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The attitudes and perceptions of beginning teachers in relation to teaching controversial issues in the history classroom

Mary Woolley

Canterbury Christ Church University, UK

Abstract

This paper reports on research into the attitudes and perceptions of beginning history teachers in relation to teaching controversial issues. In 2007 the UK Department for Education and Skills, alongside the Historical Association, published a report into the teaching of emotive and controversial issues in history which suggested avoidance of some topics by some teachers. Initial research was carried out with 32 beginning history teachers to explore their attitudes to teaching controversial issues in the history classroom. Ten years later, the research was repeated with a further cohort of 37 beginning history teachers to explore whether attitudes had changed. Findings showed an enthusiastic, almost moralistic group of beginning teachers, committed to sharing a wide range of views with their young audience. The beginning teachers were remarkably confident about teaching controversial issues. The area where beginning teachers lacked confidence was in dealing with parents who disagreed with their approach to teaching a certain topic. Almost all the beginning teachers thought it was appropriate for history teachers to teach topics in a way that might conflict with family or cultural values. New concerns have emerged for some beginning teachers over how to teach the history of migration in a sensitive and appropriate way.

Keywords

Controversial history; teacher attitudes; beginning teachers; history teacher education

Contacto:

Mary Woolley, Canterbury Christ Church University, North Holmes Road, Canterbury, Kent, UK CT1 1QU. Mary.Woolley@canterbury.ac.uk

Actitudes y percepciones de los profesores principiantes en relación a la enseñanza de temas polémicos en la clase de historia

Resumen

Este artículo es una investigación de las actitudes y percepciones de los profesores de historia en relación con la enseñanza de temas polémicos. En 2007, el *Department for Education and Skills* del Reino Unido, junto con la *Historical Association*, publicó un informe sobre la enseñanza de temas controvertidos en la clase de historia en el que sugirieron que algunos profesores evitaban algunos de estos temas. La investigación inicial se llevó a cabo con 32 profesores de historia principiantes para explorar sus actitudes hacia la enseñanza de temas polémicos en el aula de historia. Diez años más tarde, la investigación se repitió con una cohorte de 37 profesores de historia principiantes para comprobar si las actitudes habían cambiado. Los resultados mostraron un entusiasta, casi moralista grupo de profesores principiantes, comprometidos a compartir una amplia gama de puntos de vista con su alumnado. Los maestros principiantes estaban notablemente seguros de enseñar temas polémicos. El área donde los maestros principiantes carecían de confianza era en el trato con los padres que no estaban de acuerdo con su acercamiento a enseñar ciertos temas. Casi todos los profesores principiantes pensaron que era apropiado que los maestros de historia enseñaran temas de una manera que pudiera entrar en conflicto con los valores familiares o culturales. Nuevas preocupaciones han surgido para algunos maestros principiantes sobre cómo enseñar la historia de la migración de una manera sensible y apropiada.

Palabras claves

Historia polémica; Actitudes de los maestros; Maestros principiantes; Educación del profesor de historia

Introduction

> While the flexible national curriculum encourages teachers to choose content likely to resonate in their multicultural classrooms, in practice some have found it difficult to do so. There are several reasons for this, from the relative familiarity of traditional subjects to the fear of misrepresenting certain topics clouded in controversy.
>
> (Lord Adonis, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Schools, 2006)

History education often includes areas of study that can prove contentious in relation to society, culture, religion or ethnicity. The above quote from Lord Adonis shows that there have been concerns within political circles that such areas are sometimes avoided by teachers in order to steer clear of controversy in the classroom. In 2006 the government commissioned research on best practice in teaching emotive and controversial history. The report concluded that while there were a sizeable number of opportunities available to schools to consider emotive and controversial issues in the history classroom, a number of constraints existed, including the tendency of teachers to avoid emotive and controversial

history (Historical HA, 2007). The report suggested that while some history teachers were willing to tackle sensitive and potentially controversial topics 'head-on;' others tended to avoid such issues in the history classroom. The reasons behind this avoidance could have stemmed from background, disposition, subject knowledge, training or teaching context. By 2016 concerns remained surrounding the teaching of potentially controversial topics in the history classroom, with a national newspaper headline reporting that a new history GCSE examination course on migration was branded 'disturbing' and 'dangerous' (Ward, 2016). Yet 2017 saw the international Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] planning to include questions about 'global competencies' in the next round of the influential international Pisa tests. Andreas Schleicher, the education director behind the plans, said, 'it is increasingly important for young people to engage with diversity, to be open to that, to draw value out of it, to see diversity not as a problem' (Coughlan, 2017). While many aspects of a diverse past may prove uncontroversial, there are examples of actual or perceived unfairness related to diversity that could prove controversial in many of today's classrooms. It is crucial to give students the opportunity to learn about and discuss such issues within the relatively safe environment of the classroom.

