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# Research and Practice in History Education in England: A Perspective from London

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## **Abstract**

This paper reflects on the current state of history education research and practice in England by exploring the aims that history education serves in theory and in practice and by sketching recent trends in English history education research and scholarship. Aims are explored through reflection on the ways in which they have been discussed in English history education literature and through an analysis of recent English curriculum documents. The paper goes on to explore teachers' ideas about aims, as revealed in recent curriculum contestation, and teacher and student thinking about aims, as revealed in aspects of two published studies – on student teacher's thinking about what history education is for and school students' understandings of the value of learning history. Changes in history education research and theory are explored by comparing three editions of an influential book, written for teachers and teacher educators. These editions span the period between 2000 and the present and analysis of the focus on the chapters in the editions enables change and continuity in research and theorizing during this period to be considered. The paper ends by identifying possible future agendas for English history education research and theorizing.

**Keywords:** History curriculum and pedagogy, History education research, England

## **Introduction**

As is the case in many countries internationally – particularly in the context of international educational comparison and competition (Brant, Chapman and Isaacs, 2016) and of social and political change and curriculum contestation (Wilschut, 2010) – history education in England is in a constant state of change.

This paper endeavours to make sense of the contemporary history education landscape in England by giving an account of some of the key themes and traditions influencing the recent development of English history education. It does this by considering, first, the aims that the English history curriculum can be understood to serve and, second, contemporary trends in history education research and practice.

Like all writing – about history or anything else – this paper is positioned: it reflects my own thinking about history education research and practice and, in particular, the London tradition in which I work (Lee, 2005). The paper does not pretend to be a systematic review of the landscape or to offer new research findings but is, rather, a positioned perspective on developments.

### **The Aims of School History in England: Contexts and theoretical considerations**

Identifying the ‘aims’ of history education is not a straightforward matter. History, is an essentially contested and so is school history (Gallie, 1956). Since its inception in the nineteenth century, modern historiography has flourished under the wing of the state and, despite counter-trends since the 1960s, history remains in large part a national or a ‘nationalized’ industry (Berger and Lorenz, Eds., 2008). School history has been even more explicitly tied to the nation state than history and has often functioned explicitly in many states as a tool for national identity engineering (Carretero, 2011). These facts about the history of school history do not determine its nature – since the origin of an institution is not the same thing as its function in the present – however, they do ensure that school history remains controversial, since national identity remains the subject of contestation within states and between them and since the salience of the politics of national identity fluctuate over time (Foster and Crawford, Eds., 2006; Nakou and Barca, Eds., 2010; Taylor and Guyver, Eds., 2011).

Political debates about the history curriculum do not, of course, take place in a pedagogic or curricular vacuum. Pedagogic stances on the purposes and identity of history education vary and shape and inform history educators’ practices and responses to wider debates. In what follows, I will draw on Peter Lee’s analysis of differing understandings of history and their relationships to thinking about aims (Lee, 2014) in order to sketch some of the positions the aims of school history that have been influential in shaping English discussions and practices. Simplifying English debates considerably, we can say that they have been influenced by three related understandings about what learning history involves:

- Learning History involves developing **skills**

- Learning History involves mastering **historical thinking concepts**
- Learning History involves mastering **knowledge of the events and concepts of the past**

The first idea – that understanding history involves mastery of skills – has been very influential on practice and on debates on practice (Cain and Chapman, 2014). It is a useful idea, but one that needs to be handled with a considerable degree of care. As Lee has pointed out (2005), the word ‘skill’ implies activity more than it suggests thinking and skills (such as riding a bicycle) are things that we get better at more through repetition and practice than by thinking and reflection. It is clear, nevertheless, that learning history requires the development of a number of generalized skills that are common to all subjects (such, for example, as the ability to make notes, the ability to read text, and so on). A focus on skills can, however, lead to a focus on activities more than on thinking and this can have negative effects on teaching and on learning (McCrorry, 2015).

The second understanding of what learning history involves relates to broad concepts and modes of thinking that are necessary in order to build, organise, apply and express historical knowledge and historical thinking. These are called ‘second-order’ understandings in the English tradition of historical thinking (Lee, 2005). Historians aim to build knowledge about an absent object – ‘the past’ – and work with the remains of this past that continue to exist in the present (source materials) to build do so. This process of knowledge-building involves a number of inter-related forms of thinking (for example, asking questions and drawing conclusions) that are linked to an understanding the concept of ‘evidence’ (Ashby, 2011). Thinking evidentially involves understanding the fact that we can use one thing – historical sources – to help us answer questions and draw conclusions about another thing – the absent past. It is obvious that ‘evidence’ is not unique to history – we can speak of ‘scientific evidence’ in the context of biology or physics, ‘legal evidence’ in a legal context, ‘geographical evidence’ in relation to knowledge building about landscape, and so on. It is equally obvious, however, that ‘evidence’ means different things in these different contexts: we do not reason to historical ‘proof’ in the same way that we reason to mathematical proof and the historical concept of evidence has distinguishing features shaped by the fact that it relates to establishing knowledge claims about things that no longer exist on the basis of their remains in the present. Historical thinking concepts are modelled in a number of different ways in different traditions around the world. There are English models (Lee, 2005) but there are also Canadian models (Seixas and Morton, 2013), Dutch models (van Drie and van Boxtel, 2008), and so on.

