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Experiencing the History National Curriculum 1991-2011: Voices of Veteran Teachers

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Experiencing the History National Curriculum 1991-2011: Voices of Veteran Teachers

Abstract

2018 is thirty years since the Educational Reform Act of 1988 introduced a National Curriculum to England, Wales and Northern Ireland. This article questions whether this policy became something to be celebrated, commemorated or ignored. The National Curriculum for History has proved contentious in media and academic circles, but the focus has been on documentation over lived experience. In contrast, this research used an oral history approach to explore how thirteen history teachers perceived, experienced and enacted the National Curriculum in their own classrooms between 1991 and 2011. The findings show this period could be closely identified with increased prescription in the history classroom and, as a corollary, a potential loss of teacher autonomy. The National Curriculum played some part in that process, but after the initial shock, was not perceived as a restrictive force. Changing responses to the National Curriculum over four programmes of study illuminate changing experiences of history teaching from 1991-2011; a period fraught with developments in national educational policy.

Keywords: National Curriculum; history curriculum; prescription; autonomy; history teacher; enacting curriculum; historical content; assessment; change

The year 2018 comes thirty years after the Educational Reform Act that introduced a National Curriculum to England, Wales and Northern Ireland. While this policy may have been renewed by successive political regimes, not all history teachers would be so quick to commemorate this as a milestone in the history of history education. After five Programmes of Study in history education, the policy debates and documents of the National Curriculum have been well

researched.¹ However, three decades since its conception within the Education Reform Act, there is a paucity of research concerning the impact of the National Curriculum in history classrooms across England. While deliberations over details in the documentation have earned many pages of media coverage and academic interest, much less is known about how teachers enacted the curriculum in their classrooms.² This paper provides a historical lens to several contemporary debates. There is growing evidence of recruitment and retention crises in secondary teaching.³ Questions are raised over teacher autonomy and the role of assessment.⁴ The debate over the place and even the nature of knowledge in the history classroom has been reignited; traditional and progressive approaches to teaching the subject are contested among history practitioners in the realms of Twitter and the ‘blogosphere’.⁵ Chronological milestones can be a useful point to take stock and use a historical perspective to consider impact and consequence of policy, not least to listen to the voices of practitioners who have experienced policy in the classroom. There are several further intentions behind this paper. It seeks to explore how teachers enacted the National Curriculum in history classrooms, and how and why this changed over the decades following its introduction. It also seeks to use teacher testimony to explore how teachers conceptualised and mediated the National Curriculum documentation.

¹ Robert Phillips, *History Teaching, Nationhood and the State: A Study in Educational Politics* (London: Cassell, 1998). Robert Guyver, ‘The History Working Group and Beyond: A Case Study in the UK’s History Quarrels’, in *History Wars and the Classroom*, ed. Tony Taylor and Robert Guyver (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2012).

² For example, Laura Clark, ‘Schools Told to Dump Churchill and Hitler from History Lessons’, *MailOnline*, 13 July 2007; Mike Baker, ‘History Study Needs Facts First, Analysis Later’, *The Guardian*, 18 January 2011; Graeme Paton, ‘National Curriculum Being ‘Dumbed Down’’, *The Telegraph*, 4 January 2010.

³ Neil Carmichael, ‘Recruitment and Retention of Teachers: Fifth Report of Session 2016-17’, ed. House of Commons Education Committee (London: HMSO, 2017).

⁴ Yvonne Williams, ‘If Education in 2017 Is So Good, Why Are Teachers Voting with Their Feet?’ in *The Times Educational Supplement* (TES) 24 January 2017.

⁵ See blogs on history education such as <https://clioetcetera.com/>, <https://robertpealhistory.wordpress.com/>, www.andallthat.co.uk (accessed September 21, 2018).

Placing the introduction of the National Curriculum in a broader historical context illuminates the competing approaches to history education merged in the original documentation. Several commentators have pointed to the notable influence of a ‘great tradition’ in the construction of the 1991 History National Curriculum; didactic teaching of a mainly British, political history to mainly passive pupils.⁶ However, the National Curriculum Programme of Study, in its inclusion of evidential understanding, owed just as much to the emergence from the 1970s of an alternative approach to school history which became popular first through the Schools Council Project 13-16 (later Schools History Project [SHP]).⁷ It has been argued that in moving towards SHP, history teaching developed from a ‘technical act for conveying knowledge’ to a ‘cultural act that taught students about warrant, about the nature of understanding and about their own role in making historical knowledge.’⁸ The SHP approach to history teaching was not without its critics, with some arguing students lacked the ‘historical imagination’ to understand the past through sources. Deuchar feared students would be trained to make the statements examiners would be looking for; he claimed the skills-based approach of SHP, therefore, ran the risk of becoming ‘a parlour game’ which ‘distorts and diminishes history.’⁹ A more common attack, coming from the political right, argued a focus on skills undermined the knowledge of the past pupils needed in order to foster a sense of national identity.¹⁰

⁶ Chris Husbands, Alison Kitson, and Anna Pendry, *Understanding History Teaching: Teaching and Learning About the Past in Secondary Schools*, (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2003); Phillips, *History Teaching, Nationhood and the State: A Study in Educational Politics*; David Sylvester, ‘Change and Continuity in History Teaching 1900-93’, in *Teaching History*, ed. Hilary Bourdillon (London: Routledge, 1994)

⁷ SChP became SHP in 1984.

⁸ Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas and Sam Wineburg, *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 3.

