

# Curriculum coherence and teachers' decision-making in Scottish high school history syllabi

Debates over which historical content should be compulsory for study in the school curriculum are a common feature of education systems across the globe. These debates invariably weigh the perceived benefits to social cohesion of a 'common core' of knowledge against the perceived risks to democracy of government-sanctioned 'official knowledge'. Scotland has, perhaps, taken an extreme position on this debate by specifying no mandatory historical content in its social studies curriculum. This paper uses 21 interviews with Scottish history teachers to explore how schools use this curricular autonomy: which historical periods they choose to teach and why.

The paper suggests that, without access to theoretical debates about the nature of historical knowledge, schools fall back on instrumental justifications for content selection within the curriculum. The result in many cases is an extremely narrow and fragmented syllabus in which pupil preference, teacher interests and the logistics of timetabling guide content selection.

The paper concludes that the formulation of coherent school-level history curricula is dependent on the fostering agency among a theoretically-informed teaching profession.

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Led by supranational discourses emerging from the OECD (2005), the last two decades have seen a shift in the curriculum policy of many countries away from lists of prescribed 'core knowledge' towards curricula which emphasise generic competencies and transferable skills (Whitty, 2010; Young & Muller, 2010). Also explicit in these curricula is the positioning of teachers as curriculum makers (Philippou, Kontovourki, & Theodorou, 2014) who, by virtue of their familiarity with the context within which they work, are best placed to select the knowledge and areas of study which will enable their students to demonstrate these skills and competencies. Scotland's *Curriculum for Excellence* is an archetype of such curriculum models (Priestley & Biesta, 2013), appealing to laudable aspirations for children to become 'confident individuals, successful learners, responsible citizens and effective contributors' (Scottish Executive, 2004) while intentionally leaving open the question of what such children might need to know.

The issue of knowledge selection is, perhaps, more fraught in the subject of history than anywhere else in the curriculum. As a school subject, history has a long tradition of usurpation by distasteful regimes which emphasise national narratives greatness or betrayal to buttress the prevailing ideology (Ferro, 1984). In those jurisdictions where a common core of knowledge is mandated, these questions of knowledge frequently erupt in public 'history wars' (Nash, Crabtree, & Dunn, 1997; Taylor & Guyver, 2011) between those who emphasise the perceived benefits to social cohesion of a 'common core' of knowledge, against those who caution against state-sanctioned 'official knowledge'. Although public history wars can be unedifying, their intensity reflects public interest in the school curriculum as a site of collective memory (Nora, 1989), an interest which does not simply disappear when curriculum-making takes place out of public view. While a significant body of research exists analysing state-mandated history curricula, those jurisdictions where curricular decision making has been devolved to the school level are less represented in the literature. This imbalance perhaps reflects the methodological challenges and problems of access inherent in studying such systems. Put simply, it is easier to analyse a single national curriculum than the individual curricula of possibly hundreds of schools.

The limited empirical research on how schools operationalise their curricular autonomy with respect to history has contributed to a public debate which breaks along familiar ideological lines: while progressives emphasise teacher professionalism and the affordances of child-centred curriculum design, the right insists on parents' 'right to know' what their children are taught (Quicke, 1988; Dale, 1989). This paper aims to move this debate out of its ideological dead-end by offering some empirical evidence about how teachers use the autonomy they are afforded.

This paper asks two superficially simple questions: what history do schools in Scotland choose to teach and what criteria are applied when making these decisions? While, on the one hand, these questions invite descriptive responses, these responses reveal the discourses (and ideals) which inform teachers' decision-making and also the structural conditions which serve to constrain these. The paper begins with an overview of the Scottish education system before reviewing the relevant literature in relation to this. Following a brief methodological clarification, it presents an overview of the history curriculum of 21 Scottish schools before presenting the reasons offered by teachers for making these curricular choices. The paper concludes by reflecting on the implications of these findings for Scottish schools and the field of history education.

### **The Scottish Context**

Scotland's *Curriculum for Excellence* identifies two educational phases within children's schooling: a 'Broad General Education' (BGE) (ages 3-14) which emphasises breadth, and a senior phase (ages 14-17) in which children study a smaller number of subjects for national examinations administered by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). In the majority of Scottish schools, children are invited to choose subjects for senior phase study at the end of their second year of high school (known as S2), and although official figures do not exist it is likely that some 50% of Scottish children study no history after this point<sup>1</sup>. Thus, the question of what curricular decisions teachers

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<sup>1</sup> Since curriculum decisions are taken at a school level, no nationwide figures exist for the numbers of students who continue their studies in history after it ceases to be compulsory, but an earlier survey (n=101) of

make about history in the first two years of high school is also a question about the totality of the historical education that some 50% of Scottish children receive.

Reflecting recent supranational trends in curriculum policy (Priestley & Biesta, 2013), *Curriculum for Excellence* leaves open the question of what specific historical content children should study. In place of a list of mandated content or specified topics, the curriculum offers *Experiences and Outcomes (Es and Os)* to which all children are entitled. With respect to history (more properly *People, Past Events and Societies*) the only real guidance towards the selection of content is the requirement for children to study 'the development of the Scottish nation' (SOC 3-02) and 'migration to and from Scotland' (SOC 3-03). While the only guidance which is not focused exclusively on Scotland has students 'comparing Scotland with a society in Europe or elsewhere' (SOC 3-04). In addition to these mandated themes, it is expected that students will study other aspects of history of the schools' choosing. Scotland's curriculum is, therefore, a high-autonomy and high trust model in which teachers are assumed to be best placed to decide what students should learn. As Ormond has written about the New Zealand curriculum, such models contain an 'unstated implication of high expectations... that suitable historical times and places, the breadth and depth of topic engagement and the sequencing of historical contexts will be carefully considered and accommodated' (Ormond, 2016, p. 603).