English models share many features with the others – for example, a focus on understanding historical ‘causality’, historical ‘significance’ and historical ‘change and continuity’ – but the English model also has some distinctive features, notably a focus on ‘historical interpretations’ or ‘historical accounts’ (Chapman, 2016a), a concept that is not present in North American models of historical thinking (Seixas, 2016). As was the case with ‘evidence’, these are all concepts that might be found in many other subjects – except, perhaps the concept ‘change/continuity’, which seems inherently historical because it deals with time. Again, like ‘evidence’, these concepts have particular features in the context of history that they do not have in the context of other disciplines: ‘causality’ means something different in science, where the notion of ‘scientific laws’ has relevance, and in history where a law-based model of explanation is not appropriate (Day, 2008).

The final element of understanding relates to understanding of the past itself, or what is called ‘first-order’ knowledge and understanding in the English tradition (Lee, 2005). We can distinguish between a number of aspects of ‘first-order’ knowledge. On the one hand, we can distinguish between simple factual propositions about the past (the claim, for example, that a particular person was ‘king’ on a particular date) and concepts that belong to the past that it is necessary to understand to grasp of the meaning of particular propositions (such, for example, as the meanings of the concept ‘king’ in the Norman period). A number of issues arise in relation to first-order knowledge building that are specific to it – for example, questions about how to enable children to build knowledge in cumulative ways that enable them to make use of and organise this knowledge (Counsell, 2017; Howson and Shemilt, 2011).

All three of these elements are essential to historical thinking and, thus, to authentically historical school history. Some are, however, more essential than others: the notion of ‘skill’, for example, does not have very much that is historical about it and there can be no historical learning without knowledge and understanding of the past. A number of different ways of thinking about the aims that school history follow from these understandings, depending on how they are prioritized and combined.

If, for example, one prioritizes content above all else then the aim of school history becomes the mastery of a particular body of knowledge or narrative. This understanding of school history is commonly encountered around the world and is usually associated with a traditional pedagogies and to an approach that values history primarily as a tool for fostering identity and identification. There is a very great deal of scope for variation within a traditionalist stance, because there is a wide range of positions that can be

taken on the identity and focus of the ‘good story’ to be transmitted. This is often apparent in our parliamentary debates in which the differing narratives of competing political parties are often dramatized (Hansard, 2009) and one can imagine a wide range of possible stories that might be given prominence in different contexts (for example, narratives focused around gender or the environment).

There are clear limitations to this content-driven approach. One is that content alone is likely to be inert. Understanding an historical narrative – as a narrative rather than simply as a series of statements about the past in chronological sequence – requires more. Narratives typically involve explanation and attributions of causal role (indicated, for example, by the word ‘because’). Narratives also attribute significance and map change and continuity and, at scale, they entail complex understandings of time (indicated, for example, by period labels like ‘the Renaissance’). It is not possible to understand historical content using content alone, since, to be meaningful, content has to be organised conceptually. There is a further and equally telling objection to modelling historical learning in terms of content alone. All that students can do with a ‘given’ story is give it back (i.e. repeat what they have learned). If we want to enable students to reorganize and deploy what they learn in flexible ways – as they must be able to do if they are to use and *apply* it in a meaningful sense – or to make new ‘stories’ with what they have learned in the future as history continues to unfold, then we need to equip them with conceptual understandings and tools with which to interrogate and re-structure what they learn.

Historical content knowledge alone is not enough, then, and we come to a different possible aim: the idea that school history should aim to develop historical thinking about the world and about problems in the human past. This aim can, however, mean many different things. The simplest understanding of this aim might be that children need to understand the past in the manner characteristic of the discipline of history – for example, without anachronism and in ways that are based in historically sound reasoning about evidence, about change, about cause and so on. We might call this an *academic* or *disciplinary* rationale for learning to think historically. The problem with this rationale, however, is that it gives no account of the overall aim that is served by coming to know the past in historical ways. Historical thinking rationales that wish to go further than a merely academic justification for historical learning need to connect historical thinking with students’ own lives – to argue, for example, that learning to think historically will develop their learning about what it means to be human, about how the world works and about the limits and possibilities

that arise in different historical contexts (including the present). An approach that links thinking about the past to thinking about the present and future might be called an ‘historical consciousness’ approach to the aims of history (Lee, 2004). I have attempted to provide a rationale of this kind of approach in my own work as follows:

Learning how to think historically means learning how to think in a disciplined way – learning how to ask questions about the past, how to think evidentially and contextually about the record of the past and how to think critically about the stories people tell us and that we tell ourselves (Wineburg, 2001; 2007). It is empowering to learn to think in these ways and essential that citizens do so ‘in a world dominated by emotional appeals, quotations ripped out of context, incendiary language, and journalistic analyses’ (Wineburg, 2007: 11).

Learning how to think historically also means learning how to understand human problems as problems in time (Tosh, 2008)... [E]verything is shaped both by the legacies of the past and by the ‘history stories’ we all tell ourselves...

There is no alternative to thinking historically, therefore, and the choice is between trying to do it well – in the context of traditions of disciplined historical thinking about the problems that we all face as historical beings (Gardner, 2000) – or setting out to do it badly, without historical education and in a present-minded way.

