

INFLUENCE OF PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS' KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF HISTORY ON CURRICULUM PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION

Mr. Anoop Kumar Yadav
Assistant Professor
Mata Jiyo Devi College of Education, Hissar

ABSTRACT

The article reviews different views of school history and questions the extent to which official policy is implemented in schools and classrooms. It suggests that the origins of many of the beliefs which primary teachers hold in relation to history are located within their own experiences of learning history and their family backgrounds and interests. Ways in which these beliefs about history impact on teachers' curriculum decision making are explored through individual case studies. In terms of classroom practice, the article explores the relationship between teachers' historical knowledge and understanding and their pedagogical beliefs about children's learning. In the discussion, the important mediating influence of teachers in implementing policy is acknowledged and issues for further consideration are raised.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past hundred years shifts in the rationale for teaching history in schools have occurred. As the present becomes the past, changes arise in beliefs about what constitutes history and what a study of the past should involve. In the early years of the twentieth century, history was regarded as an important subject for moral training, as, 'the lives of great men and women, carefully selected from all stations of life, will furnish the most impressive examples of obedience, loyalty, courage, strenuous effort, serviceableness, indeed of all the qualities which make for good citizenship. It could be argued that as the influence of the church over education declined, historical stories were providing exemplars of moral behaviours for children to emulate. Straightforward stories about famous characters (mainly men) and their contributions to the nation's and empire's well being were advocated. The slaughter of the First World War tempered strong nationalistic histories, and the importance of learning about other countries' histories and the work of the League of Nations was emphasised in the 1920s. As child centred ideas gained credence in official circles, the importance of history for developing children's own sense of identity was increasingly acknowledged. History offered opportunities for building on children's own enthusiasms and extending their imaginations.

Progressive ideas incorporated within Plowden's report on primary education emphasised the importance of learning about children's personal histories and local studies. Topic approaches permitted linkages to be developed with a range of subjects.

The range of factors which influence teachers' decision making is identified within Shulman's description of teachers' pedagogical content knowledge, which he describes as a blend between knowledge of content and knowledge of the diverse factors which effect its implementation in the classroom. In terms of history, John suggests that secondary history teachers' knowledge draws on a range of elements to inform planning and teaching, which incorporate personal beliefs and values, knowledge and understanding of history and an awareness of educational contexts. A more complex model of teachers' subject knowledge is developed who includes John's elements and also stresses the dynamic nature of teachers' knowledge as it is developed in day to day classroom interactions. The eleven components of her knowledge bases for teaching include substantive and syntactic subject knowledge and curriculum knowledge, alongside general pedagogical knowledge and knowledge derived from teachers' classroom experiences.

This broad range of factors which influences teachers' decision making and curriculum implementation can account for the variations in interpretations of official policy. Knowledge and understanding of the subject are layered across educational concerns such as children's learning, effective teaching strategies and respect for the outcomes of education. The history National Curriculum requires primary teachers to have knowledge of history's syntactical and substantive understandings. Substantive knowledge comprises the series of facts and concepts that can form a network of semantic understandings. This aspect of historical knowledge is embedded within the areas of study and study units in the Programme of Study. Syntactic knowledge relates to the truth claims of particular disciplines; it concerns the procedures of the discipline and how valid judgements may be made (Schwab, 1964). In this respect teachers are expected to be familiar with skills and understandings of the subject, outlined in the Programme of Study for history.

However, whilst the distinction between syntactical and substantive knowledge is helpful for describing different kinds of subject knowledge, in practice both components are often very dependent on each other. Different historical enquiries influence both the selection of historical knowledge and its interpretation. His typology of history teachers indicates that their beliefs about history influence both selection of content and ways in which they teach the subject. Five broad categories of history teachers emerge from Evans' data: storyteller; scientific/historian; relativist/reformer; cosmic philosopher and eclectic. Storyteller teachers emphasise the importance of telling children about events and people in history to gain cultural knowledge and a sense of identity. Scientific/historian teachers focus on historical explanation and interpretation, valuing analytical and research skills and approaching history with an element of objectivity. An emphasis on the importance of an historical perspective for understanding current issues, creating a 'better world' and learning from past mistakes is a feature of relativist/reformer teachers. Cosmic philosophers search for general laws and patterns in history and eclectics are teachers who do not respond to any particular typology.

