
Big Society? Better History? or Same Old Nonsense? Drawing the Battle Lines for the Future of School History

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ABSTRACT School history looks set to return to the political agenda with the recent announcement of a curriculum review and ministerial speeches on the need for change. This article seeks to identify key issues on which the battle for school history will be fought. It situates the debate in the context of developments in theories of how people learn and in the UK tradition of history education research findings. It addresses some of the arguments raised by the Better History Group and argues that history teacher professionals are best placed to decide the future shape of history education.

NOW, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!
(Thomas Gradgrind in Dickens' novel *Hard Times*)

I'm not going to be coming up with any prescriptive lists,
I just think there should be facts.
(Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education)[1]

The education policies of the Coalition government are lifted straight from the Conservative Party manifesto which argued for a 'schools revolution'. [2] Among many other more controversial changes, such as academies and free schools, the

Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove argues that the place of history in both the primary and secondary curriculum needs be enhanced.

As I wrote this article, Gove announced a 'Curriculum Review'.^[3] There was little detail available on the substance of the planned changes to history, other than that it will decide on whether history and other subjects should be compulsory to 16 and that it should focus on the 'facts and essential knowledge' required. Earlier in that month, Professor Simon Schama had been appointed a 'history tsar' to provide expertise, joining another television history celebrity Niall Ferguson. Perhaps, more significantly, Gove also announced that history, along with geography and a language, would now be included in the list of subjects that comprises the 'English Baccalaureate'. To some extent this, more than anything else, will dictate the future of school history, something I discuss later.

Meanwhile the debate about the future of school history is in full swing. The terms of this debate are muddy. More often than not it is about the content of the curriculum – is it British enough? Is it narrative enough? Sometimes there is a confused juxtaposition of 'skills versus content'. At its crudest, it is a lament that school history does not teach the facts – the dates of kings and queens, I presume. But whatever the terms, it is strikingly obvious that there is a near unanimous hostility to the current situation.

In December 2010, interviewed in a Radio 4 Today Programme,^[4] Niall Ferguson and Tariq Ali agreed school history was a 'total disgrace'. Commentators of all sorts are keen to have their say ^[5] and it is hard to find a positive word.

This 'discourse of derision' has been a constant theme in right wing circles stretching back beyond Thatcher. Prince Charles, through his annual English and History Conference – now repackaged as the 'Prince's Teaching Institute' – has provided a regular source of argument that condemned school history for its lack of British narrative. Stories routinely appeared in the right wing press picking up on alleged scandals such as the children who don't know about 1066 and all that.

In 2003 the BBC reported Prince Charles' warning that

Fashionable trends in education risk producing a generation of 'culturally disinherited young people'. He argues that in the teaching of both history and English Literature there is too much focus on the 'exclusively contemporary' and the 'immediately palatable'. He says both subjects need a 'coherent, chronological narrative' which allows young people to be 'rooted in their tradition'.

Instead they are often taught what is most 'accessible' rather than most useful, he says. He concludes that many of those who leave school with good qualifications have a 'shallow-rooted' education, lacking knowledge of their national history and heritage. As a result, they find themselves devoid of that all-important anchor when buffeted by the storms of life.^[6]

Recently, the curriculum has been condemned as being too heavily focussed on 'Hitler and Henry'. It is claimed that the modular structure of GCSEs and A levels stifles the development of an effective narrative of the great sweep of history. It has also been criticised both for being not British enough and not having a truly global perspective! It seems everyone wants to have a go at school history and everyone has a view about how to put it right. There are complex and contradictory analyses. Some focus on the minimal time allocated to history. Others condemn the modular structure and type of 'source work' prevalent in GCSE and A level history exam. Some froth at the mouth about history failing to tell 'our island story'.

