

**An Exploration of the Role of Ethnic Identity in Students’
Construction of ‘British Stories’**

Abstract

Much of the research into history teaching and ethnicity concludes that the historical narratives that children from minority ethnic groups construct differ significantly from ‘mainstream’ or official national narratives and are often accompanied by a sense of disengagement or even alienation from the dominant history narratives taught in schools. Our research suggests that in England (or more specifically in London) the picture is more complicated than this. First, we did not find compelling evidence that students from black and minority ethnic backgrounds feel alienated or disengaged from the British history they are taught. Second, we found a surprising similarity across the narratives that different ethnic groups chose to tell us about British history, suggesting amongst other things some curriculum inertia in schools. Where differences did exist, we suggest that these can be explained as much by gender and broad cultural influences as by ethnicity. Third, whilst *what* students chose to include in their narratives was broadly similar across different ethnic groups, the reasons for including them *did* differ. Finally, and perhaps most positively, we conclude that students of all ethnic groups are keen to engage more critically with British narratives and would relish more opportunities to do so than current school curricula appear to encourage.

Key words: ethnic, gender, identity, British, narrative, school history.

Introduction

In political and public debates about the purposes of teaching history in Britain – as in many places around the world - the importance of teaching a national narrative is frequently linked to the formation of a strong national identity (Harris & Reynolds, 2014; Harris, 2013; Yates, 2017). This connection is an unproven one, not least because it is difficult to isolate the relative significance of different influences on our sense of identity (or identities). Nevertheless, politicians of both the left and the right in Britain have argued for a stronger narrative of British history in schools in order to nurture a sense of pride in and identification with ‘Britishness’ and British values. At the (right-wing) Conservative party conference in 2010, Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove’s claim that ‘Our history has moments of pride, and shame, but unless we fully understand the struggles of the past we will not properly value the liberties of the present’ was not too different from (left-wing) Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown’s claim (made whilst Chancellor of the Exchequer) in 2006 that:

There is a golden thread which runs through British history - that runs from that long-ago day in Runnymede in 1215 when arbitrary power was fully challenged with the Magna Carta, on to the first bill of rights in 1689 where Britain became the first country where parliament asserted power over the king, to the democratic reform acts.... I propose that British history should be given much more prominence in the curriculum, not just dates, places and names, nor just a set of unconnected facts, but a narrative that encompasses our history.

Meanwhile, the Labour MP Tristram Hunt has argued that ‘in an age of increasingly fractious identities - of migration, globalization and religion-ethnic sensibilities - history at school has a prescriptive role to play in forging a sense of national, British identity (2011, p. 263).

What these – and other - politicians share is a belief that a national narrative which emphasizes Britain’s achievements will enhance community cohesion and loyalty to Britain through a sense of national identity (Haydn, 2012). What they also share is an assumption that young people are receptive to such a message.

In our research we set out to explore a possible connection between students’ ethnic identities and their narrative construction of a ‘British’ story. In doing so we were interested to consider how far students’ ethnicity affects the way they interact with British history and shapes the stories they tell. In many of the public and political debates about the history curriculum - including those contributions outlined above - students tend to be viewed as blank canvasses rather than as individuals whose background and prior knowledge shape the different meanings they make of history. We were influenced by researchers before us (such as Peck, 2010 and Epstein, 2009) who have questioned this assumption in regard to the relationship between ethnicity, race and meaning making in history. There is limited research of this issue in England and we developed a different methodology to existing work (such as Hawkey & Prior, 2011) by working with student focus groups with distinctive ethnic identities.

Literature Review

The relationship between school history and identity

Whilst the assumption by some politicians that a positive national narrative will strengthen national identity and loyalty may be attractive, especially in a Britain rocked by terrorist attacks carried out by British citizens in July 2005 (Whitburn & Yemoh, 2012), the notions of both a singular national narrative and a singular British identity are contested ones. The British historian Richard Evans, for example, argues that ‘to feed

only one narrative to children as their only ‘big story’ for ‘identity’ purposes...is to confuse history with propaganda’ (2011). He goes on to argue that Michael Gove’s ‘national story’ confuses history with memory and suggests broadening our curriculum to include the histories of people living in Britain – to include British history but also the history of the countries which they or their families may originate from. This is an argument we have both heard in schools which may, for example, make a point of teaching about Indian Independence if they have a large Indian population (Kitson, Husbands & Steward, 2011) and echoes some of the responses to Harris and Burn's (2016) survey of what history teachers in England feel should be taught in schools. This radical redefining of national history to include the varied stories of all who call themselves British is in clear tension with the way Hunt (2011) conceives of a national narrative to promote social cohesion. Indeed, Hunt criticized Evans for making an academic rather than a political argument and suggested that such a diverse approach could threaten social cohesion at a time when it is sorely needed.

However, there is limited evidence to suggest that history taught as a national narrative of state building can foster social cohesion. Whilst Harris (2013) argues that history plays a ‘powerful role in shaping identity and national sentiment’ (p. 411), the outcome of recent research suggests that whilst history and identity are linked, the extent to which *school* history and identity are linked is more contested. Rather than school history itself shaping identity, it may in fact be the other way round - that identity plays a powerful role in *shaping the way young people interact with the past*. Research in America, Canada, New Zealand and Northern Ireland into young people’s responses to national narratives or specific events in national history suggest that racial, religious, ethnic and cultural identities exert powerful influences on what they choose to take and

reject from the history they are taught in schools (Epstein, 2009; Barton & McCully, 2012; Peck, 2010, Sheehan, Epstein & Harcourt, 2017). This includes a situation where students (in Northern Ireland) are aware that the historical understanding gained from their community lacks balance in contrast to the school history they are learning and yet still persist in drawing from their history lessons whatever best supports their pre-existing ideas (Barton & McCully, 2012). Epstein (2009) helpfully draws on Wertsch's (2002) notion of schematic narrative frameworks in discussing similar findings: in her research in the United States, both black and white students drew on the same history taught by their teacher but used it in ways that aligned with the contrasting frameworks they already had in place.