⁹ Stewart Deuchar, *History & GCSE History*. (London: Centre for Policy Studies, 1987)

¹⁰ Sydney Wood and Fran Payne, ‘The Scottish School History Curriculum and Issues of National Identity’, *The Curriculum Journal* 10, no. 1 (1999): 107-121

These diverging schools of thought about the nature and purpose of school history led to passionate discussion during the construction of the National Curriculum. Indeed, of all the subjects, it has been suggested history aroused the fiercest controversies and the wildest debate.¹¹ One of the reasons for the contentious nature of the National Curriculum was the freedom teachers in England and Wales had experienced over the curriculum since 1944.¹² Batho, conducting a survey of guidelines for the teaching of history from Local Education Authorities in 1985 concluded the authorities were loath to appear to dictate to the profession.¹³ Nevertheless, from Callaghan's famous 1976 Ruskin speech on accountability onwards, government control was beginning to grow at the expense of teacher autonomy. The Education Reform Act of 1988 was far from popular, with Chitty suggesting 'it attracted more bitter and widespread opposition than any piece of legislation passed since the introduction of the NHS.'¹⁴ With the appointment of a rather traditional History Working Group, the teaching community expressed fears about content and assessment structures which did not prove unfounded. Problems existed from the outset in terms of implementation, particularly in terms of 'the overwhelmingly overloaded content' and 'the difficulties of the assessment stages and targets.'¹⁵ However, Bowe et al. have suggested the very language of 'implementation' was used to make the process of introducing a curriculum appear simple. They argued that in reality there was 'a complex and sophisticated process of accommodation' between the National Curriculum texts and existing assumptions.'¹⁶

¹¹ Martin Booth, 'History', in *The Multicultural Dimension of the National Curriculum*, ed. Anna S. King and Michael J. Reiss, (London: Falmer Press, 1993): 78-90

¹² Gill Helsby, *Changing Teachers' Work* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999); Gill Helsby and Gary McCulloch, eds., *Teachers and the National Curriculum* (London: Cassell, 1997).

¹³ Gordon Batho, 'History: A Most Crucial Element of the Curriculum: LEA Guidelines for the Teaching of History 5-16', *Teaching History*, 42 (1985): 3-4.

¹⁴ Clyde Chitty, *Education Policy in Britain, 3rd edn* (London: PalgraveMacmillan, 2014), 51.

¹⁵ David Cannadine, Jenny Keating and Nicola Sheldon, *The Right Kind of History, Teaching the Past in Twentieth-Century England*, (London: PalgraveMacmillan, 2011), 199.

¹⁶ Richard Bowe, Stephen J. Ball and Anne Gold, *Reforming Education and Changing Schools: Case Studies in Policy Sociology* (London:Routledge, 1992), 88.

Recently, there have been divergent analyses of National Curriculum documentation produced since 1991. Counsell, in her 2011 article on disciplinary knowledge, focused on detailed and specific points of change in the Programmes of Study.¹⁷ She noted the second-order concept of ‘significance’, for example, was present in every National Curriculum since 1995, but only appeared in the Attainment Target in 2008. She suggested this was largely in response to ‘burgeoning teacher discussion’ around the concept.¹⁸ Counsell points to a focus on overviews in the documentation; after the detailed prescription of the 1991 Programme of Study, the 1995 version of the document explicitly required overviews. Counsell also emphasised a move from ‘changes’ in pre-2008 curriculum documentation to ‘change’ from 2008, suggesting this indicated ‘the type of discipline-specific generalisation pupils were to explore’.¹⁹ The article underlined the detailed disciplinary framework explicit within the curriculum documentation. Chapman et al., however, have offered a rather different conclusion. They carried out a content analysis of the different curriculum documents through a quantitative method, counting the number of pages devoted to concepts, content and explicit consideration of aims and purposes in each document.²⁰ Through this analysis, they claimed ‘the key purpose of the curriculum, with the exception of 2008, has been to define the content to be taught.’ These two contrasting analyses of the same group of documents show how important it is to gather evidence from the teacher voice across this period. It is crucial to identify how far teachers have picked up on the minutiae of changes in the documentation articulated by Counsell or how far teachers believed the purpose of the curriculum documentation was to define the content being taught.

¹⁷ Christine Counsell, ‘Disciplinary Knowledge, the Secondary History Curriculum and History Teachers’ Achievements’, *Curriculum Journal* 22, no. 2 (2011): 201-225.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 208.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 215

²⁰ Arthur J. Chapman, Katharine Burn, and Alison Kitson, ‘What is School History For? British Student-Teachers’ Perspectives’, *Arbor: Revista de Ciencia, Pensamiento y Cultura*, 194 (788), Article a443.

Exploring teachers' oral accounts

Twenty interviews were carried out with thirteen experienced history teachers between 2011 and 2016, using an oral history approach to explore change. Interviews were transcribed, coded and set against secondary literature and contemporary policy documentation. The teachers involved in the study taught history in the secondary classroom from 1985 to 2011, with most teaching across the whole period.²¹ This led to a very particular group of teachers, only a small minority of whom had moved into senior leadership positions, but all of whom were passionate about their subject.

The approaches of life history and oral history have much in common in their methods, but they emerge from different roots in sociology and history and have a different purpose. Oral history specifically seeks to contribute something to the historical record. Gardner has made a clear distinction between life history and oral history. While both may use life stories elicited through interview, he argued life history emerges when we 'remain content to listen to the narrative on its own terms, as a constructed and purposeful account'. However, if we wish to take this narrative as a starting point from which to 'probe individual memory for more precise, detailed, or verifiable information about the past,' this approach takes us towards oral history.²² Little critique is offered in this paper for the teachers' voice. The focus is on the perceptions and experiences of teachers themselves and their particular selection of memories from their past experiences. In choosing to explore a historical concept such as change and with an aim

²¹ The group of interviewees consisted of 7 men and 4 women, aged between late 40s and early 60s. Between them, the sample had taught in 24 schools in 13 different local education authorities across the south of England across their careers.

²² Philip Gardner, 'Oral History in Education: Teacher's Memory and Teachers' History', *History of Education* 32, no.2 (2003): 175-188.

to enrich the existing historical record, it was decided to use a specifically oral history approach, seeking witness of events and changes taking place in the classroom, rather than a life history approach which might have focused more on the broader lives of participants themselves.²³ More recently, in this journal, Doney, Freathy and Parker have coined the term ‘oral life history’ to describe an approach including oral interviews, but not seeking to bring about social change. This author is sympathetic to that approach but feels in this research, where the sample was entirely teachers whose voices and experiences had been previously silent, the term ‘oral history’ is appropriate.²⁴

Oral history interviews rarely provide a neat, complete account of chronological events. In this study, for example, teachers proved more familiar with the detail of school and classroom experience than with the minutiae of policy or curriculum documentation. Indeed, an analysis of different sources from this period might lead to a rather different analysis.²⁵ In order to provide a contextual backdrop, a brief documentary analysis was therefore undertaken to provide a frame for the words of participants. The fragmentary nature of interview evidence, coupled with the potential problems of memory suggested a need to set a historical backdrop from alternative sources. This provided a chronological and contextual structure within which to frame the evidence of participants. Each of the four National Curriculum Programmes of Study from across the period was analysed and summarised. An analysis of the initial National Curriculum documents provided an insight into the intentions of policy-makers when the Curriculum first came into play. A comparison between the initial curriculum documents and

²³ Philip Gardner, *Hermeneutics, History and Memory* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010).