Whatever the faults and whatever the analyses, battle lines are now being drawn over the future of school history. Laurie Penny, writing in the *New Statesman* saddled up with this attack on the Secretary of State;

Michael Gove's wish to re-engineer how history is taught to children is, quite simply, about social control. It is part of a broader political discourse that seeks, ultimately, to replace the messy, multivalent web of Britain's cultural inheritance with one 'big story' about dominance and hierarchy, of white over black, west over east, rich over poor. [7]

Andrew Stone's timely article 'What's wrong with school history?' in the *International Socialism Journal* gives a good account of many of the issues, setting the debate in an historical context and rounding off with a relentless attack on Niall Ferguson's vision for school history.[8]

This article attempts to pick up on some of the strands woven into Andrew Stone's account. It will look, perhaps unfashionably, at what is right about school history. It will argue that history is, at least at secondary level, generally popular, progressive and based fairly securely on concepts derived from our understanding of history as a form of knowledge. It develops this point by looking at issues of pedagogy and how people learn in history. It will then focus on some of the issues at stake as described by a key actor in the debate – the Better History Group.

When I started teaching history in 1993 the scars of the last great battle over the shape of the History National Curriculum (HNC) were just beginning to heal. In our classrooms we tried to make sense of the HNC over the next decade. There were teething problems but, although this was a model curriculum imposed on teachers by a Tory government, the HNC was more or less welcomed by classroom teachers. Certain features, such as the explicit recognition that history involved different interpretations, were very welcome. The breadth and balance of British, European and World history was also helpful. The focus on skills, using sources for example, was seen as an important breakthrough, despite the fact that over time it tended to degenerate into bizarre, and sometimes meaningless 'source work' routines rather than genuine 'evidence' work.

It appears today that much of what was positive has been conveniently forgotten. History teachers need to think carefully about this legacy, to clarify their arguments and, in my view, prepare for the battle ahead. This article hopes to help this process.

What is Right with School History?

The current History National Curriculum (HNC) is still dominated by British History, but it seeks to strike a balance between British, European and World history. Through the skills and processes component there is some attempt at teaching about the disciplinary nature of history – chronology, interpretation and use of evidence for example.

This is a great improvement on what came before. The ‘Great Tradition’ of history teaching was a Gradgrind diet of disconnected facts and dates grouped around a crude chronology of kings and queens. This was challenged by the emergence of a ‘new history’ in 1960s and especially with the Schools’ Council History Project (later to become the Schools History Project or SHP) pioneered by David Sylvester and expertly theorised by Dennis Shemilt.[9]

The Tory rhetoric around the time of the 1988 Educational Reform Act appeared to want to roll SHP back. Thatcher’s attack on empathy and her direct intervention in the History Working Group failed to do so. The HNC’s prescription of content was a sop to the right wing. But the inclusion of ‘history skills’ similar in nature to ideas of the SHP was a clear victory for progressive history education, even if it was limited, at the time, by fashionable ideas of post modernism which argued crudely that history was simply a set of different, equally valid narratives.

The Blair era did little to alter this compromise. Periodic moral panics about ‘Britishness’ did not alter the curriculum substantially. It did fuel a righteous indignation in right wing circles. Gove is heir to this agenda. But it was another of Blair’s education policies that had a more lasting impact.

His predilection for privatisation allowed an increasing takeover of all things in education, including the curriculum, and big business, through exam boards and publishing house mergers, to assert ever greater influence over classroom practice. The market knew best under Blair and inexorably the hidden hand of the market came to shape the curriculum, in particular the formulaic approach to ‘source work’ and the narrowing of topics into ‘Hitler and Henry’. (It was almost impossible to buy resources to support other topics that were listed in the optional sections of the HNC).

Yet despite these tendencies the quality of history remained high. OFSTED’s report ‘History in the Balance’ based on data from inspections between 2003 and 2007 concluded

Students’ achievement in secondary schools and colleges is good and, in terms of examination performance, standards compare well with other subjects. At best, students know a lot and are able to pose questions, seek evidence, evaluate it and communicate it well in

different ways. They understand important concepts and are adept at history skills. However, only just over 30% of students study the subject at Key Stage 4 and fewer still post-16. The National Curriculum and examination specifications have provided a successful curriculum which has been faithfully delivered by teachers and by leaders of the subject in schools.[10]

Hardly a record of failure! OFSTED was worried about certain tendencies. Weakness in primary history was a problem due to history being squeezed by literacy and numeracy programmes. The curriculum was in need of change and, unsurprisingly for OFSTED it doffed its cap in the direction of Prince Charles and argued the need for more emphasis on chronology and narrative. No substantial analysis was offered for the decline in numbers taking history, perhaps because this would have exposed the market in exam qualifications in which other subjects – notoriously certain GNVQ s- allowed schools to jump up the league tables.

