



Ofsted subject conference report: history

History 4–19: the relevance of history

**Better
education
and care**

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Synopsis

The conference was held in association with the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), the Specialist Schools Trust (SST) and the Imperial War Museum and took place against a backdrop of pending curriculum reform. Working in three groups covering the 4–19, 4–11 and 11–19 age ranges, delegates were asked to give their opinions on the success or otherwise of the present curriculum and to reflect on whether and how they would like to see it change to make it more relevant to pupils, students and adults in 2005. Delegates were therefore being asked to add to HMI's evidence base and thus help HMI to formulate future policy advice.

Twenty-one teachers were invited to attend covering the full 4–19 age range. They were selected from state and independent schools with known success in history. Teachers were joined by representatives of the sponsoring organisations as well as delegates from the Historical Association, higher education and other bodies including a representative from the business world.

Summaries of seminar sessions

The scene was set in a series of presentations given by Paul Armitage, HMI, Ofsted Subject Adviser for History; Jerome Freeman, QCA; Chris Culpin, Schools History Project; Sean Lang, principal author of the Historical Association's recent 14–19 report; and Geoffrey Sparkes, lately of the Bank of England and currently a school governor.

Criteria for a revised curriculum

Paul Armitage, HMI, Ofsted Subject Adviser for History

As a backdrop to delegates' discussions, delegates were invited to consider the following criteria for a revised curriculum. The criteria are heavily influenced by the best traditions of history education as well as significant education policies, in particular those linked to inclusion and Every Child Matters:

- a curriculum that upholds the best principles of historical study in a democratic society, i.e. one that involves pupils in gaining significant historical knowledge and in learning the skills necessary to identify and interpret evidence, form opinions and communicate these successfully both orally, in writing and using modern media
- a curriculum that encourages all pupils to attain the highest possible standards and progress well
- a curriculum that meets the history needs of all pupils and students by focusing on what they will learn, not what teachers will teach
- a curriculum that concentrates on the knowledge (content), understanding and skills that are most relevant to all pupils in 2005
- a curriculum that pupils understand, so they know why they are studying history and why it is useful in understanding contemporary life – it should also be interesting and fun

- a curriculum that ensures pupils get a coherent overview of history with understanding of progression
- a curriculum that ensures a smooth transition for pupils between key stages
- a curriculum that recognises the wider needs of pupils and students (for example, literacy, numeracy and personal development) and demonstrates how history supports these other needs
- a curriculum that responds to other initiatives, in particular the 'Tomlinson' report on 14–19 curriculum reform
- a curriculum that is conceptually very clear so that, particularly in primary, it can be delivered successfully by non-specialists.

It was suggested that one way of addressing these criteria could be a curriculum content based on answering big questions, for example: 'Why and how has Britain fought wars?'; 'How have we been governed?' and 'How have human rights evolved over time?' At the same time, the traditional skills of posing relevant questions, selecting evidence, evaluating evidence, making judgements, and communicating findings would be sustained and developed. A good example of the latter could be challenging pupils to use the full range of media so successfully used by professional British historians.

The other opening speakers broadly supported these criteria though they differed, in small ways, as to the content of a curriculum that would support them. Geoffrey Sparkes, for instance, placed considerable emphasis on the development of skills, whereas others stressed the importance of knowledge and understanding of significant events.

Group discussions and outcomes

Below is a brief summary of the recommendations of each of the three working groups.

In their discussions, the 4–11 group argued strongly for retaining the best of the present curriculum. It advocated a judicious blend of knowledge and skills development and argued for some flexibility in content to meet pupils' needs in history as well as other areas of the curriculum such as literacy. It suggested a curriculum based on themes as well as defined events that are meaningful to pupils and that could also reflect topicality, for instance, World War II, Nelson, and the Olympics.

The 11–19 group defined the purpose of history in the school curriculum. The group stressed that the subject is fundamental to young people understanding themselves, their inter-relations and why things are as they are including the values that people hold. It looked to a blend of compulsory and optional curriculum areas as well as changes to assessment criteria so that assessment objectives cease to be 'atomised and de-contextualised'.

The 4–19 group emphasised the need for clearer definition of progression in skills as well as content in a curriculum that is relevant to pupils because it covers local, British and world history. The group suggested some overarching

exemplar questions: 'How have people lived?'; 'How have they been ruled?'; 'What have they believed?' The group also raised critical issues such as professional development, assessment and transition from primary to secondary.

Next steps

Using its full range of evidence, which includes evidence from inspections, discussion with professionals, and other research, HMI will advise ministers, officials and others on policy developments. HMI will be drawing on the evidence from these discussions when compiling such advice. A major Ofsted report on history is planned for 2006.

Further information

Further information on the seminar, including details of the sessions, outcomes from discussion groups and lesson ideas contributed by delegates, is available from: gary.linin@ofsted.gov.uk

Further information: Ofsted guidance and subject reports can be found on the Ofsted website (search for history in the publications section) and on the history pages of the QCA website www.qca.org.uk.