(Chapman, 2009: 1-2)

Finally, it is possible to regard historical thinking and historical content primarily as an occasion for the development of generic competencies and to model history as a context in which these competencies can be developed. One problem with this approach has already been mentioned – the fact that ‘skill’ can lead to activity more than to cognition. It is also the case that in this approach the competencies matter more than the history and history could easily be replaced in this model by any other subject matter that might deliver the same competency outcomes (as, for example, in the Royal Society of Arts’ ‘Opening Minds’ curriculum - RSA, n.d. and RSA, 2005).

### **The Aims of History Education in England: Which aims have significance in practice?**

Identifying the aims of educational practices is a complex activity. We can distinguish between a number of levels at which aims are realised: in curriculum documents, in the thinking and practices of teachers and in the understandings of pupils. Data identified at some of these levels can be difficult

to find and, even where data is plentiful, it can be hard to interpret. The first of these levels – the curriculum – is the easiest to comment on with confidence. The documents are readily available and the espoused aims of the curriculum are easy to identify and analyse. However, teachers have to make decisions about implementation and practice can often diverge considerably from curriculum statements. Data about teachers' thinking is typically collected through interview and what is said in interview and what is done in practice, day to day, are often wildly divergent. The same is true of students' statements and, equally, what students think they are learning and what they are actually learning can be highly divergent. It should also be said, of course, that both teachers and students are highly diverse groups, making it very difficult to generalise about the curriculum realised in practice.

*History's Aims in the English Curriculum and in English Curriculum Debates*  
The aims statements of our history curriculum in the National Curriculum for Key Stage 3 (for students aged 11-14 years), for the GCSE (for students aged 14-16 years) and for Advanced Level (for students 16-19 years) are reproduced in Appendices 1-3 at the end of this paper.

A number of things are apparent from these statements. First, in terms of content, there is a clear focus across all age ranges on British history and this British focus diminishes over time.

The National Curriculum is explicit in requiring that students develop a coherent and chronologically organised understanding of the narrative of British history as a whole and this is prioritized over the history of the wider world: whereas they are to 'know and understand the history of these islands' they are only required to 'know and understand significant aspects of the history of the wider world' (DfE, 2013b: 1). At GCSE, British history 'must form a minimum of 40% of the assessed content over the full course' and courses must include history:

- from three eras: Medieval (500-1500), Early Modern (1450-1750) and Modern (1700-present day)
- on three time scales: short (depth study), medium (period study) and long (thematic study)
- on three geographical contexts: a locality (the historic environment); British; and European and / or wider world settings  
(DfE, 2014b: 4)

A Level must be 'a broad and coherent course of study' covering 'the history of more than one country or state, including at least one outside of the British Isles' and students must study 'aspects of the past in breadth (through

period and/or theme) and in depth’, covering (overall) ‘a chronological range of at least 200 years’ with ‘a substantial (a minimum of 20 per cent)... of British history and/or the history of England, Scotland, Ireland or Wales’, including a study of ‘change and/or development over a period of time... normally at least 100 years’ (DfE, 2014a: 2).

The aims articulated in the curriculum statements can be summarised as follows in terms of a number of broad categories (Table 1).

Table 1. Summary Analysis of the Aims Statements for the English History Curriculum for Key Stage 3 to A Level

History should aim to:	Key Stage 3	GCSE	A Level
Inspire interest and enthusiasm for the study of the past	✓	✓	✓
Develop understandings of identity / diversity	✓	✓	✓
Develop competence in enquiry, a questioning disposition and general cognitive abilities	✓	✓	✓
Develop understanding of the discipline of history	✓	✓	✓
Develop knowledge and understanding	✓	✓	✓
Develop communication and organisation of knowledge	✓	✓	✓
Help prepare students for citizenship		✓	
Help prepare students for future study		✓	

There are significant differences in what the curriculum documents do, however, once one gets beyond statements of aim: for example, whereas approximately 22% of the Key Stage 3 document is concerned with developing competence in enquiry, a questioning disposition and general cognitive abilities and understanding of the discipline of history, the equivalent figure is approximately 30% for GCSE. This comparison is not strictly fair, since a key function of the Key Stage 3 document is to state the content of the curriculum and this is not the case with the other two documents which are developed in fuller detail by a number of ‘Exam Boards’.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the impression that this comparison creates – of a curriculum that gives more explicit consideration to the competencies of historical thinking the older the students become – is an accurate one.

### *Teachers’ Understandings of the Aims of School History*

As I have said, it is harder to know what history teachers think the aims of

school history should be than it is to know what curriculum documents say. Although there are exceptions (such as Husbands, Kitson and Pendry, 2003: 116-137), history teachers' ideas about aims are not researched very often.

Despite this fact, we have considerable evidence about teachers' thinking about aims in relation to our current curriculum than in relation to earlier curricula. This is because our 2013 National Curriculum document was widely opposed by teachers in its draft form (published in February 2013). By contrast with the curriculum that preceded it (QCA, 2007), the architects of the 2013 curriculum presented it as an explicitly traditionalist one whose aim was to 'restore' traditional national narrative to the heart of history education. Our Education Secretary argued that history had become overly focused on 'skills' and that history education was failing children by 'sundering... our society from its past' such that children were 'growing up ignorant of... the history of our United Kingdom' (Gove, cited in Smith, 2017: 7). In the 2008 National Curriculum, developing historical thinking was the focus of three of the six pages of the document that dealt with what children should be taught, and curriculum content was presented as a series of broad issues to be explored (such as 'the different histories and changing relationships through time of the peoples of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales' (QCA, 2007: 115). By deliberate contrast, the 2013 curriculum, in both its initial draft (DfE 2013a) and its final version (DfE, 2013b) – was largely taken up with bullet-pointed content to be taught (the subject of approximately three of the five pages in the final draft).