Gove and his right wing media acolytes are clearly engaged in wrecking tactics, talking down not just school history but the whole structure of state education. For this reason alone, history educators, parents and students should be warned. Gove's agenda has narrow political objectives. There is nothing 'Big Society' in it: no genuine consultation; no honest accounting; no democratic accountability. Indeed their analysis rests on a travesty of the history of history teaching and an abject account of what history education really involves.

The next section seeks to highlight some of the issues in history education that have been airbrushed from the present political debate. It draws on the strong, pioneering tradition of research in history education in the UK. It focuses on the critical issue raised by Jerome Bruner [11] of the need for educators to focus on the disciplinary nature of a subject.

History as a Form of Knowledge

The place of history in the school curriculum is fairly uncontroversial. There is near total agreement that history should be part of a child's education. The threat to history comes not from opposition to the subject, but from pressure to compete in league tables, where other subjects and qualifications are considered easier or more rewarding in terms of GCSE passes. The focus on literacy and numeracy at Key Stage 1, 2 and 3 have also helped to marginalise history with OFSTED claiming that only 4% of the primary curriculum was devoted to history.

The squeeze on history is in stark contrast to rich tradition of research into History in education in the UK. From the early pioneers such as M.W. Keatinge, through Denis Shemilt and the Schools Council History Project and into the ground breaking research of Peter Lee & Rosalyn Ashby in Project CHATA [12] there has developed a consistent and profound understanding of what it means to teach history. Successive governments have largely ignored

this research. The HNC did accommodate some aspects, but the evidence collected by researchers offers a compelling case for a different vision of school history.

Limitations of space and time here do not allow me to do justice to the detailed argument of these research findings. The central argument is this: history is a distinct form of knowledge with its own disciplinary 'concepts and procedures. Effective teaching and learning of history depends on students developing expertise in understanding and applying these. These concepts and procedures – sometimes wrongly called skills – define the nature of how historical accounts are constructed, in particular the role of empathy, evidence and interpretation in this process.

Project CHATA research findings challenged the assumption that children will construct sound causal explanations from factual information imparted during history teaching. The relationship between dates, events, motives and actions of people in history are not easily understood by children. Students often wrongly assume that people thought and behaved in the past as we do today. History can be counter-intuitive. Students' ways of thinking in history can be littered with misconceptions which, if not addressed, are barriers to developing a rational understanding. For example, many students will argue that 'eyewitnesses always know better'. It has a certain playground logic, but it won't do in history. Identifying such misconceptions and providing clear routes of progress in historical understanding should form the basis of a successful history education.

This sort of analysis holds the key to a much more effective description of what history education should look like. This does not mean curriculum content is not an issue. But it does reassert the critical importance of 'skills' (the use of 'skills' is unfortunate shorthand for what is involved. We are really talking about complex concepts and procedures not skills). A history pedagogy informed by such ideas and by wider theories of how people learn is crucial to development of better history teaching.

History and How People Learn

Although, history is a distinct form of knowledge, it is not exclusive. It shares similar traits to other subjects and success in one area can help develop success in another. Nevertheless, to make progress in history, students need to understand and master the disciplinary 'concepts and procedures' of the subject. This is true for all forms of knowledge – maths, music and so on. Our understanding of these things necessarily shapes our view of school history. How people learn in history is no different from how people learn in general. Fortunately there is abundant evidence about how people learn, although this, again, has hardly featured in the debate about school history.

There are many, overlapping accounts about how people learn. I intend to rely here on one useful account published by the National Research Council in the USA. *How People Learn; Brain, Mind, Experience and School* [13] identifies three

key principles in what, at the time of publication, was considered a new science of learning. These principles can help us understand what an effective history education might look like.

The three key principles are as follows

1. Students come to the classroom with pre-conceptions about how the world works. If their initial understanding is not engaged, they may fail to grasp the new concepts and information that are taught, or they may learn them for purposes of a test but revert to their pre-conceptions outside the classroom.[ibid]

Without attention to pre-existing knowledge, there is little hope of progress. Teachers need to pay attention to incomplete understandings, false beliefs, naïve renditions or misconceptions of concepts and then seek to transform them.