²⁴ Jonathan Doney, Stephen G. Parker and Rob Freathy, ‘Enriching the historiography of Religious Education: insights from oral life history’ in *History of Education*, 46, 4 (2017): 436-458.

²⁵ For example, interviews with a different cohort of teachers who underwent teacher education after the inception of the National Curriculum, might give a different account of the period. Also, an analysis of *Teaching History* articles from across the same period may provide a different emphasis.

further versions of the Programme of Study in 1994, 1999 and 2007 enabled an overarching picture to emerge of changes in curriculum documentation across this period.

Experiencing the History National Curriculum

These interviews revealed different responses to the National Curriculum from different groups of teachers. While some teachers feared the level of detail in the Programme of Study, a small minority minimised the impact of the National Curriculum and focused only on changes in assessment. A third group had their own pre-existing professional agenda to realise and feared the National Curriculum would impede those personal goals. For each of these groups, the process of accommodation was different. This paper considers the impact of the National Curriculum on history teachers, suggesting groupings of teachers according to their responses to different versions of the National Curriculum Programme of Study. Exploring detailed interviews with veteran history teachers enables a move away from teachers being treated as a homogenous body in the research literature.

Enacting the first National Curriculum

The National Curriculum for history was introduced for first teaching, to Year 7 only, in September 1991, three years after the 1988 Education Act announced its creation. When the detailed documents arrived in schools they were presented in large white folders with purple print. As the document set out on page 1, ‘The Programmes of Study specify the matters, skills and processes which are required to be taught to students.’²⁶ From the inception of the National

²⁶ DES, ‘History in the National Curriculum (England)’, (London: HMSO, 1991), 1.

Curriculum, the teacher was conceived of as a compliant practitioner who was expected to teach that which was 'required' by the new curriculum mandates.

Among the teachers interviewed for this study, there was a sense the National Curriculum was tolerated, rather than popular. When Patrick was asked how his department had responded to the first version of the National Curriculum he replied, 'Not positively, not positively, we didn't like it, no.' He was consistent with this in the second interview:

None of us liked it. One of our main criticisms of it was, we felt it was being imposed, but we felt all schools weren't the same and therefore the same curriculum wasn't necessarily appropriate for all schools.

Patrick was particularly disturbed by the uniformity of the curriculum. He had created a bespoke history curriculum offer for the female students in his single-sex school when the document was published. He was not ready to concede that they would benefit from learning the same selection of historical topics as every other school in the country.

Emerging from a context of autonomy in choices of content and pedagogy in the 1980s, the introduction of a National Curriculum in 1991 was a major turning-point in terms of prescription. As Allan succinctly put it, 'for the first time schools were being told by government *diktat* what topics to teach in Years 7 to 9.' Patrick elaborated on this:

I can see it as a turning-point. It was the first time really that you had any sort of prescription outside those laid down by the exam boards... I do remember because I was head of department at the time it came in. We had to do an awful lot of planning and an awful lot of work, it created all sorts of issues in resources

Patrick clearly resented the imposition of the National Curriculum in 1991, perhaps particularly because he was so proud of the innovative curriculum he had already developed in his own

department. Other teachers were less passionate in their emotions, but still clearly shocked.

Nicholas remembered the restriction of autonomy:

You could do basically anything you wanted before the National Curriculum. Suddenly, bang, you've got teacher assessment, this is prescribed, you must do this... It was kind of a culture shock.

Simon agreed, emphasising the new division in content between primary school and secondary school history, 'no Greeks, no Vikings, no Egyptians, and it was very prescriptive.' For some teachers, the dislike of the National Curriculum mandates stemmed from the amount of detail prescribed. As Nicholas put it, 'there was always the knowledge the National Curriculum was unworkable.' Although the interviews were carried out twenty years after the initial National Curriculum was introduced, the shock at this imposition still carried in the voices of these teachers.

The National Curriculum Programme of Study set out a detailed list of topics to be taught with five Core Study Units and three Supplementary Study Units.²⁷ A detailed assessment framework was also set out which, by division into 'Attainment Targets' for evidence, causation and interpretations could have had a great deal of impact on the way teachers approached the historical content.²⁸ However, the majority of participants, in talking about how the introduction of the National Curriculum changed their practice, chose to talk about the extent of change in the content they covered. Despite the opportunities for potentially innovative content in the Supplementary Study Units such as 'Black Peoples of the Americas' or 'Mughal India,' the prominent language used to talk about the content of the National Curriculum in 1991 was one of restriction or loss. Diane summarised this view:

²⁷ DES, 'History in the National Curriculum (England)'.

²⁸ Ibid.

I would say the National Curriculum has restricted it because you had far more choice over picking what you did [before it was introduced].

Several teachers chose to highlight, like Simon, the shift of several ancient civilisations to the primary school history curriculum. Alison said:

We used to do ancient civilisations for Year 7, you know, Ancient Greece, Ancient Egypt... Ancient Rome got cut down to just Ancient Rome. We used to spend some time looking at the Celts and Celtic Britain and that's gone so we just do a 'what is history?' course, which we put together, then we go into Ancient Rome, Roman Britain, and then there's a gap between the Black Death and 1485 that we don't cover at all.

Although the list of optional topics in the Key Stage 3 Programme of Study was actually quite wide-ranging (and certainly more wide-ranging than the previous schemes of work these teachers had described), most of the teachers interviewed chose to remember the introduction of the National Curriculum as a period of limitation.²⁹

When the teachers interviewed had talked about teaching experiences during the 1970s and 1980s, time restrictions were not mentioned as an issue. Suddenly, for the teachers in the sample, the implementation of the National Curriculum led to a feeling there wasn't enough time to fit everything in. When Alison was asked why she ended local history and visits to local churches after 1991 she replied:

Because the National Curriculum doesn't really allow it and you have to race to get through things. If you're lucky you can give them a sense of chronology before you miss out a couple of hundred years and whizz on to the [next thing].

