Making history powerful

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Abstract

This research paper explores the effects of promoting empowerment in the key stage three history curriculum. For this research the term 'empowerment' relates to engaging pupils, enlightening them to the world around them and encouraging them to use their voices. Through applying an empowering approach to the history curriculum we can teach pupils the historic challenges that people have faced which help explain current issues, and educate pupils on how and why to use their voices.

Keywords: history; curriculum; key stage three; empowerment; human rights; pupil voices; engagement

Introduction

'Miss, why do we need to learn about this? It happened so long ago'. I was asked this question during a lesson on the Norman Conquest in my first year as a qualified history teacher. The pupil was not trying to be impolite but was genuinely intrigued as to why we were studying an event that happened nearly a thousand years ago. As a lover of history, I had never questioned the relevance of any historical topics that I studied at school; I was simply content with learning new knowledge about a subject that fascinated me. This question encouraged me to reflect on the type of history teacher I wanted to be. I realised that I wanted to give my pupils a history education that was meaningful and had the power to inspire.

This realisation has shaped my lesson planning throughout my career and influenced the focus of my research. The research presented here is aimed at exploring the effects of promoting empowerment in the key stage three history curriculum. The term 'empowerment' is defined as the process of giving a group of people power and status in a particular situation.[1] For this research the term refers to engaging pupils, enlightening them to the world around them and encouraging them to use their voices. The scheme of work devised for this research aims to teach pupils the history of key human rights issues and, in doing so, to encourage them to stand up for what is right: making history powerful.

Why is history an important subject, and how has the KS3 curriculum developed?

The subject of history can seem irrelevant to many as it is easy to question the importance of studying the past when education should be, as summarised by Malcolm

X, the 'passport to the future'.[2] Yet the knowledge and skills a history education can provide are invaluable. They allow pupils to develop a sense of their identity, improve their awareness of different cultures and enhance their understanding of how society changes. As Baldwin argues, history is an 'essential and controversial part of any curriculum'.[3] It provides pupils with the opportunity to investigate, argue and challenge, key characteristics of active global citizens. The subject of history also 'provides the essential context for contemporary issues'; it enhances pupils' understanding of the modern world.[4] However, I believe an effective and empowering history curriculum is yet to be achieved.

It is important to understand how the curriculum in England – and within it history as a subject – has developed in order to truly understand the strengths and limitations of the current national curriculum. During the 19th and 20th centuries, education in England was subject to politicisation, defined by Marsden as being used 'to serve the ends of significant power groups'.[5] This is evident when considering the traditional approach to teaching history, which was essentially a 'received subject' that aimed to provide 'moral exemplars'.[6] The introduction of the national curriculum in England in 1988 received similar criticisms. Chitty argues that Conservative education secretary Kenneth Baker used the national curriculum as a form of 'social control' in an effort to 'instil respect for all the institutions of a bourgeois state'.[7] Fortunately, there now seems a general consensus that education must go deeper than promoting idealistic values, as evidenced in the current history curriculum, which states that pupils should study the development and complexity of societies and not isolated 'historic achievements'.[8] Nevertheless, concerns remain. A survey conducted by Ofsted in 2015 referred to key stage three as the 'wasted years', with many schools dismissing it as low priority.[9] Its shortcomings were further echoed in research by Ofsted and HM chief inspector Amanda Spielman who criticised the value placed on examination results, suggesting 'we all have to ask ourselves how have we created a situation where second-guessing the test can trump the pursuit of real, deep knowledge and understanding of subjects'.[10] The answer seems obvious when considering the role of the New Right in promoting the concept of education as a marketplace, whose efficacy is continuously judged by performance league tables.

