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# Strengthening teacher networks: Decolonising secondary school history curricula

JULY 2022

**AUTHOR**

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# Summary

This study aimed to build on existing Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) partnerships with secondary schools to establish a history teachers' network. The focus of the network was to facilitate collaboration, as well as the co-construction of knowledge and understanding in relation to the decolonising of history curricula in secondary schools. The purpose was also to strengthen teacher networks for the longer term, and to create a space in which different stakeholders can exchange ideas in a bid to support the decolonisation process.

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# 1. Introduction & literature review

The decolonising of curricula is a current issue in education and is perhaps more urgently needed for the subject of history than many other disciplines (Moncrieffe, 2018; 2020). Johnson and Mouthaan (2021) found in their research that teachers were key agents for change in relation to the decolonisation of curricula, stressing the importance of teacher development in this area. Despite urgent calls for this process to take place in schools, there is a range of challenges that can make it very demanding. The decolonising of curricula is not an integral part of the Department for Education's core content framework, which contains the stipulations that initial teacher education providers are required to adhere to. Furthermore, decolonising history curricula is not frequently considered an integral aspect to focus on when preparing students for GCSE history examinations (Joseph-Salisbury, 2020, p. 10). Therefore it can be difficult for teachers to find the time to develop their own knowledge, understanding and resources (Johnson & Mouthaan, 2021), especially when pressures in schools are often aligned to Ofsted and examination requirements.

The complexities and varying interpretations of what it actually means to decolonise curricula can also present challenges and uncertainty. During a time when these issues have been brought to the forefront of the education agenda, and many history teachers are keen to undertake this work, they appear more urgent than ever. However, developments in schools are often highly dependent on specific school and departmental contexts and can vary significantly – hence the initiative of developing a history teacher network to share experiences between and beyond individual schools (for example, Ainscow, 2020; Ainscow et al., 2012) in order to facilitate collaboration and co-creation among a range of history teachers.

The role of teachers in curriculum-making, and the importance of practitioners' ownership and sense-making in implementing sustainable changes to curricula have been established in existing research (Pyhältö et al., 2018). Putting an emphasis on the importance of the school context for the development of teacher agency, or lack thereof (Priestley et al., 2016, p. 198), this project aimed to establish a multi-school forum for history teachers with the objective of enhancing teacher agency through methods of collaboration and co-creation.

In line with a recent report from Runnymede (Johnson & Mouthaan, 2021), the aim of the project was to incorporate decolonial practices as a key aspect of teacher development, viewing teacher agency as an ecological concept – as being 'always enacted in a concrete situation, constrained and supported by cultural, structural and material resources available to actors' (Priestley et al., 2016, p. 192). The aim, therefore, was to co-construct an interactive space where history teachers had an opportunity to 'achieve' agency (Priestley et al., 2016, p. 190), collaborate, and co-construct knowledge, understanding and practices. Harris (2020) has emphasised how curriculum design '...is a deeply intellectual exercise that requires attention to what should be taught, underpinned by a clear understanding of why and how something should be taught'. Considering such demands, the intention of this project was to create a space for teachers to begin to undertake this intellectual exercise, in order to facilitate the development of decolonial practices.

## 2. Research design

The project had three key objectives.

- To facilitate a network for secondary school history teachers beyond their individual school contexts.
- To develop practices of co-production among the key stakeholders (researchers, practitioners, museum) to generate knowledge, tools and resources to support history teachers' development of agency in the decolonising of the curriculum.
- To explore the process of collaboration and co-creation through data collection and analysis, and to share knowledge and understanding generated from the project with the wider education community.

The network consists of approximately 30 history teachers who signed up as participants, and a further seven student teachers who expressed an interest in joining the network. All participants have access to the network's shared area, are invited to network meetings and receive all communications. Online meetings, as well as museum sessions, have been attended by a range of participants depending on availability.

The project generated a range of data which was analysed with the intention of exploring how a cross-school network for history teachers, with a focus on co-production of knowledge, could enhance teacher agency. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) was employed in a bid to be responsive to the data. This also acknowledges the interpretative role of the researcher in making meaning of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

The data collected were generated from the following activities of the history teacher network.

- 1. Baseline and end of project surveys of participants.** The baseline survey informed the discussion in the first network meeting and provided insights into history teachers' experiences of decolonising history curricula before participating in the network. The end of project survey was a way to ascertain individuals' views on their own development, what worked/did not work well and what would enhance the network moving forward.

- 2. Online meetings of the history teacher network.**

These meetings were recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis to identify key aspects of participants' discussions, thinking, ideas and collaboration/co-production.

