Educating Britain? Political literacy and the construction of national history

Helen Brocklehurst, Department of Political and Cultural Studies, Swansea University

Despite the reflexive nature of historical enquiry and the degree of national inter-connectness now theorised by UK historians, education debates over History teaching in Britain often yield a comforting defence of Britain’s ‘island story’. The singular ‘island story’ is an economical narrative device favoured by politicians and further mediated through newspapers which profit from such national cryogenics. Maintenance of a currency, or crisis, of Britishness can also be contrasted with the relative absence of longitudinal or comparative enquiry into identity and school curricula. In addition, the teaching of states, connections, and post-sovereign communities is largely under theorised, potentially contributing to the sterility of future debates about citizenship, agency and Britain’s wider political reach. It is argued here that the public framing of history as nationhood, and the under-development of children’s political literacy, are mutually reinforcing conditions by which the state has constructed a stabilising yet shifting presence of the ‘national’.

Introduction

Academics don’t get involved as much as they should do in school-level education but that’s partly because in this country, school education has become so complex. I would reiterate the point that certainly, as far as history is concerned, history was formed as a discipline along with the nation-state, and it’s very difficult to think historically outside of national tunnels. I make a distinction between national history and nationalist history. Nationalist history is easy enough to subvert as it so clearly is teleological and serves a political purpose. It is more difficult to subvert national history because you have to construct something (Breuilly, 2005, 132).

As Breuilly implies, unified ‘national’ history is frequently and easily drawn upon for political purposes although its meaning is widely contested amongst historians and consumers. Such history turns for nation-builders and nationalists. In the words of the late Raphael Samuel ‘...history, whether we like it or not, is a national question and it has always occupied a national space’ (127). Further, as Reicher and Hopkins note, History itself bestows a unique kind of authority to claims of national identity (2001: 23) –indeed, ‘the age of a nation and its continuity are almost always exaggerated’ (17). They write: ‘[w]e have seen how central historical studies have been to nationhood. We know how important it is to find some silver thread that stretched back to time immemorial and can therefore be used to trace the national essence’ (51). Identity and nationhood thus remain central concerns of states - fused, invoked and represented despite being essentially unknowable standpoints and processes. The nation within historical narratives is both relied upon, yet elusive – a montage of remembering, forgetting, lies we tell ourselves and imaginings. Identity can perhaps be thought of as a reflexive phenomenon; easier to recognise from its perceived presence and desired impact, than it is to circumscribe or prove. Flexible, variable, multi-tiered, parasitic, contradictory, even cross bordered - it perhaps defies definition. As Bevir notes, through decentred theory we can at least access ‘the nation as constructed, transnational, differentiated, and discontinuous, the result can be described as history beyond or without the nation’ (2013). Of relevance for this study then is ‘not whether ‘nation’ exists; it is rather how the category operates in practice, that is, how nationalist logics and frames of reference are formulated and deployed’ (Jenkins, 2011, 15.). The current Education Minister for England, Michael Gove, offered a typically loaded framing in this respect prior to his National Curricula reforms:
Children are growing up ignorant of one of the most inspiring stories I know - the history of our United Kingdom. Our history has moments of pride, and shame, but unless we fully understand the struggles of the past we will not properly value the liberties of the present. The current approach we have to history denies children the opportunity to hear our island story (Gove, 2010).

It is perhaps no coincidence that the Edwardian children’s book Our Island Story (Marshall, 1905), much invoked by the Education Minister (we shall return to this later) is also the favourite children’s book of the current Prime Minister and many social and political elites in the UK (Garton-Ash, 2013). Yet Gove’s sentiment perhaps reveals as much about weakness, and panic as it does about confidence in ‘our island identity’. Pocock prominently argued in 1995, that we might also now ‘move from the illusion, or verbal confusion, that British ‘history’ is the history of a shared identity with a shared past, to the more focused realisation that it is the history of the attempt, with its successes and failures, to create such an identity’ (295). Within a history of the Isles – or two islands, and many partial and sub-national configurations thereof – the ‘island story’ is clearly a convenient moniker. Bevir echoes these sentiments when he argues that it is ‘time for social scientists to start telling the histories of all sorts of overlapping groups only some of whom attempted, more or less successfully, to construct national imaginaries and impose those imaginaries on others’ (2013, 21). He argues that traditions are embedded in practices’ and an inheritance that we may seek to modify (22). At the heart of this paper then is a question of who has access to tradition – or permission to be history and permission to change history. It is interesting perhaps that one Minister has wielded quite so much power over the future nation in this respect and ‘too much power’ by his own admission (ref, 2013).