This research focused on the attitudes and perceptions of beginning history teachers as they entered the profession. The initial research, completed in 2007, explored which topics beginning teachers believed could prove controversial in the classroom with a second strand considering how confident they felt about teaching controversial issues. A decade later this research was repeated, with a third strand introduced to explore whether the attitudes and perceptions of beginning history teachers towards teaching controversial issues had changed over ten years. With significant changes in the political arena over this decade, the rise of right-wing populism, the debate surrounding immigration and the continued terror-threat, understanding the attitudes and perceptions of beginning teachers remains an important area of research.

Background

In a historical analysis of history education in England, Aldrich and Dean considered the variety of purposes behind the teaching of history in the mid-twentieth century. These included 'the study of history 'for its own sake;'' 'to introduce children to their heritage' and 'to inculcate civic pride and nationalism' (1991, p. 101). The 1970s saw the emergence of the Schools Council History Project, aiming to develop evidential thinking in secondary school history students (Elliott, 2016). The use of primary evidence had its benefits: 'Material given at second-hand does not readily attach our emotions, our imagination or our commitment; first-hand, primary sources do, if they are handled with care' (Fines, 1994, p. 125). Encouraging emotional or affective engagement with the subject brought new challenges for the history teacher.

Historical content promoted by SCHP often had contemporary relevance that could prove controversial, including the Arab-Israeli conflict, the settlement of the American West and conflict in Northern Ireland (Cannadine, Keating, & Sheldon, 2011). While the advent of the National Curriculum in 1991 enshrined the use of evidence and interpretations in school history, some have suggested that an Anglo-centric view of the past was promoted (Mohamud & Whitburn, 2016). From 2001 an increasingly flexible National Curriculum enabled teachers to encompass a broader view of the past, however not all teachers took advantage of the flexibility being offered (Husbands, Kitson, & Pendry, 2003). Inspections found that students' understanding of the connections between historical topics studied and contemporary issues tended to be weak (Ofsted, 2005, 2007). It is at this juncture

between past and present that controversy can often lie, where the subject or area is of topical interest (Holden, 2007).

Research concerning the teaching of controversial issues stems from the Humanities Curriculum Project (Stenhouse, 1970). Literature written under the threat of a restrictive National Curriculum (Carrington & Troyna, 1988) was renewed with the introduction of Citizenship education and the promise of a more flexible curriculum from September 2000 (Holden, 2007). While many aspects of multi-cultural history are not controversial, the failure to provide a multicultural version of British history has repeatedly been highlighted (Bracey, 2006; Grosvenor, 2000; Wilkinson, 2014), but there is little research on why teachers might avoid such areas.

In the decade since the initial research was completed, there have been various research projects that touch on this area. The most significant is the work of the Centre for Holocaust Education. In 2009 a report was published on how and why the Holocaust was taught in state-maintained secondary schools in England. This report concluded that there was considerable variation in the curriculum time spent on the topic and in the subject knowledge of teachers. Many of the teachers surveyed found it difficult 'to articulate the distinct nature of the Holocaust,' framing it rather in terms of 'universal lessons.' Others reported difficulties including, 'dealing with emotional content' and 'responding to some students' misunderstandings and prejudice' (Pettigrew et al., pp. 8-9). A more recent report exploring what young people know and understand about the Holocaust concluded that myths and misconceptions that circulate widely in British society have not been effectively addressed in the classroom, but suggested that the Holocaust is 'a difficult and emotive subject to teach' (Foster et al., 2016, p. 2).