In addition to generalised issues with the national curriculum and within it the key stage three curriculum, the subject of history itself faces further challenges. For instance, the Ofsted survey that referred to key stage three as the 'wasted years' found particular weaknesses within the subject of history, suggesting that teaching 'failed to challenge and engage pupils'.[11] This observation echoes previous criticisms of history education as a subject to be 'received'.[12] This is a fundamental problem if we are to teach pupils to become active citizens. The 'transmission/reception' method of teaching is arguably resorted to due to the high amount of content that is to be covered. Former Conservative

prime minister David Cameron referred to the revised national curriculum in 2014 as 'rigorous, engaging and tough'.[13] This is evident when considering the complex topics pupils are required to study in history, such as world events and challenging second order concepts. The weaknesses of the national curriculum and the subject of history itself outlined here – including the influence of politics, the intense exam focus, the failure to engage pupils and the breadth of topics to be studied – have created, in my opinion, a history curriculum that is disengaging and often without meaning. It is time to step away from this approach to education. It is hindering our young people and often producing graduates who, in the words of employers, 'have nothing about them'.[14] My aim as a teacher is to inspire, encourage and motivate our young people to embrace the world they are growing into, and I believe the subject of history has the potential to achieve this.

Next steps for the key stage three curriculum?

Arthur Chapman, professor of history education at the Institute of Education at UCL, notes a change in approach to the curriculum in recent years, which I believe has the potential to dramatically improve the history curriculum delivered at key stage three. Chapman notes a 'knowledge turn', a movement that places subjects more centrally when considering what schools are for, and so addressing the criticisms outlined above that the current national curriculum is dominated too much by politics and exams.[15] Michael Young, educator and academic, builds upon this and advocates the concept of 'powerful knowledge', a relatively new concept that defines knowledge as 'powerful' when it provides pupils with meaningful and worthwhile information.[16] This approach is distinct from the previous approach to the curriculum that was arguably based upon the 'knowledge of the powerful', advocating the interests of those in power.[17] The idea of delivering 'powerful knowledge', placing pupils at the heart of their education by thinking about their needs, is an approach that could readily be applied to the history curriculum.

Other academics and educators also recognise the need to deliver a more meaningful education to pupils. Peter Hyman, co-director of Big Education, promotes a curriculum organised around the head, heart and hand. The approach is built upon the concept of training our young people to shape a better world because, arguably, 'the world requires the next generation to make a better fist of it than we have'.[18] In addition, educator and author Dr Debra Kidd proposes the notion of a 'curriculum of hope' where 'empowerment is the goal'.[19] Kidd's approach requires moving beyond a curriculum that focuses solely on what works in order to pass tests. It concentrates on engagement, highlighting that children who are invested in their learning are more likely to be successful.[20] This is echoed by Martin Haberman who also stresses the importance

of engaging pupils within their education, suggesting that 'schooling is living, not preparation for living' and so we should engage pupils in issues that they view as vital concerns.[21] This suggests a clear future direction for the curriculum, placing pupils' needs at the centre of their education and devising a curriculum that is meaningful to them. This links to the concept my research advocates: empowerment.

What topics could empower pupils?

In light of such observations, to create and implement an empowering curriculum for history at key stage three we must carefully consider the topics that should be covered. Therefore, building on Haberman's argument that good teaching happens when pupils 'are involved with issues they regard as vital concerns', it seems appropriate to consider modern-day topics and how they can be incorporated within the curriculum.[22]

Although diversity within education has been a national target for many years, in regard to race, this has arguably not yet been achieved. Cole argues that a multicultural curriculum can often be 'patronising and superficial', and highlights the power of history as a subject that could play an integral role in breaking down the misconception of 'them' and 'us'.[23] Events triggered by the death of George Floyd in May 2020 emphasised the divisions in our world and the racism within it. An empowering history education has the potential to address these issues, providing pupils with the precise knowledge of our world's development and so, as promoted by Hyman, empowering them to make a better world in the future.[24]

Furthermore, inequality in regard to gender remains a topic for debate in modern society. Despite the progress that women have achieved over the last 100 years, the fact remains that women are still more likely to go into lesser-paid jobs in HR, creativity and public services in contrast to male-dominated management roles.[25] Murray suggests that the solution to this is to teach girls to use their voices in school, thus linking to the concept of empowerment.[26] History is the perfect subject to achieve this as, by encountering examples of women who have campaigned for key issues, pupils can develop an understanding of how to use their own voices and perhaps use this in their own lives.