Peck's research in Canada (2010) and Hawkey and Prior's research in England (2011) both invited students of different ethnic backgrounds to tell the history of the country in which they now live. Peck found that ethnicity influenced both the students' narrative templates – *what* was significant to include in their narratives - and the *criteria* they used as the basis for selection. As Barton and McCully (2012) had found in Northern Ireland, students in Peck's study were aware of the influence their identity had on their understanding of the past and were able to articulate how their ethnicity had shaped their narratives. The findings of Hawkey and Prior in an English setting were slightly different to Peck's. They concluded that whilst there were variations in how individuals positioned themselves in relation to a national narrative, this was not obviously influenced by race or ethnicity and that differences occurred within the same ethnic group. They also found that whilst family and community influences were important, these also varied within as well as across ethnic groups. Not surprisingly, they conclude that 'the picture, therefore, is one of complexity' (Hawkey & Prior, 2011, p. 242) and

suggest that comparable research elsewhere has tended to focus on more settled minority ethnic communities whereas in England (and Britain more generally) we are dealing with a ‘newer and emerging world of increasing migration and trans-migration, which is more varied and fluid than previously’ (p. 243) and which may have a profound impact on how young people interact with British history. The work of An (2009), although conducted in the United States, is illuminating here. Amongst US/Korean students, she found that the ways they made sense of American history was influenced by their migration backgrounds. Second-generation Korean immigrants were likely to interact differently with American history than trans migrant groups. Research therefore suggests that identity, including a specific ethnic or racial identity, can exert a powerful influence on what young people take away from their history lessons and what narrative frameworks they construct but that we should be wary of over-generalising. Students’ race and ethnicity may also influence more affective dimensions of learning history. Doharty (2019) has argued that students of African and Caribbean descent have negative experiences of studying Black history in England because of a pedagogy tainted by subtle manifestations of racism – what Doharty terms ‘microaggressions’. In her study about the experiences of Black African students learning about the trans-Atlantic slave trade in English schools, Traile (2007) similarly found an emotional connection between identity and history when she found that these students felt a sense of shame when taught about slavery in school. Harris and Reynolds (2014), also working in England, explored the potential relationship between students’ racial and ethnic identity and their enjoyment of *all* their school history and found that whilst these were not an obvious factor in the variation of responses they received, students from minority ethnic groups, whilst happy to learn British history, also wanted to learn the history of where they come from. Harris and Reynold’s

conclusion that race and ethnicity do not greatly affect students enjoyment of history contrasts with recent Royal Historical Society report (Atkinson et al, 2018) which found that although history is a popular subject in UK schools, BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) pupils are less likely than their peers to study it beyond the age of 14, including at university where only 11% of history students have a BME background compared to nearly a quarter of all university students. Responding to focus group interviews with young people, the authors call for more diverse school and university curricula in order to appeal to a more diverse group of students.

The suggestion in the report that BME students do not always feel that history is relevant for them echoes Wilkinson's (2014) work. Researching in an English context, Wilkinson describes the 'absent curriculum' of Islamic history, even in schools with a majority Muslim population, and notes that this led to some disaffection with the subject in his study of Muslim boys. He also suggests a link between this disaffection and the fact that in his study, Muslim boys were less likely than their non-Muslims peers to feel they had a good understanding of the basic civic history of England, despite attending the same lessons. Wilkinson's findings, in keeping with some of the other studies cited above, suggest not only that focusing too exclusively on a national narrative may be demotivating, but that this also makes it less likely that BME students will engage with such a narrative in the first place.

The complexity and intersection of identities

We need to tread carefully when discussing the relationship between school history and identity, not only because it is far from clear in what direction the influence travels but also because identity itself is multi-dimensional. Research suggests that internationally, many young people do not see their identity in primarily national terms (Grever, Pelzer,

& Haydn, 2011) and consider themselves to have multiple identities. Peck (2010) found that students perceived themselves as having different ‘sides’ to their identities which echoes Carrington and Short’s (1998) work on the ‘hyphenation’ of identity and inside/outside identities. Carrington and Short, working in Britain, found that few 8-11 year olds thought ‘cultural homogeneity’ was a defining feature of nationhood and they embraced a pluralist view of Britain. In a separate study of twelve to thirteen year olds, they found that a majority of white students did see their identity in simpler terms, regarding themselves as unequivocally British, whilst most students from a BME background ‘viewed their national identity in hyphenated terms’ (Carrington & Short, 1998, p. 140) – for example British and Pakistani or British and Indian. This complexity is echoed elsewhere in the literature. Harris and Reynolds (2014) cite an example of a black student referring to the British as ‘they’, who did not treat ‘us’ fairly (in regards to slavery). Meanwhile, in Hawkey and Prior’s (2011) research, some students from minority ethnic backgrounds did use ‘they’ about the British whereas others did not and one student from India referred to Britain, India and Pakistan all as ‘they’.