Teachers have been found to approach the teaching of controversial issues in different ways. Conway completed a doctorate comparing the teaching of sensitive issues in history in England and Northern Ireland between 1991 and 2001. Some of the teachers in her study felt they had not been trained to deal with sensitive issues in the classroom. They felt difficulties arose when teaching topics 'that impinged on the ethnic as well as the religious background of the pupils' (Conway, 2010, p. 249). In her coding of interviews with experienced history teachers, Conway identified three different approaches to the teaching of sensitive issues. The first was the lion who 'takes a crusading approach, waging a vigorous campaign in favour of a cause.' The second was the fox, who 'takes a conciliatory approach… avoiding direct confrontation.' The third was the mouse, 'timorously avoiding sensitive issues' (p. 290). In a similar study of history teachers in Northern Ireland and their approaches to teaching the conflicted history of the region, Kitson and McCully identified a continuum of teachers, labelling them 'avoiders,' 'containers' or 'risk-takers' (Kitson & McCully, 2005). Such categories have, however, been questioned by Harris and Clarke in their work with trainee history teachers and how they responded to the challenges of embracing diversity in the history classroom. They found the categories were not discrete; some students, while appearing to 'avoid' some issues, would be willing to take more risks with others. They also suggest that being a risk-taker could, at times, be a negative rather than a positive approach. They offered an alternative, more complex, framework covering positions from 'confident' to 'uncertain' to 'uncomfortable,' where confidence was not necessarily a comfortable position (R. Harris & Clarke, 2011, p. 168).

This paper explores the attitudes of the beginning history teachers at the very start of their career to discover whether the attitudes and perceptions beginning teachers bring with them to teaching explain their approach to teaching controversial issues. For the purpose of this research project, the definition of controversial history is borrowed from the TEACH report:

> The study of history can be emotive and controversial where there is actual or perceived unfairness to people by another individual or group in the past. This may also be the case where there are disparities between what is taught in school history, family/ community histories and other histories (HA, 2007, p. 3)

Conway has distinguished between controversial issues, which operate predominantly in the cognitive arena, 'where there is a possibility of finding a rational conclusion' and issues which become 'sensitive and delicate' when they operate primarily in the arena of feelings or values (Conway, 2010, p. 51). This research concerns itself primary with controversial issues while accepting that they may at times become sensitive in certain circumstances.

Methods

In England, most history teachers for the 11-18 age range are trained to teach through a one-year postgraduate course (PGCE). The majority of such programmes are led by university training providers in partnership with schools, where beginning teachers undertake at least 120 days of placement. In recent years government policy has promoted the growth of a School Direct programme, with schools taking the lead in initial teacher education. However, most School Direct programmes work in close partnership with university training providers. This research, therefore, explored the attitudes and perceptions of beginning teachers to teaching controversial issues in the history classroom, where 'beginning teachers' relates to student teachers on the PGCE or School Direct programme. 32 beginning teachers from one institution in the south of England completed questionnaires in 2006. In 2016, a further 37 beginning teachers from two institutions in the south of England completed the same questionnaire.

A mixed-methods approach was selected to explore the attitudes and perceptions of beginning teachers to teaching controversial issues in history. The instrument included items on motivation, purpose and confidence. Participants were asked to rank sixteen historical topics for potential on a scale of 1 (not controversial) to 4 (highly controversial). These topics (Table 2) were selected from National Curriculum or GCSE textbooks according to their potential fit with the definition of controversial history used above. Participants were asked to rank ten factors that could contribute to making a topic controversial (Table 1). They were also asked to rate their own confidence in using a variety of strategies to handle controversial issues in the history classroom including 'staying neutral' and 'organising a debate.' The responses to closed questions were entered into SPSS which yielded descriptive statistics showing the percentage of responses to predetermined answers.

Table 1.

Factors affecting controversiality

Differences between school history and family history
Ethnic background of pupils in class
How long ago the events being studied occurred
Number of people that died in the event
Political allegiance of parents
Possibility of personal connection with pupil experience

Relationship of the school with parents
Religion of pupils
Teacher subject knowledge
The use of particular resources

The initial questionnaires were used to select 6 teachers for interview. They were chosen to be representative from across the range of responses: 3 males, 3 females; 2 mature students; of which some were very confident, some less confident in their attitude to teaching controversial issues. The six beginning teachers took part in two semi-structured interviews, each lasting around thirty minutes. Interviews built on the individual responses provided on the questionnaire. The data was transcribed, then coded using NVivo and analysed in sympathy with grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

One problematic aspect of the approach to data collection was the position of the researcher as a tutor on the first initial teacher education course. Care was taken not to select personal tutees as interview participants. All participants gave their informed consent to the research and were assured that as far as possible confidentiality and anonymity would be respected (Malone, 2003).