Evidence for an empowering approach

There are various case studies to support a move towards an empowering approach, one which places pupils' needs more centrally in their education. For example, Fautley, Hatcher and Millard aimed to re-engage pupils within secondary school through restructuring elements of the key stage three curriculum.[27] This involved introducing new units that were based on pupils' 'understandings and concerns related to their own lives, their communities and the world beyond'.[28] Debra Kidd worked with one of the

schools and its teachers to devise a scheme of work entitled 'Plots and protests – how can we use our voices to change the world?'. The scheme included lessons on historical events such as the Gunpowder Plot. These were compared to events in the modern day, thus allowing pupils to consider the motivations and actions of protest and helping connect the 'then' to the 'now'.[29] The approach resulted in improved pupil outcomes and knowledge recall. Pupils articulated a broader perspective on serious issues. The approach was also found to be accessible to all.[30]

In addition, Covell and Howe demonstrate an alternative way of promoting empowerment through the curriculum by teaching the topic of human rights.[31] The curriculum was delivered across 10 schools to pupils aged between 13 and 15 in their health and social studies class. Observations found that by the end of the unit pupils 'showed high self-esteem, higher levels of perceived peer and teacher support and indicated more support for the rights of others'.[32] The improvement in self-esteem is of particular interest, as researchers noted how this might have resulted from 'a sense of empowerment that the curriculum appeared to engender'.[33] The value of a human rights education is echoed by Audrey Osler and Hugh Starkey, both professors, who suggest that current citizenship education is outdated. An alternative approach based upon human rights is much more fitting.[34] They promote 'education for cosmopolitan citizenship', which prepares pupils to live and grow in diverse societies where, importantly, 'they feel empowered to make a difference'. [35]

The literature reviewed here reveals shortcomings within the history curriculum delivered at key stage three in England. However, the literature has also demonstrated a promising approach to teaching, where the needs of pupils are placed more centrally within their education, and has shown how such an approach can support academic and personal development. My research paper aims to demonstrate how an empowering approach within the history curriculum can achieve this by engaging pupils in topics that are relevant to them and encouraging them to use their voices. Through introducing a new scheme of work to the year eight curriculum, I hoped to empower pupils through a historical perspective.

My project

The scheme of work I created was entitled 'How has the fight for human rights shaped society?' It consisted of seven lessons (outlined in Figure 1) that explore the history of key issues regarding equality, specifically focusing on the historic challenges in struggling for gender and racial equality. It is important to note that lessons were delivered virtually due to the lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The study involved 74 year-eight pupils of mixed ability. Data were obtained through classroom observations, focus group interviews, questionnaires and attainment data.

My research explored the effects of encouraging empowerment in the key stage three history curriculum. The term 'empowerment' relates to engaging pupils, enlightening them to the world around them and encouraging them to use their voices. In an effort to understand the 'effects' of encouraging empowerment, I formulated the following research objectives:

1. To what extent can encouraging empowerment improve engagement in history lessons?

2. How can an empowering approach support pupils' academic and personal development?

3. To what extent can history lessons improve pupils' understanding of the modern world?

I followed the British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines and also complied with the University of Birmingham's ethical process.[36]

Figure 1: Outline of the scheme of work

> **Unit Title: *How has the fight for human rights shaped society?***
> **Lesson 1: What are human rights?**
> Lesson 2: How were women treated in the 19th century?
> Lesson 3: How impactful was the fight for women's suffrage?
> Lesson 4: Have women achieved equality? *(ext. writing)*
> Lesson 5: How powerful was the American Civil Rights Movement?
> Lesson 6: What is the history of the Civil Rights campaign in Britain?
> Lesson 7: Why is it important to protect human rights? *(ext. writing)*

My findings

This section presents a summary of my findings.

