



Runnymede Briefing: Westminster Hall Debate 'The teaching of migration in the history curriculum'

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Our Migration Story: background, context and findings

Context: race, demographics and history

- **Changing demographics** and school composition: nearly 17% of children aged 0–15 in England and Wales are from black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds. [BME young people](#) make up around 27% of state-funded primary and secondary school pupils in England. As Alexander and Weekes-Bernard have noted 'This not only raises questions about **what constitutes 'the nation'** in the National Curriculum, but how truly 'national' the reach of the National Curriculum is' (Alexander & Weekes-Bernard, [2015](#)).
- Despite Britain's increasingly diverse classrooms, history teaching in schools remains focused on **narrow, celebratory**, accounts of '**Our Island Story**' and has been dominated by a '[Hitler and the Henrys](#)' approach (Paton, 2014).
- The Royal Historical Society's (RHS) **Race, Ethnicity & Equality Report**, published in October 2018, highlights low up-take of history as a subject at school by BME pupils and low-levels of undergraduate admission to history for BME students. The data shows that racial and ethnic inequality affects history more acutely than most disciplines (Atkinson et al., [2018](#)).
- The RHS report also identifies the need to **widen the history taught** in schools and universities in order 'to challenge the racial foundations of the discipline and to reflect the full diversity of human histories.' (Atkinson et al., [2018](#)).

National Curriculum for history: recent changes

- Topics relating to British histories of migration and the British Empire have **appeared and disappeared** from the National Curriculum at the will of the governing party: original 1991 curriculum for history was redrafted in 1995, amended in 1999, again in 2007 and more recently in 2011 and 2014.
- In September 2014, the **new National Curriculum** for history launched. Through a broader and longer historical focus it, in theory, offers history teachers the freedom to integrate and teach more diverse content.
- However, there are **constraints** – the new National Curriculum for history homogenises and distinguishes between different national histories; there's little

explicit emphasis on racial and ethnic diversity within Britain; it downplays the diverse internal histories of 'Our Island Story' i.e. along lines of gender, class, sexuality, religion, region (Alexander & Weekes-Bernard, [2015](#))

- In terms of British histories of **migration and empire**, the 2014 National Curriculum for history states the following:
 - At KS2 (Primary) the only named statutory topics of study which relate to British histories of migration and empire are - Romans, Anglo-Saxons, Scots and Vikings.
 - At KS3 (11 – 14 years) the **Holocaust** is the only named statutory topic of study.

Beyond this, the National Curriculum for history simply provides a list of **'examples' as suggested topics of study**. These suggested examples include some signposting to topics relating to British histories of migration and empire - the Norman conquest; the first colony in America and first contact with India (1509-1745); Britain's transatlantic slave trade, the development of the British Empire (1745-1901); Indian independence and end of Empire (1901 to the present day). However, these suggested 'examples' are **curiously limited in scope**. They don't signpost to other possible topics of study, for example, the longstanding ethnic and racial diversity of migration and settlement in Britain, or to histories of British BME communities and related movements for equality and justice. There's no explicit signposting to the development of British colonies in Africa and the Caribbean, or to the nature and impact of British colonialism at home or abroad (from 1901 onwards), or to histories of decolonisation across the globe.
 - In September 2016, **the OCR and AQA exam boards launched new GCSE modules** on 'Migration to Britain' (each include some coverage of the British Empire). These modules are exciting and innovative opportunities for teachers to engage young people with these important British histories. However, history is a **non-compulsory** subject of study at GCSE, the new modules remain **optional** for those selecting GCSE history, and any widespread take-up of new modules is hampered by ongoing **structural barriers** (outlined below).

History Lessons: findings from our previous work with schools

- Over the last 10 years, [The Runnymede Trust](#), in partnership with Prof. Claire Alexander (Manchester) and Prof. Joya Chatterji (Cambridge), has led a number history projects to help teachers engage young people in schools with more **expansive, representative and inclusive** histories of Britain.
- **Previous projects** include the [Banglasteries](#) website/teaching resource and the [Making Histories](#) project. The latter engaged 300 young people of all backgrounds, from across the country, in conducting oral history research to uncover the often untold histories of migration in their communities and neighbourhoods.
- Lessons which emerged from these projects with teachers and schools (Alexander & Weekes-Bernard, [2015](#)):
 - there was a **strong appetite** among young people, of all backgrounds, for history teaching that reflected a broader range of voices and experiences (through more inclusive content and methodologies).

- teachers displayed an interest in engaging with more representative histories of Britain, but there was a **lack of confidence, support and resources** for those who wanted to embed these histories in their practice.
- teachers felt constrained by the increasing **demands on their time** and energies in a fast-changing teaching climate.