Teacher opposition to the initial February 2013 draft of this curriculum (DfE, 2013a) was vocal and widespread – in public consultations, in meetings organised by the Historical Association, in the press and, particularly, on social media (Smith, 2017). This opposition was instrumental, in the end, in securing substantial revisions in the final curriculum document (DfE, 2013, b). Opposition focused on a number of issues – including the politicization of the curriculum and a lack of consultation – and on aims. There was widespread teacher opposition to a model of history that was perceived as prioritizing 'a superficial gallop through a series of events and individuals' (Harrison, 2013: 5) and as failing to recognise 'history' as 'an intellectual discipline underpinned by a rigorous conceptual framework' (Historical Association, cited in Smith, 2017: 13).

Some further evidence of recent teacher thinking is provided by Chapman, Burn and Kitson (in press), a study based data gathered in 2010 and arising from a student-teacher discussion of the aims of history education that involved forty trainee history teachers at the Institute of Education, University

of London. Data arising from this discussion were coded thematically in order to identify the prevalence of particular aims in students' responses. Some of this data is presented in Table 2 below and some examples of text coded under these categories is then provided.

Table 2. Student Teachers' Positive Ideas about the Aims of School History  
[N = 40. Adapted from Chapman, Burn and Kitson, in press]

Code	Students making positive reference to particular aims	
	Count	Percent
Understanding of the present	26	65
Transferable / generic skills	24	60
Knowledge and understanding of the past	20	50
Fascination / aesthetic appeal	17	42.5
Historical consciousness	15	37.5
Disciplinary knowledge	13	32.5
Personal identity / pride	11	27.5
National identity / pride	10	25
Citizenship / Community Cohesion	9	22.5
Understanding difference	9	22.5
Prudential uses of history (learning lessons)	8	20
Intellectual maturity	7	17.5
Group identity	5	12.5

As the table shows, the most popular aim identified in our sample was 'understanding the present', an aim illustrated by the following statement:

[B]y helping... students to place themselves within some sort of context, e.g. immigration... then we have gone some way to giving our subject an important role within the curriculum.

(Chapman, Burn and Kitson, in press).

Other prominent aims included developing 'transferable skills', building 'knowledge and understanding of the past' and encouraging 'fascination' with the past and developing 'historical consciousness', illustrated in turn by the four examples below:

[T]he skills... can be described as nothing but beneficial to a student's... academic career even if they forget the information...

[A]n interest in the past and a desire to increase knowledge and understanding is a good thing.

[H]istory should be about engaging with the past with excitement, and the beauty of history.

With history we are able to identify what is transient and what is enduring and where we stand in the flow of time.

(Chapman, Burn and Kitson, in press).

### *Pupils' Understandings of the Aims of School History*

History students' ideas about the purpose and value of school history are also under-researched. Although it is now over ten-years-old, we do have some very interesting data on this issue, provided by a survey study, commissioned by the English Qualifications and Curriculum Authority that reported in 2005 (Haydn, 2005; Harris and Haydn, 2006 and 2008).

This study surveyed 1,740 Year 9 students (13-14 year-old) pupils from 12 schools from a range of locations, including the East of England, London, and the South Coast, and conducted focus groups with around 160 students (Haydn, 2005: 8). The survey aimed to understand a number of issues, including the extent to which students enjoyed history and the extent to which this had changed over time. In all, around 1,500 comments on the purpose or uses of school history were collected of which around 850 were usable for analysis.

Analysis of the data revealed that the majority of students enjoyed history (69.8%) and found it useful (69.3%) and it was apparent that both enjoyment and perceptions of the usefulness of history had improved since earlier studies conducted in the late 1960s and early 1980s (Haydn and Harris, 2008: 44 and 46). The questionnaire explicitly asked students to consider:

Why do you think that they have history on the school curriculum? Can you try to explain your ideas about in what ways it might be useful for people to do history at school?

(Haydn, 2005: 11)

The reasons that students gave for finding history useful revealed less comforting data about students' perceptions of history's aims or what history was for.

Around 250 of the 850 usable responses to this question made reference to uses of history that corresponded to one degree or another to the kinds of aim that are common in our curriculum documents, as in the following example:

So that we can learn about our country's past and why we ended up this way. It's useful to know this because then you have an idea of why our country is this way today.

(Haydn and Harris, 2008: 45)

Around 50 responses explained the usefulness of history in prudential

terms – making it possible for the present to learn lessons from the past and avoid repeating past mistakes.

It's important to know what happened in history for the bad things not to happen again and for people to learn from it.

(Haydn, 2005: 13)

Around 200 responses understood history to be useful in employability terms, but often in ways that tied this use to particular professions only.

If you were going to work in a museum or be an archaeologist or anything to do with the past, you'd need to know about history.