Objective 1: To what extent can encouraging empowerment improve pupil engagement in history lessons?

It is suggested that pupil engagement is an essential component of learning.[37] Therefore, in light of observations from Ofsted discussed above,[38] it can be argued that the lack of engagement that has been witnessed in history lessons is having a negative impact on pupils' education. Young advocates the concept of 'powerful knowledge', which is defined as information that is both meaningful and worthwhile to the recipient.[39] My scheme of work built upon this approach by aiming to provide 'powerful knowledge'

to pupils by teaching them topics that were relevant and enlightening for them. Data produced as a result of this research found that such an approach has the potential to improve pupil engagement. For example, despite lessons being delivered virtually I noted a general increase across all classes in classroom discussion and debate, a key signifier of engagement. This was markedly different to other year eight classes who were not part of the sample, and other year groups whose engagement notably decreased during virtual lessons. In addition to this, within the lesson entitled 'Have women achieved equality?' pupils debated the topic of 'pink tax', whereby the girls informed the boys of the upcharge often levied on female products in comparison to male products. Although one might be tempted to criticise this debate by arguing that the pupils had stepped away from the subject of history, this would be an error. Studying the historical challenges that women have faced led the class to understand why there are still challenges today. This demonstrates how applying a historical perspective to current issues can enlighten pupils.

Objective 2: How can an empowering approach support pupils' academic and personal development?

The literature reviewed in this paper outlined current criticisms of the key stage three national curriculum whereby knowledge of assessment topics is prioritised over 'real, deep knowledge and understanding of subjects'.[40] Although this paper does not aim to discredit the importance for schools of supporting pupils to secure strong examination results, it does wish to highlight that teaching pupils topics beyond the GCSE syllabus will not disadvantage pupils. This research provides evidence to suggest that the teaching of topics which provide pupils with 'powerful knowledge'[41] – not solely such knowledge as will help them pass tests – can also support their academic development. In this research, pupils were assessed via a piece of creative writing at the end of the scheme of work: a speech entitled 'why is it important to protect human rights?'. The speeches were graded using the assessment criteria provided by the school. The results are shown in Table 1. Unfortunately, I was not able to obtain more assessment data due to difficulties created by the pandemic.

Table 1: Results of final assessment

Year 8 Sample		Pupils who submitted the assessment		Pupils who met or exceeded their target grade	
High ability	28	High ability	12	High ability	8
Mid ability	26	Mid ability	7	Mid ability	6
Low ability	20	Low ability	4	Low ability	3
Total	74 (100%)	Total	23 (31.1%)	Total	17 (73.9%)

From the data presented, it is clear that taking an empowering approach supports academic progress, as 17 of the 23 pupils who submitted their assessment either met or exceeded their end of term target grade. Pupils were able to develop their historical skills, which will be of value to them at GCSE level. Like Kidd, I acknowledge that such progress does not happen without other intervention strategies.[42] There is still clear evidence to suggest that this approach, a step away from an exam-motivated one, does not limit pupil progress but can support academic development. In addition, observations revealed how such an approach can support pupils' personal development, most notably their self-esteem. For example, one pupil who was often quite reserved asked if she could deliver a speech to introduce the lesson entitled 'Have women achieved equality?'. It was clear that her passion for the topic encouraged her to use her voice and this shone through in her speech. This example illustrates the confidence that can grow within a pupil when they are engaged and feel empowered to use their own voice.

Objective 3: To what extent can history lessons improve pupils' understanding of the modern world?

Often pupils do not understand the relevance or importance of a history curriculum, and this can cause disengagement. Evidence collected prior to the delivery of this scheme of work corroborates this. For example, during the focus-group interviews prior to the scheme of work, when asked 'how far do you feel that your education applies to the world around you?', one pupil replied, 'I don't see any link at all'. I responded by asking 'Would you like to learn more about current affairs at school?', to which one pupil responded, 'Yes, because one day we are going to go into the open world'. Another added: 'We may only be children but we have a voice'.