The implications for history teaching are far reaching. The attempt to impose a national view of what should be learned in a blanket fashion (such as in the National Curriculum) does not allow the starting point of learning to be student pre-conceptions. Indeed the pre-conceptions are those of the authors of the HNC, not the student. The logic of the new science of learning is that a curriculum should be devised on the basis of the prior knowledge of the cohort being taught.

This, in turn, would require teachers to conduct a fairly detailed examination of students' prior knowledge. This point is even more poignant if the diversity of a classroom, especially in an inner city school, is considered. Race, class and gender are some of the important measures of diversity, but diversity is also expressed in myriad ways such as country of origin, home circumstances, and primary school experience and so on. The challenge for history teachers is how to recognise predictable pre-conceptions, how to draw out unpredictable pre-conceptions and how to work with pre-conceptions, to build on them, challenge and where appropriate replace them.

A top down curriculum based on factual knowledge and understanding needs to explain how it will help this process. The child is not an empty vessel. Their prior historical understanding is shaped by wide variety of factors. These pre-conceptions are crucial in defining the next steps. It is wishful thinking to assume that the blanket prescription of a curriculum will relate to the needs of all our children.

The second key finding is

2. To develop competence in an area of enquiry, students must: (a) have a deep foundation of factual knowledge, (b) understand facts and ideas in the context of a conceptual framework, and (c) organise knowledge in ways that facilitate retrieval and application.[ibid]

This finding emphasises that learning with understanding rather than memorizing is vital. Most would agree the days of rote learning the dates of

kings and queens belong in the dustbin of history. But the danger, as we will see later, is that a curriculum that focuses on factual knowledge will trump the other aspects.

Facts are important but only if as package of 'usable knowledge'. A way to explain this is to compare the way an 'expert' and a 'novice' use knowledge. Experts' knowledge is organised around important concepts. It is 'conditionalised' to specify the contexts in which it is applicable and it supports understanding and transfer rather than only the ability to remember. The novice has only a grasp of isolated facts.

The implications for history are profound. First, it is clear that study in depth is essential. The attempt to provide a broad content coverage as implied by the National Curriculum and hinted at in the Better History Group proposals is misguided. Deep factual knowledge is crucial, although not as lists of 'Gradgrind' facts, but as factual information organised around a conceptual framework. Without the conceptual framework deep factual knowledge is worthless.

This notion of a conceptual framework needs further elaboration. What is a conceptual framework? Are some conceptual frameworks more useful than others? There are already some that are very familiar to history teachers. Built in to the HNC are conceptual frameworks such as chronology, change and continuity, similarity and difference. These concepts have been at the heart of HNC for two decades, but do they help?

Again it is the research into the difference between experts and novices that has shed some light on this issue. Experts have the ability to see patterns of meaningful information, so their ability to problem solve is at a higher place. This is a process of knowledge being 'conditionalised' in order to be retrieved in a fluent or effortless manner and applied to the next problem. Thus the conceptual framework helps a deeper understanding of factual knowledge. For example, when studying the events of the English Civil War, the expert may have in mind conceptual frameworks such as 'the transition from feudalism to capitalism' or 'revolution'. The 'facts' about failure of the Long Parliament, the execution of Charles and so on can be slotted into these frameworks. But to the novice, the facts or events may appear disconnected. The lack of sophistication in the novice's conceptual framework should be the target of effective history teaching. Building more sophisticated conceptual frameworks is the long task of history teachers.

In the history classroom, each teacher has their own expert knowledge and their own more or less developed conceptual frameworks. Their task must be to place these frameworks in front of students so that they can be applied, developed and or rejected. An obvious implication is that planning for units of work would require, not only the identification of students' pre-conceptions, but also the conceptual framework that the teachers are using. A further implication is that history teachers need to be history experts, with detailed subject knowledge. Top down proscribed content can leave many teachers teaching topics about which they know little.

