Decolonising the primary school history curriculum

Transforming approaches to teaching and learning about national identity and nation

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Discussion points

1. #BlackLivesMatter in Education
2. Calls for teaching and learning of ‘Black’ British histories
3. Government denial
4. Decolonising curriculum knowledge
5. Historical Consciousness
6. Diversification of curriculum follows decolonisation
7. Research with trainee-teachers
8. Centring the ‘Black’ British voice in teaching and learning
9. Critical curriculum thinking
10. Opportunities
#BlackLivesMatter in Education (Moncrieffe, 2020)

Government denial

The curriculum is ‘broad, balanced and flexible’ enough i.e.

know and understand the history of these islands as a coherent, chronological narrative, from the earliest times to the present day: how people’s lives have shaped this nation and how Britain has influenced and been influenced by the wider world (DfE, 2013, p.1)
Continued government denial

What the recent Government response did not acknowledge was dominance of Eurocentric (whites-only) historical starting points throughout the statutory content directives and guidance of the national history curriculum. These instruct teachers to ensure that

‘all pupils know and understand’ about ‘how people’s lives have shaped this nation’ with one-dimensional Eurocentric focus on ‘Britain’s settlement by Anglo-Saxons and Scots’; and ‘the Viking and Anglo-Saxon struggle for the Kingdom of England’ (DfE, 2013, p.4)
Examining the issue

Decolonising curriculum knowledge (Moncrieffe, 2020)

‘Epistemic violence’ (Spivak, 1999)

Research evidence speaks of oppression occurring to young minority-ethnic group (non-white) learners in their engagement with dominant Eurocentric history curricula (see Chantiluke, 2018; Charles, 2019; Hawkey and Prior, 2011, Grever, et. al., 2008; Maylor, et al. 2007; Traille, 2007)
"This is an important book at a time when colleagues across education are scrutinising their work, seeking to increase diversity and to build a balanced equitable learning experience for all... I recommend this book to all those training to teach and to those keen to revisit their predisposed assumptions about what should be taught in the primary history curriculum."
—Dame Alison Peacock, Chief Executive, The Chartered College of Teaching, UK

"This book is a timely, and above all, practical guide to the transformation of Britain’s primary school history curriculum. It will be an invaluable tool for teachers and trainers as well as a map for future debates over the importance of history in the making of national identity."
—Professor Paul Gilroy, Institute of Advanced Studies, University College London, UK

This book calls for a reconceptualisation and decolonisation of the Key Stage 2 national history curriculum. The author applies a range of theories in his research with White-British primary school teachers to show how decolonising the history curriculum can generate new knowledge for all, in the face of imposed Eurocentric starting points for teaching and learning in history and dominant white-cultural attitudes in primary school education. Through both narrative and biographical methodologies, the author presents how teaching and learning Black-British history in schools can be achieved, and centres his Black-British identity and minority-ethnic group experience alongside the immigrant Black-Jamaican perspective of his mother to support a framework of critical thinking of curriculum decolonisation. This book illustrates the potential of transformative thinking and action that can be employed as social justice for minority-ethnic group children who are marginalized in their educational development and learning by the dominant discourses of British history, nation building and national identity.

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### Typologies of historical consciousness

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<th><strong>The ‘Traditional’ Type</strong></th>
<th><strong>The ‘Exemplary Type’</strong></th>
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<td>making ‘the past significant and relevant to present actuality and its future extension as a continuity of obligatory cultural life patterns over time’ (Rüsen 2006, p.71).</td>
<td>sees ‘Tradition’ moving ‘within a rather narrow frame of empirical reference’ and ‘viewed as a past recollected with a message or lesson for the present, as didactic’ (Rüsen, 2006, p.73).</td>
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<th><strong>The ‘Critical Type’</strong></th>
<th><strong>The ‘Genetic Type’</strong></th>
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<td>sees history functioning as ‘the tool’ by which the continuity of the traditional and exemplary is ‘ruptured, deconstructed, decoded - so that it loses its power as a source for present-day orientation’ (Rüsen, 2006, p.75).</td>
<td>sees that ‘change is of the essence, and is what gives history its sense’ (Rüsen, 2006, p.76).</td>
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Decolonising the curriculum through critical orientations with historical consciousness offers enlightenment for realising that one-dimensional Eurocentric knowledge has been privileged by the statutory content directives and guidance. Seeing and accepting this can transform thinking about the possibility of broader forms of knowledge for teaching and learning.