Evans' study (1994) acknowledges the important influence of family, personal backgrounds and teachers' own beliefs and values on their professional identities and work practices. He suggests that teachers within different typologies share similar backgrounds and interests and that teachers' conceptions of history can also be related to their political beliefs. The history curriculum presents one view of history. Teachers are surrounded by history in their everyday lives. They have a view on the past which may or may not always correspond to school history, prescribed in the curriculum. The different ways in which teachers' views concur with the history National Curriculum and relate to their beliefs about education and children's learning are analysed in the following case studies.

Common features within the data maps were identified, together with the frequency with which teachers referred to them. Comparing the data maps of individual teachers also enabled the identification of different emphases which teachers placed on their history teaching. The frequency of comments which related to the key issues which teachers had mentioned were noted and compared with the clustering's on the data maps. Through charting the frequency of certain comments, some conclusions about the main beliefs and emphases of individual teachers concerning history and history teaching were reached, which were evaluated within Evans' (1994) typology of history teachers. Grids noting the frequency of teachers' comments relating to Evans' different typologies were constructed. The influence of teachers' background and experience contributes to different interpretations of official policy. Thus it could be argued that the curriculum cannot be imposed from above, but develops from the reality of different encounters within the educational context. Total compliance is not achievable and is a factor which needs to be considered in the current educational climate of accountability, standards and target setting prevalent in English primary schools.

A broad range of aims are incorporated within the current history National Curriculum and the case studies reveal that individual primary teachers emphasise particular aspects more than others. Harriet is concerned with passing down cultural traditions through stories; Ruth employs history to explain current events and focuses on problem solving activities. The development of skills in analysis and deduction are key features of Anne's approaches. In this respect teachers are according different priorities to particular aspects of the history curriculum and to history's syntactical and substantive structures. However, the data also suggest that whilst teachers might emphasise particular features, they do not neglect other areas completely, since comments, albeit fewer are recorded in all other categories. In terms of the rationales for learning history identified at the beginning of the article, different strands can be discerned. The potential of history for citizenship education is particularly in evidence from Ruth's comments and to some extent from those of Harriet. However, the notion of citizenship education has altered radically from the beginning of the twentieth century where it comprised generally listening to stories about the great and the good, to a more active approach, involving children in participation and decision making. In line with child centred approaches, all three teachers were keen to generate children's enthusiasm for the subject and their planning took into account children's interests and stages of development. The

teachers also encouraged children to raise questions and to draw conclusions from different historical sources. Although Harriet commented that she felt history did not have a methodology, she described several instances when children were encouraged to evaluate evidence either in the classroom or as they worked in their local environment.

It could be argued that this breadth enabled teachers to feel confident in their history curriculum decision making; they were aware of what they hoped to achieve and of the strategies through which they might accomplish their aims. The breadth of experiences furnishes a contrast with the current standardised and utilitarian initial teacher training (ITT) curriculum which focuses on the acquisition of a narrow range of standards and provides little opportunity for reflection. The primary teachers within the case studies were able to transform the written curriculum into meaningful experiences for their children. They did this by reflecting on their own knowledge and beliefs and linking them to their evaluations of the needs and interests of their children. As they talked about history, teachers were constantly making pedagogical connections.

CONCLUSION

The case studies illustrate teachers' important roles in mediating the curriculum and in re-shaping it for the children in their classes. They serve as reminders that in a technical age, personalities are still important and teachers remain powerful influences on children's learning. The beginning of the article reviewed the development of different rationales for teaching history in school, during the past hundred years. The case studies provide further evidence on how this process continues to occur and ways in which history is legitimated within the curriculum. Questions relating to whose history and who creates the story of the past are raised. Teachers' different interpretations of the history curriculum suggest that history cannot be viewed as a distinct body of knowledge which can be handed down intact to succeeding generations. Rather, it is a fluid cluster of understandings, shared and shaped by everyone who comes into contact with it.

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