Curriculum theory, curriculum policy and the problem of ill-disciplined thinking

[[1]](#footnote-1)aRichard Harris[[2]](#footnote-2) and [[3]](#footnote-3)bKatharine Burn

[[4]](#footnote-4)a *School of Education, University of Southampton, UK*; [[5]](#footnote-5)b *Institute of Education, University of London, UK*

This paper examines the implications of policy fracture and arms length governance within the decision making processes currently shaping curriculum design within the English education system. In particular it argues that an unresolved ‘ideological fracture’ at government level has been passed down to school leaders whose response to the dilemma is distorted by the target-driven agenda of arms length agencies. Drawing upon the findings of a large scale on-line survey of history teaching in English secondary schools, this paper illustrates the problems that occur when policy making is divorced from curriculum theory, and in particular from any consideration of the nature of knowledge. Drawing on the social realist theory of knowledge elaborated by Young (2008), we argue that the rapid spread of alternative curricular arrangements, implemented in the absence of an understanding of curriculum theory, undermines the value of disciplined thinking to the detriment of many young people, particularly those in areas of social and economic deprivation.

**Keywords**: curriculum policy; curriculum theory; history teaching

# Introduction

It is not unusual for there to be controversy about the place of history in the school curriculum. In England, each successive curriculum review since the inception of the National Curriculum in 1988 has given rise to heated political debate and passionate outcry from the media. Previous battle-lines have been drawn over the relative weight accorded to the acquisition of factual knowledge (as opposed to an understanding of the *nature* of that knowledge and how it is acquired), and emotions have been inflamed by fears over which version of the past might be prescribed. What those earlier protagonists shared, however, was an assumption that history had a vital role to play within the school curriculum. Indeed it was precisely because of its presumed importance in the education of future citizens that arguments raged so fiercely. That assumption has, however, been quietly undermined by the latest revision of the curriculum. While disagreement continues about which – or rather *whose* – version of the past should be learned, the ground is being swept from beneath the protagonists’ feet by competence-based curriculum models that challenge the place of all conventional ‘subjects’.

The aim of this article is firstly to elaborate this policy contradiction, exploring why history should be among the subjects so threatened even as politicians of all persuasions continue to assert its importance in the education of future citizens. By examining the various stages through which espoused policy is enacted and experienced, we then seek to establish how and by whom these tensions are resolved in practice, and to assess the impact of this process, particularly in relation to the principles of equity and entitlement which the National Curriculum originally enshrined. The policy analysis that we present is informed by a national survey of more than 700 secondary schools conducted by the Historical Association in the spring of 2009 (Burn and Harris 2009).

Within the revised National Curriculum for Key Stage 3[[6]](#footnote-6)(QCA 2007a), which sets out the curriculum for students at state-maintained secondary schools), three kinds of claims have been made about the importance of history within young people’s education. Some relate to the development of disciplinary understanding: an appreciation of, and capacity to engage appropriately in, the processes by which our knowledge of the past is created. Others are much more focused on employability: the development of transferable skills and a questioning disposition. Most prominent, however, are those concerned with young people’s capacity to make sense of the world in which they live and their place within it, encouraging them to ‘make connections’ and ‘to ask and answer questions of the present’ through their engagement with the past. Knowledge of the history of their own communities – at personal, local and national levels; of the ‘historic origins of our ethnic and cultural diversity’; and of European and wider world history – is intended to help them ‘develop their own identities’ and to equip them to participate in a democratic society (QCA 2007a). The emphasis on diversity and identity derives from the Ajegbo report into Diversity and Citizenship (DfES 2007, 14), commissioned with a specific remit to explore whether ‘modern British social and cultural history’ should actually feature as a ‘fourth pillar’ within the Citizenship curriculum. In asserting that it is important for young people to ‘consider issues that have shaped the development of UK society - and to understand them through the lens of history’ (8), the review group members were effectively calling for some kind of history to be taught to young people up to the age of 16. The Labour Prime Minister had previously expressed a similar view, arguing not only that the teaching of citizenship should be more closely rooted in history, but that British history ‘should be given much more prominence in the curriculum’ (Brown 2006).

Yet, despite the rousing declarations of history’s importance within the curriculum and the insistence by politicians on the critical role that the subject plays in equipping us to live together, there are equally strong forces operating within the revised curriculum and upon those responsible for its implementation that are tending to destroy the security, and certainly the integrity, of history’s place within mainstream secondary education. Alongside the claim that it ‘continues to recognise the importance of subjects’, the new curriculum immediately asserts an ‘emphasis on the development of skills for life and work’. These include not merely the ‘functional skills’ of English, mathematics and ICT that have been ‘built into the curriculum’ but also the ‘framework for personal learning and thinking skills’ (PLTS) embedded in the new programmes of study (QCA 2007b). The focus on the skills and qualities required to be ‘independent enquirers, creative thinkers, reflective learners, team workers, self-managers and effective participants’ prioritises the development of a range of generic *competences* rather than the mastery of particular kinds of *knowledge*. The influence of this competency-based curriculum model has found its most extreme expression in the ‘Opening Minds’ framework developed by the Royal Society for the Arts, which features five broad areas of capability and encourages schools to develop them through an integrated (rather than a subject-based) curriculum programme exploring common themes (RSA n.d.).