Moreover, for all such representations of power over ‘national History’ teaching – and concomitant heralding by education ministers and political elites, it was, and arguably still is, a relatively marginalised concern and certainly not yet delivered in comparable ways that might satisfy those who claim to rely on its compass. Britain has long eschewed the opportunity to deliver history across young people’s lifetimes and since the formation of the ten subject national curricula in the 1980s, History has only been compulsory up to the age of 14. Two members of the EU – the UK and Albania - have no compulsory history or ‘civics’ education beyond this age, wherein such a national story might be most forcefully fostered or transmitted. And, despite regular reforms, in each constituent part of the UK, History can potentially be interpreted without significant reference to ‘national’ boundaries and delivered without centralisation or prescription of specific national or nationalist classroom resources. There has also been little systematic research into how children in the UK understand or perceive ‘national’ narratives delivered within curricula, despite constant conviction amongst politicians that national narratives do matter (Goalen, 1988; Ribbens, 2005, Barton and McCully 2005; Grever et al. 2008; Sheldon, 2011). Ironically, there has been no longitudinal attempt to survey or map young people’s consumption of their ‘national’ past in any part of the UK – be it on route to Ukania (Nairn, 2000) or the Disunited Kingdom (Grant and Stringer, 1995). The unexplored nature of this debate for History educators was explicitly referenced by Philips et al. in 1999, yet few studies have been forthcoming and a cross national comparison also proved too large and complex for the only major study of the history of history education undertaken by Cannadine et al. (2010). In their survey of History teachers (in England) and deployment of statutory British History teaching - Sheldon correspondingly noted little enthusiasm to teach British history as the ‘history of four nations’ - or of teachers in England conceding prominence to Scottish, Welsh and Irish history (2013, 44). And, although ‘a global dimension’ is required of the current national curricula, its relation to
‘the national’ or even supranational, within compulsory history, citizenship studies, geography, or religious education is still largely under researched.

The debate about history education is at least partly complicated by public and mediated reactions to history teaching in particular as the retrieval of buried national treasure – literally evidence of a golden age. History mined for this purpose is less a practice of discovery but a search for glory, greatness and heroes. Populist or even patriotic appeals to secure a national narrative or chronology have remained remarkably similar across time and by political elites and grandstanding about ‘national’ history for a national purpose remains unabated, and curiously timeless in the English Press. History is perceived as immersion and exposure – a public experience – the passive, infantilised and patriotic equivalent of a sheep dip - not a private and intellectual negotiation. As Cannadine et al. note, there have been constant complaints about the teaching of history for as long as it has been taught: ‘that young people know too little about the national past; that they are ignorant about dates, battles, politicians and kings and queens’ and the print media has revitalised themes of anxiety and derision in History for a century or more. The appeal for a secure narrative – is thus a narrative of security in itself. Childhood also has interesting parallels here. Storytelling begets the growth of young people and nations. Both are about becoming – with debates polarised over agency and legitimacy – of subject and experience. Perhaps too, that which we most claim to care about, we also neglect. The relationships explored in this article are thus curiously marked by absences and contradictions.

The sum of the parts

As Sheldon notes, many European nations have put compulsory education and history teaching at the heart of their projects of national self-definition. In comparison ‘the British State for most of the 19th and 20th centuries was ‘allergic to compulsory anything and to compulsory national identity most of all.’ In the recent past, ‘central government left it to local government, who left it to schools who left it to teachers’ (Sheldon, 2009). Early generations of children were exposed to a ‘national story’ even across varieties of schooling, because of conviction about its content and also the redemptive power of ‘Whiggish’ facts within memory based testing. Although most young people left school aged 14 or 15, or earlier, they had studied a common, chronological narrative in their history lessons. By the 1970s and 1980s attendant pressures from globalisation, migration and devolution led to the first significant national evaluation of education and its purpose – the so called ‘Great Debate’. History was a lightning rod for ‘national’ anxieties and clashes over the content of History reached their height in the period of the Conservatives landmark 1988 Education Act and new National Curriculum framework for England and Wales. The creation of the first National Curriculum History for England (for children up to 14) thus created the most significant struggle in education policy formation to date, often articulated - the 'battle for the big prize' - for culture, for identity and for hegemony (Phillips, 1992).

Although the desire for a national curriculum was partly created by teachers themselves, the debate about its form engaged the entire education community and was marked by two related concerns – content versus skills and the stabilizing presence of a (national) chronological narrative. On one side was the great Tradition of History Teaching (Slater, 1989) – inherited, introspective and not at all inconvenient – wherein skills were rendered as oppositional to knowledge. So called ‘New history’
teaching in schools which was ‘veering on postmodernist approaches’ (Trowler, 1998) and its emphasis on interpretation, potentially paved the way for post-national narratives in a newly shrinking world. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s identification of the New History was ‘radically left-wing, undermining traditional, sequential and essentially national (patriotic) school history’ (Guyver, 2013). ‘appalled’ by the lack of chronology achieved by the History Working Group (Stow and Hyden, pg), her direct intervention in 1987 perhaps illustrates the vitality of chronology as a Trojan horse of national identity. One author and teacher parodies ‘the implicit and sometimes explicit narrative’ that was being constructed in this period:

once upon a time, all English schoolchildren had learned their national history properly, thoroughly, and lovingly; ‘recently’ (exactly when this happened depended on your age or political orientation – it might have been as long ago as the 1960s or as recently as the New Labour years since 1997), it had been eclipsed by faddish new subjects like media or IT or by political correctness or by a misguided belief that history was more about ‘skills’ than about learning your national story. (Mandler, 2011).

