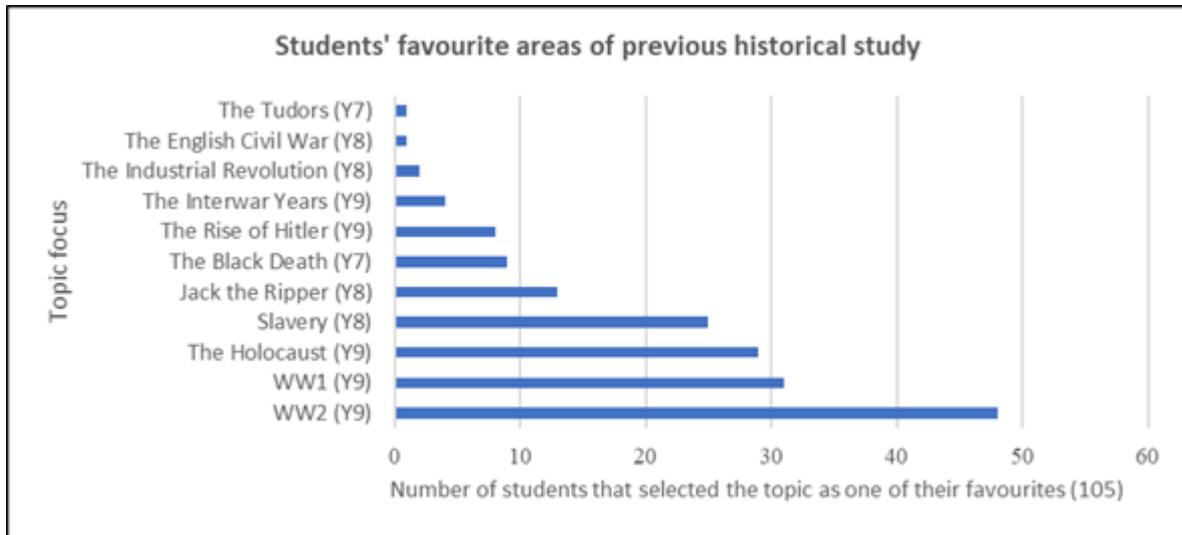
As Figure 4 illustrates, the three most popular topics that were selected by students during the questionnaire stage were all modern twentieth-century ones. Most students explained that they had found the world wars 'interesting' or 'engaging', with frequent references to the global aspect of the conflicts or that lessons challenged their existing preconceptions. Interestingly, some students also referred to family connections to either conflict, possibly underscoring the importance of such familial links (Grever et al., 2011). It is also possible that some students find it easier to empathise with topics that are more firmly rooted within a modern context (Endacott and Brooks, 2013). In considering the top three most popular topics, some students may have been predisposed to select specific topics on the basis of having studied them more recently. The three most popular were all studied in Year 9, and it is worth considering that topics that were studied longer ago were not cited nearly as often. Perhaps naturally, students found it easier to recall topics studied more recently; however, this does not account entirely for all responses, with some Year 9 topics, such as the interwar years, failing to gain much support in comparison with more popular Year 7 or Year 8 units. Indeed, just under one-quarter of students referred to the Year 8 'Black Peoples of the Americas', or 'slavery', topic as one which they had found to be the most interesting:

- 'It is relevant to my culture.' (Student 22, questionnaire response)
- 'My family members were a part of it.' (Student 45, questionnaire response)
- 'It still influences today's society.' (Student 57, questionnaire response)

This would appear reasonably consistent with the overall emphasis that students placed upon both diversity and 'learning from mistakes', which were identified by students in explaining their views of what constituted 'British history'. The comments from Student 22 and Student 45 seem to support the argument that some students still identify specific topics as being 'theirs' (Lee and Shemlit, 2007), or as holding specific relevance on the basis of their family background (Grever et al., 2011). It also suggests that, within the context of the school, in which levels of ethnic diversity were below national average, students' family background and sense of community retained some significance in influencing how they perceive their own personal relationship with specific historical topics, contrasting with the findings of

Hawkey and Prior (2011). This seems to support the idea that a curriculum which fails to include diversity would increase the chances of alienating specific students (RHS, 2018).