Diane gave a similar impression, that once the National Curriculum arrived, she felt a need to comply and fit everything in:

²⁹ There were nineteen supplementary study units included in the original Key Stage 3 Programme of Study. These included Castles and Cathedrals, 1066-1500; Culture and society in Ireland from early times to the beginning of the twentieth century; The Neolithic Revolution and Black Peoples of the Americas: 16th to early 20th centuries.

Well, when we started. .. I can remember when I first started teaching [in 1978] I used to miss great bits out if I didn't think it would be that interesting. Whereas you can't now. You go through it all regardless.

If 'it' can be taken to refer to the National Curriculum it is clear Diane felt she had more autonomy to select and omit content before 1991. Nicholas was quite explicit about not being able to fit the demands of the curriculum into the time allocated for it. He recalled:

You would have needed to still be teaching the National Curriculum in Year 10 to get to whatever it was at the other end.

The first version of the National Curriculum included more content than the History Working Group initially intended. The Programme of Study was designed for history as a compulsory subject until the age of 16.³⁰ The last-minute decision to make history optional after 14 put new pressures on content-coverage for the history community and that pressure was remembered by many of the history teachers interviewed, twenty years later.

While a general disgruntlement with the implementation was shared among all the teachers interviewed, with unanimous concerns over limitations of time and complexities of assessment, there was a diversity in how the teachers responded to those challenges. Several possible groups can tentatively be identified here. Alison and Diane form the first group, compliant with the letter of the curriculum and therefore frustrated. The extracts from interviews above include the phrases 'you can't now' and 'the National Curriculum doesn't really allow it.' The curriculum became the reason behind limitations in practice. A second group could tentatively be identified in Mark, Edward and Laura. They each downplayed the impact of the National Curriculum on their teaching. Mark said:

³⁰ Cannadine, Keating and Sheldon, *The Right Kind of History*, 199.

I wasn't opposed to the National Curriculum as such, I didn't have any kind of great concerns about what it did and I thought it was very well sort of prepared in lots of ways... I mean, there's no question that we haven't done it, we haven't subverted the National Curriculum or anything like that.

Edward also downplayed the impact of the policy:

In terms of content, it wasn't like some people predicted that we were teaching all this amazing stuff pre-National Curriculum and then suddenly we have to do what we're told... I think they do need the history of the British Isles, so we were always teaching that anyway.

A sense of continuity emerges here among these teachers; the National Curriculum did not have a fundamental impact on teaching.

There was, however, a third group of teachers. Their practice was not fundamentally changed by the introduction of the National Curriculum, but they were somehow more vociferous in their concerns and claimed to be more proactive in mediating the curriculum to suit their personal agenda. Allan, Patrick and William all spoke about how prescriptive they felt the National Curriculum was, and yet then continued to describe how they found a way to accommodate the topics they wanted to teach. At first, Allan was concerned his department could no longer teach the Aztecs as the topic had moved to the primary school curriculum. He recalled:

We always did a topic on European voyages of exploration. And then we did a unit looking at the impact of the arrival of Europeans in a certain part of the world and the topic we always did here had some very good resources was Cortes and the Aztecs – which of course the National Curriculum made a Key Stage 2 topic.

Instead of letting this directive restrict the curriculum offer, Allan found another, similar topic in the Incas and gradually planned that civilization into schemes of work. Allan had forged a compromise between the restrictions of the National Curriculum and his own definitions of school history. It may be something about the way Allan framed his memories of this period,

but unlike Alison and Diane in the first group, he wasn't going to let his frustrations with the new curriculum stand in the geographic range of historical content he believed was important.

Patrick and William provided similar examples of accommodation, finding ways to continue topics they were passionate about before 1991. Patrick believed his previous bespoke schemes of work, focusing in particular on women's history, were curtailed by the imposition of the National Curriculum. He recalled:

When it first came in, it specified what topics you had to teach and it specified the content that had to be included, and it [the previous integration of women's history] didn't really fit. I think we still did do a bit of the suffragettes, but also when you had to get through so much more, you couldn't fit everything in. I felt at the time of the National Curriculum we actually lost quite a lot of good teaching because we had topics and we had schemes of work that worked really, really well and got the students really engaged and it might be quite a long-term thing. With the National Curriculum you had to do that topic in three lessons...we had no choice but to comply really, but ...we tried to bend it as much as we could to what we wanted.

Patrick did display frustration here, and a reluctant compliance but took a step further than Alison and Diane in suggesting his department 'bent' or mediated the curriculum to suit their own agenda. Unlike Alison and Diane, he was not passively accepting of limitations. Although the policy was seen as prescriptive, it was possible to be pliant in response to that policy. Patrick and his department had the space, autonomy and confidence to use existing materials and ideas within the framework of the new curriculum.

When the National Curriculum was introduced in 1991, William was teaching in a multi-cultural setting and, like Patrick, was keen the curriculum taught in his department should reflect the makeup of the school cohort in order to heighten engagement and provide a more rigorous historical experience. By 1991 he had already developed a series of lessons teaching

African history. He was concerned about the prescription in content from the National Curriculum, but seemed to have been able to navigate a way through it. He reminisced:

I remember with the National Curriculum coming out, I remember fretting for months thinking, are they going to destroy the opportunity of doing this multicultural history? Because there was all sorts of talk that this was going to happen and what, what it was going to be like... and being so relieved when the report came out because they had a unit, Black peoples of the Americas. I'm thinking OK. And it's not so prescriptive that you can't build in African empires here as well as slavery, you can do that. And so one of the first things I did at S— when I went there... was I started with Year 9. I did a unit on Black peoples from Africa to America and it started with the empire of Ghana and Mali, and then we went into the slave triangle and went to the Caribbean and so forth.

The teaching of African empires was something William felt passionately about. Here he saw the opportunity to squeeze African history into a relevant supplementary unit. Like Patrick, he had some initial anxiety about the level of prescription but found a way to teach the topics that were important to him. Somehow, he had the professional confidence to make that decision.