(Haydn and Harris, 2008: 45)

The remainder of the responses made reference to a range of different ideas, including the trivial ideas about history's use, the idea that studying history helped people in the present appreciate how much better their lives were than those of their ancestors and ideas relating to intergenerational transmission. For example:

I think it's quite a good talking subject and you can tell your son and daughter and their sons and daughters.

(Haydn, 2005: 15).

Haydn and Harris also note that a number of aims, stressed in contemporary literature or in government policy, were missing from most of the students' responses.

[O]nly 22 questionnaire responses... mentioned 'skills' as a benefit of school history... very few responses made reference to [the development of young people's political literacy], with only one explicit mention of the word 'citizenship'... hardly any mentioned 'patriotism', or suggested that history might contribute to pride in being British, or loyalty to the state.

(Haydn and Harris, 2008: 46)

Haydn and Harris observed large variation in response by school – suggesting that the cultures of school departments can make a significant difference to pupils' perceptions of history. There was also evidence to suggest that changing the culture of history department could make a large difference to students' responses – in one school teachers taught about aims and repeated the survey a year later and reported higher positive ratings for usefulness and more sophisticated ideas about aims when they did so (Haydn and Harris, 2008: 46).

## **History Education Research in England: Traditions, current developments and agendas**

*An Overview of the Landscape of Research and Practice*

History education research in England suffers, to an extent, from uneven development. On the one hand, very few research projects focused exclusively on history education have been funded by our research councils in recent years and these studies have tended to be small-scale, for example:

- Project CHATA (Concepts of History and Teaching Approaches) conducted at the UCL Institute of Education (Lee and Ashby, 2000);
- Usable Historical Pasts (UHP) conducted at the UCL Institute of Education (Foster, Ashby, Lee, 2008); and
- The Arguing in History Project conducted at the Open University (Coffin, 2007).

On the other hand, these relatively small-scale projects (notably, CHATA) have been very innovative and influential and some very substantial research projects have been funded that include some consideration of history education or that focus on a specific aspect of history education in depth, for example:

- The International Instructional Systems Study, funded by the US government's Centre on International Education Benchmarking that included a research strand on history and the social studies (Brant, Chapman and Isaacs, 2016); and
- The UCL Centre for Holocaust Education's national study of teachers' understandings and practices in Holocaust education (Pettigrew, et al., 2009) and its study of what children know and understand about the Holocaust, a study with over 8000 respondents and probably one of the largest studies of children's historical knowledge ever conducted, worldwide (Foster, et al., 2016).

Practitioner research and practitioner curriculum development are, by contrast, deeply rooted and very well-developed. There are developed national networks in England supporting teacher writing, discourse and knowledge exchange. Recent studies have pointed to the significance of these networks in enabling sustained and systematic reflection and theorizing (Fordham, 2016) and the flourishing of a strong tradition of teacher curriculum development and innovation (Counsell, 2011). This culture is sustained by a number of structures – most notably, the Schools History Project annual conference that takes place in Leeds every July and the activities of the Historical Association which include the following:

- An annual conference which provides opportunities for history teachers to present and share pedagogic and curriculum innovations;
- Two professional journals for history teachers working in primary education (*Primary History*) and secondary education (*Teaching History*);

and

- a research journal (*The International Journal of Historical Learning, Teaching and Research*).

*Teaching History* is the most influential of the HA's publications on English teachers and, in addition to providing the basis for the networked teacher scholarship, the journal is also a conduit for the sharing of research findings nationally (for example, Haydn and Harris, 2008, discussed above) and internationally (the journal has published articles by prominent international researchers, for example, Wineburg, 2007; Seixas, 2009; van Drie and van Boxtel, 2013).

#### *Research and Practice Agendas and Themes: Change and Continuity*

It is difficult to generalise about current trends in research in England without conducting a systematic literature review. A good proxy is a volume that has appeared three times since the year 2000 and that is intended to provide an overview of key issues and developments for teachers and trainee teachers. The first iteration was entitled *Issues in History Teaching* (Arthur and Phillips, Eds., 2000) and both subsequent editions have been entitled *Debates in History Teaching* (Davies, Ed., 2011 and Davies, Ed., 2017).

An analysis of the chapter titles of the three editions is provided below. The codes used to group chapter titles are explained in the discussion that follows.

Table 3. An Analysis of the contents of *Issues in History Teaching* (2000) and the 2011 and 2017 Editions of *Debates in History Teaching*, expressed in percentages.

Category	2000	2011	2017	All editions, 2000-20017
Knowledge and Understanding	33.3	38.1	34.8	35.4
Ethics, Citizenship, Diversity	13.3	9.5	21.7	14.8
Whole school issues	13.3	19	13	15.1
Age Phases	10	14.3	13	12.4
Assessment and Attainment	0	4.8	8.7	4.5
Teacher training and teacher knowledge	6.7	4.8	4.3	5.3
International Developments	10	0	4.3	4.8
National policy - history and context	6.7	4.8	0	3.8
School Inspection	6.7	0	0	2.2
Links with academic history	0	4.8	0	1.6
	100	100	100	100

The most prevalent category in all three editions is ‘Knowledge and Understanding’: there were 21 chapters focused on these issues in the three editions overall. This category gathers together:

- a) two chapters concerned with ‘first-order’ content knowledge – ‘Historical knowledge and historical skills: a distracting dichotomy’ (Counsell, 2000) and ‘The fertility of substantive knowledge: in search of its hidden, generative power’ (Counsell, 2017);
- b) two chapters concerned with frameworks for organizing substantive knowledge at scale – ‘Frameworks of knowledge: dilemmas and debates’ (Howson and Shemilt, 2011; Shemilt and Howson, 2017);
- c) two chapters concerned with modelling historical literacy and historical consciousness (Lee, 2011 and 2017); and
- d) fifteen chapters focused on ‘second-order’ conceptual understandings – for example, ‘Teaching historical significance’ (Hunt, 2000), ‘Historical interpretations’ (Chapman, 2011 and 2017b) and ‘Understanding historical evidence: teaching and learning challenges’ (Ashby, 2011 and 2017).