The debate, or challenge, tellingly generated more media coverage than any other issue in education, through many thousands of articles and dramatic by-lines. The UK is a newspaper reading community and regular features mourned the loss of familiar, glorious, traditional and inspirational teaching. Although the threatened consequences to children and statehood were left somewhat obscure and intangible they were often vividly illustrated by recourse to a whiggish canon of threatened icons. A typical allegation held that Great History, of kings, warriors, and Florence Nightingale, would be ‘axed’, in favour of lessons laced with third-world, feminine and poverty-stricken characters within local, European, social or postmodern contexts (Brocklehurst and Phillips, 2004). When analysed more deeply, the notion of 'British' identity envisaged within press discourse – and its degeneration via History - was essentially an English construction. In this cartoon-like representation, the ‘national past’ was guarantor of a secure national future and a story in itself. It is worth noting here that the structure of the/a entire curriculum is also a response to perceived threats to the stability of knowledge and society. For example the ushering in of compulsory ‘core’ subjects quickly situated and marginalized alternatives such as ‘environmental education and political education’ (Hargreaves and Reynolds cited in Trowler, 1998, 79). This discursive and real separation of children from politics – by the state and in the name of the state - is at the heart of this article

Interestingly ‘whereas the Conservatives were exercised greatly about history in schools, Gareth Elwyn Jones, the only person to sit on both the History Working Group and the Welsh History Committee, lamented the ‘poverty of the Labour Party’s thinking on education generally and the history curriculum in particular’ (Sheldon, 45). Perhaps in consequence, the final architects of National Curriculum History Orders were largely able to work without significant elite interference. Wales was later granted separate History Orders through the insights of a separate working group for Welsh history, ‘the Kings and Queens of England were not going to be acceptable’, (Daugherty-Elfed Owens, 1987) and Wales in effect held a separate national curriculum. In 1991 the curriculum was revisited and Department of Education and Skills initiated a statutory requirement for a ‘truly British history syllabus’ for England and Wales, to replace what was in their word ‘basically English-orientated approach to British history’ (original emphasis) (DES, 1990, 17). At this juncture the National Curriculum also placed comparatively more emphasis on non-European history, although it might be argued that its statutory requirements were still modest. It would be interesting to
speculate if this tightening of ‘British History’ arose in response to perceived existential threats. Crawford (1995) illustrated how New Right activists were especially able to influence political debate through the use of the press to simplify and polarize complex arguments. ‘Take Pride in History’, urged the Sunday Telegraph in 1991 in typical popular reportage. Daily newspapers presented an ‘essentially patriotic vision of Britain and Britishness often eliding this imagining with an explicit anti-Europeanism’ (Phillips 1998, 45). And as Maastricht loomed one commentator noted that ‘it is a tragedy that at the very moment Britain contemplates and immersion into Europe, our teenagers are giving up the lessons which will hand them a cultural identity of which they can be proud’ (18.10.92). Tellingly, within the post 14 curriculum, there seems to have been resistance to allowing pupils to encounter the EU within a modern history setting. Stephen Wall, adviser to Margaret Thatcher apparently led the Foreign Office to pressure the Department for Education and Employment. “The EU is only on the GCSE modern history curriculum,” he wrote, ”thanks to FCO pressure on the DfEE last year’. In Ireland by contrast ‘ a truly European dimension’ (Saviddes, 2002) was developed in the post primary modern history curriculum which did ‘not focus purely on European wars and includes the study of European moves to peace’.

By the end of the millennium in England, schools were asked to ‘contribute to the development of pupils’ sense of identity through knowledge and understanding of the spiritual, moral, social and cultural heritages of Britain’s diverse society and of the local, national, European, Commonwealth and global dimensions of their lives’ (1999). Savvides suggests that reforms which finally added an explicit European Dimension into the National Curriculum were prompted by the 1998 UK government’s Presidency of the European Union and necessitated by a general reluctance to accept its worth (2002). Notably, the specified content of the History curriculum also survived the shift from Conservative government to New Labour suggesting that ‘differences in educational ideology are less distinctive’ in their impact on curricula per se (Trowler, 1998, 109). Blair’s infamous 1996 election campaign of ‘Education, Education, Education’, perhaps reflected education’s importance but inflicted less certainty about education’s ‘national purpose’ than ever before. The following recent statement by the UKs current Conservative Education Minister, Michael Gove, offers a pertinent example of this cross fertilisation:

…..the truth of our Island story is that we are – and always have been – an innovation nation...Blair displayed a keener understanding of Britain than most leading Labour politicians ever have. He instinctively appreciated that British citizens have robust views on crime, traditional ambitions for their children’s education, natural respect for the armed forces and a principled dislike of penal rates of taxation. (Michael Gove, 2012)