The third element of this is that, in order to develop competence in an area of enquiry, students must organise knowledge in a way to facilitate retrieval and application. This has implications for the method of assessment used in history classrooms. The simple test of factual knowledge is worthless. Attempts to measure attainment next to 'level descriptors', as in the HNC, is also questionable.

The key feature of assessment is whether the acquired understanding can be transferred to new problems. For example, is a student of the causes of the First World War able to apply the understanding gained to the causes of the Second World War or the Vietnam War? Assessment, even for the purpose of accountability must test deep understanding rather than surface knowledge. This raises issues about the purpose of assessment and the real function of assessment, which lie beyond the scope of this discussion.

The third and final key finding of HPL is

3. A 'metacognitive' approach to instruction can help students learn to take control of their own learning by defining learning goals and monitoring their progress in achieving them.[ibid]

This is not the place to examine in detail the components of a metacognitive approach. New developments in the science of learning show the importance of people taking control of their learning. People must recognise when they understand something. A metacognitive approach includes elements such as the ability to predict their performance on tasks, to monitor their current levels of mastery and understanding, sense making, self-assessment and reflection on what worked and what needs improving. As with other key findings, the need for a metacognitive approach is not exclusive to history. Indeed research shows that such approaches need to be integrated into the curriculum across all subject areas. History teachers need to identify and develop strong metacognitive, formative assessment or assessment for learning (AfL)[14] strategies.

The three key findings outlined above present a different point of reference for the teaching and learning of history, and indeed all subjects. The implications are far reaching both intellectually and organisationally. Under the heading 'Bringing order to chaos' the authors of the *How People Learn* acknowledge the difficulties facing teachers. They identify the 'cacophony' of voices arguing this strategy versus that strategy. These debates have centred on questions such as 'Are some teaching techniques or topics better than others? Encouragingly the authors cut through this debate with simple, but effective analogy.

Asking which teaching technique is best is analogous to asking which tool is best – a hammer, a screwdriver, a knife or pliers. In teaching as with carpentry the selection of tools depends on the task at hand and the materials one is working with. [ibid]

There is 'no universal best teaching practice', but if a set of core learning principles are established the 'many possibilities then become a rich set of opportunities'. The same can be said about curriculum content. Those at the 'chalk face' are perhaps best placed to decide what will serve their students' purposes. To the hard-pressed teacher, it may sound like a utopian vision. But it is a message that the new masters of the curriculum review would do well to heed.

If the principles above were applied to teaching and learning in schools we would see a very different approach to education as whole not just school history. Much progress has been made in developing teaching by applying the ideas of metacognition or as it is more commonly known as formative assessment or 'Assessment for Learning'.

There is a marked confluence in these different research findings. This suggests these ideas have something to recommend them. Yet they rarely feature in the wider discourse about school history. Indeed the argument is dominated by the right wing media and a section of the history teaching 'establishment' now calling themselves the Better History Group (BHG). The way history teaching is construed by the BHG suggests this research tradition is being marginalised.

'Better History' is Right Wing History

In January 2010 the BHG held a seminar to discuss the future of school history. The report of the seminar shows how little of the argument from history education research inform their findings.[15] It reveals that old prejudices and simplistic formulas are the order of the day.

Not surprisingly Michael Gove has seized on this report to claim that he has the support of professionals. Worse still, it looks like Gradgrind Gove is taking heed of their central argument that the emphasis in the new curriculum must be on facts and knowledge. It is worth, therefore, examining in some detail the arguments put forward by BHG.

Their first argument is that history should be compulsory to 16. As a history teacher, I am less inclined to argue against this! But if we agree that history should be compulsory in school until 16, there remains a problem over how much time it should be allocated. It is currently compulsory to end of KS3 and features as an option choice at GCSE and A level. History is not unpopular or unattractive to students. It is the league tables, the pressure to rise up the tables that limits its uptake.

There may be nothing wrong in making history compulsory to 16, unless we are opposed all compulsion in selection of any topics (a real choice for students?) but to insist that it is part of an English Baccalaureate (EBacc) as Gove has now done means that it will become the focus of intense exam pressure. To do well in the league tables, schools will need all students to do well in history. Publishing tables of EBacc performance will have an impact on the exam boards, the style and content of examinations and inexorably the style

of teaching. Pressure to do well, to get up the table will override all other concerns. The risk is that any benefit of making school history compulsory to 16 is likely to be counteracted by its inclusion in the EBacc.