As the analysis above shows, the last sub-category (chapters on ‘second-order’ concepts) is the most prominent one under ‘Knowledge and Understanding’ and chapters on second-order concepts were the most prominent across the three editions overall.

Research on second-order concepts has formed a key focus of practitioner and academic research in history education in England over the last twenty-five years and it has also been the most internationally influential type of English history education research. The key innovations in this area were the *Schools Council History Project Evaluation Study* (Shemilt, 1980), conducted in Leeds, and Project CHATA (Concepts of History and Teaching Approaches), conducted in London (see, for example, Lee and Ashby, 2000). This research has been very influential in shaping the focus of North American research (Wineburg, 2001 and 2007 and Seixas and Morton, 2013) and it formed the basis of the American National Academies’ summation of history education research for teachers *How Students Learn: History in the Classroom* (Donovan and Bransford, Eds., 2005), which was authored, in large part, by London and Leeds researchers. Second-order issues have formed a key focus of practitioner research in *Teaching History* and elsewhere, as Fordham has shown, in an analysis of teacher citation of research and practitioner work in their papers in the journal (Fordham, 2016) and as Counsell has shown in her account of the contributions that practitioner research and reflection has made to the development of English curriculum and pedagogy since the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1991 (Counsell, 2011).

The key focus of research and practitioner writing and reflection on second-order concepts has been on the challenges that thinking historically poses for students and on finding ways of mediating these challenges in the classroom. The Leeds and London research has been informed by ‘conceptual change’ paradigms in cognitive science (Di Sessa, 2014) and by the insight that in history, just as in physics, learners do not come to their lessons with empty heads but with preconceptions and misconceptions that can inhibit historical learning. As Carretero and Lee put it:

[T]hinking historically is counter-intuitive (Lee, 2005). History requires understanding concepts that differ from everyday conceptions and explanations. Some everyday ideas are completely incompatible with history; many students, for example, believe that we can only really know anything by directly experiencing it. Many more students believe that because there was only one series of events that actually occurred, there can only be one true description of the past. (Carretero and Lee, 2014: 587).

To make progress in historical understanding, students need to be helped to see the inadequacy of their everyday conceptions in the context of history and teachers need, first, to recognise and understand the misconceptions that their students may hold and, second, to design teaching and learning in ways that help students move towards more powerful ideas. Research in this tradition has, accordingly, focused on describing and theorizing children’s tacit and explicit ideas about how history works and on modelling progression in children’s thinking by exploring, among other things:

- the ways in which children think about why things happened in the past (causation and the explanation of action – Lee and Shemilt, 2009; Chapman, 2017a),
- the ways in which children think about why different interpretations of the past exist and how they were formed (historical accounts – Lee and Shemilt, 2004; Chapman, 2011); and
- the ways in which children think about how we can go about producing knowledge of events in the past (historical evidence – Lee and Shemilt, 2003; Ashby, 2011).

Practitioner theorizing on second-order issues has focused on strategies to build help build children’s grasp of the conceptual tools that they need to master in order, for example, to:

- explain why things happen in the past (Chapman, 2003; Chapman and Woodcock, 2006; Buxton, 2016);
- grasp and make sense of historical significance and the ways in which

historical individuals, events and developments acquire and change significance over time (Bradshaw, 2006; Brown and Woodcock, 2009; Harcourt, 2016);

- use and evaluate historical evidence in order to make and to evaluate knowledge claims about the past (Riley, 1999; Pickles, 2011).

Although second-order aspects of historical knowledge and understanding continue to be a key focus for attention, other aspects of historical knowledge building have come to the fore in the last fifteen years. How children acquire and can come to master and use factual knowledge at different degrees of complexity, precision and generality have been a key aspect of Counsell's work (2000 and 2017) and the focus a number of recent and influential practitioner reflections (for example, Hammond, 2014). Understanding the sense that students make of what they learn and reconceptualising students' historical knowing as meaning-making is a key focus of innovative work by McCrory (2015). The development of historical knowledge at scale and the wider question of how children might come to *use* history in ways that can inform their understandings of the world has formed the basis of an innovative research programme, in both Leeds and London. Shemilt and his colleagues in Leeds have played a key role in innovating thinking about how children can come to form large scale representations of the past – frameworks of knowledge and big pictures (Shemilt, 2000; Howson and Shemilt, 2011). They have also conducted exploratory classroom research on students' 'big picture' thinking (Blow, et al., 2015) and on strategies and approaches that can be used to help develop it (Rogers, 2008 and 2016; Nuttall, 2013). The London-based project Usable Historical Pasts (UHP) (Foster, Ashby and Lee, 2008) gathered empirical data on the usable big pictures of the past that English students' had and were able to draw upon when thinking about connections between the past, the present and the future – a topic that has been explored in a number of papers drawing on UHP data and also on data on student teachers' thinking (Howson, 2007; Lee and Howson, 2009).