Other official encouragement to experiment with curriculum design came from the launch in 2003 of a two-year Key Stage 3 programme (i.e. pupils aged 11-13 rather than 11-14). While the secondary curriculum was initially envisaged as a three-year programme, encompassing the full range of subjects (followed by a two-year Key Stage 4 programme leading to public examinations), the project encouraged schools to reduce the length of Key Stage 3 in order to ‘to increase the pace of learning, improve the motivation and engagement of pupils, improve the transition from Key Stage 2 (at the end of primary schooling) to Key Stage 3 and to open up curricular flexibility through the time saved.’ (Nott, *et al.* 2007). While the time saved can be used in a variety of ways, its effect generally is to allow earlier specialisation (giving students up to three years to focus on a more limited range of public examinations at GCSE or equivalent qualifications). It thus has the effect of reducing by a third the time that most students will spend learning history in school (since the subject is not compulsory beyond the end of Key Stage 3 and approximately 70% of pupils do not continue with it beyond this point).[[7]](#footnote-7)

The emphasis on securing five A\* to C grades (or their ‘equivalent’) is another policy lever with a tendency to reduce the amount of history taught in schools – this time at Key Stage 4.[[8]](#footnote-8) It provides an indirect incentive for schools to discourage or even prohibit those students who might only achieve a D grade in the subject from continuing to study history beyond the age of 13 or 14. Instead such students are urged to pursue either those qualifications which are assumed to be easier (an assumption substantiated , for example, by Coe’s (2008) application of the Rasch model to the comparability of GCSE examinations), or those that are worth more in the ‘league tables’ for the number of passes they confer.

While the government and its advisers continue to advocate the study of history, claiming that it plays a vital role in the education of young people as future citizens, there are thus a range of countervailing policy initiatives that challenge the role of all subjects (other than those seen to deliver the functional skills of literacy, numeracy and ICT), and that militate particularly against those such as history which are perceived to be more demanding. Our aim now is to examine how these conflicting imperatives play out in practice, using data from a national survey of history teachers to explore how and by whom the tensions are resolved, and what the impact of this uncertain process is on history teaching and learning.

# Determination and enactment of policy

As Davies and Hughes (2009) explain, the enactment of policy takes place at different levels: national policies are espoused by the state, enacted by a profession and experienced by a community. Successful policy implementation, as Youngs and Bell (2009) demonstrated in their study of 20 years of teacher improvement initiatives in Connecticut, therefore requires the careful building of political support; the involvement of stakeholders in the process, thereby also building capacity amongst these groups; and – for long-term reform or sustained impact – a series of policies that are connected and mutually reinforcing. It is unsurprising that ‘fractures’ can occur within the process at several different levels (Davies and Hughes 2009). This was true even in relatively straightforward contexts – such as the post-war tripartite model in which national Government, local education authorities and education providers each played their part in the translation of policy into practice (Ball 1997). Yet, as Hodgson and Spours (2006) illustrate in their analysis of 14-19 reform, the fundamental economic, political and ideological disturbances that stemmed from policies originating under the Conservatives and largely continued by New Labour have dramatically transformed the policy-making process in the last 30 years, creating far greater scope for tension and discontinuity. They trace a number of major inter-related changes that have contributed to the creation of a ‘new form of education state’: the growth of ‘arms length’ agencies; political centralisation; the introduction of a quasi market in education; and a flood of new types of competing policy text.[[9]](#footnote-9) Together, these new forces ‘have introduced complexity, reduced democratic accountability, increased unpredictability and unintended outcomes and generated policy contradictions through politicised decision-making’ (Hodgson and Spours 2006: 683).

It is our contention that this lack of coherence is equally evident in the realm of curriculum

policy. Indeed, as outlined above, the latest version of the National Curriculum (QCA 2007a) effectively presents schools with conflicting policy requirements. The ‘Big Picture’ with which it was first launched by Mick Waters, then Director of Curriculum at QCA, vividly illustrates the range of competing priorities schools are required to address(QCA 2008).[[10]](#footnote-10) Urged to begin by focusing on ‘what we want to achieve’ schools are directed to think firstly about overall aims of the curriculum: the creation of ‘successful learners’, ‘confident individuals’ and ‘responsible citizens’. These broad aims are to be underpinned by, or interpreted in the context of, the five outcomes of the Every Child Matters Agenda (‘be healthy, stay safe; enjoy and achieve; make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being’) which are in turn aligned with, or supported by, three kinds of ‘focus for learning’: attitudes and attributes (such as determination, adaptability and confidence), skills (the ‘functional’ ones of literacy, numeracy and ICT as well as the PLTS outlined above) and finally ‘knowledge and understanding’ for example, of the big ideas that shape the world. Four further layers of the diagram are then presented in relation to ‘the ways in which we organise learning’: its different components; possible approaches to learning; seven ‘whole curriculum dimensions’; and only then the statutory dimensions as defined in relation to subjects or ‘areas of learning’. The impact of the diagram as a whole, and the position of these statutory dimensions within it, makes it very difficult for schools to interpret the QCA claim, cited above, about the National Curriculum’s continued recognition of the importance of subjects. The result of this plethora of potential purposes and organisational options has unsurprisingly been a raft of more and less radical curriculum experiments, resulting in fragmentation of the education system.