The findings

Controversial history

The beginning history teachers were asked to rank sixteen items on a scale of 1 to 4 for how controversial they believed such historical topics would prove in the history classroom. Results are presented in Table 1, with a comparison made between the two cohorts, a decade apart. While the Arab-Israeli conflict was perceived as most likely to prove controversial in history classrooms in both 2006 and 2016, further themes developed. Topics relating to religion, in particular, Islam and Judaism, or ethnicity, emerged as highly controversial. There was also some indication that dealing with the history of migrant communities such as 'black history' and 'Irish history' could be controversial. Such themes were supported by the interview data. Mark suggested, 'the situation in Ireland, perhaps teaching about slavery, apartheid, the Holocaust.' Victoire substantiated this: 'Stereotypically the Holocaust, but also aspects of the Crusades can be quite controversial.'

The largest difference in opinion between the 2006 and 2016 cohorts concerned teaching the 'settling of the American West.' Where the average score was 1.91 in 2006, suggesting a not particularly topic (in a range of 1.28 to 3.38), this had risen 0.44 to 2.35 in 2016 (in a range of 1.35 to 3.16), suggesting the topic of American history had become more. This change could have reflected the presence of American politics in the news around the time the survey was taken, particularly the presidential election and prominence of the Dakota Access Pipeline story in news headlines. Several students in the 2016 cohort took the opportunity to add topics to the list that they felt could cause particular controversy in the history classroom. These included '9/11 and the War on Terror,' 'Prisoners of war and torture camps,' 'Race relations in modern day USA,' 'Islamic history' and 'women's rights and suffrage.' Again, the recent history and politics of the United States of America were perceived as potentially controversial.

Table 2.

Beginning teachers' perceptions of controversial topics

	2006	2016	change
Apartheid in South Africa	2.56	2.51	-0.05
Arab-Israeli conflict	3.38	3.16	-0.22
British Empire	2.28	2.49	+0.21
Irish famine	2.03	1.92	-0.11
Josephine Butler	1.79	1.71	-0.08
Oliver Cromwell	1.59	1.73	+0.14
Rwandan genocide	2.84	2.97	+0.13
Settling of the American West	1.91	2.35	+0.44
The Black Death	1.28	1.35	+0.07
The Crusades	2.47	2.16	-0.31
The Holocaust	3.09	2.97	-0.12
The Reformation	1.75	1.62	-0.13
Trans-Atlantic slave trade	2.72	2.86	+0.14
Troubles in Northern Ireland	3.09	2.78	-0.31
Use of nuclear weapons	2.88	2.89	+0.01
Vietnam war	2.53	2.35	-0.18

1 represents not controversial, 4 highly controversial

Factors affecting controversiality

Ten factors were listed for students to rank in terms of their effect on how controversial a topic is in the history classroom. There are concerns around such a use of ranked factors rather than giving a more open-ended question; beginning teachers may have attributed value to certain factors which otherwise would not have occurred to them, but the findings here focus on the top three ranked factors.

In 2006 three factors were consistently rated as influential in affecting whether a topic would be controversial in the history classroom. First, the ethnic background of students in the class; second the religion of students in the class and third, the possibility of a personal connection between the topic taught and student experience. In 2016 the results were very similar, with ethnicity and religion of students still ranked in the top three as factors affecting how controversial a topic would be in the history classroom. However, the possibility of a personal connection with student experience was ranked as the highest, above ethnicity and religion. 'Political allegiance' of parents was ranked fifth out of ten possible factors, with 'teacher subject knowledge' ranked ninth out of ten.

These findings were supported in the interviews where all the participants thought that student background was a key factor in whether or not an issue would be controversial in

the history classroom. As Helen said, 'it depends on the class you're with.' Bob went further:

> I think you need to take into account the particular background or sensitivities that they might have in particular subjects, that might conflict with what they've been taught at home

The ethnic and religious background of students were specified repeatedly as an important factor. As Victoire found:

> It's very difficult because you have a multicultural society. How do you explain to them that they [the crusaders] thought Christianity was right if you're in Birmingham with a majority Asian population who come to your school?

Students' ethnicity was also seen as an issue in schools with a more monocultural population. Helen was concerned that some children might have parents 'who have a very racist attitude.' This raised questions about teaching in a way that potentially conflicted with parental values.