- 3. Outputs by participants and the community partner from face-to-face sessions at the participating museum.**

These outputs from sessions at the museum were analysed in relation to participants' thinking around opportunities to decolonise curricula, but also in relation to collaboration between history teachers and museums.

- 4. Resources generated and shared as part of the history teacher network** were analysed as practical examples of artefacts linked to the themes generated from the other areas of data collection described above.

### 2.1 LIMITATIONS

Although this is a qualitative study, it is worth noting that the input from individuals varies significantly in the data, depending on their availability to attend network meetings. Some participants attended all meetings, while others attended one or two. Some participants were only able to take part by accessing the shared area, so their ideas and opinions were not expressed in verbal discussions in meetings.

Ethical approval was obtained through the faculty research ethics processes at MMU.



# 3. Findings

## 3.1 VIEWS ON THE DECOLONISING OF HISTORY CURRICULA

The initial baseline survey, in combination with analysis of the network meetings, provided some detailed insights into the way in which history teachers conceptualise the decolonising of history curricula. A number of participants used the discourse of diversity and diversifying when describing what decolonising the curriculum meant to them. Their conceptions also included gender, class and LGBTQ+.

Making the curriculum less Eurocentric was another prominent response. There was a recognition of 'whiteness' as a concept and as something problematic in regard to its prevalence in more traditional histories. For example, one response suggested that decolonising the curriculum would mean '...not just teaching from a white, male Eurocentric perspective'.

There was a prominent sense among a high number of participants that the desire to decolonise the curriculum stemmed from a wish to make history accessible to all students – to make it representative of the students and their communities. This factor appeared to be a prominent motivator in a number of responses, showing a desire among teachers to make history more relevant and inclusive for the pupils they teach ('inclusive' was a recurrent term). Furthermore, teachers from school contexts with mostly white students also expressed the need to decolonise their history curricula. They felt an urgency to teach their pupils about other historical narratives, not solely that of a traditional Eurocentric perspective. One participant commented that unless further focus was given to decolonising the curriculum, '...the only time they [pupils] see a non-white person in the history classroom is in chains on the Middle Passage...'.

## 3.2 OBSTACLES

Through the initial survey and the analysis of discussions in meetings, some key obstacles were identified that participants considered to be

significant in hampering efforts to decolonise curricula. These were of particular interest to the project since it could indicate the areas where the network might be able to provide support, and where co-production of knowledge might take place. Factors that emerged as significant obstacles include the following.

- GCSE specifications
- The focus of the National Curriculum (which was viewed as unhelpful)
- Difficulties finding relevant resources
- Developing own subject knowledge and racial literacy
- The lack of time available to undertake this work; this was often also linked to many of the other obstacles mentioned.

Discussions in the first network meeting raised the priority of the lack of resources, or, perhaps more accurately, the challenges of finding them, as one of the most urgent areas teachers wanted support with. Participants stressed their ability and willingness to create lessons and learning activities based on, and related to, relevant resources. However, finding these was considered time-consuming; this also extended to gaining further insights from research and academic literature.

## 3.3 RUNNING A CROSS-SCHOOL ONLINE NETWORK

Both opportunities and challenges emerged as a result of setting up a (post-)pandemic online network. For further details see Olsson Rost (2022).

## 3.4 COLLABORATION & CO-PRODUCTION

### 3.4.1 The museum

Co-production with the community partner from the museum resulted in input from the museum's education officer at one of the network meetings (focusing on teaching the transatlantic slave trade) and through sessions at the museum.

The exchange at the museum sessions was fruitful, with positive feedback from both the museum's education officer and the teacher participants. The participants specifically commented on the usefulness of a tour led by the education officer, and how this input aided them to discover new facts and resources that would support their teaching.

The consultative session allowed participants to become familiarised with the museum's resources, but also the education officer to receive feedback on how the resources could be used by school pupils. Analysis of the data suggests that participants were able to envisage a range of curriculum areas where the sources could support pupils' learning. The ideas spanned from specific topic areas on existing curricula, such as 'Black and British', immigration after the Second World War, and units on 'power of the people', to enquiries led by historic concepts such as longer-term consequences. The consultation gave the education officer an insight into how the source materials sit in relation to school curricula, and how enquiry questions can make the sources more purposeful. Furthermore, teachers provided insights into how they envisaged preparing pupils before visiting the museum, and how the museum can provide resources to support this.