Davies and Hughes’ (2009) analysis of different forms of fracture at different levels helpfully illuminates these processes of curriculum change as they play out in diverse settings across the country. At the heart of central government policy is an ‘ideological fracture’, crudely epitomised as a conflict between traditional subject-based curriculum design and alternative competency models, but revealed by the ‘Big Picture’ to encompass many more potential splinters. The presentation of competing aims and few directives other than the injunction to innovate (albeit in a ‘disciplined manner’, by which QCA simply means attention to aims, to the organisation of learning and to evaluation), means that individual schools appear to have been given a degree of freedom and responsibility in relation to the curriculum unknown for the past 20 years.

 The extent of this freedom is most clearly revealed in the curriculum requirements for academies – publicly funded schools that operate independently of local authorities. They tend to be situated in areas where the community populations include higher than average proportions of children eligible for free school meals; with special educational needs; of black or minority ethnic origin; and of lower levels of attainment at Key Stage 2 (NFER, 2006; DCSF, 2008). Although the government pays most of the capital and all the running costs of these schools, private sponsors have a significant influence on the way in which they are run, including their choice of subject specialism[s] and much of the curriculum to be taught (National Audit Office, 2007). Indeed, the only elements of the National Curriculum to which academies are subject are the programmes of study for ICT and the core subjects of English, maths and science. In the quest to ‘raise aspirations and attainment in deprived communities’ – the original aim of the academies programme (DCSF n.d.) – all other subjects can be dispensed with altogether.

The ideological fracture at the level of espoused policy has in effect made ‘agency fracture’ or dislocation between espoused policy and policy enactment inevitable. The lack of clarity means that the ideological debates are ‘shunted’ down the system, for resolution at school level. While such local control offers a space for creative thinking and the scope to respond to local contexts, the process of decision-making is complicated by the interventions of diverse interest groups, each seeking to mediate the official policy, and offering authoritative interpretations of its implications for curriculum design. Thus, for example, the RSA has developed its *Opening Minds* curriculum (RSA, n.d.); the ‘Campaign for Learning’ has launched its *Learning to Learn* model (Campaign for Learning n.d.), while Guy Claxton’s ideas have found expression in the *Building Learning Power* initiative (The Learning Organisation n.d.).

Decision-making processes at the micro-political level have always, in fact, been important. As Kelchtermans (2007: 472) rightly points out, any macro-policy measures ‘during their implementation get caught up in the process of interpretation and translation towards the particularities of the local context’ – a process that makes it crucial to understand the factors that determine the policy choices of school leaders. But here the inter-related changes outlined by Hodgson and Spours (2006) have had profound implications on the degree of freedom actually enjoyed by individual schools. While much greater power has undoubtedly been vested in school heads, their choices in the exercise of that power have in fact been simultaneously guided by very powerful external mechanisms. The process is described by Ozga (2009) as control through a system of ‘governance’. Although the education system has the appearance of greater deregulation, the use of data-rich systems to monitor educational outcomes provides a strong form of leverage over decision-making, as do the Ofsted inspection regime and other ‘arms length’ agencies which evaluate effectiveness, particularly in relation to the critical indicator of the proportion of students gaining five A\*-C grades or their ‘equivalent’.

There are therefore a great many tensions apparent in the construction of school curricula. At one level schools are apparently being invited to grapple for themselves with the ideological debate that has been passed on to them by a government apparently unwilling to issue clear guidance in the face of competing claims being made by advocates of different curriculum models. At another level, however, the extent of ‘arms length’ control exerted indirectly by government, means that head teachers are far from being free to make their own decisions.

**Findings from an online survey about the impact on school curricula provision**

The nature of the choices made in these circumstances and the influences that teachers believe have shaped the decisions taken in their individual schools are revealed in relation to history by an online survey conducted by the Historical Association. This survey was carried out in the spring of 2009, with invitations to respond sent directly to every secondary school in England, as well as to teacher members of the Historical Association. Over 700 responses were received from history teachers, and details of school postcodes were used to eliminate multiple responses from teachers in the same school. Responses to the survey’s questions about teaching 11-14 year olds were received from 644 schools (although the numbers responding to each specific question about practices in different year groups vary slightly). The 644 schools included 503 state maintained comprehensive schools, 36 state-maintained grammar schools, 23 academies[[11]](#footnote-11) and 82 independent schools. Although the numbers of schools of each type obviously varies considerably, the pattern of responses provides a similar sample for each, in terms of the proportion of schools responding. Responses were received from approximately18% of comprehensive schools in England 22% of grammar schools, 29% of academies and 19% of independent schools.