Foster, Ashby and Lee’s (2008) research into school students’ capacity to construct large-scale narratives included a question where they asked students to describe their identities. Whilst 78% of the students declared themselves to be either British or English to some extent, only 42% saw this in exclusive terms. Echoing Carrington and Short, Foster et al refer to ‘hybrid and multiple identities in which “Englishness” or “Britishness” was often combined with other national, regional and ethnic characteristics (e.g., Black, African, Caribbean, Bangladeshi, Indian, Irish, Russian)’ (p. 12). In a follow up question they were invited to write something further about ‘who they were’. Here, the students drew on a wide range of influences including religious,

cultural, national, gender and age. This broad sense of what shapes our identities was also visible in our research where the intersection of racial, ethnic and other identities (such as gender) was apparent.

Young people's engagement with narratives

In light of the complexity and intersectionality of students' identities, the goal of teaching a single historical narrative in schools which can promote a single national identity appears ambitious to say the least. There are two further challenges in this endeavour: first, the difficulty young people may have in constructing meaningful 'big picture' narratives and second, the influence of the students' existing frameworks which can be hard to shift. The work of Foster et al (2008) has illuminated the first challenge by finding that young people's narratives of British history tend to be dominated by an event-like, rather than a process-like, approach. In other words, their narratives are more likely to list series of events than to offer a coherent account of change over time. Only ten out of 47 students in their study 'moved beyond recounting discreet and unconnected events to offer a sense of important themes, trends or processes in the passage of British history' (p. 9). As we will explore later, this contrasts with our own research which found that students were more adept at crafting a coherent account of British history. One reason for this may be the methodological challenges of finding out what young people know and can do in history. Foster et al asked 14/15 year old students to tell the story of British history over the last 2000 years which could prove prohibitively difficult for some students to attempt given the amount of history they need to recall in order to connect aspects of the past together coherently. Like Peck (2010), we chose to provide some visual prompts, a point we will return to below.

The second challenge of narrative construction in history classrooms lies in what Wertsch (2002) has termed ‘schematic frameworks’, that is the mental frameworks through which we individually make sense of the past. He argues that such frameworks are so deeply rooted in particular narrative traditions that ‘they may survive the appearance and disappearance of massive efforts by states to inculcate specific narratives organized around mid-level events’ (p. 177). As already mentioned, Epstein has drawn on Wertsch’s work explicitly to help explain her findings in the US and a more recent study provides another good example of the stability of students’ schematic frameworks (Epstein, Mayorga & Nelson, 2011). A highly effective teacher in the US, teaching a class of mainly Black students, included examples of white Americans who fought for civil rights, she was unable to shift their view of white Americans as anything other than a monolithic and privileged group. In other words, these students’ ingrained schematic frameworks proved resistant to adaptation.

Wertsch (2017) has warned us of the dangers of treating young people as ‘empty containers’ and his description of history as ‘active meaning making’ (p. 153) is an apt one: young people learn about the past in different ways and in different places – at home, within their communities, on the television and in school. When Foster et al (2008) asked the question “Does History play any part in who you think you are?”, the majority of students drew on ‘personal and family history’ when explaining ‘how the past shaped their identity’, which aligns with the findings about schematic frameworks in Epstein’s (2009) research. Furthermore, the ‘narrative thinking process’ is rarely made ‘transparent to students’ in schools (Levesque, 2017, p. 237).

The School Curriculum in England: whose history?

In our research we set out to explore the ways that young people of different racial and ethnic identities make sense of a national narrative in the specific context of London in the UK. We began this literature review with British politicians' aims for the history curriculum and we will end it with a brief explanation of the history school curriculum in England in order to provide some context for our study. In England, all students learn history between the ages of six and either 13 or 14 at which point it is an optional subject. There has been a national curriculum since 1991 and this has been revised five times, most recently in 2014, although schools have been strongly encouraged to become academies in recent years which allows them to disapply the national curriculum if they choose.

The two most recent versions of the national curriculum reflect a tension between singular and plural identities. In 2007, the national curriculum for history required students to learn about 'the social, cultural, religious and ethnic diversity of the societies studied in Britain and the wider world' and 'the impact through time of the movement and settlement of diverse peoples to, from and within the British Isles'. The emphasis was on understanding how Britain has been shaped by cultural, social and ethnic diversity from the Middle Ages onwards and, tellingly, on pupils' understanding of their identities, *plural* (DFES/QCA, 2007, p. 3). In 2013, the national curriculum for history, although recognising history's role in understanding 'the diversity of societies', refers to identity as *singular*: 'History helps pupils to understand...their own identity.' (DfE, 2013). In line with this change is a greater emphasis on British history in the curriculum: at key stage 2 (ages 7-10), two thirds of the topics are now broadly speaking British and at key stage 3 (ages 11-14), it is approximately three quarters.

Despite the ambitions of the 2007 curriculum, it seems unlikely that it made much difference to what history was taught in schools (Harris & Reynolds, 2018) with Ofsted (England's school inspectorate) reporting in 2011 that the role of history in helping pupils to understand and appreciate an increasingly diverse society was 'insufficient' (Ofsted, 2011, p.56). Indeed, for all the changes of emphasis in recent versions of the national curriculum, inertia seems the best way to describe the history curricula up to 13/14 years (Harris & Reynolds, 2018). The topics which dominate key stage 3 curricula in schools today are strikingly similar to those one of us taught when embarking on our teaching career nearly twenty-five years ago when a national curriculum was first introduced. What is not in doubt is that British (or more accurately, English) history *has* dominated the curriculum up to age 14 (and is a major feature up to age 18) for some time, despite the claims of politicians and others to the contrary. Whether this is in the form of a narrative of British people, a narrative of the British nation state or a collection of individual stories that do not link together into a sense of an overarching narrative is more debateable.