While there was an overarching sense of discontent and frustration concerning the imposition of the National Curriculum, teachers appear to have responded in different ways. Where Alison and Diane were compliant and shared their frustrations, teachers such as Allan, Patrick and William chose to share a more confident narrative of how, despite their frustrations, they had managed to accommodate their own agenda within the constrictions of the National Curriculum. The teachers in these interviews were, however, united in choosing to talk about the impact of the National Curriculum on the content they taught, rather than on their approach to teaching the subject.³¹

³¹ In the full doctoral research there were many conversations about changes in teaching approach, but these were more associated with the influence of SHP and the move from O Level to GCSE examinations than the impact of the National Curriculum.

Further Programmes of Study 1994-2008

The Dearing Review of the National Curriculum, published in 1995, for first teaching to all three years of Key Stage 3 in September 1995, led to less prescribed content but such content was still expected to be taught in broadly chronological order.³² From 2000 the Programme of Study for History was more flexible and specifically encouraged the use of overview and depth to cover a range of content.³³ In their 2003 review of eight history departments, Husbands, Kitson and Pendry found the 2000 version of the National Curriculum was met with a mixed, though broadly positive response in schools as prescription was reduced and departments and teachers were left to interpret terms like ‘major features’ and ‘significant events’ as they saw fit.³⁴ While a thematic approach was theoretically possible from 2000, from 2008 this approach to the past was strongly encouraged in the National Curriculum Programme of Study.³⁵ The 2007 document suggested, ‘The study of history should be taught through a combination of overview, thematic and depth studies.’³⁶ It continued in this broad and overarching style:

The choice of content should ensure that all students can identify and understand the major events, changes and developments in British, European and world history covering at least the medieval, early modern, industrial and twentieth-century periods.

The only events specified and therefore given some sort of compulsory status were:

The nature and impact of the two world wars and the Holocaust, and the role of European and international institutions in resolving conflicts.³⁷

Summaries of the different Programmes of Study can be seen in Table 1.

³² DFE, ‘History in the National Curriculum’ (London: HMSO, 1995)

³³ DFEE/QCA, ‘The National Curriculum for England: History.’ (London, 1999)

³⁴ Husbands, Kitson and Pendry, *Understanding History Teaching*, 99.

³⁵ QCA, ‘History Programme of Study: Key Stage 3,’ (London, QCA, 2007).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 115.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 116.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Between 1991 and 1995, when the second version of the Programme of Study was published, there were significant changes to the status of history as a school subject. While the original intention at the inception of the National Curriculum was for history to be compulsory to 16, from 1991 it became optional from the age of 14. From the original intention for statutory testing of all subjects at 14, this was reduced to a focus on English, mathematics and science from 1993.³⁸ This significantly reduced the pressure on history teachers as they no longer had to prepare Key Stage 3 pupils for external assessment.

The teachers interviewed shared memories of a definite sense of relief around the time the second Programme of Study was introduced. As Nicholas said:

The Roman Empire went ... I think the government said, well you haven't got to do that any more.

Patrick spoke of a similar experience:

they started to realise I think themselves it was over-prescriptive, and once you got much broader headings it was then much easier, you could then go back to what, your own way if you like.

Conversations with teachers about this period in the early 1990s once again seemed to centre round prescription of content. While Dearing brought less detail in the content prescribed, there was in some, comparative way, a more prominent place for the 'Key Elements.' In this second Programme of Study, they were consolidated on one page and therefore, demonstrated a sharp

³⁸ Cannadine, Keating and Sheldon, *The Right Kind of History*, 199-200.

move away from 45 statement Level Descriptors as featured in the original version. The term ‘Key Elements’, however, was not used by any of the teachers interviewed.

A sense emerged from the interviews that the National Curriculum documentation became less relevant to practice from the 1994 Dearing review onwards. As Mark said, they weren’t intentionally ‘subverting’ it, but neither were many of the teachers particularly aware of the more subtle changes in the 2000 and 2008 Programmes of Study highlighted by Counsell among others.³⁹ As the policy itself became less restrictive between 1995 and 2008, giving more freedom for planning according to individual school contexts, this freedom did not always translate into practitioner practice. As Edward put it, talking about all the different versions of the Programme of Study since 1991:

Well, our curriculum, our schemes of work haven’t particularly changed in that time...if something’s not broke, I don’t fix it.

Allan supported this, suggesting a reason why close attention to the detail of the National Curriculum was not necessarily the focus of every teacher. Asked whether later iterations of the Programme of Study had affected teaching in his department, he replied:

Not really, apart from reassurance that the content is being freed up a bit and it’s a bit more flexible and there isn’t going to be a National Curriculum police slinging history teachers in jail for not having covered an element of the Programmes of Study. I mean I suppose, to be fair, in a school like this our major focus and our major concern has always been A-level and GCSE, so sticking to the exact letter of what the National Curriculum prescribes has always been lower down on our list of priorities.

Beyond the earliest versions of the National Curriculum, however, what was remarkable about the interviews with the teachers was the lack of weight placed on changing versions of the National Curriculum as an agent for change in their practice. The removal of external

³⁹ Counsell, ‘Disciplinary knowledge for all’, 201-225.

assessment at the end of Key Stage 3 may have borne some relation to this process of prioritisation.

Nicholas, in referring to the lack of Ofsted focus on curriculum coverage in school, supported Allan's views that the National Curriculum had become less important:

Oh crikey, we don't take any regard to the National Curriculum so I mean we...well, there are whole lumps that are not taught. We don't do, oh I can't think what we don't do, but it's what's left I think is probably a better one to look at....We've been Ofsted'd I think four times now, nobody has ever asked me about the National Curriculum.

Nicholas was speaking in 2011 after a substantial curriculum revision in his department a few years earlier. When he referred to 'huge lumps that are not taught' it is difficult to know to what he is referring as there was little substantive content detailed in the 2007 Programme of Study. The language, however, 'there are whole lumps that are not taught,' suggested that Nicholas, despite being head of department, was unfamiliar with the very flexible and open 2008 National Curriculum Programme of Study. Mark gave a similar impression when he spoke of 'some of these topics you feel you've got to do just for form's sake, really.' Indeed, for the teachers in this research, the later changes to the National Curriculum played little part in their presented narratives of change beyond 1995.