## Literature Review

### *History teachers as curriculum makers*

There is a long tradition in the UK of history teachers as curriculum makers which originated in the work of Stenhouse (1968), and continued through the efforts of the Schools Council History Project and its successors (Schools' History Project, 1976). This tradition of

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teachers yielded a school-by-school average of 45%. We have more reliable figures for the numbers of students who are presented for examinations. In 2018, the number of students taking the National 5 qualification in history (14,473) was around a third of that taking the same examination in English (44,477) (SQA, 2018). Since the number taking the subject and not sitting an examination is likely to be greater than this (and given the 45% indicated by the survey), we can infer that the estimate given here of 50% is a fair approximation.

school curriculum autonomy came under scrutiny in the 1980s as New Right commentators attacked a perceived ideological bias in teachers' curriculum-making and demanded statutory national curricula as a remedy (Crawford, 1995; Phillips, 1998). Although the initial introduction of national curricula came as a something of a shock to history teachers, they were soon able to exercise considerable curricular autonomy within an overarching statutory framework (Woolley, 2018). The value of this autonomy to teachers can be seen (in England, at least) when it was threatened by a new more prescriptive curriculum in 2013. Smith (2019) argues that English history teachers were able to mobilise sophisticated theoretically informed defences of their autonomy against incursions by the state. Also in England, Harris and Burn found similar resistive attitudes but were more sceptical about its theoretical hinterland:

‘there is a clear sense of what teachers do not want in a curriculum, with some indication, but rather less clarity, about what they do want... the theoretical debate about the curriculum and its implications for content selection, particularly the role of frameworks, does not appear to be part of many teachers' conscious reflections’ (Harris & Burn, 2016, p. 539).

Again in England, Harris and Reynolds (2018) found that the level of conceptual clarity about content selection and curriculum design differs enormously between schools, but that an untheorized episodic approach which jumps between unconnected ‘topics’ dominates in many schools. A comparative study of New Zealand and England concluded bleakly that ‘data from both countries reveals that few of the teachers consider the overall shape of what students would learn when planning’ (Harris & Ormond, 2018, p. 12). In New Zealand, Ormond (2016) found that the considerable freedom accorded to teachers there resulted in a curriculum which was oriented solely towards the demands of external assessments, with little consideration of what knowledge might be useful to children and why.

Beyond history specifically, there has been a burgeoning interest in the question of how teachers have adjusted to curricula which position them as active curriculum makers (Priestley & Biesta, 2013). Priestley, *et al.* (2015) have argued that conceptions of teachers as curriculum makers are bedevilled by older sociological notions of 'agency' as a capacity that individuals hold in opposition to structures. If agency is conceived in this way, they argue, then the simple act of reducing structures will allow greater space for this agency to manifest itself. In contrast to this approach, they argue for an ecological understanding of agency in which agency is conceived as something that teachers achieve rather than a capacity that they possess. Agency is achieved not through the absence of structures, but through an interplay between teachers and the contexts within which they operate. In Berlin's terms (1961), agency requires a positive conception of freedom as 'freedom to' rather than simply 'freedom from'.

In a similar vein, Philippou *et al.* (2014) examined teacher responses to increased curricular autonomy in Cyprus and found that teachers consciously positioned themselves in relation to the curriculum as either spectators, receivers, implementers or reformers. Teachers adopting each position seemed to read and understand curriculum change differently, some appreciated the autonomy they were given and capitalised on it, others continued to adopt a passive role as curriculum receivers. It is, it seems, one thing to give teachers their freedom, it is quite another for teachers to capitalise on the autonomy that this freedom affords. At a minimum, teachers need access to two key debates: about the purpose of their subject and about the knowledge which children might need to meet this purpose.

### ***Why teach children history?***

A consideration of aims and purposes is an essential first step in any curriculum planning: discussion of the 'what' and 'how' of learning must be a corollary of the 'why'? Wilschut (2009) has suggested that there are two principal positions with respect to the purposes of history teaching: a 'cultural' conception of the curriculum which believes that a shared national narrative is an essential curricular outcome; and an 'educational approach' underpinned by an ostensibly depoliticised view of

what it means to learn history. Recent work has further dissected the notion of an 'educational approach' to the purposes of the history curriculum. Seixas (2017) has suggested that there are two traditions in history education which he terms 'historical thinking' and 'historical consciousness'. For Seixas, historical thinking – which aims to teach children something of the historical method - has dominated curriculum planning in England and Canada. This tradition argues that curricula should seek to develop children's metahistorical understanding (with respect to organisational concepts such as change, causation and evidence) and has offered progression models to show how this might be scaffolded (see, for example, (Lee & Ashby, 2000)). Historical consciousness, on the other hand, emphasises the question of how individuals in the present relate to the past. This tradition dominates in the German-speaking world and considers the ways in which the past intrudes into the present, and how individuals comprehend and assimilate these intrusions. While historical thinking is thoroughly modernist in its outlook – aspiring towards a more disciplinary 'correct' account of the past – historical consciousness is influenced more by postmodernist doubt, placing the individual, rather than disciplinary norms, at the 'centre' of history<sup>2</sup>.

As Levesque and Clark (2018) have shown, both traditions have advantages and limitations. While the German tradition considers accommodates the ontological questions of postmodernity, operationalising the concept of 'historical consciousness' so that it might be taught and assessed has proven problematic. On the other hand, the relative simplicity of the progression models offered by English researchers reify disciplinary rigour as a path to 'objectivity' and in doing so necessarily marginalise the formation of the child's own relationship with the past. Recent work has sought to harmonise the traditions. In Canada, Duquette has proposed a tentative assessment schema for historical consciousness (Duquette, 2015), while in England, Lee has sought to combine his earlier

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<sup>2</sup> In their work on traditions in history teaching, Levesque and Clark (2018) largely adopt this bifurcation between Anglophone and Germanophone traditions but propose a third position emphasising democratic citizenship which has been influential in the US. This tradition is influenced by more sociocultural conceptions of education and has received its fullest treatment in Barton and Levstik's *Teaching history for the common good* (2004).

work on progression in children's historical thinking with Jörn Rüsen's work on historical consciousness (Lee, 2004). While Lee retains an avowedly modernist commitment to the historical method, he borrows Rüsen's 'disciplinary matrix' to theorise the ways in which humans relate to the past. For Rüsen, our need to understand history within our everyday life (*lebenspraxis*) is the spur for investigating the past. These investigations - completed in disciplinarily rigorous ways - give rise, in turn, to a new curiosity about the past. For Rüsen (and for Lee), the result is that the individual comes to 'orientate' him- or herself within time. In doing so, Rüsen's model brings together the seemingly irreconcilable domains of academic method and natural human inquisitiveness. Lee proposes 'historical literacy' as a legitimate curricular aim and outlines three dimensions in relation to this (2011, p. 65):

1. An understanding of the *discipline* of history,
2. A set of personal dispositions based on respect; both for the notion of truth and for people in the past
3. A *usable* historical past on different scales which allows the user to orientate him- or herself in time.