The scheme of work I delivered aimed to address these limitations, and its impact was revealed when analysing responses given during the focus-group interview conducted afterwards. When asked 'how has this scheme of work helped your understanding of the world around you?', pupils' responses included: 'I never realised how bad it was … we've come a long way and this makes me feel better', and 'It teaches me that we shouldn't judge a book by its cover'. Both responses demonstrate how pupils had been enlightened about the world around them and in doing so had developed a degree of empathy. I asked 'did you enjoy linking history lessons to the present day?', to which one pupil replied: 'Yes, as people today often take what they have for granted, this makes us more appreciative of what we have'. Such a response highlights not only the success of this approach in linking history to the modern world but also its necessity, for pupils are provided with knowledge that enlightens their minds to the world around them. It can be concluded that this approach has the potential to dispel the criticism of history as a subject from which pupils disengage. Linking past and

present can engage pupils by demonstrating the continuing relevance of the past to the world around them.

Objective 4: How important is it to teach pupils through a human rights perspective?

This was not an original research objective, but came to light during data analysis and provides additional evidence to promote the value of my study. The questionnaire conducted prior to the delivery of the scheme of work revealed pupils' lack of knowledge as regards human rights. However, data collected from the questionnaire after the scheme of work, and pupils' written work, revealed that pupils had developed a clear sense of the importance of human rights. For example, in the second questionnaire pupils were asked: 'What do you think is the biggest reason why it is important to learn about human rights in history?'. They were given four options to choose from. Eight out of 17 respondents circled: 'It teaches us what happens if someone's rights are ignored', highlighting how the topic had allowed pupils to develop a degree of empathy for the challenges of others. Furthermore, six respondents circled: 'It teaches us how to stand up for our rights', echoing findings made by Covell and Howe that pupils seemed to display a sense of empowerment when studying human rights.[43] Pupils' written work displayed similar findings. One pupil wrote in their final assessment: 'If we continue to speak up about issues in the world then hopefully we will be able to get rid of discrimination altogether'. This demonstrates how the topic enlightened pupils to the importance of human rights and created a sense of empowerment whereby they felt that they had the ability to make a difference.

Conclusions

The data analysed in this paper have demonstrated the value of adopting an empowering approach within the history curriculum. However, I recognise that this research is not without its weaknesses. First, it consisted of a small sample of participants and so conclusions drawn are limited. In addition to this, the Covid-19 pandemic created practical challenges such as online lessons, and limited the number of questionnaires obtained and the degree of pupil interaction. This in turn hindered classroom observations. Such limitations suggest that the results obtained from this research are not generalisable. However, the study did not aim to generate generalisable results. The important point is that these results are relatable, as advocated by Bassey, and so have the ability to hold a degree of value for others.[44]

My positionality must also be taken into account. My familiarity to pupils could have caused them to give answers they thought were desirable, a consequence of the Hawthorn effect.[45] However, I believe my position benefited this research. To understand the impact of the scheme of work, it was important to understand the characters of

pupils prior to its delivery to ensure I was confident to draw conclusions about changes in behaviour.

Overall, this approach of engaging pupils, enlightening them to the world around them and encouraging them to use their voices has revealed a variety of benefits. Most notably, pupils have been shown to demonstrate improved engagement, academic progress and a greater awareness of issues of the modern world. This research has addressed current criticisms of the key stage three history curriculum. Many history teachers strive to overcome these challenges. My study presents one approach that could improve what is delivered. It indicates a promising future for the subject, one where we make history powerful.

Abigail Milligan is a secondary school history teacher who has worked in schools in the Midlands and London. She completed an MA in Teaching Studies in 2021, which influenced the motivation for this article.

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Notes

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