Freeing up the Curriculum 2008—2011

From 2008, the government encouraged schools to be more 'flexible' in their approaches to the National Curriculum, especially in how 'foundation subjects' such as history were approached. Here, three different 'alternative' approaches to the curriculum will be explored. First Diane, whose school introduced a competence-based curriculum in Year 7. Second, Dana,

who initiated the development of a cross-curricular *Opening Minds* programme for Year 7. Third, Patrick who passed comment on similar developments in his own school.⁴⁰

Diane, speaking in 2009, was the least positive of the three teachers concerning this initiative, but the requirements of the particular course were imposed on her by the senior management of the school. When asked to teach history through a ‘competence-based’ curriculum from 2006, there wasn’t significant change in Diane’s teaching approach, possibly because she was resisting the original intentions of the programme. Interviewed in 2009, she recalled:

History was expected to be just a vehicle for the skills... I just taught the same topics I was teaching and I’m afraid I just taught it in the same way. I mean, the children’s thinking, because they do all this thinking skills.... And I was, didn’t you expect the children to think before? Were they just cabbages sitting there?

It is noticeable that when the National Curriculum was brought in Diane was compliant, but this prescription at school level was resented and resisted. She resigned from the school in 2011, shortly after this interview took place, and found a history teaching role in a selective school with a more traditional approach to the curriculum.

The other two teachers involved in an ‘alternative’ curriculum were more positive about the experience. Dana was unique among the history teachers interviewed in volunteering to set up a project-based learning scheme in 2006. What others saw as prescriptive, intrusive and academically questionable, Dana seems to have embraced.⁴¹ She recalled:

⁴⁰ See this website for further details of competence-based curricula and their impact in the history classroom Historical Association, <http://www.history.org.uk/secondary/categories/488/resource/2795/skills-based-curriculum>.

⁴¹ This positive attitude toward the cross-curricular approach could relate to Dana’s American, social sciences teacher training.

We brought in *Opening Minds*⁴² a few years back, the former head of geography and I... it's not just project-based learning but it's all about enterprise skills and that sort of thing, and evaluating your work and, what type of learner you are. So that's all come into the history part.

A more detailed description of one of the projects revealed what she valued about the scheme:

My present Year 10s were part of the guinea pig group, and I will show to anybody the best film I have ever seen kids make on transportation to Australia. Its puppets, finger puppets, and it is absolutely brilliant. And that was *Opening Minds* because it gave them the bottle to actually try it.

One benefit Dana may have secured for her students through this cross-curricular approach was more time to focus on historical topics. The sacrifice, however, may have been in the broader, disciplinary history described in the National Curriculum. After several years of creativity with the *Opening Minds* curriculum, Dana and her colleagues seem to have come to the same conclusion:

The *Opening Minds* is gone because I said to them I cannot achieve what you want me to achieve... how can I get those skills, and at the same time, I've got to get these kids interested.

Dana's school ended this curriculum experiment in 2011. This coincided with the introduction of the English Baccalaureate by the coalition government, an accountability metric which gave a higher priority to history and geography GCSE grades. Patrick described a completely cross-curricular approach designed within his particular school where teachers collaboratively planned and taught to big topics such as 'Freedom.' By 2011, however, he had reached a similar conclusion to Dana, that such approaches did not prepare students suitably for the demands of GCSE History.

⁴² RSA, <http://www.rsaopeningminds.org.uk/about-rsa-openingminds/> (accessed September 21, 2018).

As the 2008 Programme of Study itself provided more freedom, there seemed to be less curriculum time actually available to the history teachers in school, perhaps reflecting the lower status of the subject on the whole-school curriculum at this point in time. There was a growing trend towards the ‘three-year GCSE’ in the late 2000s and early 2010s, where more time was spent on selected external examination specifications and less on the broader range of Key Stage 3 subjects. In the 2011 Historical Association survey, 11.7% of respondents identified this practice in their school. By 2015 it was practice in ‘around a third of schools.’⁴³ As Burn and Harris put it, this policy ‘automatically reduced by a third the time that is allocated to history for all those young people who choose not to continue with the subject at GCSE.’⁴⁴ As a result of this policy, Edward and Alison found themselves having to crunch three-year schemes of work into two. Edward explained:

There’s a different, not accelerated curriculum. History and geography are compulsory in Year 7 and 8, pupils opt to do it in Year 9, so two-year National Curriculum Year 7 and 8, where we have to cover as much as we can.

Alison, teaching in the same department as Edward, substantiated this description:

If the children don’t do history in Year 9 then they don’t do any modern history at all... We do give them home learning projects...so we cover our backs by making the third term’s home learning project a twentieth-century project. But otherwise, you reduce what we do for Tudors and Stuarts so much that again it becomes a mishmash.

Edward and Alison were teaching history in a challenging school context in the late 2000s. One school-level decision that had a major impact on the status of history in the school was the decision to move to a two-year Key Stage 3. Both of the history teachers interviewed from the department were furious about this decision. With the reduced time-scale for teaching the subject, they struggled to adapt and reduce the schemes of work. As a result, some pupils would

⁴³ Katharine Burn and Richard Harris, ‘Why Do You Keep Asking the Same Questions? Tracking the Health of History in England’s Secondary Schools,’ *Teaching History*, 163 (2016): 55.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

have completed their history education chronologically before the industrial revolution, not studying any part of the nineteenth or twentieth century in a secondary school history lesson.

Dana faced similar challenges, but approached the challenge of limited time in a more innovative fashion, deciding to move her department towards a thematic approach, a suggestion made in the 2008 Programme of Study. Dana recalled:

We did [teach thematically] with Year 8 because of being crunched down to such a little bit of time. So, we went with the idea of change in the power of the king, change in the power of the people. So, we're kind of walking through, so we started with the Normans, and then we went to the Tudors, and then we go into the Victorians... I don't like it that much but...I just think kids lose chronology.

Dana identified a problem in the limited time her Year 8 had to understand a broad range of history. Unlike Edward and Alison, however, she chose to change schemes of work and innovate with a thematic approach in an attempt to solve this 'chronology problem'.

Once again, a range of reactions can be identified in teachers who were asked to respond to the challenge of a more flexible curriculum from 2008 onwards. However, although the National Curriculum suggested such changes, the school approach of limiting National Curriculum History to two years rather than the intended three was a key point. In the race for 'raising standards' and the prioritisation of GCSE grades, the demands of the National Curriculum Programme of Study for History were being ignored by senior leaders and teachers were struggling to afford the curriculum the time it deserved.