Barton and Levstik (2004), whilst supportive of the use of school history to promote social cohesion via a national narrative, warn that we quickly run into the question of 'whose history?' as selections are made about what to include and omit. A good example of this in the British context is the handling of Black British history which is largely absent from school curricula except in the form of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, a topic which generally keeps a Black presence in Britain at arm's length. With post-1945 history often squeezed at key stage three, the origins of multicultural modern Britain are rarely explored and instead, schools more often turn to the American Civil Rights campaign for the heroic actions of Black activists (Whitburn & Yemoh, 2012). As Mohamud and Whitburn (2016) point out, children in England are more likely to

learn about Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycotts rather than Paul Stephenson and the Bristol Bus Boycott of 1963. Mohamud and Whitburn further argue that if history is reduced to grand historical narratives, 'Black history is relegated to an isolated corner of the curriculum' (Mohamud & Whitburn, 2016, p. 6) whilst Siblon (2005) found that 74% of English schools do not or rarely teach Black British history at all.

Summary

Overall, the research that currently exists on BME students' interaction with school history in England suggests that the relationship is a complex one and sensitive to the contexts of the schools and individual students. Harris and Reynold's (2014) contention that the race and ethnicity of students had a weak impact on their enjoyment of history contrasts with both Atkinson et al's recent study (2018) and Wilkinson's (2014) findings specifically in relation to Muslim boys. Hawkey and Prior's (2011) research in England found that different British narratives emerged within ethnic groups in contrast with the more coherence in narratives within ethnic groups in Peck's (2010) work. Finally, the work of Traile (2007) and Doharty (2019) suggest that ethnicity may have a profound influence on the way young Black students respond to the teaching of Black history (or more specifically, to the trans-Atlantic slave trade). Overall the picture is one of complexity which deserves more attention and it is in this context that we offer our research as a contribution to our understanding.

Methodology

During the summer term of 2016, we carried out focus group interviews with Year 9 (thirteen and fourteen-year olds) in six secondary schools in London in which we asked

students to tell us the story of Britain using pictures as prompts. We analysed the interviews in two main ways: in terms of the choices they made and the reasons they provided for these choices.

Research Participants

As we were looking at the link between students' ethnic identities and their narrative construction of a 'British' story, participating students were selected according to two main criteria. First, they needed to be at a stage in their schooling where they had sufficient historical knowledge to construct a relatively comprehensive story of Britain. Second, we had to select students from a range of ethnic backgrounds.

We decided to conduct our research with 13 and 14-year-old students (Year 9), as they would have enough background knowledge to complete the research task successfully. At this age students will have studied history as a separate subject for almost three years and will have generally followed the English national curriculum for history which aims to provide children with a narrative of British history. This was borne out by curriculum documents provided by the history departments as well as the focus groups. All the student participants recognised the events we had included in the picture prompts. In addition, working with these students allowed us to draw on as wide and diverse a pool of participants as possible as history is compulsory for all students until the end of Year 9 in the schools we worked with.

The students were drawn from six urban schools in inner and outer London with a comprehensive intake and ethnically diverse student populations, although in several schools, a particular ethnic group dominated. We purposefully selected the schools based on what we knew about their ethnic make-up. After gaining ethical approval from our university and the consent of the headteacher, we asked the school to select a group

of three to four Year 9 students from a relatively similar ethnic background. The demographic surveys completed by the students and the groups' discussions suggest that the brief was met. Once the students had been selected we sought written parental permission. Before the focus groups we verbally outlined the purpose and content of the research and gained informed consent from students themselves. A total of 21 students took part in the study. According to the demographic survey, which all participating students completed, 15 (71%) were from a range of ethnic minority backgrounds and six (29%) from a white British background. 13 (62%) of the participants were female; eight (38%) were male. Table 1 provides a summary of the demographic information given to us by the research participants.

[Insert Table 1 here.]

Data collection procedures

To elicit students' construction of a British narrative, we developed a semi-structured group task, consisting of three stages: an individual participant demographic survey, a group card selection and discussion task, and a group interview. We collected the data through group discussion and interviews rather than individual written work to enable young people, who might struggle with the latter, to talk about their 'British' story.

Participant selection was left to the individual schools but as we were interested in the link between ethnic identity and the construction of a British narrative, we asked schools to, as far as possible, aim for ethnically homogenous groups. We recognise that this approach to participant selection can be critiqued as 'imposing' a degree of ethnic homogeneity on groups of students who ultimately came from varied and diverse backgrounds. Yet, the demographic information survey which students completed after they had been selected by the school and immediately before the group discussion as

well as the group discussions itself indicated that in each of the groups students did generally see themselves as coming from very similar ethnic backgrounds. They were seemingly confident in expressing their shared ethnic identity as well as more specific individual differences in the survey as well as the discussion. Table 2 provides a summary of the groups at each school.

[Insert Table 2 here.]

As already mentioned, during the first stage of the task, we asked students to complete a standard demographic form, stating their gender, age and ethnic group. However, following Peck's model (2010), we also gave them the opportunity to describe their ethnic identity in a few sentences in a way that 'made sense' to them. Similar to Peck, we were keen to provide students with the opportunity to give their own definition of their ethnic identity rather than solely offer a range of prescribed categories.