Here Gove illustrates the appeal of ‘traditional’ education and traditional values through the prism of ‘British nationhood’ – cleverly celebrating its timelessness by concession to the Labour Prime Minister before him. It is clear that politicians can hold court through rhetoric cut through with historical contexts, perhaps because so many hold historical degrees. In contrast we are only just seeing the rise of the ‘public historian’ who might challenge them. Thane observes that ‘History plays many roles in British culture’ but that it does not do enough to ‘inform … public discourse and public policy about urgent contemporary issues’ (2003, 5). Ironically, Historians suggest that the very detail of their craft renders them less potent and less prepared to engage in the tub-thumbing political discourse and that only a select few have informed such high profile debates. Historian Tom Devine, who has shaped the Education framework in Scotland, drew attention to the ‘quality’ of the recent debate over history teaching in England. ‘In Scotland, there would have been incandescence
in the academic community and also in civil society. It has been a poverty-stricken and parsimonious debate (2011). Perhaps in their absence, popular sources such as patriotic story books have been able to inform the public consumption of history and whet the appetite for national narratives. In 2005 the right wing think-tank Civitas (the Institute for the Study of Civil Society) campaigned for, and launched its own primary school book – in fact a centenary edition of Our Island Story (1905) and the only example of such an intervention taking place on a national scale. Backed by the right wing Daily Telegraph, the campaign asked all those who ‘care about our history’ to help to fund raise and republish the text, making it available to all 20,000 primary schools in Britain. Can this century old story book help to ‘save our history, our children, and their future?’ posed the newspaper? The book ‘gives the young reader a brilliant picture, simple but accurate, of the way in which our ancestors made us the people we are today’ (The Daily Telegraph, 15.06.05), and would, in the words of John Clare, a prominent educationalist, ‘restore narrative and chronology to history teaching’ and serve as an ‘antidote to the fractured, incoherent history most primary school children read’. Civitas publications promoted the book as the ultimate guarantor of state security: ‘If the nation is worth preserving, then so is the teaching of its history in such a form as renders its members glad of being such and willing to make sacrifices on its behalf, even to the point of the supreme one, should that be necessary (Conway, 2005 8). No follow up study of this book’s impact ensued, although it clearly informed the current Cabinet.

Further Education Reforms in 2008, were to simplify the number of taught History courses to four, at least one of which had to be in British history, the others in British, European or world history, guaranteeing a quarter of teaching time was spent on Britain. Teachers and professional bodies expressed broad satisfaction with this prescribed proportion. However explicit reference to ‘European’ is by no means straightforward to quantify. Despite the statutory requirement made of schools, Fass noted in his own recent study of curriculum delivery that there was not a single post-war European topic, or even sub-unit, in the history curriculum or reference to the historical development of the EU. Instead, the curriculum celebrated British history and British ‘wins’ within a European theatre of war (2011). Most recently the Education Minister Michael Gove, with the initial support of the historian Simon Schama, created a draft History Order in early 2013. The Historical Association, one of the main bodies representing teachers in his area, vehemently argued that the content of the draft Programmes of Study were far too narrow in their focus on British political history. Indeed the lengthy pages of historical events and battles listed in the draft curriculum departed from two years of consultation and repelled almost the entire historical community in the UK – creating a temporary and unparalleled unity. Undeterred, the right wing Mail portrayed the forthcoming curriculum as ‘a triumph of patriotic, militarised, xenophobic chauvinism, conquering Labour’s 2007 left-wing programme, celebrating a narrative of social reform’ (Guyver, 2013). History teachers in England stated with confidence that if Gove’s original ‘curriculum of the dead’ had been rolled out – ‘they would have done their own thing anyway’. Their main frustration was that it lacked vision to capture children in any meaningful way and potentially spelled the death of the subject. The orders were however significantly redrafted and now specify that children learn: ‘the history of these islands as a coherent, chronological narrative, from the earliest times to the present day: how people’s lives have shaped this nation and how Britain has influenced and been influenced by the wider world’ – alongside ‘significant aspects of the history of the wider world: the nature of ancient civilisations; the expansion and dissolution of empires; characteristic features of past non-European societies; achievements and follies of mankind’. ‘Follies of mankind’ has also not been specified,
although statutory History content includes ‘challenges for Britain, Europe and the wider world 1901 to the present day’ (2013). The phrasing perhaps prevents the articulation of Britain as a challenge for Europe and vice versa. The new English History curriculum has already received some criticism from Historians for a relative neglect of Europe and as Evans notes, refers to "British, local and world history", but does not once mention ‘European history’…and not continental Europe except insofar as it has influenced the history of Britain (Evans, 2013).

Gove has also asked that all schools make use of co-curricular learning –noting that ‘sports clubs, orchestras and choirs, school plays, cadets, debating competitions, all help to build character and instil grit’ (2014). The concept of national character (often elided with national identity) is implied here although it is unclear if all children will be informed enough – or even nourished enough to debate with the vigour he intends. Although the quest for appropriate history is well evidenced, it is perhaps the articulation or politicisation of this demand that is important rather than its realisation in classrooms.

The state we’re in

[S]ome of us have followed this madness for decades, watching the progressive dismantling of the story of Britain which was all of a piece with dismantling the very identity of Britain through mass immigration, the erosion of self-government by the EU and its replacement by universal’ values such as human rights (Phillips, 2013).

