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Strengthening teacher networks, decolonising secondary school history curricula: challenges and opportunities in a (post-)pandemic context

The role of teachers in curriculum-making, and the importance of practitioners' ownership and sense-making in implementing sustainable changes to curricula is quite well-established (Pyhältö et al., 2018). The aim of this ongoing project, which has been funded by a BERA small grant, is to set up a multi-school forum for history teachers in order to provide an opportunity to enhance teacher agency (Priestly et al., 2016:198) through coproduction of knowledge. The key objectives were not specifically to examine challenges and opportunities in a (post-)pandemic context. However, this evaluation of the work in progress cannot be fully undertaken without consideration of the related challenges and opportunities posed by the Covid-19 crisis, as well as the wider calls for the decolonisation of curricula as a result of the *#BlackLivesMatter* movement. Decolonising of curricula is a very current issue in education, but is perhaps more urgently expressed for the subject of history than for many other disciplines (Moncrieffe, 2018).

The (post-)Pandemic context certainly presented possibilities for an online forum in a way that we probably could not have envisaged, or practically facilitated, in a pre-pandemic world. When asked, a clear majority of participants expressed a preference for online rather than face-to-face meetings, so this informed the decision to create an online forum. A key challenge from the beginning was how to establish a 'social presence' in the development of a virtual community of inquiry (Garrison, 2009). An online environment does not necessarily hinder the development of this social presence, or what we might refer to as a sense of community. The shared belonging to a group can help foster a sense of community online (Roger and Lea, 2005, p.8) – in this instance, a group of history teachers. However, 'trust' between participants can be challenging to achieve in a virtual space, and it is easier for online participants to become 'lurkers' rather than active participants in contrast to interactions in face-to-face meetings (McLoughlin et al., 2018, p. 139). The social presence is crucial for a network such as this where sensitive and difficult conversations might result in discomfort (Boeler and Zembylas, 2002) when our roles as (predominantly, but not exclusively, white) educators are being explored and examined.

When seeking to establish an online community of practice, Embrett et al. (2021) identifies key factors that help structure such a community:

> 'Mutual engagement' describes the interaction among members that strengthens their connections and leads to shared understanding. 'Joint enterprise' refers to the process of engagement where members work towards a common goal. Finally, a 'shared repertoire' captures the use of communal resources that facilitate group engagement. (Embrett et al., 2021, p. 529)

Although aspects of these factors are evident within the online network, some are more prominent than others. Whilst the 'shared repertoire' is a definitive strength of the network to date, 'mutual engagement' and 'joint enterprise' are less well-developed. It has previously been acknowledged that coproduction of knowledge can be challenging when the focus – in this instance the decolonisation of history curricula - is a contested concept (Pohl et. Al, 2010). Both the initial survey (sent out to participants prior to the first meeting), and consequent discussions, have demonstrated a great interest in the decolonisation of history curricula, with some teachers having extensive

practical experience. However, the initial survey also indicated a wide range of ideas among participants of what the decolonising of history curricula means. This is where 'joint enterprise' becomes challenging, since the common goal might appear obvious, but can in fact, on closer inspection, look quite different in practice. Therefore, in an online network where 'social presence' is a challenge, complex and sometimes sensitive discussions can be difficult to negotiate.

However, despite these challenges, creating an online network has also provided opportunities. First, the time-efficiency of online meetings has been key for time-poor teachers who are doing this work outside of their regular teaching commitments. Second, the initial survey indicated wide-ranging experiences among participants: some are teachers in 11-16 High School settings, others at Sixth-form colleges. A number of participants are Early Career Teachers, whilst others have been teaching for over 20 years. Unsurprisingly, there is also a variety of existing knowledge, understanding and level of experience of decolonising history curricula. Using a range of online platforms has allowed the researcher to collect information and views from a wide range of participants, much wider than those able to regularly attend network meetings. The virtual spaces have also facilitated effective resource-sharing between teachers, the researcher, and community partners. The online format has also permitted the researcher to become a less prominent presence in the coproduction process in a bid to encourage participatory action research (Elden and Levin, 1991).

The importance of the role of teachers as 'critical curriculum thinkers', especially when developing a decolonised curriculum, has previously been emphasised (Harris, 2020). However, a major obstacle identified by the network participants is a lack of time to undertake this work. This online forum is certainly an attempt to provide space for such critical thinking among history teachers, with an aim to facilitate the coproduction of both knowledge and resources to support curriculum development.

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