 In interpreting the survey results it is important to remember that only the state-maintained comprehensive and grammar schools are legally required to follow the National Curriculum for history. Independent private schools have no obligation to follow the National Curriculum at all, while, as noted above, the publicly funded but essentially independent academies, mainly operating in areas of high deprivation, are only required to do so in relation to ICT, English, maths and science. Thus among the publicly funded schools in England, it is those serving the most disadvantaged young people who have the most scope to ignore any expectations of breadth and balance in the curriculum, or the contribution to the development of responsible citizens of a meaningful history education.

Analysis of the responses shows that schools are responding in different ways to the array of competing policy texts (represented both by the competing elements within the ‘Big Picture’ of the curriculum for state-maintained schools and the curricular freedom granted to academies), and to the ideological fracture with which they are confronted. There are clear signs of an increasingly fragmented education system – of ‘school curricula proliferat[ing] in any direction’ just as White (1982:154) feared was happening under the essentially autonomous school system that preceded the introduction of a national curriculum. While some schools are following the injunction to innovate by introducing ‘alternative’ curriculum arrangements, merging or essentially abandoning traditional subjects and using more thematic kinds of focus as a vehicle for the acquisition of competences, others have retained distinct subjects but reduced the time allocated to them in order to accommodate competences or thinking skills in separate ‘learning to learn’ lessons. Many schools, of course, have made very few changes, arguing that their existing arrangements already meet the priorities of the new curriculum.

***The spread of ‘alternative’ curricula***

In a small, but rapidly increasing number of schools, history is disappearing as a discrete subject within the curriculum. This is particularly true in Year 7, the first year of secondary school (see Table 1).[[12]](#footnote-12) Although most schools (about 75% of those responding to the survey) reported that they still teach history as an entirely discrete subject in Year 7, 6.6% teach it as part of an ‘integrated’ humanities programme while a further 7.1% offer it within an ‘alternative’ curriculum, based around the development of specific skills or competences rather than around subjects. Nine of the 42 schools that referred to an ‘alternative curriculum’ specifically named the ‘Opening Minds’ (RSA, 2010) curriculum initiative developed by the Royal Society of Arts. Others referred to ‘enquiry’, ‘skills’ and ‘competency’ or to various kinds of integrated provision (‘clusters’, ‘themes’ or ‘projects’). In two cases the programme was presented explicitly as a transitional programme bridging the move from primary school, and four others saw its focus as ‘learning to learn’.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Table 1. Teaching arrangements for history in the first year of secondary school (Year 7)

What is striking is the variation between different types of schools in terms of the format in which they reported teaching history. Over 90% of the independent and grammar schools represented still teach history in Year 7 as an entirely separate subject, but only 72.3% of the comprehensives and 59.1% of the academies that responded claimed to do so.

When invited to indicate whether they thought their alternative curriculum programme had impacted positively or negatively on pupils’ learning, only four of the 42 history teachers indicated that its effects had been positive. While most suggested that it was still too soon to tell, 18 teachers gave very negative assessments. They highlighted the pupils’ lack of historical knowledge and specific vocabulary and their inability to use historical evidence, which they claimed led to a fall in standards as they embarked on GCSE courses. Other specific concerns included pupils’ inability to grasp the period being studied, and the incoherence of their experience. As one teacher commented:

Pupils are learning a great deal less in terms of Medieval History. The course lacks coherence for the pupils as the topics taught do not necessarily follow one another in terms of chronology or even within a thematic approach. [Teacher 167, comprehensive school]

Our findings here closely parallel those reported by the school inspectorate, who noted in 2009 that there is ‘widespread interest in such skills-based courses’ (Ofsted 2009, 11). Their subject-based surveys of geography, history and religious education found 24 schools of the 84 that they sampled had integrated courses in place or being planned. Although some of the courses had undoubted strengths (including good levels of pupil interest and appropriate thematic and conceptual links as well as shared approaches to the development of general learning skills), the inspectors also identified emerging problems:

These included the loss of subject content and subject skills development; lack of continuity from primary school experience; lack of rigour and challenge; uneven quality of teaching and artificial ‘links’ or themes. These problems were especially manifested where courses had been given insufficient planning time and where the component subject departments were not fully involved in planning. (Ofsted 2009: 12)

We also found that the integration of history within more generic programmes could lead pupils to the assumption that history was unimportant for their education. One teacher claimed that students are ‘no longer aware of when they are learning history or geography’ and that they have become ‘disrespectful of a subject that they don’t perceive as “real” or “important”’[Teacher 416, comprehensive school].

## *Variation and cuts in the time allocated to history*

Even where history officially features on the curriculum, considerable variation was reported in the amount of time allocated to its study. While some schools had safeguarded time for the subject, others seemed to be responding to the revised curriculum by reducing the time allocated to it, and many provided less than an hour a week. Nearly 48% of the academies that responded to the survey reported that Year 7 pupils spend an hour a week or less on history, as did 30% of the comprehensive schools. In contrast, the time allocation in grammar and independent schools seemed much more secure, with only 12% of the former and 7% of the latter giving so little time to the subject (see Figure 1).

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Figure 1. Actual time allocation for history in Year 7 by type of school.