Figure 4. Questionnaire responses indicating students' favourite areas of previous historical study (Source: Author, 2023)



What changes might students make to the history curriculum?

As previously established, the current National Curriculum predominantly focuses upon 'these islands' as a singular narrative. However, the way that the students conceptualised their own understanding of British history seems to be at odds with this, with much more focus upon Britain's wider place within the global community (see Table 4).

Table 4. List of topics most frequently proposed by questionnaire respondents to be added to the history curriculum (Source: Author, 2023)

Proposal	Number of students who gave the response
No proposed curriculum changes	26
The Romans	11
More global history	11
The Suffragette movement	10
American history	9
Modern British history (1945 onwards)	9
Egyptians	7
Aztecs	7
The French Revolution	6
Greeks	6
More Jack the Ripper	5
The Titanic	5
Victorians	5
Tudors (Current curriculum focuses largely upon Henry VIII and the Reformation; respondents suggested a broadening of this)	5
Asian history	4

Specific requests, such as those to focus upon 'Asian history', appear to conform to Grever et al.'s (2011) hypothesis that students are more likely to prefer more personal strands of history, which link closely to their ethnic or family background. Although the number of students of Asian background within the year group was relatively small, there was clearly a demand for this area of history to be awarded greater focus. Interestingly, the prevalence of ancient history topics within the top 10 most selected by students matches the findings of the Youth and History survey (Angvik and Von Borries, 1997), in which studying ancient history was seen as strongly desirable by students. The reasoning behind this is likely to be multifaceted; however, it seems worth considering that focus group discussions revealed that many students had already studied ancient history topics at primary school, thereby providing them with some existing familiarity.

The concurrent themes of choice and diversity were emphasised during the curriculum construction task completed by both focus groups (see Table 5).

Table 5. Topics selected by focus group participants during curriculum construction task (Source: Author, 2023)

Topic	Selected by Focus Group 1	Selected by Focus Group 2
American history	✓	✓
Black peoples of the Americas	✓	✓
The British Empire	✓	
The Cold War	✓	
Conflict in the Middle East		✓
Crime and punishment	✓	✓
The Egyptians	✓	
The French Revolution		✓
The Greeks		✓
The Holocaust	✓	✓
The Industrial Revolution	✓	
Jack the Ripper (added by students)		✓
Medicine through time	✓	
Migration to Britain		✓
Post-World War Two British history		✓
The Rise of Hitler	✓	
The Romans	✓	
The Russian Revolution	✓	
The Tudors	✓	
The Victorians	✓	
Witchcraft	✓	✓
Women's suffrage	✓	✓
World War One	✓	✓
World War Two	✓	✓

At the start of each focus group, all students completed a standard demographic self-identification form, which was useful in establishing the influence that this might have upon their perceptions (see Table 6). Focus Group 2 were particularly keen to emphasise that more modern historical topics 'seem more relevant'; however, both groups selected topics with variety in terms of timescale. It is worth noting that several students made numerous references to current affairs or to the present political context when justifying their choices. For example, several students referred to wanting to learn about the 'Windrush' or 'Britain's EU membership', when the decision was made in the second focus group to add their own focus upon modern British history.

Table 6. Student responses to standard demographic self-identification form (Source: Author, 2023)

Focus Group 1		Focus Group 2	
Ethnic group	Number of participants that self-identified as belonging to group	Ethnic group	Number of participants that self-identified as belonging to group
White – English/ Welsh/ Scottish/ Northern Irish/ British	4	White – English/ Welsh/ Scottish/ Northern Irish/ British	4
White – Other (Not defined)	1	Asian/ Asian British – Bangladeshi	1
White – Russian	1	Mixed/ multiple ethnic background – White and Black African	1

Focus Group 2 were particularly keen to put across their case for making the curriculum more diverse by focusing upon the historical role of women:

Especially as this is a girls' school we learn a lot about men's history, and I know that you can't change the past because it was dominated by men, but it's not as interesting for us. We'd rather have, like, more diverse stuff like the migration topic. (Student 2, Focus Group 2)

This response seems revealing, if only because it demonstrates that even students are aware of the challenge that is posed by trying to draft a diverse curriculum when the subject matter can be anything but diverse. Of all the topics that the focus group participants discussed, this was most obvious during their deliberations over the 'Black Peoples of the Americas' topic. Both groups quickly made the decision to include it; however, both were keen to emphasise that they felt this had to be done as sensitively as possible. Student 4 in Focus Group 2 identified herself as being of 'Mixed White and Black African' descent using the standard demographic form provided at the beginning of the focus group. In discussing teaching about slavery, she made the case that:

It's good to learn about the slave trade, but often you only look at the negatives, especially for the slaves, but then the positives to the British people. It's the same in modern times now, in TV and stuff you get the adverts of people needing water and food in places in Africa and people get the impression that everyone in Africa is poor and stuff, but that's not the reality. (Student 4, Focus Group 2)

Such a statement seems to add weight to the argument of those who contend that including such topics creates the risk of alienating students by reinforcing negative generalisations (Mohamud and Whitburn, 2014; Traille, 2007). However, in this instance, this student was keen to emphasise that this would not encourage her to remove the topic entirely. Her justification for this was that the history of slavery was an integral part of the British narrative, and that removing it entirely would be far more damaging. Instead, she made the case that greater time should be dedicated to it, so that students might be afforded an opportunity to appreciate the lives and cultures of African peoples prior to the arrival of Europeans. This

again highlights the importance of regularly updating such schemes of work, with the aim of moving beyond more traditional British teaching perspectives towards more inclusive ones.

Despite the fact that both groups were unanimous in their arguments that British history was important, neither group selected specific topics which many might consider fundamental to a 'nation state' narrative, such as the English Civil War, on the basis that they found political history to be dull and unengaging, preferring instead to focus more on the stories of 'people'. Here, it is worth considering Harris's (2013) work in drawing a distinction between British history as an essentially political history of these islands, and a history of the British peoples, which focuses more on the experiences of the people who have lived in the country. Although it was put to the students that some would consider the English Civil War to be fundamental to the establishment of 'democracy' as a key concept of 'Britishness', neither group felt that this resonated with them. However, it seems likely that this was more to do with the way in which the topic had been delivered, rather than the subject matter itself. It would certainly be interesting to see whether teaching the English Civil War from a more social perspective would generate significantly different results.

Conclusions

Overall, this case study suggests a mixed picture. Generally speaking, the students involved reported positively upon the quality of history teaching that they received, and this was reflected in the fact that it was one of the most popular academic subjects in the school. However, there was evidence that this did not always translate to correspondingly high numbers of students opting to continue studying history to GCSE, with a number of students seemingly put off by its 'hard' status, while also struggling to articulate potential benefits in terms of skills that it might help them to develop. Although historical skills were emphasised within the planning and delivery completed by school staff, many students were not able to consistently and explicitly state reasons for studying history which went beyond generic extrinsic purposes. It is noteworthy that even within an environment of limited student diversity, the participants were still quite critical of the curriculum being delivered. This was reflected in the fact that many called for a wider range of topics, albeit most of which were still reflective of a White, Western perspective. In some cases, there did seem to be links between students perceiving a topic as being more relatable or applicable to them on the basis of their ethnicity, family background or gender. However, relevance seemed to be defined by many on the basis of proximity in time and contemporary links, rather than by these factors alone. Overall, relying upon a more traditional narrative based upon a singular 'island story' seems to be at odds with what these students wanted. If this is the case with regard to a student body of predominantly White, middle-class females, then more diverse communities within Britain might react even more strongly in their desire to see a greater geographical range and breadth of topics within the curriculum, beyond those which have been traditionally delivered.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The author declares that research ethics approval for this article was provided by UCL Research Ethics Committee.

Consent for publication statement

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

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