As the construction of historical narratives involves the purposeful selection of historical events and people, we provided each group with a set of 26 cards with images and brief information and asked students to work together as a group to decide which ten of the cards they would choose to tell the story of Britain. Ten cards seemed a manageable number within the time given and we told students that ultimately, we were asking them to answer the question: 'If an alien arrived in your school and you were to tell them the story of Britain, what kind of events and people would you include?' We used 'alien' as we wanted the children to think of the person as having no prior knowledge of British history.

The historical events and people we selected for the cards were based on an examination of the most recent national curriculum for history in England (DfE, 2014), as well as the Runnymede Trust's response to it (2015). The Runnymede Trust is an

independent UK think tank that generates research aimed at promoting racial equality in Britain. They have consistently criticised the narrow British focus of the national curriculum and argued for the inclusion of more international and diverse perspectives. The aim was for the events and people on the cards we created to reflect Britain's diverse history, while also being familiar to the pupils. However, in order not to limit students' responses, we also emphasised to each group that they should feel free to add historical events and people who they thought were missing from the cards but should be included in their story of Britain and we supplied blank cards for this purpose. Table 3 below displays the historical events and people included.

[Insert Table 3 here.]

Each card contained the highlighted title or name of the event or person, dates, one to three images, and a short text describing the event. The card stimuli were intended to provide an initial hook and a useful conversation starter, moving the focus away from the researcher and onto the task. We wanted to make it as easy as possible for students to tell their British story and use the cards to provide them with a starting point, which would activate their historical background knowledge. The text consisted of a brief factual summary. The card on the Battle of Hastings, for instance, stated:

The Battle of Hastings in 1066 saw the Anglo-Saxons under Harold Godwinson defeated by the Normans under William. Following his victory William made himself king of England and successfully defeated several rebellious English nobles.

Although minimal, the cards involved pre-selection of historical content by the researchers and thus contained an unavoidable element of interpretation and subjectivity. As we noted in the literature review, above, we deliberately rejected an approach which asked students to tell a story of Britain without any prompts at all and we accepted that our choice of images influenced the stories the students told. We were

comfortable with this as we did not want to place the challenge on the process of narrative construction but rather we wanted understand the decisions children make when telling the story of Britain. In other words, we were less interested in the narrative construction process and more concerned to understand the way identity – and especially racial and ethnic identities – might shape the way young people interact with British history.

After some time to read and consider the cards individually, we asked the groups to work through the card selection task with minimal guidance. Once the groups had selected the ten cards they thought were most important in telling the story of Britain, we asked them to explain each of their choices and to summarise the story they would tell the alien in a few sentences and asked again whether anyone believed that additional cards should have been included in the story. Although the group discussions were useful in that they encouraged students to explore the rationale for their choices, it should be noted that ultimately the research process encouraged students to create a group narrative through working together. Peck (2010) was able to mitigate this factor by interviewing students individually after the group discussion.

Finally, to encourage, like Peck (2010), meta-awareness of their choices, we asked students to consider what factors had influenced their decisions and whether they thought their own age, gender and ethnic background might have impacted on their card selection. After the group interview, to compare each group's choices with what students had studied as part of their history curriculum at school, we asked the participating departments to provide us with a list of the topics which students had studied so far. (See table 4)

[Insert Table 4 here.]

Data analysis

To explore how pupils constructed a British narrative and the extent to which this might be influenced by their ethnic background, we analysed and compared the events and people which the different groups had chosen, as well as the reasoning that lay behind their decisions. We tabulated the groups by ethnic background, history curriculum studied and cards chosen and then analysed the discussion and interview transcripts, using inductively constructed codes (See Table 5).

[Insert Table 5 here.]

Findings and Analysis

Students' responses to demographic questionnaires

All students completed a standard demographic form stating their gender, age and ethnic group. (See appendix.) Most, except the white British and white English students, provided more detail on their ethnic background in the final part of the questionnaire which asked them to describe their ethnic identity in a few sentences, 'in a way that made sense to them' That all students from ethnic minority groups completed this part of the form, whereas none of the white British students did, suggests a greater sense of complexity with regard to their ethnic identity amongst the former, as well as a desire to clarify and for several students to declare that they are indeed 'British'. One could also argue that it implies a perception on behalf of the majority 'white British and/or English' population that they represent the 'norm' and thus have no need to 'explain' their ethnicity.

Students used this opportunity to provide additional detail on their ethnic background through reference to their parents and ethnic origins. In several of the responses,

students – particularly those of mixed Caribbean backgrounds - emphasised their multiple identities whilst others stressed that, despite their seemingly non-British heritage, they felt and were ‘British’. In addition to detailing the ethnic background of her parents, one female Asian student from Nightingale College felt it necessary to declare her very strong sense of patriotism towards Britain: ‘I love Britain and I don’t ever want to leave. I am patriotic about Britain and that describes my ethnic identity’. Taken together with later statements by her and her group about preferring what they regard as progressive British culture above the more traditional culture she and her peers encountered at home, we interpreted this as her making positive choice for a British identity. Overall, our findings were consistent with others’ in terms of the complexity of identity and identities, especially amongst ethnic minority groups where, for example, the use of ‘we’ is inconsistent (Carrington & Short, 1998; Peck, 2010; Hawkey & Prior, 2011).

Analysis of cards chosen by student groups: an insular narrative?