### 3.4.2 Chairing the network: the experienced history teacher

To make the teacher network sustainable, and to encourage a feeling of ownership and collaboration, an experienced history teacher chaired the meetings. As the project was based on the tenet of co-production, this role evolved in response to discussions and areas of interest as they emerged. The chair led discussions and also shared their own expertise and resources. As the project progressed, the insights gained suggest that this role needs to be flexible and that the chair needs to be a role model, both in sharing their own thinking and practices, and in encouraging a safe space without judgment. The following quote exemplifies this part of the role.

*'...some of us have been teaching for a long time. Some of us are just new into teaching. Some of us are first year teachers. Now with that in mind, there is always capacity to change...it's not about feeling bad or saying you're wrong, I'm right... all it's about is moving forward. How can we develop more of an anti-racist culture to increase the personal development of our pupils because as history teachers, the personal development of...our pupils, doesn't just fall with the PSHE [personal, social, health and economic education] programme. It falls with other subjects as well, but one of the most important ones is the history curriculum.'*

### 3.4.3 The research team

Due to the involvement of the two community partners, the principal investigator and research assistant were able to attend meetings and museum sessions in supporting roles, and to assist the community partners with administrative and organisational duties. The less prominent presence of the researchers during meetings also created space for teacher-to-teacher discussion and collaboration, enhancing the opportunity for participant-led collaboration and co-production. The research team was also able to dedicate time to collating relevant resources and provide summaries from academic and professional literature in response to requests from participants.

## 4. Discussion & suggestions

The findings suggest that there was a real appetite among the participants to decolonise history curricula in secondary schools, and that a multi-school forum is one way of providing some of the ‘cultural, structural and material resources’ (Priestley et al., 2016, p. 192) required to allow history teachers to start (or in some cases continue) the process.

### 4.1 SUGGESTION 1

The diverse ideas and views about what the decolonising of the curriculum in secondary schools entails, and therefore how this might be approached, highlighted not only differences in knowledge and experience, but also awareness of wider racial literacy. The motivation of making history curricula more representative and inclusive appeared to be strong, but further input on more general racial literacy and anti-racist practices could support a deepening of knowledge and understanding, going beyond the idea of providing a representative curriculum.

### 4.2 SUGGESTION 2

The obstacles that participants emphasised as being significant were often linked to the issue of having enough time to undertake the work required. This accentuates the importance of the co-production process (a key feature of the research design of this project), which allowed for administration, organising, planning and resource production to be responsive to participants’ needs and requests. It also meant that a lot of the time-consuming work was undertaken by the researchers or the community partners. The co-production process with community partners brought great benefits to the network. When developing a cross-school network such as this one, it is essential to consider these relationships. For example, the teacher who chaired the meetings also planned a lot of the content, acted as a role model and put participants at ease. It is crucial to entrust this central role to a suitable individual, but it is just as important to be able

to compensate them appropriately for the time, effort and expertise that they bring to the network.

### 4.3 SUGGESTION 3

There were both benefits and challenges associated with running the network online (Olsson Rost, 2022). The key implication to consider when setting up an online cross-school network is how to create a space where participants feel secure and confident to discuss issues and possibilities connected to the decolonising of the curriculum, racial literacy and anti-racist practices (Olsson Rost, 2022). To undertake deeper thinking and discussion in network meetings, it might be beneficial to facilitate an initial face-to-face session. This would allow participants to become familiarised with each other before undertaking online discussions that can be challenging, and can sometimes cause discomfort (Boler & Zembylas, 2002). If this is too difficult to accomplish (depending on the geographical spread of participants and time available), a digital space where participants can ‘meet’ prior to gathering for discussions online could be another option.

### 4.4 SUGGESTION 4

Related to the above, another implication to consider is the complications involved in organising network meetings where all participants can take part. The difficulties of finding a date and time that would accommodate everyone was a recurring issue throughout the project. This was resolved to a certain extent by the shared area, allowing participants to access anonymised meeting notes and resources online. However, a more flexible digital space would ideally be created where communications and consultations could be undertaken (with other teachers as well as researchers) more regularly, and where new resources could be easily and visibly uploaded as the network progressed. This is something that will be essential for the network as it moves forward.

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## 5. Conclusion

This study showed both possibilities and challenges in developing a cross-school history teacher network. The findings have provided insights into a range of aspects, such as history teachers' conceptions of the decolonising of the curriculum, obstacles and solutions as perceived by participants, and also very practical insights into collaborative research design, and the co-productions of knowledge and understanding. The outcomes from the project will influence the design of the network going forward, especially in terms of the kind of digital space that would be most useful for participants. Further collaborations with the community partners are already under discussion, which is an indication of the longer-term sustainability of the network.

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