The beginning teachers seemed to develop quite different approaches based on their differing school placements. Where Jane had some experience teaching in a multi-cultural environment she felt:

> There you get this kind of sharing of knowledge and information from different areas and drawing it together and I think controversial issues really help that to happen and getting everyone involved.

Victoire, having taught in a school with a significant white majority seemed to support this view:

> The problem with my school is that I don't think there's one ethnic minority [student] in my class – in any of them. Which makes it more interesting because then you have to teach it so that you're not kind of confrontational with the views of the people in the class. You have to kind of say well every opinion matters. And it's a different kind of challenge. It would probably be easier if someone in the class was from an ethnic minority because then you've got some kind of way to say, look, we're getting everyone's opinions – it would have made it easier instead of having this solid opinion that everyone was sort of shouting at you.

Bob, however, sounded a note of caution over instrumentally selecting historical content to meet the perceived needs of society:

> I don't like this idea that you teach certain topics in order to address a perceived problem of racism – teaching the British Empire as an inherently bad thing, for example, is rubbish and I think you should be aware of different historical beliefs about that – not just general one view just because it might be politically correct.

Bob suggested the need for teaching different historical interpretations as a way of approaching potentially controversial topics in the history classroom, but this approach could require deeper historiographical knowledge some teachers.

Justification

The beginning teachers felt justified in teaching controversial issues in the history classroom. When asked whether controversial history should be taught, 94% of the 2006 cohort responded 'yes;' the rest responded with 'maybe.' The 2016 cohort were similarly enthusiastic, with 97% responding with a resounding 'yes.' When the 2006 cohort were asked whether it is appropriate for history teachers to teach topics in a way that may conflict with family values/ beliefs or cultural values/ beliefs, 34.4% of the sample circled 4 on a scale of 1 to 4 where 4 was 'appropriate.' 43.8% circled 3 (78.2% in total agreed). In 2016, 51% circled 4, 46% circled 3 with 97% in total of the beginning teachers, therefore, agreeing that it was appropriate for history teachers to teach topics in a way that may conflict with beliefs students have experienced outside the school.

In the interviews, however, justification seemed to come across in diverse ways from the different teachers. Jane, who had experience in schools as a teaching assistant, was an ardent supporter of the teaching of controversial issues:

> I like the idea of doing controversial issues and attacking things that others see as a bit, do I touch on that because…

She used terms such as 'attacking,' 'struggle,' 'tackling' suggesting that she saw a challenge here, but also perceived a need: 'It might be difficult, but I think you have to attempt to do something.' Jane seemed to see the teaching of controversial issues as a way of tackling some of the problems in society. Craig, a father and a mature student saw the role of the teacher as more guiding than challenging:

> I think you should be involved in controversial issues and to guide them, to inform them, to let them make good decisions, not just idiosyncratic ones, you know on what they've picked up on just what their parents say or people that are close to them.

This very different approaches of these two teachers are reminiscent of Conway's analogy to the lion, fox and mouse. Where Jane appears as the more confrontational lion, Craig comes across as the more conciliatory fox.

The reality of classroom experience, however, led to some limitations on how these intentions transferred into practice. Craig perceived issues over time constraints:

> It was a case of that lad who was about to make the racist comment, it's just ingrained, those sorts of attitudes, and if I'd had time I think during that particular lesson, if that was really the focus of the lesson I would have concentrated on that and would have gone through it in more detail. It wasn't the focus of the lesson, so it was a case of just stopping the boy and getting on with what I was supposed to be concentrating on.

Helen found her purpose limited by the apparent apathy of her students:

> I've just done the Holocaust. I found it very difficult for Year 9 to get them to realise that we must learn this so that it doesn't happen again, and their reluctance to want to know sometimes, some parts of history – what's the point in that?

Bob, among others, found that a focus on controlling student behaviour led him away from his initial teaching and learning intentions:

> before when I thought about doing it, I was quite idealistic about what I was going to achieve and it came to the point, eventually, where it was just a matter of kind of getting through the grind if you like, it was a bit hard in that sense to do. And sometimes that didn't always – it wasn't always the best environment to think up new ideas to continually engage with kids and it was just a case of just trying to get through something because especially if their behaviour was an issue, and that's something that I haven't… that's been a difficulty of mine… to deal with and that became the issue rather than what I wanted to get across to them.

The inevitable challenges of first teaching placements may have placed some limitation on the ambitions of the beginning teachers. Craig, taking the initial conciliatory approach, may have been less affected by this than the more crusading Helen and Bob, who appeared quite disappointed in themselves for not achieving what they had set out to do.