The second argument is that there is a case for a 'continuous and coherent 11-16 history course'. On the face of it this appears seductively simple and ever so logical. Yet, as I tried to show earlier, the content of the curriculum is less important than pedagogy that it informs it. The implicit assumption bound up in this demand is that teaching topics in chronological order will instil a sense of chronology. It is an appealing idea but utter nonsense. Developing an effective chronological framework or 'big picture' requires specific teaching of chronological concepts. Deep understanding and developing a coherent conceptual framework is the crucial ingredient. It is an area of history teaching that we still have much to learn about.

But the notion of that a coherent content will achieve this is a red herring. It begs the question; coherent to whom? The answer leads us down a dangerous path into 'state' history. The Curriculum Review group will have their view of a coherent history course, but others will beg to differ. The danger is that it will become a dominant ideology once enshrined in a curriculum. The current HNC partly escapes this charge by allowing a wide range of topic selections in each category, even if resourcing those sections is not always possible.

The crucial point is that there are different perspectives on what makes a coherent course. The politics, attitudes and experience of each historian, each history teacher and each politician mediates their understanding. A government imposed one risks becoming a Stalinist dictat.

To illustrate this point, you only need to look at the proposed curriculum developed in 2007 that is posted alongside their report.[16] Its overwhelming preponderance of British history and the selection of content represent, to my mind at least, a fairly narrow limited vision for school history. But what is most alarming is the sense that the primary purpose of this curriculum is fostering a sense of 'national identity' rather effective teaching and learning of history. This sort of 'little England' vision might fit well in the shires of middle England, but is laughably out of touch with our urban, working class population.

The third argument presented by BHG is the importance of building up and extending students' historical knowledge. To be fair there appears nothing to argue about here. As already outlined, the need for deep factual knowledge is crucial. The problem here is striking a balance between outline and depth studies. It is a problem that the HNC suffered from. And it is a problem that creates much confusion. Mike Baker, the former BBC education correspondent reports a conversation with the playwright Alan Bennett;

'I think we should be teaching the outline of English history as used to happen when he was at school.' Mind you, he admitted, that he only really got the full chronology of history when he went to Oxford.[17]

Clearly, at least for Bennett, the outline approach did not work! How many of us gained a fully formed map of this past at school? Can a school history curriculum ever reach that level of depth or does that not require study of history to university level?

The final issue is the alleged 'damaging effects of the current mechanistic and formulaic methods of assessment at GCSE and A level'. The central problem here is the architecture of the ERA 1988. Its neo-liberal agenda focused on league tables and market competition. This was the key factor in distorting the nature of school history. BHG concerns about GCSE & A level support this claim. From the lofty ideals at its inception, GCSE History became a pale shadow of what was intended. The concentration and centralisation of the exam processes in the hands of fewer but bigger businesses meant that market performance for these exams became more important than intellectual rigour.

It is the pressure of exam performance that leads history teachers to repeat studies of Hitler. Accumulating an A* to C is the 'Moses and the prophets' of GCSE history teaching. Breadth, balance and diversity get lost along the way. It is true that the current rendition of 'source work' has become routine and sometimes meaningless, but this is the product of the market in education not the curriculum design.

Proper evidence work was the hallmark of the School Council History Project. A genuine return to the investigative, problem solving approach of SCHP would be a welcome step.

EBacc to the Future?

Perhaps the worst feature of the BHG report is the absence of a forward looking vision. There is nothing in the report that talks of new possibilities. Where, for example, are the ideas about the new ways in which history is represented in film or other media? Where is the discussion of developing new technologies to support history investigations, or the possibilities of breaking away from the traditional, written exam type of assessment to embrace oral and multimedia assessment platforms? Better history will need better engagement with the present if it is to offer a palatable vision for the future.

The BHG report is a small 'c' conservative report that will be pounced on by big 'C' Conservatives in government. It will allow a narrow section of society to claim the endorsement of the history profession. It will give succour to those reactionaries who crave a history curriculum based on 'our island story'.