Encompassing ‘Black’ British lives and experiences in teaching and learning is a starting point for providing teachers and learners with a curriculum that is more representative of the full range of past experiences.

After engaging in the enlightenment processes of decolonisation emerges the creative possibilities for diversification of curriculum.
I worked with twenty-one white British trainee primary school teachers. I asked them: **What does British history mean to you?**

White-British teachers reproduce white British histories in their thinking about approaches to teaching and learning British history (Moncrieffe, 2020).
Centring the ‘Black’ British voice in teaching and learning

Oral testimonies written first-hand by African-Caribbean (Black British) people concerning their lived experiences from episodes from British history including: migration to the British Isles from Jamaica as part of the Windrush Generation; and cross-cultural encounters through the Brixton uprisings in 1981.

Aiming to see if these oral testimonies could support the trainees, transforming their embedded thoughts about teaching British history in the primary school classroom.
“You have got this chance to contrast”

Diana: ...the Viking raids and invasions. They are quite ... and then Anglo-Saxon laws and justice and invasions, death and resistance and all of those sorts of words might be associated with... with riots and change and stuff like that and so you have got this chance to contrast.

Catherine: It’s all migration I suppose isn’t it?
Diana: Yeah.
Catherine: Well. Like the settlement of Anglo Saxons you can... Like when they (parent and child) are talking about... Brixton Erm... being the ethnic minority... settlement. They settled there. And you could almost say like where did Anglo-Saxons settle...

Diana: Settle (in synchrony with Catherine).
Catherine: ....and you can kind of make relations that way.
“We are going to need to have multicultural perspectives within the curriculum.”

Catherine: On page 4 line 35 where the child says “stood up for their rights”, that’s a kind of freedom of speech.

Anne: Yeah, that’s Britishness. Because it’s about being able to do that; being able to express what you want and protest without having any backlash from the government which I don’t know is always 100% true. But that to me is what is all about living in a country where you should be allowed to say what you want.

Catherine: So maybe... Equality. Yeah maybe the equality side of it. Like: “Why just us?” Like: “Why not that person as well?”

Anne: Yes. You could say that is a protest because you’re being discriminated against and you’re protesting against.

Catherine: Yeah.

Diana: Yeah and I think like if we are going to be talking about ‘tolerance’ and ‘equality’, if we are going to be teaching those British values, then we are going to need to have multicultural perspectives within the curriculum.
Primary school teachers and trainees must be empowered to engage in questions and debate the ‘what’ and the ‘why’ of curriculum implementation in their teaching and learning (Harris, 2020; Moncrieffe, 2020; Moncrieffe & Harris, 2020).
Opportunities for primary school teacher-trainees to explore how the past is related to the present (more recent) giving sense and meaning to our current social multicultural conditions as British people, and future possibilities in our transformations. This fits with the national curriculum aim:
Understand historical concepts such as continuity and change, cause and consequence, similarity, difference, and significance, and use them to make connections, draw contrasts, analyse trends, frame historically valid questions and create their own structured accounts, including written narratives and analyses (DfE, 2013, p.1)
Final thoughts

The central message from my research is that current primary school history curriculum teaching and learning directives and guidance through a dominant white British ethnic nationalist narrative reinforces inequality and division of British people. An improved primary school national history curriculum would give equal focus to broader stories of peoples who by our various passages have come to the British Isles over the ages. Any future revisions to the history curriculum teaching and learning directives and guidance should incorporate the statutory teaching and learning on ‘Black’ British people, for use as a model in presenting the eclectic fluid nature of our national identity, and for reforging the idea of nation in the 21st century.
References