Intense debates over the warp and weave of past and present identity in the UK, framed sometimes interchangeably as ‘national’ or ‘nationalist’, demonstrate significant state investment, and perhaps explain the resilience of the UK’s uneasy partnership with the European Union. That ‘the nexus between the state and education...remains a cardinal expression of statehood’ (Fass, 2007, 327) may also go some way to explaining why a commitment to European education is most difficult to evidence in England’s curriculum for example. McCrone suggests that education and its iconography is central to Scottish national identity and to all western nations (McCrone, 244). McCrone talks of the modernising effect of education – asserting that ‘the monopoly of legitimate education is now more central than the monopoly of legitimate violence. Hence nationalism grows in the medium of this rational, egalitarian ethos’ (245). Perhaps as significant is Britain’s long dependency on sovereignty as her essential characteristic – scaffolded onto her memory and past as a global power. Existential threats to sovereignty, also offer a narrative thread – or foil - par excellence with which to subvert or sustain nationalisms. Insecurity about Britain’s place in the world was a useful trope which came into play at the height of the first National Curriculum, Education Minister Kenneth Baker argued for a curriculum that evidenced ‘Britain as a world power’.

A power of language and a sense of history are essential to the well-being of any nation. For too long some people have written off our past and have tried to make us feel ashamed of our history. Britain has given a great many things to the world. That’s been our civilising mission. Our pride in our past gives us the confidence to stand tall in the world today. (Baker cited Samuel, 1990, 2)

He further specified that British matters take up 50% of teaching time (Proschaska, 87) – thus pitting British history and global history as equal, although such greatness may have translated into delivery of a mere one hour of teaching each week. Perhaps paradoxically, during the intervening twenty years, the semantics of globalisation have become ‘a new patriotism for state survival’ (Economou,
Echoing this, Scottish historian Tom Devine also made the recent justification that though ‘national history should be the core’, world history must be taught in parallel ‘to avoid introspection and parochialism’. (Devine, 2011). Scotland offers an interesting case in point here, being poised to debate its national future in the devolution referenda of 2015. In contrast to England, Euroscepticism in Scotland has been replaced by support for Europe as a means of encouraging the devolution agenda and Scottish policy makers have exhibited a cautious optimism. Europe became an alternative point of reference in which UK policy developments could be challenged or mediated. Europe thus can be a conduit for the transmission of global agendas into the national arena. For example, An International Outlook: Educating Young Scots about the World (Scottish Executive 2001), emphasised the importance of the European (and economic) dimension in the school curriculum, asserting that ‘we are already European citizens, with rights and responsibilities...we must earn a living within an increasingly global economy’. The Scottish Government’s international perspective within the Curriculum for Excellence, publicly states that: ‘The focus should be on Scotland and Scotland’s place in the world - challenging our ambitions against the achievement of other countries and aiming to have a confident sense of self. Further ‘Learning in schools should promote an understanding of Scotland, our culture, heritage and history, our environment and our place in the world (2010).’ Interestingly Scotland’s sense of Scottishness has been in greater evidence despite a relative decline in ‘Scottish’ dimensions of the curriculum, not least due to lack of resources. Scotland’s latest education reforms have exposed the lack of specification of content per se in the new curricula, which is also narrowly predicated on social responsibility rather than political activism (Biesta, 2008). These dimensions are amply captured in the government’s Education Scotland web portal which synthesises projections of ‘Scotland and its place in the world’ with sophisticated yet intimate, digitally mediated invitations to engage with ‘devolution’, ‘homecoming’ and the study of Scotland (2014).Politics is perhaps then refracted through investments in national education as an idea – rather than a national ‘history’ which is deployed.

In contrast, a review and public consultation is currently under way in Wales to uncover whether there is ‘sufficient emphasis on Welsh history and the stories of Wales in the teaching of history’. ‘Wales, Europe and the World’ is prominent theme in the Welsh Baccalaureate. But History also has an emphasis on local history, and is taught alongside statutory Curriculum Cymreig which explores a sense of belonging and reflects on the experience of the Welsh and as such has no direct parallel in any of the other parts of the UK. As the authors of an interim report note - ‘...the history taught in schools plays an integral part in the dissemination and reinforcement of national identities. It provides students with a sense of self, an idea of where they came from, and of the values of their nation’. The careful wording of the report itself –deploying plurality and singularity -‘Welsh history and the story(ies) of Wales in the teaching of history’ is also of note here. Nevertheless, they note that ‘many learners in Wales learn far more about the history of England than that of their own area and country and that not enough attention is paid to the other countries of Britain. The Welsh government review group has also noted that education reportage makes very few references to the other national curricula in Britain, while the English curriculum is all too often described as ‘the national curriculum’ (Learning Wales 2013).

