

# WHAT HISTORY SHOULD WE TEACH? THE TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE

## THE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION'S PRIMARY SURVEY

— Melanie Jones

### Introduction: The Historical Association's 2010 Primary History survey

The government's 2010 White Paper makes clear that the history curriculum will be reviewed.

This is the ideal time to consider that very contentious issue – *What History Should We Teach?* And who better to ask than those who really know and understand what the curriculum will look and feel like on a day to day teaching basis: teachers.

So, over 340 teachers and primary education specialists from a wide geographical area responded to the Historical Association 2010 Primary School survey.

### The survey's findings

#### Teaching time

In terms of teaching time, it seems that the vast majority were not unhappy with the amount of time that history received on the curriculum.

- The average time spent across all year groups except foundation/early years was in excess of 1 hour per week, with the greatest amount of time being spent at Year 5, with on average 1.4 hours per week.

#### Teaching history as a discrete, separate subject

Having said this, only 31% of those who answered the question said that they taught any of their history discretely at Key Stage 2. This figure is lower at Key Stage 1 at only 16%.

#### Curricular content: topics

The survey also highlighted a trend in terms of teaching topics. The most popular topics at **Key Stage 1** were famous people, Florence Nightingale and The Great Fire of London, whilst the most popular topics at **Key Stage 2** were Ancient Egypt, Invaders and Settlers, the Tudors, the Victorians and Britain Since 1930 in general and World War II in particular.

Most schools stuck to the Key Stage 2 topics listed above. Does this support the government's concern that children are being fed a narrow diet of Tudors, Victorians and World War II?

**No – the overwhelming evidence is that primary schools are following the detailed, de facto prescriptive advice of the government mediated through the QCDA as to the National Curriculum History that they should teach.**

- It makes schools that choose to interpret the curriculum differently a departure from standard practice.
- It does not prevent, for example, schools interpreting the National Curriculum: History topic of famous people by

choosing other figures than those mentioned in QCDA government guidance, see PH 53 (Lisa MacGregor and Sue Temple). But, ***the grim reality is that primary schools treat government guidance as being prescriptive.***

#### Curricular content: choice

The opinions of respondents ranged far and wide, from dinosaurs to the French Revolution, from world history to gender history. One thing was clear **the need to extend the existing curriculum to incorporate historical thinking and the narratives/histories of other groups in society:** gender history; multicultural British history; citizenship and diversity.

#### Assessment and progression

The survey raised serious concerns over progression and assessment: whilst **81%** of those who answered the question **planned for progression, only 9% found the National Curriculum level descriptors for history extremely useful;** and whilst **69% assessed in history,** 31% were not formally assessing the subject.

#### Teacher professional development: subject knowledge and training

This brings us on to probably the biggest issue raised by the survey, that of **historical knowledge and training.** The majority of primary teachers are not history specialists; therefore subject knowledge and training are a real issue.

- The fact is that **only 11% of history coordinators had received any training** for their role, and the comments made by one respondent provide a stark picture. "I am the history coordinator. I have had no training for this role and yet I am expected to disseminate practice to the rest of the staff."
- It also seems that **67% of respondents** who answered the question either **did not know of or did not have an advisor** that they could call upon.
- **Only 16% said that they liaised with local secondary schools,** where they could potentially seek the support of history specialists.
- **Lack of opportunity** to attend subject-specific CPD was identified as a concern by **90%** of those who answered the question.
- **Lack of time for history in ITT** was identified as a concern by **74%.**

#### Conclusion

Rather than the government focusing on what history we should teach, the **teachers' evidence indicates that perhaps the focus should be on equipping teachers to teach the subject effectively,** see page 44 of this edition.

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