Seixas (2017) identifies the last of these three aims – temporal orientation – as the key difference between the German and English traditions. However, this orientation is more than simply identifying oneself as a product of historical inheritances, it is also future-oriented. In Duquette's words, historical consciousness is 'the understanding of the present, thanks to the interpretation of the past which allows us to consider the future' (Duquette, 2015, cited in Seixas, 2017, p. 63). In other words, the pasts which one draws on influence the futures that one can imagine; such a conception has profound implications for children's education.

As Nora (1989) notes, the past is encoded in the present through *lieux de memoire* (sites of memory) such as statues, battlefields, myths and symbols. Of these sites of memory, the school curriculum is significant for at least two reasons: first, it carries the de facto approval of the state. Second, its audience is both 'captive' and cognitively immature. These considerations mean that

theoretical discussions about the purposes of history education can never be the last word in curriculum planning: the what and how carry great significance too.

### ***What substantive history should children be taught?***

For a long time, the question of what aspects of history should be studied in what depth was underexplored. Up until the 1970s, this was simply because the answer seemed obvious: there was, in each country a 'great tradition' or – in the words of John Slater (1989), an 'inherited consensus' - about what should be taught. More recently, debates over curriculum content – the 'common core' in a US context - have become more widespread and adversarial (Foster & Crawford, 2006; Taylor & Guyver, 2011; Smith J. , *Discursive Dancing: Traditionalism and Social Realism in the 2013 English History Curriculum Wars*, 2017). While there is widespread concern about the potential implications of state-mandated 'core-content', history educators have been criticised for avoiding the question of knowledge selection entirely. In The Netherlands, Wilschut (2009) has argued that many history curriculum researchers have 'ended up in considering selection of content an irrelevant matter' and cautions that 'if one does not worry about matters of selection, the likely result is that the obvious will be chosen' (p126). While one of the pioneers of 'Historical thinking' in England has complained that,

'[at present] the majority of adolescents leave school with bits-and-pieces of knowledge that add up to very little and fail to validly inform, or even connect with, their perceptions of present realities' (Shemilt, 2009, p. 142).

A curriculum which aspires to historical literacy (or historical consciousness) desires that children be able to make sense of the ways in which the past is refracted through the prism of the present. Such a curriculum, therefore, requires that children construct what Lee (2011) calls 'usable historical pasts', a mental framework which allows new knowledge to be assimilated and contextualised. The dilemma for history educators is obvious: how to design a curriculum affords children this framework, but which does not reproduce dominant master narratives. What limited empirical evidence we have suggests that the majority of children will not construct such frameworks

organically (Foster, Lee, & Ashby, 2008; Kropman, van Boxtel, & van Drie, 2015; Blow, Rogers, & Smith, 2015). The creation of usable mental models is, therefore, something which teachers may need to attend to specifically.

Consequently, with respect to curriculum content it is likely that the key question is not 'what should children be taught?' but rather, 'how can what we teach best serve to develop children's historical consciousness?' Chapman and Wilschut (2015) have highlighted how this search for 'joined-up history' is fertile ground for new theorisation about how historical knowledge is conceived in the curriculum. There has been a growing interest in the need for teachers to attend to the development of children's 'frameworks of knowledge' (Shemilt & Howson, 2011). These 'big picture' versions of the past afford the 'mental furniture' which allow children to orientate themselves in time and to assimilate new knowledge about the past (Lee & Howson, 2009).

The practical difficulties associated with developing these frameworks mean that little empirical research has taken place in this field. Action research projects in this area are intriguing, but frequently too small scale to be compelling (Carroll, 2016; Nuttall, 2013; Rogers, 2016). In the Netherlands, children are assessed on their 'chronological reference knowledge' and the curriculum is built around a loose framework of periodisation which children are expected to learn (Wilschut, 2009; 2015). However, as Lee and Howson (2009, p. 215) write, 'we do not yet know how to teach a historical 'big picture' that is open enough to avoid claiming to be the sole story, but coherent enough to be used'. Furthermore, other researchers have questioned whether too great an emphasis on big pictures risks robbing history of its human dimension which may, then, alienate children from the subject (Barton, 2002; 2015).

Renewed attention has also been paid to substantive historical knowledge by another group of English researchers whom I have elsewhere termed 'Traditional Social Realists' (2017). These researchers value recent research into large scale frameworks of the past but argue that initial meaning can only be given to these frameworks through careful attention to substantive concepts

such as 'empire', 'nation' and 'factory' (Counsell, 2017). Fordham (2016) has argued that more attention should be paid to the ways in which pupils develop increasingly sophisticated definitions of these terms through structured teaching of a range of examples.

Research in history education is coalescing around a consensus that substantive knowledge is important, but there remains disagreement about why. In more centralised jurisdictions – like the Netherlands – these debates are of import only to academics and policymakers. However, in jurisdictions – like Scotland – where responsibility for knowledge selection is devolved to schools, these challenging questions are being asked of ordinary classroom teachers. While the tradition of emphasising historical thinking which emerged in England in the 1970s has helped teachers to assess and advance the sophistication of children's historical thinking, such an approach frames the child more as a student than a citizen. However, historical learning does not end with school: history intrudes into our lives in all kinds of ways from all kinds of *lieux de memoire*. The concept of historical consciousness considers the child's life beyond school – what will he or she need to know about the past to make sense of the present? It used to be thought that historical thinking, properly taught, could act as a prophylactic against these false histories but there is less confidence about such a view now. The question of which histories children should learn is a fraught one but not one that can be safely ignored.