Curiously the national curriculum does not include independent schools or academies (potentially up to 50% of students) and the government has yet to reconcile its two tier delivery of curricula in this sense. The lack of a national delivery to so called national curricula is telling of its true ideational and political capital. Lawn (2013) compounds this challenge by describing the construction of England’s’
unique ‘systemless education system’. Classroom teaching in such academies have remained largely outside the scrutiny of the press suggesting the notion of choice or freedom seems to trump the apparent risks of ‘national’ or ‘compulsory’ curriculum design. Tristram Hunt - TV historian and now politician is one prominent exception – lamenting the unshackling of the History curriculum, and, subtly referencing ‘sub-national’ communities as a new threat in the UK:

This fragmentation of schooling is inherently antagonistic to the teaching of a unitary Island Story [my italics] able to knit together Britain’s increasingly autonomous religious and ethnic groupings. Free schools in Bradford and Godalming are going to offer very different versions of our national narrative. You cannot have both a government-sanctioned account of British history taught in classrooms with French republican diktat and a free-market model of school provision that allows every community and ethnicity to pick and choose their account of the past. (Hunt, 2012)

One further ‘separate’ example – that of a ‘European School’ is worth further note here. The mission of the 30 or so European Schools is to provide a distinct intergovernmental multilingual and multicultural education system designed for children whose parents work for the European institutions. In the case of England’s only ‘European school, analysis showed that ‘learning to be European’ - rather than content based learning about Europe was the ethos within the school– a ‘thin’ approach in that it is the very nature an educational system is seen to encourage pupils to develop a sense of European identity (last page). Ironically, teachers there also reported uncertainty about the concept of Europeanness and a degree of alienation from its forms – I ‘[h]onestly, I do not feel that I’m really European because I don’t know what it means …so far for me the EU is not linked to people. It’s a financial world, a political world ... an economic world; it’s not a people world. (Savvides, 2006, 125).

Political literacy

...to gain historical perspective by placing their growing knowledge into different contexts, understanding the connections between local, regional, national and international history; between cultural, economic, military, political, religious and social history; and between short- and long-term timescales. (DoE, 2013)

‘the major events, changes and developments in British, European and world history, stating that students need ‘an understanding of the changing nature of conflict over time and attempts to resolve conflict and develop cooperation, including through international institutions such as the United Nations and the European Union’.

The current history curriculum, illustrated above, is explicitly characterised for the first time by phrases such as ‘political history’ and ‘military history’. Many children reach University exceptionally well versed in war which perhaps not surprising when one considers Britain’s warrior past – and present. Up to two thirds of teenagers studying History after age 14 elect to study Nazi Germany. Scotland’s advisory bodies have noted the Nazification of the curriculum and the Wales advisory group also cite the hegemonic presence of resources on Nazi Germany as a particular challenge for Welsh history teaching - in addition to the omnipresence of English history. Although the EU’s origins are also sculpted by war it is unlikely that such obsession with it was anticipated by her architects. What are parameters of ‘the political’ already established in the values of the education system? Perhaps as a consequence of accreted political illiteracy there is little debate about the place of ‘war’
or politics in the official curriculum. The nature of modern politics, especially at an explicitly international level, is not systematically addressed in most school curricula and key conceptual issues which underpin power and violence are virtually absent. As has been noted earlier, young people are also rarely researched as consumers, interpreters or transmitters of identity or security.

‘Political literacy’ – in the sense of children’s cognition of politics and our cognition of children as political bodies and minds – might help shed light on our ‘island’ story further. If even young children are capable of learning about human rights, religion or citizenship – then why not systematically include the institution of sovereignty and the political roles of international institutions? Should children learn about themselves in relation to ‘international society’ earlier? Children protected ‘from politics’ and potentially denied recognition as ‘political bodies’ are arguably ill equipped to recognise and think critically about the political world they are in – least of all help make it. In earlier work I argue that concepts of children are premised on a notion of childhood as an experience which has, or should have, little in common with the political – and that the international realm is where this conceptual distance is most ardently maintained (Brocklehurst, 2006, 2011). Children’s conscious contribution as citizens and as political actors is not consistently recognized, exposed, or provided for in their education. Disengagement with childhood can mask and distorts children’s roles as complex consumers of, and agents within (international) politics. Misrepresentation or denial of agency and capacity surely lessens the dividend that education can provide. Apparently child-centric societies and democracies can side-line children, sending mixed messages about their contribution as future citizens and as spectators, consumers and ultimately stabilisers of nations and their wars (Brocklehurst, 2011). Politics is about power and here, within children’s learning spaces, it has found quiet anchorage. Curricular and public support material is worth dwelling on here.

The politics of production of informational and literature intended for juveniles (aged 3 to 18) is a vastly neglected research area (Brocklehurst, 2011). Research shows that many compelling ‘factual’ books characterising the international politics of today potentially undermine citizenship education. Institutions are not fun it seems – and nether is cooperation marketable. Texts on global threats barely mention ‘liberal’ or institutional dynamics – further fostering children’s perception of a hostile and hopeless world. War, terrorism and global threats dwarf material on the EU, the UN and other institutions included in the curriculum. There are many factors working against the provision of juvenile literature on supranational politics. Deck argues that ‘the simplification of cultures and history is itself a form of violence’ (2004). To this I would add the subculture of children’s informational literature (Connolly, 2008; Geruluk, 2012). One might also ask if this is why there are so few commissioned textbooks on Britain’s peacetime relations with Europe. Clearly children are reading books in a political context – but not on the EU. Like children’s news programmes, such texts also demonstrate and profit from a powerful anticipation of children’s political literacy at a time when this aspect of their development is rarely acknowledged explicitly. Critical literacy however is not yet common to classrooms having only very recently been realized in elementary curricula such as history (Cooper 2007: 221) and through philosophical enquiry. This is perhaps evidenced by within Northern Ireland – where history has been essential in maintaining and challenging identity divisions. As Barton, et al urged greater critical literacy to be fostered amongst school children ‘to enable them to confront the interface between past and present’. Despite the immense significance

---

1 The new pilot International Baccalaureate course on Global Politics for 16 – 18 years olds offers an interesting comparison here and offers significant weighting to core concepts such as power, sovereignty and cooperation.
of history teaching, and of delivery within the ‘hidden’ curriculum of segregated school classrooms it is notable that the Education authorities invested in very little into interrogation of the hidden curriculum of classrooms and narratives.