Assessment in the National Curriculum

A ground-breaking part of the National Curriculum in 1991 was the progression model built-in through the Attainment Targets. The initial intention was for uniform national tests in every subject for students aged 7, 11 and 14. Bowe and Ball found, in talking to teachers around this time that ‘fear, loathing and dread’ were the normal reactions to this plan.⁴⁵ By 1993 it was decided national tests would be limited to the ‘core’ subjects of English, maths and science. History, therefore, was left with this complex system of assessment by Attainment Targets, linked to particular second-order concepts and processes. The Dearing review of 1994 saw a simplification of this model as the Attainment Targets were simplified to one set of nine ‘Level Descriptors.’⁴⁶ The expectation was that students would be given a Level at the end of a key stage, so for secondary students, this would just be at the age of 14, at the end of Key Stage 3. The 2000 version of the Programme of Study still declared ‘the level descriptors provide the basis for making judgements about students’ performance at the end of key stages.’ The final development for assessment within the History National Curriculum document was a re-worded Attainment Target in 2008. History assessment at Key Stage 3 was internally governed within schools, without external moderation or comparison.

The reality of teacher experience of assessment seems to have diverged increasingly from the government-published policy across this period, particularly in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The teachers interviewed rarely chose to speak about methods of assessment early in their career. This was in contrast to descriptions of more recent practice, where assessment often dominated the interview discourse.

⁴⁵ Bowe, Ball and Gold, *Reforming Education and Changing Schools*, 101-2.

⁴⁶ DFE.

The teachers interviewed for this research did not have fond memories of the first set of assessment criteria in the original National Curriculum. Edward put it bluntly: ‘when they first came out they were just, absolutely appalling.’ Simon remembered some of the challenges in following this policy:

I think we probably had quite a few difficulties, shall we say, assessing all the different statements and all the different Attainment Targets because there were three of them.

In 1995 a new version of the Programme of Study was launched, bringing the three Attainment Targets into one, with nine different Level Descriptors. At this point, it appeared to be common practice across the interviewees to give one ‘Level’ at the end of Year 9, in alignment with the policy. Laura described some of the challenges of making an accurate judgement:

You were looking at such a wide range of skills, and you’re trying to come up.... with this broad fit, or best fit of where they are, and you may well find students who are really, really good at one element but very weak at another so yeah, I think that was difficult.

Dana remembered the moderation process used in the late 1990s:

I can remember that we only really reported Year 9, obviously, and when I think about how we did that, my God what would we do today? We’d literally sit there with the end of year exam and say, if they have achieved this, then this has to be a Level 6, and literally had a broadsheet, all handwritten and drew the line across and said these are your Level 7s, they’ve got this, this is your Level 6s, it was really, really, I wouldn’t say hit and miss because there was, there was some system to it... You worked on your gut, on your gut feeling, you knew your kids.

Teachers were working together, within departments, and making judgements about what Level was appropriate for which student. The quotation above suggests judgements were based on an end of year exam, but here, and in other schools, additional classwork would also have been taken into account. Nicholas substantiated this view:

I remember keeping portfolios of work, top, middle and bottom that we had put in filing cabinets ready for Ofsted to come see what we were doing.

There were government publications to support such judgements.⁴⁷ However, the very purpose of assessment in schools was beginning to change towards the end of the 1990s as New Labour brought in a renewed focus on accountability and ‘raising standards’.⁴⁸ Nicholas, above, provided a sense of this development. He wasn’t keeping portfolios of work in filing cabinets so that the department could reference them for future moderation judgements. He was keeping the work ‘ready for Ofsted.’

At this point in time practice seems to have started diverging from written policy. At some point around the turn of the century, teachers moved from giving students one ‘Level’ at the end of Key Stage 3, as stated on the curriculum documentation, to marking several pieces of work a year (if not all pieces of work) according to the same Level Descriptors. The very broad, generalised Level Descriptors were not intended for such use. Burnham and Brown wrote a *Teaching History* article in 2004 encouraging history teachers to stand up against pressures for frequent ‘levelled assessment’ from senior leaders.⁴⁹ Lee and Shemilt also published a stinging rebuke to such practice, arguing assessment should provide ‘a scaffold, not a cage.’⁵⁰ Simon gave examples of this in his practice:

For about the last 10 or 12 years probably it’s been part of the assessment. The enquiry question, why did William win the Battle of Hastings? Or, how effective was the Roman army? You know, those enquiry-type questions, and then you assess the children based on National Curriculum Levels as a result of that.

⁴⁷ Substantial materials were produced to help teachers make such judgements e.g. SCAA, *Exemplification of Standards in History: Key Stage 3*, (London: School Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 1996). None of the teachers interviewed made reference to such documents.

⁴⁸ Stephen J. Ball et al., ‘Assessment Technologies in Schools: ‘Deliverology’ and the ‘Play of Dominations’’, *Research Papers in Education* 27, no. 5 (2012): 513-33

⁴⁹ Sally Burnham and Geraint Brown, ‘Assessment without Level Descriptions’, *Teaching History*, 115 (2004): 5-15.

⁵⁰ Peter J. Lee and Denis Shemilt, ‘A Scaffold, Not a Cage: Progression and Progression Models in History’, *Teaching History*, 113 (2003), 13-23.

Here, Simon described students writing a series of essays across the school year, in response to a series of overarching enquiry questions. This was seen as good practice at the time, based on articles in *Teaching History* and specimen schemes of work produced by the government.⁵¹ The difference was that Simon was using the longer pieces of work produced by students in response to such questions as assessments to be graded with a National Curriculum Level Descriptor. This was not the policy of the National Curriculum, which still clearly stated in 2000, ‘level descriptions provide the basis for making judgements about students’ performance at the end of Key Stages.’⁵²

For several of the teachers interviewed, however, this regular use of Level Descriptors to inform marking throughout Key Stage 3 was generally seen as a positive approach. Mark added:

It’s not as if, you know, what was happening years ago is wrong, but I suspect that not all students understood how to improve on a kind of ladder of accessibility thing. And I think the fact that they have now got more idea about what to do, well has encouraged numbers.⁵³

As Lee and Shemilt had pointed out though, this potential scaffold could easily become a restrictive cage.⁵⁴ A new version of the Attainment Target published in the 2008 curriculum documentation did not seem to have a great deal of impact on the teachers interviewed. Edward recalled:

The Ofsted guy two years ago when he saw this [student friendly Level worksheets] said, oh you’re using the old ones, we went and looked on the National Curriculum and we couldn’t tell any difference between the old and new ones.