The remaining categories that are prominent in all three of the editions analysed in Table 3 include chapters focused on developments in different age-phases of education and a number of whole school issues, including literacy – for example, 'Literacies and the teaching and learning of history: current approaches to reading the past' (Mountford, 2011) – and information and communication technology (ICT), for example, 'Technology in the History classroom: lost in the web?' (Walsh, 2017). Some issues fluctuate in importance over time, reflecting changing practical priorities in the classroom: for example, assessment and attainment have come to have increasing prominence in teacher

discourse for policy reasons (the introduction of new school accountability measures have given attainment particular salience – Burn and Harris, 2016) and also because of reforms to the ways in which teachers are expected to think about assessing pupils' progress (Fordham, 2017).

The items coded under 'Ethics, Citizenship and Diversity' give an insight into ways in which wider agendas around history education are developing and changing over time. This code was created to group together chapters of a number of types:

- chapters focused on 'Truth in history education' (Haydn, 2017) and on 'Moral education, character education and history' (Peterson, 2017);
- a chapter on 'Teaching sensitive and controversial issues' (Davies, 2017);
- a chapter on 'Multiculturalism and the teaching of history' (Grosvenor, 2000) and two chapters on 'Teaching diversity in the History Classroom' (Bracey, Gove-Humphries and Jackson, 2011 and Bracey, Jackson and Gove-Humphries, 2017); and
- three chapters on citizenship – 'Citizenship and the teaching and learning of history' (Davies, 2000), 'Citizenship and history: uncomfortable bedfellows' (Harris, 2011) and 'British values, citizenship and the teaching of history' (Harris, 2017).

It is apparent from the list that these issues have come to have much greater salience over time: 13.5% of chapters fell under this category in 2000, 9.5% in 2011 and 21.7% in 2017. Some of the paper titles also tell interesting stories. 'Multiculturalism' was present in 2000 but has been replaced by 'diversity' subsequently – a change that may, perhaps, reflect controversies about multiculturalism and shifts from liberal to communitarian approaches to addressing cultural complexity (Van Oers, 2014; Todorov, 2014). The chapters point to an important area of innovation in contemporary history education in England and elsewhere that focus on the meanings historical content can have in diverse contexts (Grever, Haydn and Ribbens, 2008), and on challenging the exclusions perpetuated in much national history in the name of social justice (Whitburn and Mohamud, 2016).

Although it is a presence in all three editions, the changes in the three chapter titles about citizenship education reflect the difficulties that citizenship education has experienced in securing a place within English secondary education. Citizenship was mandated in the 2002 National Curriculum and its position was strengthened in 2008, following an influential report on community cohesion, citizenship and history (Ajegbo, 2007). However, the subject has tended to attract variable degrees of support from governments of different political persuasions and its content was significantly reduced in

the 2013 revision to the curriculum. The subject has had a variable reception amongst history teachers also. Whilst the opportunities that citizenship presented for history were celebrated by many history educators (for example, Wrenn, 1999), concern was frequently expressed that citizenship-focused history might become history rewritten to secure the ‘right’ political message (Lee and Shemilt, 2007).<sup>2</sup> We can see an echo of this mixed reaction in the title of the second chapter referenced above (Harris, 2011). More recently, some disquiet has arisen about how to respond to the recent requirement to teach ‘Fundamental British Values’ – a requirement in all subjects but one that has a particular relevance for subjects, like citizenship and history, that deal with politics and identity and we can see these ‘values’ impacting citizenship agendas in the 2017 chapter title. A concern here, again, is that history may be re-written to serve contemporary political agendas and be compromised as history in the process (Richardson, 2015).

#### *Future Agendas for English History Education Research*

As has been noted, our tradition is particularly strong in research on conceptual understandings in history and on historical thinking. Although we have a developed body of data and theorizing on children’s thinking about key historical concepts and a vibrant, creative and cumulative tradition of practitioner reflection and innovation around teaching to develop historical understanding, there are significant weaknesses in our work. This is particularly apparent where English research and practice are compared to other contexts, for example, to the Netherlands where *both* (a) a robust model of historical thinking (van Drie and van Boxtel, 2008) *and* (b) a cumulative body of systematic intervention studies have been developed (van Drie and van Boxtel, 2013 and 2016). As van Drie and van Boxtel point out, commenting on papers in a recent volume showcasing English classroom-research (Counsell, Burn and Chapman, Eds., 2016), the English tradition is stronger on ‘practice oriented research’ than on ‘fundamental research’ on classroom interventions (van Drie and van Boxtel, 2016: 207).