Our Migration Story (OMS): reframing British history

- Following on from the above projects, the OMS website was created and launched in 2016 in direct response to requests from teachers for **classroom-ready materials** on British histories of migration and empire.
- OMS was built in collaboration with over **80** academic and local historians, local and national museums and archives (incl. Imperial War Museum, The National Archives, Black Cultural Archives, V&A, Migration Museum), exam boards, teachers and professional history associations. It is designed for use by teachers, young people and the general public.
- The website is a **'one-stop shop' on Britain's long migration history**, covering the period from AD43 to the present day. The site presents the stories of the **people, ideas and objects**, from near and far, which have travelled to shape the British Isles over the last 2,000 years. Crucially, it aims to connect **academic research** in British history with the school curriculum.
- The site is made up of a series of **case studies** ('migration stories'), each driven by historical research and primary source material.
- It contains a separate **section for schoolteachers**, with downloadable lesson plans, historical enquiries and guidance on how to approach the topic of migration in the classroom.
- The site challenges users to **rethink British history** by:
 - capturing histories of ordinary and otherwise marginalised Britons
 - charting histories of welcome and inclusion, as well as of rejection, exclusion, inequality and violence
 - placing histories and conditions of global connectedness at its core
 - making British identity inseparable from two thousand years of migration & settlement
- Since its launch in September 2016 the site has had over 142,000 'hits', from across the world.
- The project has received **three national awards** - Community Integration Award (Research Champion) 2017, Royal Historical Society Public History Prize (Best Online Resource) 2018, and Guardian University Award (Research Impact) 2019.
- Our work on OMS has led to **further collaborations**, including (but not limited to) a pilot teacher-training scheme on migration and empire in collaboration with the TIDE project (Liverpool), a public event in partnership with IHR (400+ attendees) 'Where do we fit in?' Black and Asian British History on the Curriculum, and the Making Manchester oral **history** project in collaboration with Olympias Music Foundation.

Findings from OMS: structural barriers & ongoing challenges

- Since the launch of OMS in 2016, the project team has been working with teachers and teacher training organisations to disseminate the site, explore how

it used and identify what training needs are necessary to embed this content into mainstream history curricula.

- **Despite** new (optional) GCSE courses from OCR and AQA on histories of migration to Britain (and empire), the relative openness of the history curriculum up to age 14, an increasingly marketised school system that has granted many schools more autonomy in shaping their own curricula, the teaching of British histories of migration and empire remain largely dependent on the **interest and inclination of curriculum leads and individual teachers**.
- In our many conversations, focus groups and workshops with teachers, we found:
 - A pipeline problem - teachers tend to teach the history they've been taught at school and university. **What they don't know, they don't teach**. This perpetuates a vicious circle that sees teaching in schools broadly unchanged since the early 90s and increasingly out of step with young people's needs to understand their world and society.
 - Among teachers who have an interest in broadening curriculum content there is a **lack of confidence**, which prevents them from engaging with topics they perceive to be difficult' or 'sensitive'. This reflects the findings of the [Ajegbo review](#) of 2007.
 - **Few training opportunities** exist to support teachers' development around either of the above issues – building subject knowledge and building confidence.
 - Teachers **exercise caution** in the selection of new teaching topics for fear of a drop in attainment.
 - Some teachers suggested that histories of migration and empire were not relevant to them, as their students weren't **the 'right' demographic**. This reflects ongoing misconceptions that histories of migration and empire are only of interest, and relevance, to BME students. There is a great deal of work to be done to move away from the false notion that histories of migration and empire are 'Black history' or 'BME history'. Histories of migration and empire are **British histories**, which we all share and should all know.
 - It necessary to ensure that British histories of migration and empire, where they are taken up in schools, are integrated into teaching on **mainstream British history** and not relegated to the periphery, as tokenistic or celebratory content (i.e. for 'Black History Month'). **False framing** of these histories in the curriculum reinforces the artificial separation between 'their' history and 'our' history, between 'us' and 'them'.
 - Ongoing conversations about the make-up of the school curriculum, especially the history curriculum, need to be better connected with wider campaigns to '**decolonise**' the curriculum, which are gathering momentum across university campuses (not just in history, but also in sociology, politics, geography, social policy).

The debate: key issues to underline

- Our work with teachers and young people suggests that the teaching of British history in our schools continues to provide students with **an incomplete version of our national story** and is far removed from developments in academic research on British history.

- It is necessary to **reframe** understandings of British history. To do this we need to move beyond **artificial binaries** between 'World' history and 'British' history, 'white' history and 'black' history, 'BME' history and 'British' history. **BME/Black history is British history** and **British history is World history** (Alexander, Chatterji & Weekes Bernard, 2012).
- The OMS website offers a **tool** to aid this reframing in schools. The website seeks both to **globalise British history** (to make Britain's historic global connections and their causations visible) and to **localise British history** (to resurrect histories of ordinary and otherwise marginalised people and places).
- The 2014 National Curriculum for history does, in theory, offer space and freedom for teachers to integrate a broad range of topics at KS3. However, the inclusion of more 'diverse' curriculum content, including British histories of migration and empire, relies heavily on **teacher interest, selection and expertise**.
- A number of ongoing structural constraints, in terms of **teaching resources, teacher training and support**, remain unresolved (Alexander & Weekes-Bernard, 2015).
- There is need for better **teacher-training and CPD provision**, to encourage history teachers to make informed choices about their curriculum selections and to support them to deliver broader content.
- Given the fragmentary nature of the school system and the theoretical openness of the National Curriculum for history, it is difficult to know what's actually going on in history lessons (esp. at KS3). There is **need for more research** into what topics are being delivered at primary and secondary level, and how. This information is key, in order to gather an accurate picture of the current landscape and to tailor the interventions necessary to ensure that **all young people** in Britain are given the opportunity to engage with more **accurate and representative** British histories.

The Westminster Hall Debate '**The teaching of migration in the History curriculum**', for which this briefing was prepared, took place in Westminster on Tuesday 18th June at 2.30pm. For the full video recording, click [here](#). For the full transcript, click [here](#).

An **online version** of this briefing can be found on The Runnymede Trust website (www.runnymedetrust.org → 'Publications & Resources' → 'Policy Responses')