Fortunately BHG is not the only voice in the debate. However, as Andrew Stone [18] has outlined, Niall Ferguson and Simon Schama have very similar visions of narrative history and seem too full of their own 'television history' importance to consider alternatives. In contrast the Historical Association offers a more open, positive vision, albeit from the same starting places as BHG. Sadly there remains no clear voice from the classroom.

People Make History but Not in Circumstances of their Own Choosing

I'm paraphrasing Marx because it is important to emphasise women too. Indeed it is male and female, black and white, gay and straight history teachers of all sorts that should have a say in the future of school history. The students, and their parents, should also be an active constituent of the debate.

History teachers cannot remain underlings. They are the experts. The argument for experts on the ground deciding the shape of the curriculum is compelling. It could be a curriculum based on a synergy between history teacher expertise, based on research findings, and student ideas based on their experiences, needs and desires. Government should have a say but only as a partner. It is right to have a national political debate, but not if that means subordinating research findings.

The Tory right may squeal about the teacher's 'secret garden' in reference to the days before the National Curriculum in which allegedly unaccountable teachers taught random history courses. I do not want to rehearse those arguments, save to say that current accountability regimes would surely prevent a repeat of this. (I suspect that the current type of accountability regime, like the league tables, actually militates against innovation and creativity, but that is a separate debate.)

The threat to school history is real. The 'discourse of derision' may allow a narrow conservative clique to impose its vision. As Laurie Penny argues this is a vision in which white men are born to rule! As yet Gove is a Gradgrind not a Stalin. But he may end up imposing a curriculum in which history teachers will come to resemble Mr Gradgrind (and his teaching assistant Mr M'Choakumchild) forcing historical 'facts' down the throats of an unwilling generation of students compelled to sit through dull and repetitive lessons about 'our island story' to ensure their school meets its EBacc targets. That's the nightmare scenario.

If the 'Big Society' is to live up to its own rhetoric, Gove, the Department of Education and the Curriculum Review group would have the courage of their convictions and organise a series of national, regional and local debates about the future of school history. There should be an opportunity to hear different voices beyond the narrow confines of television historians, the Prince's Teaching Institute and the Better History Group.

If we are to convince history teachers to develop their teaching practice we will need to do much more than play with the curriculum. We could re-engage this generation of history teachers by offering them a place where they feel comfortable, where they feel their views are heard, and where there is a proclivity towards creativity. It is the thrill of developing new curricula and new teaching and learning ideas that motivates history teaching professionals. Freedom from the constraints imposed by the league tables and the rest of the neo-liberal architecture would be a better place to start. Providing more time for professional development, sharing good ideas and good practice at local and

national levels through INSET and local subject specialist networks would do much more for history teaching than a curriculum review.

That is not say curriculum reform is not necessary. If we are to reform the curriculum, we need to look forward to the future needs of our society to find new themes and new ideas for reform. We need to look at how history can help throw light on critical issues for future generations such as social justice and environmental sustainability. The reactionary vision of school history, that BHG, Gove, Ferguson and Schama seem happy to peddle needs to be opposed.

There is much work to be done. This work will be made much easier if it becomes part of the popular movement that began with the student rebellions of November and December 2010. Action by teachers and students over their pay and conditions will hopefully raise their expectations to the point at which they begin to re-assert their right to influence the shape of the history curriculum. I sincerely hope this happens sooner rather than later.

Notes

- [1] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-12227491>
- [2] <http://www.general-election-2010.co.uk/conservative-party-manifesto-2010-general-election/conservative-manifesto-2010-change-society-raise-standards-in-schools>
- [3] <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/curriculum/nationalcurriculum>
- [4] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/2707487.stm>
- [5] Journalist Mike Baker
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2011/jan/18/history-national-curriculum> Simon Jenkins
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/jan/20/michael-gove-stalin-history-politicians>
- [6] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/2707487.stm>
- [7] <http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/the-staggers/2010/06/history-british-ferguson>
- [8] <http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php?id=704&issue=129>
- [9] Shemilt, D.J. (1980) *History 13-16: evaluation study*. Edinburgh: Holmes McDougall.
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