It seems to me, then, that a desirable outcome for future development would be a large scale research programme focused on design-research interventions, drawing on research and theory and on teacher creativity and innovation, and focused on generating robust evidence on the effects of pedagogic approaches that aim to develop historical knowledge-building. As research arising from the Usable Historical Project, in particular, has shown, this last issue would be a particularly valuable one on which to focus: there is very good reason to think that most students complete their history education in

England without developing usable big pictures of the past (Lee and Howson, 2009; Lee, 2011). Curricular and pedagogic interventions and innovations are needed that aim to address this lack and to build usable historical frameworks that students can draw on to organise what they learn and also to think about relationships between the past, the present and the future. We have very promising work already that aims to develop our knowledge of the issues (including Shemilt, 2009; Blow, et al., 2015; Rogers, 2008 and 2016; Nuttall, 2013), however, this work has been small scale. It seems very probable that a great deal could be achieved through sustained research in this area.

A notable development – in the UHP project but also elsewhere in recent years – has been in research on students’ first-order knowledge and understanding. The UCL Centre for Holocaust Education’s study *What do students know and understand about the Holocaust? Evidence from English secondary schools* (Foster, et al., 2016) has been particularly fruitful in providing empirical insights relevant to substantive knowledge construction. As has been said, this is the largest study ever conducted into children’s substantive historical knowledge in England. One key finding of this research relates to the influence of factors outside school on children’s narratives and models of past events. Across all age ranges, and despite variation in explicit exposure to education on this topic, the report found systematic distortions in children’s understandings of the Holocaust – gaps in their knowledge and understanding, a tendency to focus on particular aspects of the Holocaust only, a Hitler-centric model of causality, and so on (Foster, et al., 2016: 37-69). As Foster et al. put it, in their summary of this aspect of their findings:

Collectively, students’ core conceptions of the Holocaust appeared to closely reflect the wider cultural and political representations of the Holocaust which proliferate within contemporary British society. (Foster, et al., 2016: 3).

What is true of this topic may be true of other topics also and it is probable that we could learn a lot about how knowledge is built in history more generally by attending to the role that cultural constructions and socially prevalent schemata play in shaping the sense that children come to make of what they learn about the past.

A further area where sustained large-scale research would be very valuable is the practice of ‘historical enquiry’. Historical enquiry has been extensively discussed in the pages of *Teaching History* and elsewhere (for example, Harris, Burn and Woolley, 2014: 187-200) and a seminal article by Riley has been particularly influential in shaping contemporary thinking (Riley, 2000). As I have summarised it elsewhere:

Enquiry is widely used in England to organise historical learning (Riley, 2000), as a tool to motivate students and organise and focus learning and as a way of modelling history as a process (the process of generating knowledge through inquiry, contained in the etymology of the word). Enquiry, of course, involves ‘discovery’ – the point is to find things out and to *build* knowledge. It is not ‘discovery learning’, however, in the sense in which this term is understood in research literature critical of constructivism (Tobias and Duffy, eds., 2009). Enquiry, as it is understood in the English history education community, is certainly intended to enable creativity and exploration but it aims to do so in the context of carefully crafted and sequenced activities planned by teachers that aim to help students answer a precise and conceptually structured ‘enquiry question’ and that lead pupils towards an outcome activity that will enable them to answer the question (Riley, 2000). Enquiry questions... are neither solely about ‘knowledge’ nor are they about ‘skills’, they are neither about didactic teaching nor about open discovery learning; instead, enquiry questions aim to *structure* learning so that pupils simultaneously *build* conceptual knowledge and understanding (history as a form of knowledge) and knowledge and understanding of the past itself (history as a body of knowledge) and they aim to do so in ways that encourage carefully planned and structured pupil activity.

(Chapman, 2016b: 12)

Examples of conceptually focused enquiry questions, used to structure students’ learning over a number of lessons, are provided in Table 4.

Although enquiry is widely used in England and although enquiry based approaches have advocates elsewhere (for example, Barton and Levstik, 2004: 188-191), we have very little robust empirical evidence about (a) the extent of its use or (b) its effectiveness as an approach. It would be very valuable to have such evidence, not least to enable enquiry models to be systematically elaborated and refined, particularly in a context where simplified oppositions between discovery based learning and direct instruction tend to polarize debates (Tobias and Duffy, eds., 2009).

Table 4. Examples of ‘Enquiry Questions’

Topic and Question	Conceptual Focus	Year Group
Alexander the Great <i>Why do film makers and historians say different things about Alexander the Great?</i> (HA, 2006: 3)	Historical Interpretation	Year 6 (10-11 years)
Crime and Punishment in Anglo-Saxon England <i>Why did the Anglo-Saxons think that trial by ordeal was just?</i> (Based on material in Lee, 2005: 48)	Empathy	Year 7 (11-12 years)
The outbreak of World War I <i>Did 2 bullets really cause 20,000,000 deaths?</i> (Teacher’s TV, 2007)	Cause and effect	Year 9 (13-14 years)
Radicalism during The English Civil War <i>Why have interpretations of John Lilburne changed over time?</i> (Braddick, 2015: 49)	Historical Interpretation	Year 12 (16-17 years)

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In England, public examinations exist in a number of formats, provided by three principal exam boards that compete as commercial operations. The documents that I examine in this paper for GCSE and for A Level are the documents that the government publish to set out general curriculum requirements. There is no public examination at Key Stage 3 and the document for this stage only exists in this form – it is not interpreted and developed by exam boards.

<sup>2</sup> This was a reasonable fear can be seen in the manner in which history was adapted by politicians to enable a positive citizenship message to be delivered (as, for example, in Straw, 2007).

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