## **Method**

This paper draws on data from semi-structured interviews with teachers working in 21 schools (19 state-funded and two independent) from 13 Scottish local authority areas. The paper emerges from a project researching history teachers' epistemologies, which was granted ethical clearance by Stirling University and funded by the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland. These interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were not focused exclusively on the research questions discussed in this paper, but instead ranged across many aspects of teachers ideas and practices. The data presented here draw on responses to three questions that all interviewees were asked:

1. 'At what stage can children discontinue studying history in your school and how much time would these children spend in history lessons?'
2. 'What topics does your school teach in this compulsory phase?'
3. 'Why were these topics chosen?'

Volunteers for interview were found through an open call on appropriate Facebook pages and through the mailing list of the Scottish Association of Teachers of History (SATH). This convenience sampling approach posed the potential for selection bias: that members of these groups might be inherently more engaged in debates around history education and therefore not representative of the profession more widely. Nevertheless, the sample of 21 schools was large enough to ensure a range of teacher backgrounds and school contexts were represented: 11 of the 21 teachers had taught for ten years or less, while 9 of the 21 teachers were female. Sixteen schools were in areas categorised as 'urban' by the Scottish government and 5 were in 'rural' or 'remote' areas.

Each school/ interview was assigned a number for analysis purposes. These numbers were assigned in order of the proportion of each school's intake drawn from the most deprived 20% of Scotland's neighbourhoods. Initially, this was done to gauge if curriculum and school intake were linked in any way, since *Curriculum for Excellence* places a high value on the suitability of curriculum to school context. While there was no apparent link this coding of schools by intake deprivation was retained<sup>3</sup> (see Table One).

No.	Pseudonym <sup>4</sup>	M/F	Years of teaching experience	School Type	No. on roll	Proportion of students drawn from areas of deprivation <sup>5</sup> (1=low, 10=high)
1		M	11-15	Independent non-faith	Not known	Not known

<sup>3</sup> This table draws on Scottish Government Schools Census Data, but some data has been re-presented to preserve the confidentiality of participants. For example, clarifying which participant schools were in 'remote areas' would have made it too easy to identify participants.

<sup>4</sup> To minimise confusion, pseudonyms have only been given to those teachers who are quoted elsewhere in the paper.

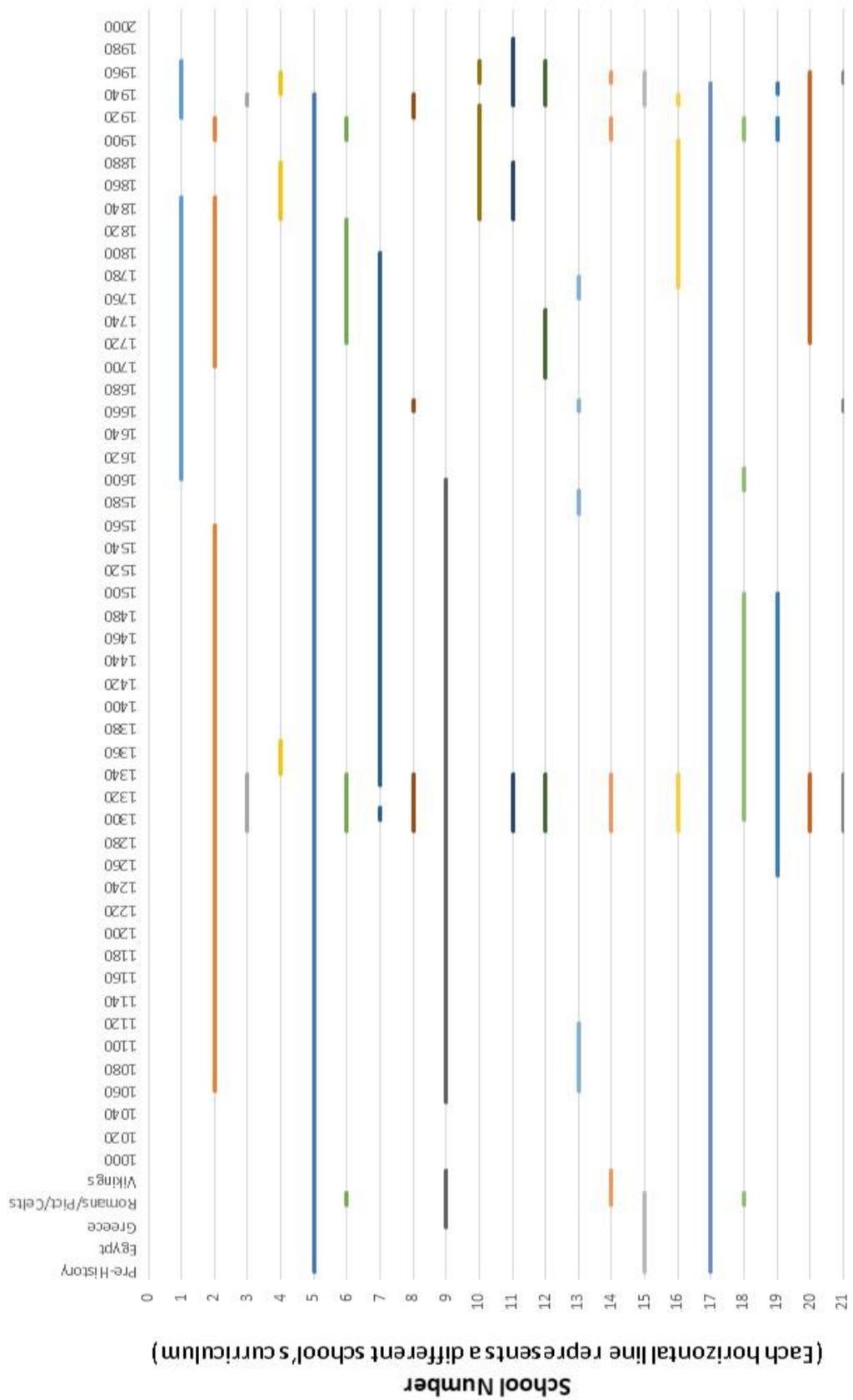
<sup>5</sup> This score is derived from the proportion of the school's intake which is drawn from the most deprived 20% of neighbourhoods in Scotland (according to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation). To give more precise figures would risk making the schools identifiable.