⁵¹ M. Riley, ‘Into the Key Stage 3 History Garden: Choosing and Planting Your Enquiry Questions,’ *Teaching History*, 99 (2000).

⁵² DfEE/ QCA, ‘The National Curriculum for England: History’ (2000).

⁵³ Here ‘numbers’ refers to the number of students opting to take History GCSE at the end of Year 9.

⁵⁴ Lee and Shemilt., ‘A Scaffold, Not a Cage’.

However, many of the teachers described taking this use of the Attainment Target one step further. School assessment and data policies began to demand a ‘split Level’ several times a year, using 4a, 4b and 4c to denote progress between Level Descriptors. While this precise marking may have enabled a sense of progression, it may not have reflected the complexity of developing historical understanding. As Counsell put it in a *Teaching History* editorial, responding to this practice in 2004:

Those who then advocated dividing up Levels horizontally as well as vertically (level 5a, 5b, 5c) no doubt felt they were creating more ‘precise’ instruments (but to technicise Levels deliberately designed to be *imprecise* renders the judgements made against them an inevitable lie.)⁵⁵

By 2011, regular ‘levelled assessment’ had become a core part of assessment for many of the teachers interviewed. Some teachers admitted they were using ‘split-levels’ as part of the performativity game. Richard described the practice in his school:

The whole school system here is that every boy has a termly assessment and there’s a grade that goes onto the database so we track them academically, very closely... To be perfectly honest with you, I don’t really understand it to be honest... I speak to the head of geography all the time because he’s a mate of mine. So, I said, so what’s the difference between a 6b and 6c apart from the fact that 6b is his target grade.... Say for example the computer’s down, can you remember what the kids’ grades are, what you’re actually going to give, if you saw that piece of work without knowing what the target grade was, what would you give it?

Richard appeared disillusioned with this imposed system, especially as it made little sense for helping students progress in his subject, but he appeared to find it easier to ‘play the game’ and input the appropriate Levels. He was not the only one to take that approach. Nicholas shared a recent conversation with the ‘data manager’ in his school.

I had a big argument last week, the poor lady, she was a nice woman. She’s fully employed now, just to be in charge of the Levels and target grades... I put the sub-level on there... so they’re supposed to go up... two sub-levels every [year] and she was complaining that the way I’d originally done it was, that that kid wasn’t going to

⁵⁵ Christine Counsell, ‘Editorial’, *Teaching History*, 115 (2004): 2

get that [target] Level. I said, yes they will. She said why? Because I'll give them the Level, and, she says you can't do that. You've got to take it seriously. I said why?

This resistance to a whole-school assessment policy was much stronger and more blatant than any reaction to national policies during this period.

Conclusion

The testimony of these thirteen teachers provides an insight into the way the National Curriculum, in history at least, has been mediated and enacted over the past thirty years since its inception in 1988. For this group of teachers, albeit limited to a certain generation, the discourse around the subject of the National Curriculum tended to be discourse around historical content. This was particularly true of the first inception of the National Curriculum in 1991, although some teachers retained a language of restriction and limitation in speaking of the curriculum documentation far later than the increasingly free documents prescribed. This group of teachers did not speak of 'key elements' or 'key concepts' or 'key processes' as detailed in the curriculum documentation over time (unless they were speaking about assessment). Although other parts of the interviews did show a shift for some teachers in their approach to teaching history and the move to history as a form of knowledge, this was much more likely to be associated with the move the GCSE from O-level or the demands of GCSE teaching, rather than the demands of National Curriculum documentation. This, therefore, suggests for this veteran group of teachers at least, there was no evidence they had picked up on the minutiae of changes in the curriculum documentation laid out by Counsell. Rather, they were more likely to see the purpose of the National Curriculum documentation as to define the content to be taught.

As Bowe and Ball pointed out thirty years ago, there was a ‘complex and sophisticated process of accommodation between National Curriculum texts and existing assumptions’ and the evidence provided by these teachers more recently supported this claim. However, the interviews suggest such complexity existed on several different levels. This opportunity to explore detailed interviews with history teachers about how their teaching changed over the course of a substantial period of time, shows the need to move away from history teachers being treated as a homogenous body, as it tends to be in the research literature. It is also necessary to consider further the background of the teacher, their context and their ability to enact a curriculum meeting their own agenda and benefiting the history education of their pupils. Allan, Patrick and William all showed examples of mediating the curriculum in this way. There are further complexities to consider such as the constraining effect of other policies which could lead to a distortion of curriculum intentions. For example, the intensified focus on assessment across this thirty year period as part of the ‘raising standards agenda’ led to changes in the way history was taught and assessed which were outside the intention of the curriculum documentation.

This paper provides a historical lens to several contemporary debates. In terms of recruitment and retention, the focus on assessment can be seen to have contributed to a negative experience in the classroom for several of the teachers interviewed. The same could be said for imposed policies from within the school, such as the move to a two-year Key Stage 3 at the expense of a broad experience of the history curriculum for all students, or the imposition of a ‘skills-based curriculum’ that several of these veteran history teachers experienced. Indeed, the testimony of these teachers would suggest knowledge and historical content retained a crucial place in their discourse and planning throughout the period. It was only the intense focus on assessment and in particular, the language of the National Curriculum Level Descriptors that

particularly shifted discourse towards assessment, perhaps at the expense of a focus on substantive content.

It is crucial to add that a different sample of history teachers, with different experiences, could have provided a different narrative of experiences with the National Curriculum. However, it is vital to listen to the voices of experienced teachers and take time to explore longer-term perspectives on recent initiatives. There is a need to acknowledge the complexities within teaching communities and identify groups of teachers who have managed to mediate generic policies within their own personal agenda for rigorous history teaching. Lastly, there is a need to encourage the professional and disciplinary confidence and language necessary to enact curriculum and other policies in a way that benefits the historical understanding of the next generation of secondary school students.