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Who are you? Who are we? Challenges in Constructing Identities through Studying the Past: Some Findings from the TEACH Report

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Abstract

This paper describes a recent research project undertaken in England for the Historical Association and the Department of Education, which examined the teaching of emotive and controversial issues in history across the age range from 3-19 years. A key finding was the extent to which the teaching of the official history curriculum in schools may be controversial when it impacts on pupils' individual, collective and community identities. Recognition of these challenges is particularly important within increasingly diverse societies. The paper describes some of the dilemmas which teachers face and analyses particular pedagogical strategies and case studies where pupils engage with controversial issues.

The title of this paper tries to encapsulate some of the tensions and complexities in current education; who are you - reminds us of the individual within society, of a personalised learning agenda - meeting individual needs and interests. Yet at the same time, who are we? raises questions such as – what is the place of the individual within a collective identity? Is there a relation between the ‘you’ and the ‘we’? The title also deliberately raises the notion of identities in the plural – there is recognition that an individual may hold several notions of identity - recently endorsed in the Parekh Report (2000) and Curriculum Review on Diversity and Citizenship (DfES: 2007). Similarly, the notion of ‘we’ – of a single national, social, civic identity is contested – in England, particularly since the devolution of the Welsh and Scottish parliaments, there is debate about the nature of Englishness and also of Britishness. In a culturally diverse society, how does the construction of national identity coexist alongside other cultural identifiers? These questions are pertinent with the need for a clearer articulation of common beliefs and values gaining more recognition in English government policy. Two recent reports from the English government (Commission on Integration and Cohesion: 2007, DfES: 2007) have signalled a more explicit stance on promoting shared values to support community cohesion. The Curriculum Review on Diversity specifically explores key questions such as; ‘do we as individuals and as a nation, respect each others’ distinct identities? and argues that ‘education for diversity’ is fundamental if the UK is to have a cohesive society in the 21st century’ (DfES 2007: 16).

In 2006 the Department for Education and Skills commissioned a report from the Historical Association in England to review evidence about learning in history and the impact of history teaching on children in school and the wider community. The Report, entitled Teaching Emotive and Controversial History (TEACH) defined emotive and controversial as, ‘when there is actual or perceived unfairness to people by another individual or group in the past. This may also be the case where there are disparities between what is taught in school history, family/community histories and other histories’

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(Historical Association 2007:3). In this respect the TEACH Report acknowledges the relationship between studying history and identity formation; the tensions between the 'we' and 'I' are embedded within the definition.

This paper draws on reviews of research evidence collated for the TEACH Report and describes some of the interplay between the history curriculum taught in school and other influential sources connected with identity formation – family, peers and media. It concludes with some of the recommendations made by the TEACH Report.

Learning history – puzzling accounts

We all learn in a social context; identities are shaped within the family before children start school and continue to develop as children extend their socialisation with different groups at school and in the different communities to which they belong. In terms of social cognition, how children understand society and their role within it, research indicates that children are heavily reliant on mediated sources of information with the family, peers, media and the school curriculum being the most important sources of information (Barrett and Buchanan-Barrow, 2005).

Ways in which children and students make sense of the history curriculum within their existing understandings and lived experiences has been the subject of several research studies (Von Borries: 2000; Wertsch, 1994; Wertsch and O'Connor: 1994) Researching children's explanations of different historical accounts, the Concepts of History and Teaching Approaches (CHATA) project concludes that children intuitively bring their own everyday knowledge to explain historical events and progression in historical thinking is marked by an increasing recognition of different viewpoints and an awareness that there is no 'fixed story' of the past (Lee and Shemilt: 2004).

Such learning begins from a very early age. Although there are only a few studies, research does suggest that even young children are aware of events surrounding them and that they do begin to develop an awareness of divisions within society and a sense of 'them' and 'us' (Bar-Tal:1996, Connolly et al: 2002). Working in Northern Ireland where there remain divisions between the Protestant and Roman Catholic communities, Connolly argues that by the age of 5 and 6 there is a greater tendency for children to identify with one community and to make prejudiced statements relating to 'the other side' (Connolly et al:2002).

Different versions of history which are presented to students create challenges for learning. Working in the United States, Levstick describes how students have to navigate through a range of competing accounts to reconcile the different anomalies which they find. In particular she notes that ethnically diverse students have problems reconciling their own notions of history learned outside school with the history encountered in history lessons (Levstick: 2000). Barton and McCully's research with secondary students in Northern Ireland (2007) indicates that communities do influence ways in which students make sense and interpret the history which they learn in school. However, students in their study often felt that community histories and popular representations of history were partial, fragmented and politically motivated and looked to school to

provide alternative perspectives and a wider understanding, as revealed in some of the comments from children in their research:

‘People tell you their views, but sometimes they don’t know what they are talking about and then you hear about it for real in school’ (Amy year 10).

‘The teacher can sort of tell you facts, and it’s sort of written in the text book, so you know it must have a bit of truth in it’ (Grace year 9).