2		M	15+	Independent non-faith	Not known	Not known
3		M	<6	State non-faith	850-1050	1
4	Steven	M	<6	State non-faith	>1050	2
5	Rebecca	F	15+	State non-faith	850-1050	2
6	Charles	M	6-10	State non-faith	>1050	2
7	Lauren	F	11-15	State non-faith	650-849	3
8		M	15+	State non-faith	650-849	3
9		F	15+	State non-faith	>1050	3
10	Ben	M	<6	State Roman Catholic	>1050	4
11	Elizabeth	F	6-10	State Roman Catholic	>1050	4
12		F	<6	State Roman Catholic	850-1050	5
13	Tony	M	<6	State non-faith	>1050	5
14		M	6-10	State non-faith	>1050	5
15	Chris	M	11-15	State non-faith	>1050	6
16	Jenny	F	<6	State non-faith	850-1050	7
17	David	M	<6	State non-faith	850-1050	7
18		F	<6	State Roman Catholic	650-849	7
19	Mary	F	6-10	State non-faith	850-1050	9
20		M	15+	State non-faith	<650	10
21		F	15+	State Roman Catholic	650-849	10

Once each school had been anonymised with a number, its curriculum was plotted on a timeline to allow analysis of the periods covered in the compulsory phase of education (Figure 1). Each participant school is represented by a horizontal line on the chart, while gaps in the line indicate that the period is not covered as part of the school's compulsory history curriculum. Like all attempts to represent rich data in a simplified form, the chart has significant shortcomings and it is important to acknowledge them here.

FIGURE ONE

Graph showing the periods covered by each school's compulsory history curriculum



First, the periods before 1000 AD are necessarily telescoped, giving the initial impression that the millennia of Egyptian Civilisation lasted just twenty years. This representational compromise was made to allow easier comparison between the far-more-numerous periods in the modern era. Second, topics which were not chronologically structured (i.e. neither a depth study nor a survey) cannot be displayed on the graph. For example, four schools (3, 10, 14, 16) taught units on ‘What is History?’ which shared the disciplinary foundations of the subject with students, while one school (15) used its study of pre-history to address ‘Big Questions’ about humankind. Finally, schools taking innovative approaches to commonplace topics cannot have this innovation represented. Consequently, School 2’s study of ‘Changing notions of kingship in Medieval Europe’ appears as a simple survey, and School 14’s study of ‘Men and Women of World War One’ seems a straightforward depth study shorn of its gender history dimension. Despite these caveats, the chart is still useful in showing two aspects of curriculum design – the overall architecture (whether depth studies or surveys are favoured) and the presence or absence of particular time periods.

Finally, the question of why schools chose the topics they had was considered by drawing primarily on participant responses to Question 3. However, given the nature of semi-structured interviews, some respondents provided information relevant to this question at other points in their interview. Initially, these were coded in nVivo under a single code (Reasons for Curriculum Choice) before these were disaggregated using codes which emerged inductively from the responses.

## **Results**

On average, schools in the sample spent 50 minutes per week on history (range= 38-80 minutes) and in 20 of the 21 research schools, students were able to stop studying history at the end of the second year of high school. Consequently, for the 50% of students who opted to discontinue studying history at the earliest opportunity, an average of just 60 hours of their ~6000 hour secondary education was spent on the subject. Hereafter, results are presented in two sub-sections: firstly a very

brief discussion of the substantive content that schools teach and second, a discussion of the reasons why these topics and approaches are favoured by schools.

### ***What substantive content do the participant schools teach?***

Two broad approaches to curriculum architecture are evident in Figure 1. In six schools (2, 5, 7, 9, 15, 17) a broad chronological sweep (of five centuries or more) is favoured, while in the others a more episodic structure is used, leading to long chronological gaps. School 3, for example, covers only The Scottish Wars of Independence, World War Two, The Holocaust and an Independent Study. While in School 4, pupils learn also learn about four disconnected topics: The Black Death, The American West, World War One and The Cold War. Although these are the most extreme examples, the graph shows that this approach of studying the past through short detailed bursts dominates in Scotland. Inevitably, some periods are more popular than others. The Scottish Wars of Independence (16/21 schools) sits alongside the Twentieth Century (18/21 schools) as the most commonly taught periods in Scottish schools. Eight schools taught World War Two and The Holocaust, and several taught Civil Rights in the US.

### ***Why do the schools teach what they do?***

The second research question concerns the reasons for teacher's curricular decision-making. These results will be considered under two subheadings: those studying overview-based curricular and those following episodic depth-study based curricula.

#### *Justifying overview-based curricular*

Six schools taught a longitudinal study with a focus longer than three centuries. In three cases, this consisted of a development of a particular theme (medicine or kingship), in two, a straightforward date-bound survey was taught and in one a Big History approach (see below) was adopted. These schools were clear that the need to develop children's chronological awareness was the basis for their choice.

I like to do things on a sort of thematic basis so that they get this concept of chronology because I think that that's often where we fall down in first and second year we tend to do a topic on industrial children, a topic on the Black Death or whatever, and it becomes... the kids don't know whether the Black Death comes before industrial children or whether the Romans come after medieval times or whatever and I think it's important for them to get a chronology of events as well.

**Rebecca, School 5**

we look at Scotland 1300 to 1800 and we try and make it a unit that is cohesive chronologically and in terms of skills to give them a broad understanding of a time period.

**Lauren, School 7**

[medicine through time] allows us to have a wide range, a wide chronology, so you know, going right back to ancient medicine, ancient Greece, ancient Egypt, all the way up to Burke and Hare, then Edward Jenner and those sort of people. So I think that's the first thing there is that it allows you to tell a good story. And the other thing as well is that I think you can't specialise in history at that stage, it gives them tasters of what was going on in different areas

**David, School 17**

All these respondents are highlighting the importance of children's ability to 'orientate themselves in time' (Lee, 2011), there is, however, an assumption that teaching periods in chronological order was enough to cement this chronological understanding, an assumption which research suggests is dubious (Shemilt, 2009). David's response is perhaps the one which comes closest to Rüsen's idea of historical consciousness. In hoping that children have 'tasters' of the past, he is asserting the value of chronological reference points of the kind Wilschut (2009) describes, but the word 'tasters' also implies the whetting of children's appetite for the past. This emphasis on pupils'

personal relationship with the past is reminiscent of Rösen's matrix in which everyday curiosity is the spur for more disciplined study of the past.