More recently pupils and students are not taught how to access or read non-fiction information in their private worlds (Jamali et al. 2008; Heider, 2009) even though “young citizens are immersed in what may be the richest, yet most fragmented information environment in human history” (Bennett 2007: 14). Research in Germany reveals that it is more important that young people are attentive and as attentive citizens are ‘politically more knowledgeable, identify more strongly with the democratic system’ and ‘feel more politically competent’ than active citizens (Geissel (2008:34) cited in Marsden, 2009, 15). As Law argues, ‘Education - to encourage children to think critically and independently is the best defence against being indoctrinated’ (2006, 167). The recent Wales History working group noted that ‘History is optional at Key Stages 4 and 5, at the precise time when learners’ intellectual development enables them to understand complex concepts and to think in more abstract terms. This is also the time when they are developing as young citizens. Typically only one third of children in England take history after the age of 14 but the take up itself sharply reflects other socio-economic divides (Skidmore, 2012). In some parts of England, no children are entered for the exam or no students who take it pass the subject – allegedly offered an easier, vocational alternative (Gove, 2008). In England there is also little taken up of Black history for example and the historian and textbook author John D. Clare also conceded that A Nation of Immigrants had not sold well, perhaps because ‘it addressed some ‘really hot potatoes’ (Sheldon, 2009). Interestingly an anti-intellectual discourse of derision is also thrust at attempts to expand disciplines such at History – note the recent headline of September 2013 – ‘Pupils forced to study History and Geography’. Here the proposed pursuit of core subjects for children after the age of 14 is marginalised by the same forces that clearly espouse ‘being’ British (via History) as a birthright.

In terms of available classroom resources it is not clear when and how the EU is able to capture teachers or pupils’ attention or if young people in the UK are aware of the EU as an important site of security, governance and cooperation. Compared to state centric issues – the teaching of the EU in classrooms generates less debate or discussion in teacher forums. The think tank Civitas (the Institute for the Study of Civil Society) provides an extensive number of worksheets for teachers and boasts an impressive advisory board of politicians, teachers and luminaries. It is worth glancing at their briefest factsheet for classroom work – potentially that which has reached the greatest number of pupils. A dense and factual, one page overview is supplemented by two eye catching quotations:

‘[Is] British democracy, parliamentary sovereignty, the common law, our ability to run our own affairs – to be subordinated to the demands of a remote bureaucracy, resting on very different traditions?’ Margaret Thatcher, UK Prime Minister 1979-1990

‘We want European Union, a United States of Europe’. Helmut Kohl, German Chancellor, 1982-1998

The rhetoric here evidences equally dramatic positions of resistance and self-determination, from the home country and from Germany - the historically dominant regional power she has fought against. Both sources might form the basis of a healthy debate – but both also signify significant loss of control and sovereignty. Four ‘hot topics’ identified on the factsheet are ‘Enlargement and Turkish membership, Immigration, Energy and climate change, and Economic crisis’. Such issues of
legitimacy and identity are to be welcomed but are not yet fully supported across the curriculum as political concepts. The new citizenship curricula provide an alternative space for ‘local, regional and international governance and the United Kingdom’s relations with the rest of Europe, the Commonwealth, the United Nations and the wider world’. Notably it is asserted that European citizenship in England remains in the shadow of ‘global citizenship’ education. Unresolved disputes about England’s role in the EU makes the concept of European Citizenship extremely challenging for teachers to deal with in the classroom beyond an economic and/or legal/rights based framework - consequently global and European citizenship education initiatives have an unofficial status in the UK (Marshall, 2009).

Conclusion

National narratives which inform education provision and debates in the national press about the apparent loss of ‘great history’ teaching, illustrate a peculiar fusion of vested interests, both tempered and bolstered by the presence of the supranational. National Curricula were conceived as a European norm from 1987 and although the project of Europeanization has secured education as a centre of meaning (Grek et al, 2009) the study of European influences on education is relatively underdeveloped. As little as a decade ago Europe had not been addressed in educational contexts (Nóvoa and Lawn, 2012) and exacerbated by Europe’s less formal policy instruments and processes, politics, sociology and EU studies generally had not engaged with education (Lawn, 2006, 275). This arena of soft law and cooperation represents an effective way of ‘creating’ Europe (Lawn, 2006, 285). Although the European project is itself an educational one, it does not however promise a way to bridge the gap between any national and supranational projections of power through school curricula. Having secured a narrative for itself, or some degree of construction, the European Union is clearly helping shape national education provision. But as a consensus seeking actor par excellence, it is unable to further intervene reflexively within these debates.