The picture is obviously complex, with considerable variation between different state maintained comprehensives: the 30% allocating an hour a week or less to history contrasts starkly with the 38% that give more than 90 minutes a week to the subject. But the tendencies of the grammar and independent schools to protect time for history and of the academies to reduce it are clear. Less than 20% of the academies whose teachers responded thought it worth investing more than 90 minutes a week in the subject, and the modal response for the academies was between 46 and 60 minutes a week. This compares with a modal response of between 76 and 90 minutes for the independent and grammar schools.

Evidence of cuts came from the significant minority of schools reporting a recent reduction in the amount of time allocated to history teaching in Year 7. Almost one third of the comprehensive schools and over half of the academies reported that the amount of time allocated to history had dropped over the previous three years (see Figure 2). While it must be acknowledged that a small number of schools actually reported an increased time allocation for history, these positive developments were essentially confined to the grammar schools, 12.9% of which reported an increase. Less than 5% of any other type of school reported giving more time to history than in previous years.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

Figure 2. Percentage of schools reporting an increase/decrease in time allocation for history in Year 7 by type of schools.

Reductions in the amount of time allocated to history were also reported in Year 8 and in Year 9. Overall 117 schools reported a decrease in time allocated to history in Year 9 (see Figure 3), and as the chart below shows, the number of schools reporting decreases was at least twice as high for all types of school as the number reporting increases. It was among the academies that the proportion reporting a decrease (35%) was highest, although approximately 20% of the comprehensive and grammar schools had also seen cuts.

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

Figure 3. Percentage of schools reporting an increase/decrease in time allocation for history in Year 9 by type of school.

Another kind of reduction in the time available for most students to study history evident from the survey is the increasingly widespread adoption of a two-year Key Stage 3. Here the driving force, operated by government at ‘arms length’ is the pressure to drive up standards as measured by the proportion of students achieving five A\*s-C grade GCSEs or their equivalent. This policy lever can be seen from the survey responses to have two kinds of impacts: prompting schools to devote an additional year to focused preparation for public examinations and restricting the opportunity for lower attaining students to opt for such courses in history.

## *Reduction of the Key Stage 3 curriculum in order to focus on public examination success*

Over 5% of the schools that responded to the survey now have a two-year Key Stage 3 programme, allowing students to drop particular subjects and pursue their own options after only two years of secondary school. Several more schools commented that they were planning to introduce this approach. Although the numbers are relatively small, our data again seem to suggest that this trend varies according to the type of school. Twenty-eight of the 32 schools with a reduced Key Stage 3 programme were comprehensive schools (which represents nearly 6% of the comprehensive schools that responded); two were academies (representing 9% of the 22 that responded). Only one grammar school and one independent school had chosen this route.

Most of the 32 schools offer an early start to standard GCSE courses with history as one of the options, either from the beginning, or part-way through Year 9. The rest offer either alternative GCSEs (some at a lower ‘entry’ level, or a different range from their Year 10 options, including Leisure and Tourism or Humanities), or practice GCSE-style courses or an ‘enrichment’ year. While history obviously features in some form among the options, the fact remains that those who do not choose history are being allowed to abandon any study of the subject at the age of 13, a year before the statutory age originally stipulated in the National Curriculum. This means that all the material currently set out within the ‘range and content’ requirements as well as the ‘key concepts and processes’ (proposed for a three-year course) have to be studied by the end of Year 8.

In such circumstances, teachers report that it is ‘impossible to deliver any Key Stage 3 programme of study that is not without huge gaps’ [Teacher 502, comprehensive school]. ‘Key concepts in the ‘story’ of Britain’s history are inevitably missing’ [Teacher 552, academy]. Any hopes of building a secure chronological framework are thwarted when students arrive in Year 8 (which is now their last year of compulsory history), having followed a skills-based course in Year 7 with no specialist history teaching, unable even to explain basic dating conventions such as the meaning of ‘century’[Teacher 163, comprehensive school]. In one extreme example the entire Key Stage 3 history programme of study has ‘been reduced to just 38 hours of teaching in Year 8 for the whole course’ [Teacher 396, academy].

Teachers are concerned not merely about the lack of time. They are equally alarmed that much of the sensitive content that they argue contributes immeasurably to effective citizenship education now has to be taught to younger pupils who ‘lack the emotional and intellectual maturity to handle it’[Teacher 676, comprehensive school]. This includes both the theme concerned with the ‘development of trade, colonisation, industrialisation and technology’ (with explicit reference to the British Empire and its impact, and to the nature and effects of the slave trade, and resistance and decolonisation) and the theme focused on the ‘changing nature of conflict and cooperation between countries and peoples and its lasting impact on national, ethnic, racial, cultural or religious issues’ (with explicit reference to the nature and impact of the two world wars and the Holocaust) (QCA 2007a). Both the slave trade and its legacy and the Holocaust are usually therefore squeezed into Year 8, when the scope for sensitive discussion of controversial issues, directly related to issues of identity and diversity, is significantly lower than it would be with older pupils.