School 15 was an outlier: in S1 (first year high school), it teaches fully integrated social studies based around 'Big Questions.' Chris, who led the design of the curriculum said he was influenced by 'the Big History that came out from the David Christian stuff and the Bill Gates Foundation.' Students, he said,

'do a fair bit of investigation looking at early man. We do civilisations, so we focus in on the Macedonian Empire, Alexander the Great, we touch a bit on the Romans, Egyptians, so fairly superficially.'

It should be noted, though, that this 'big history' differs from the kind of 'big picture history' espoused by Shemilt, Howson and others. Big History (Christian, 2004) considers the totality of the past from the creation of the universe until the present, in doing so it draws on many more disciplinary traditions than a traditional history curriculum such as cosmology, anthropology and evolutionary biology.

#### *Justifying depth-study-based curricular*

In contrast with the positive arguments around 'chronological understanding' offered by those schools which taught overviews, most schools which taught history through episodic depth studies gave exculpatory justifications for their subject choices. In other words, schools suspected that their curricula were deficient, but struggled to articulate how they might be different, given the brevity of the junior phase. Table two also shows the predominance of instrumental or logistical thinking (as opposed to historical or educational considerations) in teachers' curriculum design.

TABLE TWO

Theme of response	Schools offering this reason	Archetypal response
'Consumer' preference	3, 18, 4, 15, 10, 7	'well if they're choosing in January you want to make sure that these sexier topics, if you like, are in there because you want them to pick history'.  <b>(Lauren, School 7)</b>
Teacher preference (including availability of resources)	4, 10, 1, 8, 11	a lot of it just comes down to 'what resources do we have?' because we can't afford to just 'oh we're going to change three entire units' because it would involve money  <b>(Elizabeth, School 11)</b>
Preparation for senior phase	6, 17, 21, 10, 16, 19	'this is the really bad thing, I think with teaching at the moment: we're probably thinking ahead to what they're going to need if they sit history as an exam... which you maybe shouldn't be doing in first and second year'.  <b>(Jenny, School 16)</b>
Non-specialist teachers	19, 11, 10	I can't give [geography] the same passion that I can for history, just the same way that a geography teacher can't give the same passion for history the way they do for geography. That was one of the reasons actually why we changed [the curriculum] then was to try and make it more accessible to the non-history specialists.  <b>(Ben, School 10)</b>

*'Consumer' and Teacher Preference.* That the compulsory phase of history education in Scotland lasts just two years complicates the design of a coherent curriculum, but it also means that children must decide whether to study history in the senior phase after very little exposure to it. In some schools, students were asked whether they wanted to continue with history after a single 12 week block of study. Several teachers spoke about the need for a curriculum which appealed to students in order to improve uptake of the subject in the senior phase. Lauren (School 7) spoke of needing to teach 'sexier' topics, while Charles (School 6) used the language of business to highlight the tension between 'delivering a product' that was 'difficult' and one that was 'enjoyable'.

But I think the key thing for me is delivering a product that is enjoyable and rewarding for them and I think to go chronologically a lot of the topics, like you said the Reformation, or if you go back even earlier than that, it might be quite difficult for them.

However, the reasons for this instrumentalization of the curriculum are not hard to find: uptake of the subject in the senior phase translates into the number of history teachers that a school employs. The stakes here are enormous: if too few people opt to study history, then the course will not run in the senior phase, having real and dramatic implications on staffing. Mary (School 19) viewed this from her perspective as a Head of Faculty

I can't also pretend that second year's [not] a crucial time for me, that's at the point where I'm looking for all my staff to go 'how many numbers can we pick up here? how many classes can we get out?' because it's not necessarily in any given year people are going to lose their job but it does have an impact on the longevity of any department if we've got those consistent numbers.

While Steven (School 4) put this bluntly from a classroom teacher's perspective:

If we don't convince them to pick it, where's my job? [...] If the kids don't like it they're not going to pick history and if they don't pick history... well I don't want to go back to being a supply teacher and looking for jobs all over the place, so I want to deliver things that I'm interested in, that the kids will be interested in that they'll come back to us.

*Non-specialist teachers.* In the junior phase of Scottish education, history is taught as part of Social Subjects (alongside Geography and Modern Studies). However, what 'social studies' meant in practice varied between schools. In most schools, 'social studies' appeared on the timetable, but was used to describe three distinct subjects. While only the 'Big Questions' unit taught by school 15 (and described above) represented the kinds of cross-subject collaboration and interdisciplinary learning implicit in the concept of 'social studies.

**TABLE THREE**

<b>How social subjects is staffed</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
A single teacher teaches all three social subjects to his/ her class.	11
A teacher teaches his/ her subject to a class for a 6-week or 12-week block and then teaches the same topic to a new class.	7 <sup>6</sup>
Social subjects all taught separately from each other with specialist teachers.	3

In those eleven schools where a single teacher teaches all three social studies, there is an almost 50% chance that a child will never be taught history by a history teacher. Those teachers

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<sup>6</sup> Includes School 15 which takes this approach in S2 but teaches integrated social subjects in S1.

planning history lessons for ‘non-specialists’ to teach were conscious of over-simplifying issues to make the lessons more ‘deliverable.’ The quotes from teachers below describe the ways in which non-historians can exercise considerable indirect influence over curriculum design.

You have to make sure [the history lessons we plan are]... I don't want to say idiot-proof, but you need to make sure it's accessible for non-subject specialists.

**(Ben, School 10)**

What our faculty head is now wanting us to do is essentially to produce lesson for lesson guides [...] To essentially allow...I suppose, technically, it would be consistency

**(Tony, School 13)**

Where these compromises for simplicity were not made, teachers grew frustrated. For example, David (School 17) was particularly proud of a lesson he had planned in which children made inferences about Bronze Age Britain from the burial artefacts, but was disappointed by the response of a geography-trained colleague:

[the geography teacher] said basically they didn't have a good enough understanding of it in terms of what it was that they were meant to be saying, so again they just glossed over it'.