‘Well a lot of what you hear outside school is all one- sided. Everything is all to do with filling your head with a one-sided story. But when you come into school you get to hear the other side of the story as well’ (Robert year 10)
(Barton and McCully 2007:3).

How do children make sense of school history?

Teachers are faced with the challenge of mediating different community and family histories within the history curriculum they teach at school. Research reviewed for the TEACH project illuminates some of these challenges.

In her study of the perspectives of students of African-Caribbean descent, Traill (2006) asked both students and their mothers for their views on learning history. Views expressed indicate how important both students and mothers felt history was for promoting a positive self identify and Traill summarises their views that history was for:

- making people feel proud of their ancestors
- giving people a sense of knowing where they came from
- bolstering self esteem and helping academic performance
- helping people ‘fit in’
- teaching lessons of respect and ‘never again’

History was also a key factor in accounting for the way people perceived other people.

However, in practice this is not always achieved. Traill identifies factors occurring in some history lessons which create potential tension. These factors included teachers imposing an identity on peoples studied in the past which students of African- Caribbean heritage rejected or could not identify with. At times teachers could appear insensitive and create stereotypes of black people in history which some students took as personal attacks on themselves. For example, Shaniqua (16) comments;

‘I think every black child should know their history. At my old school they made me feel bad about being black when we did the slave trade. They talked about all the diseases that the slaves had. You should be proud about your history. They made me feel ashamed.’

Similarly, one mother spoke of her child's unhappy experience of learning about the slave trade:

...and they had to do a role play, I think there is (sic) about three black kids in the whole school. They had to do a role play – and her group obviously picked Jodi as a slave. They wanted her to speak in total gibberish which she refused to do.'

The incident so upset Jodi that it effected her behaviour elsewhere in school and Jodi was punished for her bad conduct (Traille 2006: 188).

Statements from questionnaires also indicate that the study of the enslavement and trade of people from Africa was very personal to some black children. Traille's study notes that many students from African Caribbean descent had very negative experiences here and indicates that the issues were threefold including content; pedagogy and social experience. Students were often presented with negative content such as an undue emphasis on slave diseases and very little reference to black resistance to their capture and enslavement or that they were not presented with the issue of slavery as a human phenomenon transcending different societies and races.

Many students also felt excluded by the history they were taught. Over 80% of the students of African- Caribbean descent in Traille's questionnaire sample said they did not feel involved during their history lessons. Ways teachers taught the subject often showed ignorance and lack of sensitivity. For example, Traille quotes a remark from one child that the teacher called the Africans slaves, even before they were enslaved. It was as if the enslaved Africans had never had an existence prior to their capture and enslavement.

The attitude of other children within the class was also important and students within the study observed how they felt when their peers did not take some issues seriously.

'We had to pretend to be slaves. Everyone was black slaves. And some of the kids were like saying, 'oh it's easy to pretend to act black, just act stupid, and stuff like that. And in history lessons people would make jokes like, 'you wouldn't see white people being sick over each other' (Traille 2006: 165).

Students' different backgrounds also provide a filter for students to interpret the history presented to them in the classroom and inevitably this will be different for different groups of students and provoke different reactions. The comment from Nadine, aged 14 of African Caribbean descent illuminates this point:

'Black students did not understand why it was alright to put black people through this. And even though they say slavery has been abolished and everything, it's still going on today. Like black people aren't treated as equally and still have to suffer racism and stuff like that' (Traille:2007a).

Such comments are consonant with Epstein's (1997) research with students in the United States where she noted that African American and European American students had

different views taken from the same history classes. African American students considered learning about individuals and events relating to African American freedom the most significant history they learned whereas European American students' perceptions were that people and events concerning the development of the United States were the most important.

Teachers as mediators of historical knowledge

Traille's research has profound implications for us as educators. Drawing on Shulman's work (1987) various studies have indicated the impact of teachers' own beliefs and values on their classroom practice (John: 1991, Turner-Bisset: 1999, Harnett: 2001). Harnett (2001) also discusses the range of beliefs which primary teachers hold about the purpose of history and how this impacts on how they teach history in the classroom. Implications from this study suggest that children's experiences of learning history may differ widely in the classroom with some teachers being less prepared to confront potentially sensitive issues (Harnett: 2005) and more guidance is required Harnett (2006).

Traille argues that whilst children may be aware of tensions in different accounts, many teachers are unwilling to address controversy. Her data indicate that many students when interviewed mentioned that they did not discuss controversial issues in the classroom. Some students felt disempowered when they felt that their teachers did not recognize the controversial nature of issues which they were discussing. Traille also suggests that teachers may unwittingly alienate children by their use of language and also by the silences which they keep. Teachers and children may not possess the same understandings of terms such as 'imperialism', 'slavery' 'civilised' (Traille 2006).