## *Restrictions on the scope for low attainers to study history*

The other way in which schools have sought to raise standards as measured by higher level GCSE grades or ‘their equivalent’ is to encourage or indeed compel students to pursue courses in which they seem most likely to secure passes at the requisite level. Ninety-three schools reported a decrease (beyond the usual annual fluctuations) in the number of students taking history at Key Stage 4. Although many others reported increases, a clear pattern was evident in relation to the different types of school. Academies were much more likely to report a fall rather than a rise in the numbers taking GCSE, while it was the grammar schools that reported the biggest net increase. Almost a third of the 85 respondents who offered some kind of explanation for the decline in numbers at their school attributed it to the fact that history was now in competition with a greater range of subjects, some of which were regarded as being easier, or as offering more ‘value’. Value was particularly attributed to those courses of study which were awarded the equivalent of four GCSE qualifications – some of which only required the same teaching time as two ordinary subjects. As one teacher explained, ‘History faces more competition from other subjects, especially those worth three or four GCSEs which the students perceive as easier to pass and more “value for money” such as PE courses, ICT and Media’[Teacher 77, comprehensive school].

The students were not the only ones who regarded certain subjects as being more valuable than others. Many of the comments related to the senior leadership team’s perceptions of the value of history, and there were also strong indications of an element of coercion, with restrictions imposed on the courses for which certain students could opt. A quarter of respondents pointed specifically to the introduction of vocational and diploma courses, including the BTEC qualifications (offered by the Business and Technology Education Council), which in many cases, lower-attaining students were being *compelled* to take. This effectively barred them from continuing with the study of history. Even the apparently simple aim advocated by the Every Child Matters agenda, that students should ‘enjoy and achieve’, which initially seems an entirely positive injunction to ensure that students’ learning experiences are genuinely engaging, becomes a source of serious tension when the students’ own enjoyment of a subject conflicts with the pressures placed on schools to maximise examination scores:

Students have been deliberately denied an opportunity to study history by forcing them down vocational or academic pathways. GCSE students have also been taken off courses against their wishes to do BTEC qualifications in 6 months so that the school can boost its position in the league tables. This has happened to students who were otherwise on target for a C/B in history but who were doing badly on their other optional subject. [Teacher 179, comprehensive school]

History is seen to be too academic! Entrance to the course is based on Fischer Family Trust predictions, and students who are predicted lower than a B are not allowed to study the course…We are also not allowed to run ‘entry level’ GCSE courses for students with specific needs, as that is not thought to be meeting the attainment targets for the academy. [Teacher 570, academy]

In some cases a system of academic ‘pathways’ established for 14-19 students imposes arbitrary limits on the number of students who could actually opt to study GCSE courses of any kind, thus ruling out history. As one teacher reported ‘Year 10 numbers in history are low and will continue to be so since the introduction of a pathways system that limits how many students can choose to do GCSE as opposed to BTECs’[Teacher 219, comprehensive school]. These restrictions generally arose from a need to ensure the viability of each of several different kinds of courses within the school: students would be assigned to a particular pathway which then determined the kind of courses for which they could opt.

It is apparent from the survey that the nature and structure of school curricula are becoming increasingly varied as schools respond to the plethora of initiatives, seeking to juggle competing priorities while subject to pressure from a number of different ‘governance’ levers. What is worrying about this trend is a growing division and disparity within and particularly between schools regarding access to areas of the curriculum – a pattern equally visible in Higham and Yeomans’ (2007) broader analysis of trends within 14-19 provision. The introduction of pathways often serves to ‘lock’ pupils into given academic/vocational subject trajectories, while the trend among academies in particular, but evident too in significant numbers of state-maintained comprehensive to give less space to history in the curriculum is likely to lead to many students, often from disadvantaged backgrounds, losing their entitlement to learning about the past – learning intended to inform and enrich ‘their capacity to make sense of the world in which they live and their place within it’; to ‘help them ‘develop their own identities’; and to ‘equip them to participate in a democratic society’ (QCA 2007a).

**The need for disciplined thinking**

As the previous section has highlighted, recent curriculum revisions have had far-reaching consequences. Access to specialist history teaching over sufficient time to build meaningful understanding is being denied to large numbers of young people, especially those from less advantaged social backgrounds. This is not necessarily a deliberate attack on the teaching of history, but the subject in schools is suffering what Haydn and Harris (2009) describe as ‘collateral damage’. That this should be happening is the result, as Young (2008) has argued, of a lack of attention to questions of knowledge. With policy makers (in government, and – we would argue – the school leaders responding under arms length pressure to the options passed down to them) now so focused on targets defined by qualifications ‘the question of knowledge or what it is important that students learn, has been neglected’(Young 2008: xv). Indeed Higham and Yeomans point to the ‘attenuated and emaciated curriculum dialogue’ (2007: 295) informing decision-making in schools. This neglect extends beyond questions about what knowledge to teach, to epistemological questions about the very nature of knowledge itself.