Clearly, not just history is affected in this way – no doubt geography colleagues are similarly frustrated by history teachers’ corresponding limitations. Elizabeth (School 11) was, perhaps, most stark in her assessment, but her sentiments were not uncommon:

I was teaching geography, and it's the first years... you're just... almost... you're sort of looking at the PowerPoint and going through it with the kids.

The tensions inherent in teaching social studies are made worse by the pressures to ensure uptake to the senior phase that Steven and Mary described. In some cases, teachers who are ‘social

studies' *colleagues* in the junior phase then become *competitors* for students in the senior phase. This process was starkest in School 15, the only school to teach fully integrated social studies in S1. Although an ambitious 'Big Questions' integrated social studies approach was adopted in S1, the focus changed abruptly in S2 so that only World War 2 and the Assassination of Kennedy were taught. The justification for this choice was wholly instrumental:

Chris: Geography had an all-singing, all-dancing...'we do volcanoes in the Second Year!' which kids obviously love. So we'd always done JFK 'cause kids love that, that kind of investigation unit.

Interviewer: Why those two topics in Second Year? Why JFK and why World War II? You provided a good rationale for the first year...

Chris: We were trying to attract them in. We are trying to do some things that we think would be really interested in, to get them picking History in the Third Year.

Interviewer: That's the main consideration?

Chris: That was our consideration, yeah, trying...get kids interested. And try and be historical as well.

Chris's account is quite telling. Although he has aimed for a low-resolution frameworks-based approach in S1, this approach is abandoned in S2 as students' minds turn to which subjects they will continue to study. In his own words, 'Wars and murders ...that's what you want when you're 13, 14 and that'.

*Preparation for the Senior Phase.* Shorn of access to debates about how history might be conceived in the curriculum, many schools styled their compulsory junior phase curriculum around the demands of the SQA examinations in the optional senior phase.

Our biggest focus [for improvement] is that our BGE is not [currently] effective preparation for senior phase

**(Mary, School 19)**

Obviously, you're thinking about preparing them for when they get into the senior phase.

**(Ben, School 10)**

In one respect, this is both unsurprising and unproblematic: we would expect the curriculum to plan for continuity between the junior school curriculum and national examinations. However, it is important to remember that only 50% of the students in junior phase history lessons will take the subject in the senior phase and so benefit from this 'preparation'. The 50% who discontinue history after second year have received a distorted historical education, preparation for an examination that they will never take.

This 'backwash' from the senior phase was seen in logistical as well as pedagogical terms: several schools simply taught 'watered-down' versions of examination syllabi to their junior phase students. Teachers favoured this approach because the structure of examination syllabi provided certainty with respect to substantive knowledge, as well as a resource of pre-prepared activities and assessments. However, narrow time-bound depth studies which work effectively for assessment purposes, work less well as building blocks of a child's historical consciousness.

## **Discussion**

There is, of course, a limit to what can be inferred about children's learning simply from the titles of the units that children are taught; however, it is clear from this study that an episodic

approach to teaching the past dominates in most Scottish schools. While six of the 21 schools taught longitudinal overviews, in the others the past was framed as isolated and disconnected ‘topics’ within timetabled blocks of teaching. Scotland is far from unique in this respect, and similar phenomena have been observed in both New Zealand (Harris & Ormond, 2018) and England (Harris & Reynolds, 2018). However, the Scottish case seems to be particularly striking in at least two ways. First, the enormous chronological gaps evident in some schools’ curricula. A glance at Figure One shows that several schools teach no history at all between the Wars of Independence and the 1930s. In many more cases, a single depth study is studied to illuminate this 600-year span. Second, the sheer amount of time that many schools spend on depth studies studying single events: three schools spent several weeks on the Assassination of JFK, and three others spent the same time on the 1665-66 London Plague and Great Fire.

The international research around history education offers three perspective about why this might matter. The first is the cultural literacy (Hirsch, 1987) argument propounded by curricular traditionalists. From this perspective, children are placed at a significant societal (and cognitive) disadvantage if they are not taught about some of the key shibboleths of our cultural past. Although superficially attractive, such an argument becomes more problematic when discussion turns to what (or rather whose) shibboleths are most important.

A more compelling perspective concerns pupils’ access to the foundational substantive concepts of historical understanding (van Drie & van Boxtel, 2003; Counsell, 2017). In this framing, pupils’ ability to reason historically is based, in part, on their facility with organisational ideas such as slavery, democracy and class. Although the meaning of many of these concepts vary depending on time and context, others are associated principally with a particular historical moment. Through this lens, the 600 year gap in many schools curricula between the fourteenth and twentieth centuries becomes a gap in pupils’ conceptual architecture. Even if we do not accept the cultural literacy argument that some events are *a priori* more significant than others, we can express concern about a

curriculum which overlooks concepts such as colonialism, reformation and industrialisation which are foundational to any understanding of world history.

A final –and related - reason why such a narrow and fragmented history curriculum matters concerns pupils' ability to orientate themselves in time. This does not mean an attempt to teach a 'full survey' of the past – a so-called 'Plato to NATO' or 'Adam to Atom' curriculum – but it must mean an ability to hold a 'map' of the past as part of one's 'mental furniture' (Lee & Howson, 2009). As we have seen, there are many conceptions of the purpose of history, but all include a sense that children must come to feel 'part of' history, as both an inheritor of tradition and as a future-oriented agent in the present. This sense of historical consciousness involves an ability to connect present to past, a skill which is possible only through having a sense of what 'the past' is, and of the ways in which it is mediated through retellings. This seems a dauntingly philosophical aspiration when we consider that history curriculum makers have just 60 hours of contact time with children in the compulsory phase of school. However, several well-researched approaches do exist such as Wilschut's (2009) 'orientational frames of reference' and the 'big picture' frameworks advanced by Shemilt (2009) and others.