Confidence

The beginning teachers appeared confident concerning their own ability to handle controversial issues in the history classroom, including staying neutral and exploring Holocaust denial in the classroom. Questionnaire data highlighted two areas in which they were distinctly less confident: dealing with parents and using historical sources critical of a particular religion and this was consistent in both the 2006 and 2016 surveys. Male participants were generally more confident than females – a difference that grew with age. These differences were not statistically significant, but remain interesting as they were supported by the interview data. Helen, a mature participant was the least confident, but perhaps the most realistic of the beginning teachers:

> At the moment I'd say no, I wouldn't feel very confident standing there, being the person in the middle, but again I think that comes with knowing your class, with time, the confidence and with support.

However, being confident did not signal a simplistic naivety about the challenges of handling controversial issues. Matt:

> I think I would be confident enough to tackle that [white supremacist views on a website], but I think it would be very difficult to get that across to someone who might not see the nuances.

Similar research conducted by Harris and Clarke (2011) on trainee history teachers' experiences of teaching a diverse history curriculum showed rather less confident attitudes, but it would appear that the longer-term action-research model taken in the research encouraged beginning teachers to consider these issues more deeply and thoughtfully.

Multiple perspectives

There was a consensus among the interview participants that a range of views or interpretations should be promoted in the history classroom. However, the individuals differed in their approaches. Bob, having come straight from a well-respected university with a full history degree, had a historiographical approach:

> You need to do it in a kind of open manner and say this is one interpretation. There are a number of interpretations of this.

However, not all views should be treated equally. On the subject of Holocaust denial Bob said that he wouldn't give it the credibility of being a valid historical interpretation as 'in that way it does conflict with the evidence there is out there,' but does add that 'you need to be aware of it and touch upon the ideas that there are some people who hold this particular line of thought.'

In contrast, Craig, while still determined to have a range of views in the classroom, seemed to have a different, more moral agenda:

> Perhaps if you're talking about Islamic culture everything they get in the playground or at home or in the press is mostly negative, but as historians can we give a positive view? Is there another side? A more balanced view?

Helen, less confident in her ability to deal with controversial issues in the classroom, took a more narrative, polar approach:

> At the top of the class you can say, right, we're going to do this subject and this is the way I want to teach it. At the end we will have time for you to put your views and we will discuss your views... I will teach it my side and you will have your side and ultimately we all have to make our own decisions as to where we stand.

This range of approaches could suggest confusion or at least dispute over appropriate ways of including multiple perspectives in the history classroom. The need to include historical scholarship as a way of approaching multiple perspectives seems to have been more apparent to Craig and Bob than to Helen. Problems with taking a 'balanced' approach have been raised by James Banks, who argued that any form of balance is itself a political, rather than a neutral position (Banks, 2006).

Discussion

The beginning history teachers who took part in this study were convinced that the teaching of controversial history was justified and appeared eager to carry out that teaching. If some history teachers are avoiding controversial topics, this raises issues concerning teacher development and the relationship between teacher intentions and the reality of teacher practice in the school context. Barton and Levstik have suggested that in America, socio-cultural pressures of content coverage and classroom control prevent a full exploration of historical evidence and interpretation (Barton & Levstik, 2004). Research is needed into whether this is the case in England. The findings also raise concerns about the levels of confidence shown in this research in comparison to the beginning teachers in Harris and Clarke's similar study (2011). It is possible that the initial confidence could relate to a certain naivety over the complex nature of some of these controversial issues. Initial teacher education, therefore, needs to strike a balance between informing beginning teachers of the complexity and challenges implicit within teaching such topics alongside modelling suitable pedagogies and developing subject knowledge in such areas.

Multiple perspectives

The beginning teachers in this study were convinced that one answer to teaching controversial history was the presence of multiple perspectives in the history classroom. At this early point in their careers, however, they were less clear about how they might achieve this disciplinary approach. Seixas has argued that it is possible to establish a 'complex, mutiperspectival historical truth' for our time. He suggested that 'to deny students an education in those methods... is to exclude them from full participation in contemporary culture.' (Seixas, 2000, p. 35). However, HMI has pointed to the teaching of historical interpretations as one of the weakest points in history pedagogy (Ofsted, 2004). Worth, as an experienced history teacher, questioned how she could 'allow pupils to explore a myriad of *possible* interpretations while avoiding excessive uncertainty' (Worth, 2016). Initial teacher education and subject-specific professional development for history teachers need to encourage the space for such uncertainty, which can run counter to pressures for ever-higher achievement in examinations.