‘The European dimension’ is associated with cross curricularly, the learning of languages and intercultural education. Interlinked with the idea of a European citizenship and European identity it is less committal and critically less political, (Marshall, 2009, 18) but provides opportunities for European rhetoric about citizenship and social inclusion to be operationalised. Educational policies, despite emphasizing the importance of developing critical thinking, participation and active involvement of pupils, mainly promote citizenship conceptions based on conventional actions such as voting and volunteering (Norris, 2002, 43). European citizenship is thus frequently constructed as a passive and thin form of civic engagement, leading Phillipou et al. (293) to question if a mature, ‘post-national’ or civic-based vision of national and European citizenship has emerged and yet also noting that ‘the link between citizenship and the nation-state has endured. Furthermore Phillipou et al. note that if European or global citizenship is always being reimagined in, and for, national frames of reference, then European citizenship almost has no meaning independent of national citizenship (295). It is this elasticity that provides capital and agency but ultimately Europe is what states want and make of it. Policy actors in England for example maintain a distance from European education policy-making – ‘positioning themselves more in the global, rather than the European field and presenting themselves as influencing and controlling developments within Europe but also ‘preferring to lobby at a global supranational level’ (Grek et al, 2009). ‘The UK/England governance of education is characterised by emphasis on policy outcomes’. (Grek and Ozka: 947). Economou
notes reluctance at ministerial level to translate a supranational policy into a national one (2011, 83) – further losses during transmission and finally implementation occurring as ‘a matter of chance’.

Perhaps ironically, given such ongoing whiggish anxiety within the UK, Nóvoa notes that European Union educational documents have always been centred on “rhetoric regarding the ‘great past’ and the ‘great future’ of Europe”. These now evidence a ‘small present’ (2013, 115). Grek et al also recognise a new phase – a projection of standards - captured in the goals of major policy frameworks and the context of powerful economic instrumentalist agendas – or ‘the return of homo economicus’ (Kazamias 2001 cited in Philippou 2005: 347). The Barcelona European Council (2002) agreed upon a program to be achieved by 2010, which would focus on education and training systems – and subsequently failed to meet most of the targets. The agenda was merely extended with a 2020 deadline prompting Nóvoa to lament that there are more continuities than changes in the way that European construction is conceptualised’, and a significant narrowing of investment (2013; 108, 112). As Grek et al note - the governing project of a ‘people’s Europe’ is slowly being turned to a project of individualisation – the production of a Europe of individuals, striving to accomplish international goals, indicators and benchmarks (2011, 49). More broadly then, there is likely to be less not more EU political interest in when and how interpretations of identity, nationhood and co-existence are delivered throughout curricula and across educational lifetimes. In contrast a British fixation with national narratives will endure – neither small nor always great – but secured by the history it wants if not teaching it needs. History teaching to teens and adolescents is clearly not perceived as of pragmatic importance to the UK state. The maintenance of this fundamental barrier by successive governments is of interest. One might even suggest that the absence of *formal* history teaching after 14 – and commitment to a sustained, critical dividend – advantages a state that has much to lose from such introspection. As Schama notes of the UKs reforms ‘A truly capacious British history will not be the feeder of identity politics but its dissolvent. In the last resort, all serious history is about entering the lives of others, separated by place and time. It is the greatest, least sentimental, least politically correct tutor of tolerance’. (2010)

If we briefly go back to 1905, Marshall begins the *Island Story* with apposite caution:

I must tell you, though, that this is not a history lesson, but a story-book...But you will find some stories that are not to be found in your school books,—stories which wise people say are only fairy tales and not history. But it seems to me that they are part of Our Island Story, and ought not to be forgotten, any more than those stories about which there is no doubt’ ... Remember, too, that I was not trying to teach you, but only to tell a story.
Bibliography


Booker, C. ‘The EU schemes to indoctrinate our children’, *The Sunday Telegraph*, London, November 12, 2000, Pg. 18


Evans, R. J., ‘Michael Gove's history wars’ *The Guardian*, Saturday 13 July 2013


Groves, J, ‘Schools should axe citizenship lessons and teach more British history, say MPs as they bid to half decline in the subject’, The Daily Mail Online, 10th December 2012, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2245679/Schools-axe-citizenship-lessons-teach-British-history-say-MPs-bid-half-decline-subject.html#ixzz2jeisKued


Guyver, R. 2013 ‘Should we thank Mr Gove for giving us more history?’ History & Policy, Opinion, http://www.historyandpolicy.org/opinion/opinion_104.html


Hunt, T, ‘Gove’s paradox: The Education Secretary’s free schools agenda is at odds with his populist rhetoric about history teaching’, The Spectator, 21 April 2012


Learning Wales (2012) The Cwricwlwm Cymreig, history and the story of Wales 


Marshall, H. E, Our Island Story (2005), Galore Park in association with Civitas.


Sheldon, N, (2010) History Textbooks from 1965 to the present day http://www.history.ac.uk/history-in-education/project-papers/topics.html


‘Education Scotland’, (2014)