While competency-based curriculum models have certainly not proceeded from the assumption that knowledge is unimportant, their basic premise is that, since the knowledge needed in the future cannot be predicted, what young people really need are the skills that will allow them to access and indeed create new knowledge as it is needed. However they tend to operate on the premise that the knowledge that will be required at any future point will be easy to acquire or produce and to evaluate using generic research and problem-solving skills. Such an assumption neglects the distinctive ways in which different kinds of knowledge are produced and validated. It also takes no account of the extent to which the assimilation and appropriation of new information – its conversion into genuine knowledge – depends on the learner’s capacity to make sense of it within an existing interpretive framework. If students are to acquire the historical knowledge that politicians of all parties regard as essential to the development of responsible citizenship, they need sufficient understanding of the discipline to recognise what makes such knowledge genuinely historical, as distinct from myths or legends. They also need sufficient knowledge to give them a coherent overview – a meaningful framework – that will enable them to accommodate and process the new ideas and insights they will go on acquiring about past events (Lee 1991).

Although there were heated debates about both the content and focus of assessment within the original version of the National Curriculum for history, arguments for an assessment objective devoted to ‘factual knowledge’ were rejected precisely because it was recognised that facts in themselves are meaningless until placed in the context of some kind of narrative account or explanation. For young people to engage with such accounts implies an understanding of the structural concepts deployed in history such as cause and consequence, change, continuity and significance. In a democratic society it also quickly gives rise to an awareness that there is invariably more than one account offered. In such a context, the only way of avoiding the twin dangers of an authoritarian imposition of *the* prescribed version of the past, or an absurd and destructive relativism in which any version of the past is assumed to be as valid (or invalid) as any other, young people need to understand something of the standards by which accounts of the past are validated and recognised both within and beyond the community of specialist historians.

Acknowledgement of these standards is central to Young’s (2008) endeavour to ‘bring knowledge back’ into current curriculum policy. Almost 40 years ago as a pioneer of the ‘new sociology of education’ he argued from the basis that all knowledge was socially produced to condemn the existing subject-based school curriculum as no more than an attempt to enshrine the perspectives of the elite (Young 1971). The ‘social realist’ theory that he now advances – having acknowledged the nihilist implications of these earlier arguments as they were developed within postmodernism – recognises that it is in part precisely *because* of its social nature that claims to knowledge can be validated (Young 2008). This is not to suggest that any subject community of specialists is infallible or that their judgement is the only standard by which claims can be tested; the realist dimension of his theory also emphasises the importance of their internal coherence and explanatory power. However, it does imply that if young people are to gain access to worthwhile kinds of knowledge – in this case historical knowledge – they need to develop some level of understanding of the kinds of standards applied to its production, its relationship to evidence, and the ways in which historians arbitrate between competing or contradictory claims.

This requires time and clarity of focus. The distinction that Young draws between ‘everyday knowledge’ that can be acquired through experience and the kinds of knowledge that schools should seek to develop – knowledge that confers explanatory power – is as important in history as in any other discipline. Indeed the distinction is such that Wineburg (1999, 2001, 2007) has chosen to describe the process of historical thinking as an ‘unnatural act’, so often does it run counter to intuitive or common-sense ways of dealing with information. Seeking to understand and explain what happened in the past - to reconstruct the lives and deeds, attitudes and motives of past actors from fragmentary sources, certainly draws on skills that are shared with other subjects: reading and basic comprehension, for example; the deployment of specific examples to substantiate a generalisation; and even the recognition that the sources available to us are shaped by the perspectives of their authors. Dealing with those perspectives, however, is not a matter of following routine procedures, replicated from everyday life or other kinds of ‘research’. It requires an appreciation of the distances that may lie between the perspectives of the protagonists and those of the present day: putting aside false assumptions of familiarity to engage with mental universes very different from our own. Historical thinking is ‘neither a natural process nor something that springs automatically from psychological development. Its achievement actually goes against the grain of how we ordinarily think’ (Wineburg, 1991: 491).

The same distinction between commonsense assumptions about the past and more informed disciplinary understandings is made by Rüsen (2004) who highlights the importance of the distinction precisely because of the ways in which people’s historical consciousness serves to orient them in time, acting as a frame of reference that informs their understanding of the present and shapes their thinking about possible future actions. His critique, for example, of ‘exemplary’ forms of historical consciousness which are based in common sense styles of thinking resonates with Young’s (2008) rejection of neo-conservative assumptions about knowledge in which the history curriculum is regarded as a given ‘body of knowledge’ that schools merely need to transmit to young people, thus engendering respect for the moral examples set by past heroes. The ‘genetic’ form of historical consciousness that Rüsen (2004) advocates, requires not merely an understanding of the importance of evidence, but of the ways in which interpretations and judgments of significance inevitably shift in response to subsequent developments.