There was a strong correlation between the events and people chosen and what students had learned in school across all groups. The number of events and people selected by each group which pupils had also been taught about ranged from six to ten (out of ten). On average, 76% of cards chosen were on topics which the groups had studied at school. This suggests that the events and people which young people see as part of the British story are heavily influenced by the history they learn in school. That none of the groups took the opportunity to add an event or person to the cards appears to confirm this further. There are a number of possible reasons for this. First, that they do not know much (British) history beyond what they learn at school, second that they believe the narrative they learn in school is the ‘legitimate’ one and that history learnt outside school stays outside (as in Epstein’s research, 2009) or third, that they are satisfied that

the choices made by their school is correct. As several of the research participants repeatedly expressed dissatisfaction with the story they were told by their school, we are not convinced, in our research, by the third reason and would speculate that a combination of the first two is more likely.

The groups selected the Magna Carta, Queen Victoria, Slavery Abolition Act, Industrial Revolution, Female Suffrage, World War 1, World War 2 and NHS cards most frequently. All groups chose World War 2 and Female Suffrage (see Table 6 for more details).

[Insert Table 6 here.]

If we remove Seacole School (which only had one participating student and represented an interesting anomaly discussed below) on average, there was 66% similarity across the rest of the groups in card choice. No group, including the Seacole student, chose the following cards at all: English Civil War, Mary Seacole and Florence Nightingale, Margaret Thatcher and 7/7 whilst the following cards were only chosen once: Boudicca, Crusades, Black Death, Elizabeth I, American War of Independence, Olaudah Equiano, Empire Windrush, Indian Independence and European Union. Other than the two world wars and the abolition of slavery, that the events and people showing Britain's international links were chosen by either no group or only one suggests that students perceive a British narrative as a rather isolated 'island story', with few links to the rest of the world. Interestingly, despite this research being conducted shortly before the referendum on whether Britain should leave the European Union, and at the height of the political campaign surrounding it, only one group, that of white Kosovan students from Crick College, included the EU in their selection.

The relatively ‘island-centric’ and inward-looking character of the cards chosen by the groups, as well as the large overlap between their selections, could appear to suggest that ethnic background has relatively little impact on the way our participants engage with the history taught in school. And as Harris and Reynolds (2018) argued in their recent research, the curriculum taught in English schools has a ‘clear and strong emphasis on the history of England/Britain’ with a conspicuous absence of wider world history beyond isolated and fairly limited topics such as the transatlantic slave trade and American civil rights. These limitations seem also to be reflected in the events and people which students in our study saw as part of the British narrative and are indicative of the curriculum inertia discussed earlier.

The lack of evidence suggesting a strong link between ethnicity and students’ narratives could also in part be due to the ‘London-effect’. London with its unusually diverse population might soften some of the differences between the ethnic identities and facilitate shared narratives. The research process with its focus on creating a consensus around a group narrative rather than individual narratives encouraged compromise and may also have contributed to the significant overlap. It could be argued that the tendency to converge around a consensus narrative is illustrated by the fact that the card choices of the single female students from Seacole Secondary Academy were the most divergent.

However, although there was a common ‘core’ across ethnic groups, some small differences did emerge around the issue of diversifying the British narrative. The only group to include the EU and the Windrush in their story was the white Kosovan pupils

from Crick College, whose parents had come to Britain from continental Europe relatively recently. The students themselves suggested that their ethnic background and recent migration of their parents influenced their British narrative: ‘We focused on immigration a lot... I think that may have influenced us because our parents were refugees... Because we experienced the same thing’ (Male student, white Kosovan, Crick College). The female pupil from Seacole Secondary School was the only student to include Boudicca, the Crusades and Indian Independence in her British narrative. Her differing perspective may be explained by her strong sense that the British story needs diversifying:

History is always about white males. It just is. Most of my history lessons are about white males. Sure, that is history, but girls need history to show that white males do not dominate everything. We need people like Boudicca and maybe Cleopatra to show that we girls were and are able to achieve anything that we want to. I feel like we are not included in history as much and we are not taught in history as much. (Female student, black African, Seacole Secondary School)

This sense of a lack of diversity in the British narrative was echoed by a student of mixed Caribbean background, who pointed out:

We need to learn much more about Black history... do not think there is enough credit on Black history, to be honest... We have all the things about what British people did to Black people, but we do not have enough about how Black people influenced British society. (Male student, mixed Caribbean, Thomas Percival School)

And one of the female Asian students similarly noted: ‘I only know about India in the British Empire. We need to learn about more countries. We only learn about India, but we should learn about other countries.’ (Female student, Asian, Nightingale College)

Thus, whilst the most striking factor across students’ card selections was similarity, regardless of ethnicity, and whilst the choices overall pointed to an inward-looking narrative, there were a small number of instances where students from ethnic minority

groups expressed a frustration with the lack of diversity in the history curriculum. This is not limited only to British students: Grever et al (2011) concluded from their survey in England, Netherlands and France that ‘all students declare an interest in world history’ (p. 225) and recommend that, amongst other things, the topic of national history could profitably be enlarged ‘by teaching the history of mutual relations between the country of residence, the former colonies and the countries of migration’ and thereby including ‘outside perspectives on the national past’ (p. 226).

Analysis of reasons cited for card selection: a story of national pride or oppression and suffering?