Barton and McCully's (2007) research from Northern Ireland echoes similar points made by Traille (2006, 2007a, 2007b) and suggests that teachers need to take greater account of students' own starting points when teaching history. Barton and McCully (2007) argue that students value school history in widening their understanding, yet learning alternative views of the past will not necessarily change their basic political allegiances and some may even select aspects of the history curriculum to reinforce their existing prejudices and stereotypes. To counteract such tendencies Barton and McCully advocate that teachers need to activate diversity – to recognize that within a seemingly homogeneous group there might be many different views of the same event and to encourage students to explore them. In addition they argue that teachers do need to be prepared to deal with emotions and difficult issues in the classroom (Barton and McCully:2007).

There are however, varying degrees in which teachers are prepared to engage with controversial issues in the past and some teachers are more proactive than others in actively encouraging the students to engage with different perspectives. Kitson and McCully (2005) characterize different teachers as 'avoiders', 'containers' and 'risk takers'.

The 'avoider' avoids controversy of any kind in the classroom –

'I tell them when they come into my classroom that they're entitled to their own opinion but you know everybody has to listen to what other people say... I say to them you know you have your own version of history, I'm going to tell you the textbook version and then you can draw your conclusions... I can't tell you what's right and wrong, you have to make that decision for yourself'

The 'container' might teach more controversial issues through looking at people's different perspectives and different interpretations of events.

'It's interesting in an integrated school, I love doing those topics... it's a case of , you know, getting them to role play different people and sort of deliberately getting people into the various different perspectives from what they're coming from.'

In contrast, the 'risk taker' makes deliberate decisions to engage in controversial issues within the classroom. They deal with contemporary issues and encourage students to view different interpretations of the past as problematic. 'I would teach different perspectives on the same event fairly explicitly.'

The context of the school where they worked also seemed to affect the extent to which teachers were willing to take risks. Teachers in non selective schools catering for a range of abilities and teachers in schools which were situated in areas where there had been a high degree of conflict were less inclined to take risks. They argued that lower attaining students would not be able to handle controversial topics and history teaching might inadvertently exacerbate prejudices. Secondly in areas where there had been much conflict, teachers were often keen to create calm in the classroom and were unwilling to engage with controversy. The majority of the risk taker teachers were located in integrated schools where there were both Protestant and Roman Catholic students. It would appear therefore that mixed communities served as a catalyst for the more explicit treatment of controversial issues.

Levstick (2000) also drew similar conclusions that issues of racism and discrimination were more likely to arise in schools with ethnically diverse populations and in these schools teachers were more likely to tackle race issues.

Reconciling identities – Developing collective identities.

Throughout this paper case study material has illustrated how history teaching may impact on children's and students' identities and the identities they share with their families and communities. In terms of creating notions of shared identities – who are we – this has been seen to be problematic. However, because it is problematic, this does not mean that the question should not be addressed. The recent curriculum review on Diversity and Citizenship in the UK (DfES: 2007) advocates that a strand to the citizenship curriculum should be developed explicitly entitled 'identity and diversity: living together in the UK' which amongst other issues should include 'the use of

contemporary history in teachers' pedagogy to illuminate thinking about contemporary issues relating to citizenship' (page 12), drawing attention to areas such as;

Understanding that the UK is a 'multi – national' state made up of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Immigration

Commonwealth and legacy of empire

European Union

Extending the franchise (eg the legacy of slavery, universal suffrage, equal opportunities legislation).

A further recommendation by the Curriculum Review is that there should be whole-school exploration of identities, diversity and citizenship. A Who Do We Think We Are Week is advocated for all schools to involve children in exploring these issues – the first of which is to be held at the end of June in 2008 - www.whodowethinkweare.org

Concluding remarks – the TEACH Report findings

Findings from the TEACH Report recognise the importance of addressing both curriculum content and pedagogical practices in the classroom. In turn this has implications for the professional development needs of both teachers and trainees in addressing potentially emotive and sensitive issues in the classroom. Support is needed to develop teachers' knowledge and understanding of issues as well as to promote different ways of learning about them in the classroom. Such professional development needs time; time for practitioners to absorb new ideas and time and support for them to develop their work in the classroom.

The TEACH Report also suggested that there was a need to address emotive and controversial history across the whole school. Such tensions relating to identity construction crossed other subject boundaries and were not always specific to history. There is a need for whole school planning of themes and approaches to ensure that such sensitive issues are taught in a coherent way.

The range and quality of resources available to schools to engage with more controversial or sensitive history is often limited. Textbooks may often promote single accounts of the national story, as contrasted with the multi perspective approaches endorsed by the Council of Europe. Including a range of accounts or perspectives impacts on the content coverage which textbooks authors might be able to include, particularly if they are trying to cover a long period of history in a single publication. Whose perspectives should be fore fronted in textbooks, is a potential source of controversy. Local history sources – museums, record offices, local libraries may all provide useful resources to permit schools to introduce a more varied and relevant curriculum.

The research and evidence base relating to how studying the past impacts on students' identity needs extending. Studies focusing on children's views of history and the impact of their learning in history would be useful. Case studies on ways in which teachers have addressed controversial issues successfully in their classrooms would also support less confident teachers.

Such recommendations need to be seen in the context of education's contribution to children's identity formation and provide indications for future development and work in exploring the questions posed at the beginning of this paper – Who are you? Who are we?

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