Once attention is paid to the nature of the knowledge that needs to be acquired to meet the policy makers’ objectives, the importance of disciplinary thinking, as opposed to generic thinking skills becomes clear. Even when those aims are extrinsic – the promotion of ‘responsible citizenship’ (QCA 2007a) rather than the sensitising and humanising effects that many see as history’s true value in education (Lee 1991) – their achievement requires serious attention to the substantive and syntactic concepts that underpin the discipline. Indeed history’s essential contribution to citizenship education derives from them: the ability, for example, to appreciate the chains of cause and consequence that explain how particular circumstances in the present have arisen, recognising both the deliberate intentions that have inspired previous actions and their unintended consequences; or the awareness of how differently events or situations may seem from other people’s perspectives and acknowledgement of the contextual factors that may shape their interpretations of what has happened so far and what therefore needs to be done. The conceptual understanding necessary to equip young people with an overview of the past that is sufficiently coherent to be usable, and sufficiently open to accommodate and adapt to new insights cannot be developed in a few hours. Nor can it be developed through thematic or competency-based programmes that treat all forms of knowledge as though they were the same. Of course young people should be encouraged to tackle ‘real-life problems’ that call for understandings and the deployment of strategies developed within several different disciplines. The ability to synthesise knowledge from a range of sources and in so-doing to generate new insights is undoubtedly important for those facing a future of rapid and unpredictable change. However, the cultivation of a ‘synthesising mind’, as Gardner (2007, 55) has argued, depends first on a secure grounding in disciplinary ways of thinking:

Children may well benefit from carrying out evocative classroom projects or from pursuing a unit on generative topics like “patterns” or “water” or “the cradle of civilization”. But these endeavours do not involve disciplines in any legitimate sense of that term. In making a diorama or a dance, in thinking of water or cities in a variety of ways, students are drawing on common sense, common experiences, or common terminology and examples. If no single discipline is being applied, then clearly interdisciplinary thinking cannot be at work.

Failure to attend to questions about the nature of knowledge thus leaves young people trapped at the level of their own experience, condemned simply to recycle it (Young 2008). Tragically, the evidence of the Historical Association survey is that it is those disadvantaged young people whose own experience is *least* likely to offer them other means of access to the powerful knowledge that derives from disciplinary thinking who are being failed by their schools in this way. In order to avoid the type of fracture currently visible in curriculum policy and the damaging impact that this has on young people’s educational experience, it is essential that such policy is informed by serious attention to developments within curriculum theory. Only by foregrounding an understanding of the nature of knowledge at the different levels – macro- and micro-level – where curriculum policy decisions are actually made will it be possible to address the proliferation of diverse curricula and the growth of a two-tier education system.

Table 1.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Proportion of schools offering Yr 7 history  | All schools(589 in total)  | Comprehensiveschools (465) | Grammar schools (34) | Academies (22) | Independent schools (68) |
| As a discrete subject | 75.9 % (=447 schools) | 72. 3%  | 94.1% | 59.1% | 97.1% |
| As a discrete subject within humanities  | 10.5 % (=61 schools) | 11.8% | 2.9% | 13.7% | 2.9% |
| As part of an integrated programme | 6.6% (=39 schools) | 7.7% | 2.9% | 9.1% |  |
| Within an ‘alternative’ curriculum  | 7.1% (=42 schools) | 8.2% |  | 18.2% |  |

Figure 1.

0.0%

5.0%

10.0%

15.0%

20.0%

25.0%

30.0%

35.0%

40.0%

45.0%

0 mins

1-30 mins

31-45 mins

46-60 mins

61-75 mins

76-90 mins

90+ mins

no specific

not

compulsory

State comp

State grammar

Independent

Academy

Figure 2.

0.0%

10.0%

20.0%

30.0%

40.0%

50.0%

60.0%

70.0%

80.0%

90.0%

100.0%

Time allocation increased

Time allocation decreased

Stayed the same

State comp

State grammar

Independent

Academy

Figure 3.

0.0%

10.0%

20.0%

30.0%

40.0%

50.0%

60.0%

70.0%

80.0%

90.0%

100.0%

Time allocation increased

Time allocation decreased

Stayed the same

State comp

State grammar

Independent

Academy

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1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Corresponding author. Email: rjh1@soton.ac.uk [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Key Stage 3 is traditionally a three-year programme encompassing Years 7, 8 and 9 of secondary schooling (for students aged 11-14), although a number of schools are moving towards a two-year Key Stage 3 programme. Key Stage 4 follows on from Key Stage 3, and covers the period to the end of compulsory schooling at age 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. According to government statistics (DCSF 2010) statistics, only 31.05% of the cohort who completed Key Stage 4 in 2009 undertook GCSE examinations in history. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The proportion of students in a school achieving 5 grades A\*-C is used by the government as a critical standard in determining the effectiveness of schools (Schools with fewer than 30% of students achieving this level are deemed to be ‘failing’. The percentage figure for every school is published annually within national ‘league tables’. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A fifth change identified by Hodgson and Spours (2006) ‘devolution’ is less relevant here since we are dealing only with policy in England. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Versions of the Big Picture were being presented by QCA as early as 2006, but the document has been refined and adapted over time. The current QCA site provides links to two versions, a ‘working draft’ dated June 2008, and another, updated in January 2010. It is the 2008 version that is analysed here. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The government (DCSF) describes academies as ‘all-ability, state-funded schools established and managed by sponsors from a wide range of backgrounds, including ... individual philanthropists, businesses, the voluntary sector, and the faith communities. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Much less experimentation was reported in the way that history is taught in the second year of secondary schools (Year 8). However, although only five of the schools that responded claimed to be teaching Year 8 history within some kind of ‘alternative’ curriculum programme, this may change as the revised version of National Curriculum (introduced in 2008) is implemented further up the school. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)