Although at first glance, ethnic background seems to have had a limited impact on card selection, there is evidence suggesting that ethnicity did have some influence on the reasons behind the choices. Both white British and English groups mentioned ‘national strength’ more frequently as reason for their choices. (See chart 7 for details. We calculated the percentages by dividing the number of mentions with the number of cards selected for the ethnic minority and white British groups respectively.) This is consistent with Grever et al (2011) who found that ‘natives’ in Netherlands, England and France were more likely to display pride and connection with national history than ‘non-natives’ and that native boys were more likely to have this reaction than native girls. None of the groups from ethnic minority backgrounds mentioned ‘national strength’ as a major reason other than the all-female group of Asian students from Nightingale School which repeatedly cited this, while emphasising how Britain and its progressiveness stood in stark contrast with life and culture in the countries which their families originated from. They were extremely critical of what they considered to be outdated traditional values, particularly with regard to gender, which some of their wider families still subscribed to. This particular finding echoes Hawkey and Prior

(2011) who describe one participant, Seema, as keen to distance herself from aspects of her parents' culture. 'National strength' being mentioned as a major reason by only one ethnic minority group, which was also the only all-female group, may suggest that their views reflect the intersection of ethnicity and gender.

[Insert Chart 7 here.]

'Oppression and suffering' may, perhaps, again be explained by gender as well as ethnicity. Both the all-female group at Nightingale School and the female student from Seacole Secondary School mentioned it repeatedly whereas the mixed groups did not seem to regard it as quite as important. Overall, ethnic minority groups mentioned 'oppression and suffering' almost three times as often as the white British and English groups. The differences in reasoning might not come as a surprise, but they do suggest that gender and ethnic identity influence the rationale behind the British narrative young people construct. This is further supported by the fact that students from ethnic minority groups were almost twice as likely to give 'personal and family connections' as a reason for their choice, which again implies that their story is more likely to be influenced by their immediate family and community environment. Finally, 'progress' and especially the two sub-categories of 'women's rights' and 'social rights' being cited more frequently by ethnic minority groups again suggest that these particular perspectives of British history seem to matter more to students from an ethnic minority background.

However, across all groups, the most frequently cited reason for the selection of a historical individual or event was that it 'helps to explain the present'. Harris and Burn (2016) found that history teachers commonly regard gaining an understanding of the

world today as an important purpose of school history. Our students' reasoning of why certain events should be included in their narrative seems to echo their teachers' explanations of why the study of history matters.

The role of progress in students' British narratives: finished or unfinished?

[Insert Table 8 here.]

The most striking similarity between the British narratives which emerged from each group was that all centred around the expansion of rights and increasing equality, underpinned by notions of progress overall¹. One of the female Asian students from Nightingale School said: 'I think we can agree, every step, that we became more equal to one another – whether that be gender or race. That is a big part of history'. A white English student from Lister Secondary School noted:

That is a key part of a democracy as well and how Britain became the leading nation in the world showing other countries how to behave. Everyone is equal. Women vote, men vote. I think within all of these, it is Britain not trying to, but being the most powerful

¹ This is consistent with Hawkey and Prior's finding (2011). Lowenthal (2000) argues that this obsession with rights is an example of presentism where students' values become universal values - 'slavery and servitude are not historical conditions but unnatural perversions' (p. 66) whereas if they knew more history they would realise that inequality has been the norm for most of western civilization. In other words, there is a potential tension between drawing on the past to understand the present and only looking at the past through present eyes.

nation in the world and people in the other countries admiring and following what Britain are doing. (Male student, white English, Lister Secondary School)

Although all groups told a story of progress, the extent to which pupils believed that full equality had now been achieved, and therefore this particular journey had ended, varied.

One mixed Caribbean student certainly perceived full equality as a work in progress:

‘Britain has been built upon inequality throughout history, as time progresses, but all of those inequalities are being changed with women’s suffrage and Black history. It seems

like a lot of mistakes have been made and slowly they are fixing it’ (Male student,

mixed Caribbean, Thomas Percival School). However, another student with a Black

African background noted: ‘We will keep on discriminating. We always have a

scapegoat. We always have someone to blame.’ (Female student, black African, Seacole

Secondary School)

This more ambiguous story of an unfinished journey towards equality contrasts with the

‘happy ending’ which emerged from the white British groups, exemplified by this

student: ‘I think everything here is leading up to something amazing like being the best

country in the world.’ (Male student, white English, Lister Academy) These different

perspectives might in part be explained by the different ethnic backgrounds and

experiences of the students and echo the differences we found in students’ justifications

for their card choices.

Students from both ethnic minority and white British backgrounds, however, showed an awareness that not all British history was ‘pretty’, and that what they were learning at

school may be a ‘glossy’ version. One student from an African background commented:

‘I also feel that the British curriculum shows the pretty side of the history, and no

history is pretty. I want to see something that we did wrong, but we are not going to let everyone know... There is a dark past, but it is not made public for everyone.’ (Female students, black African, Seacole Secondary School) Similarly, one of the white British students stated:

In British history, when we are learning about it, I would like to learn what we did well and what we did wrong... we stopped it [slavery] and abolished it, but without actually saying it, that means that there was slavery in Britain and in fact we started it... we do not really learn about that. We just learn about how good it was, we stopped it, and how good it was we ended it. (Male students, white English, Lister Academy)

A positive message we take from this is students’ interest in analysing and critiquing the overall narrative which emerges from their history education.