Beginning teachers as individuals

The participants had personal views on a number of the issues raised in this study, a finding supported by others who have researched beginning history teachers (Virta, 2002) Pendry (1997) found that if views on the discipline of history are not discussed, then they are unlikely to change before the end of the course. This highlights the need to discover the values and views each beginning teacher brings to initial teacher education about history, education and broader social and political topics. Harris (2012) explored 'purpose' as a way of helping white trainee history teachers engage with diversity issues. In the research for this current paper, data was not collected concerning beginning teachers' background or ethnicity. Future research in this area would amend this omission as the beginning teachers' themselves seemed to collate teaching controversial issues with religion and ethnicity. Exploring the relationship of their background to their attitudes and confidence may provide ways to develop a more nuanced and potentially more successful approach to handling controversial issues.

The affective dimension

Various questions are raised by the choice of topics identified as controversial by the participants. There are clear themes of ethnicity and race running through these choices. Themes of religion and race can be highly emotive and it is possible that it is this affective dimension to teaching that the beginning teachers knew would be challenging. This is supported by the work of McCully in Northern Ireland, where emotions about religion can run high (McCully, Pilgrim, Sutherland, & McMinn, 2002). However, with stories concerning immigration and terrorism frequently presented in the media, such issues could also be highly emotive in English classrooms. Research on the emotive reactions of students of Afro-Caribbean descent and their mothers to the teaching of the triangular slave trade supports this and raises the need to enfranchise all students within history classrooms (Traille, 2007). The concerns raised by many of the 2016 cohort over teaching elements of American history, particularly topics related to Black civil rights or immigration, show the impact current affairs can have on making elements of the past more controversial in the history classroom. Kitson and McCully suggest that the Risk-Taker teacher on their continuum might link such topics specifically to the present context as well as to the historical one. They urge teachers to consider where risks might be worth taking as long as they are handled properly (Kitson & McCully, 2005). The beginning teachers in this study did not seem to need encouragement to take risks, but there was a possibility that they were

being naïve in what such risk-taking might involve and whether or not they would have access to the appropriate subject knowledge and support. This raises questions about the subject-specific support available to early-career and experienced teachers looking to teach such topics, especially when teacher education is increasingly provided by schools.

Knowing the students

'Knowing the students better' was repeatedly offered by all the participants as a way to overcome the challenges of teaching controversial issues. This throws up obvious issues for the beginning teacher, who may take time to establish knowledge of individual pupils. After religion and ethnicity, the key factor to cause controversiality was believed to be 'a personal connection with student experience' and indeed religion and ethnicity can be seen to form part of this umbrella cause. At the same time, the revised History National Curriculum for 2013 suggests history should 'help pupils to understand the complexity of people's lives, the process of change, the diversity of societies and relationships between different groups as well as their own identity and challenges of their time' (DfE, 2013). If good history teaching is where teachers make a connection with student experience, and controversial history is also where teachers make a connection with student experience, then it is essential that teachers are prepared to teach sensitive and controversial history and not avoid it.

Conclusion

It is reassuring that, ten years after the initial research, in an ever more complex and sensitive political world, beginning history teachers still appear brave and ambitious in their desire to teach about controversial issues. In terms of Conway's mammalian analogy, many beginning history teachers appear to present as lions, crusading and confident in their approach to tackling such issues head-on. Such determination, however, can meet challenges in the reality of schools and classrooms, where concerns over behaviour or external assessment might lead to unintentional avoidance of such topics. Subject-specific professional development is, therefore, crucial in supporting both beginning and developing teachers in order to provide both the pedagogical and substantive knowledge to be able to overcome such challenges. In their 2015 survey of history teachers for the Historical Association, Burn and Harris found almost half the respondents had concerns about the extent of subject-specific CPD available to them and their capacity to attend such provision even where it was being offered (Burn & Harris, 2015). The challenges of teaching multiple interpretations of challenging historical topics alongside the challenges of getting to know students and their individual backgrounds and contexts presents a burden for beginning history teachers. They appear to have the determination to take on the challenge, but require ongoing support from schools and training providers to take a nuanced and informed approach to the teaching of controversial issues.

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