To most schools in this study, the compulsory phase (S1-S2) is not seen as a historical education in itself, but as a prelude to studying the subject in the senior phase. This instrumentalization of the junior phase was seen in several ways – the designing of 'sexy' curricular, the teaching of examination 'skills', and the deployment of non-specialist teachers. Such a conception of the junior phase takes limited account of the needs of those students (fully 50%) who choose not to study the subject beyond S2. Rather than a coherent educational programme which reflects the needs of those who will never again study history, the S1 and S2 curriculum too often appears as an apprenticeship (or a marketing exercise) for history in the upper school. The short compulsory phase leads to children choosing their subjects very early which, in turn, distorts the curriculum by pressurising teachers to design a curriculum which *appeals* to students, rather than one which *benefits*

students. This creates a grim irony: that the students who most need a coherent junior phase, are given least consideration in its design.

But schools and teachers should not be criticised for their instrumentalism; they are, after all, acting rationally in the face of perverse incentives. Teachers feel compelled to design their curriculum around the interests and tastes of twelve-year-old children in order to ensure ‘the longevity of their department.’ Teachers see curriculum design in stark terms as a balance between teaching a rounded historical education and their long-term job security. At root, this is simply a problem of time. For history to be compulsory for just ~1% of the time that children spend in secondary school is manifestly inappropriate given its importance to children’s future frames of reference and civic consciousness. More time ought to be given; but if it is not, teachers need greater access to debates over the nature and importance of historical knowledge. Here the work of Phillippou *et al* (2014) is instructive: it is not enough to grant teachers curricular autonomy and assume that teachers will know how to use it. *Curriculum for Excellence* framed teachers as curriculum makers but afforded none of the theoretical models or discursive frames that might have assisted teachers in making their curricula coherent. University teacher education programmes no doubt have a role in sharing these with prospective teachers, but it is less clear how in-service teachers might be better prepared to make important curriculum decisions. No Scottish university offers Masters level qualifications focused on History Education as a field of study, while local education authorities and the Scottish government have targeted their resources at raising attainment in national examinations (the benchmark of school quality and accountability). As Priestley *et al.* (2015) have written, there is an inherent tension between a Scottish curriculum which positions teachers as curriculum innovators within the context of strict accountability mechanisms. For many history teachers in Scotland, the Scottish Qualifications Authority remains not just the accountability mechanism by which their performance is judged, but also the only available conceptualisation of historical knowledge.

A related problem concerns the framing of social studies within *Curriculum for Excellence*. From its inception, *CfE* expressed a desire for greater interdisciplinary teaching in schools, but this has not happened. This is not a surprise: teachers are understandably protective of the meagre curriculum time that they have and are inevitably mindful that ‘their’ subject must appeal in the marketplace of subject choices that children make in S2. Consequently, subjects which are notionally collaborators, can soon become rivals for students’ affections. The simplest response might be to replace social studies with discrete subjects in the curriculum, but this is not the only potential approach. Social studies in Scotland is failing not because it is intrinsically a ‘bad’ idea - research is ambivalent on this point (Brant, Chapman, & Isaacs, 2016) – but because there has been no serious attempt to think about how it might be made to work in practice and how the disjuncture between the junior and senior phases might be smoothed. In 20 of 21 schools surveyed, ‘social studies’ meant little beyond a curriculum label which served as cover for the teaching of separate subjects. In others, the opposite problem was manifest: describing conversations with S2 students choosing their ‘option’ subjects, Elizabeth (School 11) said

‘I ask them how many people are taking geography and then one of them’s like ‘what’s geography, is that the one with the maps?’... I always remind them, I always say ‘this is your history unit’.

As I have written elsewhere (Smith J. , *Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence and History Teachers' epistemologies: a case of Curricular Epistemic Socialisation?*, 2018), it seems subject identities are softening among history teachers in Scotland, but in ways which indicate the increased instrumentalization of the subject rather than enlightened cross-disciplinarity.

## **Conclusions**

Some twenty years ago, in this journal, Wood and Payne (1999) highlighted the need for Scottish history teachers to attend to substantive knowledge:

‘History in Scottish schools does not enjoy the position that it commonly occupied in other European schools leaving teachers with dilemmas about selecting what to include in their courses.’ (p.120)

In their paper, Wood and Payne went on to link these ‘dilemmas’ of content selection to deficits in children’s knowledge, concluding that ‘a mixture of ignorance and confusion marks pupils’ knowledge of their country’s past’ (ibid). This paper makes no claims about children’s knowledge (or ignorance) of history, but it seems that Scottish history teachers are faced with a familiar dilemma.

The time allowed for teaching history in Scottish schools is clearly very short by international standards. However, it can be argued that this simply makes selection of content a more complex and urgent endeavour. However, deprived of access to debates about the role of substantive content in building children’s historical literacy teachers have no guidance about how to make these cuts. In five schools in this study, there was an attachment to longitudinal overviews but these were defended in instinctual rather than theoretical terms as ‘tasters of the past’ or aids to ‘chronological understanding’. In other cases, the articulation between substantive knowledge and pupils’ historical consciousness was even less developed. Instead, teachers have asked instrumental questions: which knowledge will encourage students to opt for history? Which knowledge will best prepare them for examinations?

It was not supposed to be this way. Scottish Education policy in the early twenty-first century aimed to energise teachers as agents of change within schools (Donaldson, 2012; Education Scotland, 2012b). However as Priestley *et al* (2015) state ‘it is one thing to expect teachers to be agentic in developing the curriculum, but it is quite another thing for this to happen in practice’ (p. 152). The same authors emphasise that ‘many teachers lack the professional language to critically engage with education policies’ (p. 160). Their solution is to increase teachers’ agency through increased access to research literature, greater collaborative working and for schools to be more critically reflective about hierarchies within schools. All these suggestions have an important role to play, but more

fundamental is a professional conversation about the purpose of history and its relationship with other social studies subjects. *Curriculum for Excellence* aspires to 'confident individuals, successful learners, responsible citizens and effective contributors' (Scottish Executive, 2004). With these overarching curricular aims in mind, schools should perhaps pay renewed attention to Duquette's (2015) definition of historical consciousness as 'the understanding of the present, thanks to the interpretation of the past which allows us to consider the future'.

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