Conclusion and Implications

Our research does not present compelling evidence that the ‘British stories’ narrated by students from minority ethnic backgrounds differ markedly from those told by their White British peers but it does suggest that this story is a relatively insular one which is strongly influenced by what students learn at school. The dominance of content which featured on the national curriculum for history back in 1991 adds weight to previous research about the ‘inertia’ of the history school curriculum in England (Harris & Reynolds, 2018). Furthermore, the most popular reason for choosing events across all groups regardless of ethnicity was a desire to use the past to explain the present and to support a general narrative about the expansions of rights over time. Finally, we found little evidence that students from a minority ethnic background feel disengaged from their study of the past. Overall, therefore, it is not possible to conclude that the British narratives constructed by students from ethnic minorities differed markedly from their White British peers, nor that clear differences emerged within the groups we selected. In this sense, the kinds of patterns emerging in Peck’s work (2010) or with bicultural

studies such as Epstein (2009), Sheehan et al (2017) and Barton & McCully (2012) are not evident in our work, a finding in England consistent with Hawkey and Prior (2011).

However, away from the headline data, our findings did indicate some interesting and important insights into the relationship between students' identity and their study of the past of which ethnicity was an important dimension. Whilst not influencing the choice of cards to any significant extent, some of the group discussions did reveal a dissatisfaction with the lack of diversity in the national narratives they are taught and this finding supports other research carried out within and beyond England (Harris & Reynolds, 2014; Grever et al, 2011). There were also interesting differences in the different reasons given for selecting the same cards, with 'oppression and suffering' a more likely reason cited by students with an ethnic minority background compared to the two white British groups who were more likely to cite national pride. This links to the finding that students from an ethnic minority background were more likely to see their narrative of the expansion of rights as unfinished. These differences 'around the edges' do suggest that ethnicity has an impact on students' interaction with the past, however muted compared with the influence of what they learn in school.

One of the most significant findings, however, related to the complexity of students' identity. Whilst the two white British groups were more likely to cite national pride as a reason for their choices, the all-female Asian group also cited this. This suggests a strong intersection of ethnicity and gender, as the group openly rejected the traditional gender expectations of their heritage and identified with – and welcomed – the greater opportunities for women that they associate with Britain. Like Hawkey and Prior

(2012), whose research led to similar findings, we think it is likely that the length of time students' families have lived in Britain is also a factor in their interaction with a 'British story' and although our research did not address this specifically, we do think it is fruitful area for further research. Overall, we believe that the different influences on students' identity are likely to be cumulative, with, for example, gender, ethnicity and time spent in Britain intersecting with other factors. This seems to make it even more imperative to teach a more diverse, outward-looking British history (and history generally). Modern British society is diverse and finding ways to recognize and indeed validate that diversity within our history classrooms seems to be pressing. By not engaging in more narratives beyond Britain or by not interrupting Gordon Brown's 'golden thread' with stories of migration and immigration viewed from different perspectives, we may be failing to support social cohesion. Part of this challenge is about overcoming the curriculum inertia that seems to exist in schools and equipping students to draw on more expansive and diverse histories which might 'belong' to the 'British Story' and indeed to debate quite openly what this 'belonging' might mean. We should also, however, be wary about drawing simplistic conclusions about the kinds of histories that students from ethnic minorities might want and benefit from: our sense from the students we talked to was that they would quickly recognize token gestures. We suggest that what students need is a more inclusive narrative or series of narratives, informed by an outward-looking perspective. Mohamud and Whitburn's (2014) work on teaching students about the 'invisible' history of Somali migrants to Britain suggests that stories about the latter are relevant to everyone. After teaching a sequence of lessons about why Somali migrants 'unpacked their suitcases in Britain', some white students explained they had enjoyed the lessons because it 'had taught us about our friends' (Mohamud & Whitburn, 2014, p. 45).

The final implication of our research draws on our finding that students are hungry to critique the narratives they learn and are very engaged when invited to stand back and consider what ‘belongs’ in the story of Britain. Although the majority of students presented a positive story of progress, they were nevertheless aware of multiple perspectives, of the potential dangers of focusing mainly on the positive elements of Britain’s past and were able – for the most part – to think critically about the past despite the fairly simplistic narrative of ‘rights’ they generally told. However, the students’ ability to think in more critical ways about a narrative framework that goes beyond collective memory seem to have little to do with the way that large-scale narratives are presented in school. Our students’ perception was often that they are being taught the ‘good bits’ and not getting quite the whole story. It would be misleading to characterise the way a British narrative is taught in all schools as ‘collective memory’ (Seixas, 2000) and indeed the presence of a disciplinary approach to history teaching in England, and in particular the concept of historical interpretations, may be partly responsible for students’ awareness of ‘versions’ of the past. However, it seems likely from our research that students are encouraged to think critically about the past within topics rather than across them. A chance to step back and consider the bigger picture of British history would enable the kinds of questions these students were asking each other to be posed in the classroom. Debating questions such as ‘whose British story is missing?’ or ‘is the story of Britain only one of gradually increasing rights?’ might go some way in helping young people make sense of and critique emerging narratives. In other words, it was clear to us that the students would enjoy the chance to be critical of narrative frameworks themselves and in fact that they would be eager to do this. This echoes Levesque’s plea, in a Canadian context, for the ‘narrative thinking process’ to be made ‘transparent’ in schools (Levesque, 2017, p. 237). It also

requires young people to step outside their own schematic frameworks and to engage metacognitively with the existence of multiple narratives. Wertsch (2017, p.153) has reminded us that young people are not ‘empty containers’ and we would suggest that a pedagogy that enables young people to confront their personal narrative frameworks, built from influences in and out of school is a key implication emerging from our research findings. We do not underestimate the challenges of doing this but it could profitably build on the successful work done by history teachers in England on the second order conceptual strand of ‘historical interpretations’.

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