

HA Update

A curriculum school of thought

The importance of the curriculum is currently in sharper focus. Often curriculum design starts with *what* will be taught, rather than the essential question of *why* it should be taught; the product supersedes the philosophy. However, without philosophical consideration, the rationale, coherence and focus of the curriculum is marred. Considering the implications of what we teach is a crucial task for history departments to undertake. At the Convent of Jesus and Mary Language College (CJMLC) the history department has developed and designed a curriculum model grounded on philosophies that have shaped and sharpened our work. This has been a collaborative journey which has created the following praxis in the department. Firstly, history interacts with both the intellect and the personal. Our pedagogical approach and curriculum content therefore matter deeply. Secondly, history can be a tool for scholar activism arising from critical consciousness and engagement. In the parlance of our students, their history education helps them to be 'woke'. History is not just about academic knowledge: it is potentially transformative. The nature and scope of our curriculum choices and pedagogical values are all centred around these key guiding principles.

Student voice

In considering curriculum design, Professor of Education, David Halpin argues that what matters most is not what is contingent for teachers,

but the learning experience of our students.¹ Some of our most valued philosophers are our students themselves. They regularly provide us with food for thought and inspire us to centre the curriculum on their needs and interests. Last year, a group of our Year 9 students were invited to speak at the Matchwomen's Festival; an annual celebration of the activism of working-class women from London's East End in 1888. In solidarity and sisterhood, these women went on strike and won an unexpected victory against one of the country's most powerful employers: Bryant and May who owned the match-making factory. The 'Matchwomen' set in motion a social movement which laid the foundation for New Unionism. This history is explored in one of our Key Stage 3 enquiries, using the groundbreaking scholarship of Dr Louise Raw.² Our students were asked to open the festival and were followed by activists, political figures and artists. In explaining the historical significance of the Matchwomen and how they inspired them, one student, Calicia, took to the mike and made a profound philosophical statement that reflects the impact of our curriculum choices.

We don't want to learn about a man who hated his wives, we want to learn about the Suffragettes, the Matchwomen, Mansa Musa and Malcom X: people who made a difference.

Calicia's affirmation demonstrates the way our students can be empowered

by our curriculum choices. In the historical scheme of things, *of course* Henry VIII made a difference and so our students will not leave school without understanding his historical significance. Our students encounter Henry VIII in the context of the English Reformation in Year 7, Elizabeth I's succession struggles at GCSE, and at A-level studying the impact of his religious and political policies on Anglo-Irish relations. However, what Calicia communicated was the importance of the content and the lens through which we teach historical episodes and focus our enquiries. Careful thought and consideration need to be given not only to what we teach, but also to how and why we present these topics on the curriculum. The implications of Calicia's maxim are provocative and profound and speak to the philosophical questions we have delved into in the process of our curriculum design.

Diverse histories

Diverse histories are at the core of our curriculum. We believe this is an act of *doing justice to history* as scholars and as a form of social justice. CJMLC is an all-girls Catholic school in the vibrant, multicultural London Borough of Brent. Many of our students are connected to global migration histories. Our classrooms are therefore richly diverse. One key thinker who has helped shape our consideration of the history curriculum is the American educational theorist Gloria Ladson-

This logo was designed by CJMLC student Felicci Reyes. It is her artistic interpretation of the values and ethos of the history department.

Billings. Her research leads her to the conclusion that culturally relevant teaching and pedagogy must meet three criteria: it should nourish the develop of academic development, cultural competence and critical consciousness. Employing this paradigm, we developed a 'Harlesden and Harvard' curriculum paradigm: a curriculum grounded in the exploration of diverse histories taught with academic rigour and integrity. Working within this framework, our students of all backgrounds gain a historicised sense of self. At times, this means decentring Eurocentric histories which often inflate the contributions of Europe to the overall human story, which subjugates the importance of histories from Africa, the Middle East, Asia and native indigenous histories. This is detrimental to our academic understanding of the past and feeds into narratives of European supremacy.

Given our philosophical standpoint, we were keen for students to start their Key Stage 3 history education by studying a history that predates and goes beyond medieval Europe. This year, in Year 7, the first enquiry we teach in order to develop students' understanding of how sources give historians evidence, looks at the African Axumite Empire and the development of Christianity in the fourth century under the reign of King Ezana. This idea was born at the 'Transforming Black History in Secondary Schools' seminar this summer.³ This CPD session was led by Dr Robin Whitburn and Abdul Mohamud of *Justice to History*, who then constructed the enquiry and brought it to life.⁴ It is our hope that the impact of this early experience of early African history is that diversity is not relegated, but reigns as a fundamental principle in every key stage.

In the previous edition of *Teaching History's* HA Update, Dr Jason Todd provided grounding and insights which show that contemporary injustices are rooted in the past and have multiple contemporary consequences.⁵ It is therefore important to use the history curriculum to dismantle these inequalities and oppressions. We have attempted to be explicit about the

ways in which our curriculum directly engages with difficult histories such as the transatlantic slave trade and the construction of racial hierarchies. We are committed to being explicit about how we can support our students to navigate the world using their historical understanding as their guide. Calicia's maxim speaks to the centrality of the past in relation to the present realities and aspirations of our students.

While our immediate motivation is rooted in our diverse community, the 'burden of representation' is a task to be borne by all schools regardless of the local demographics. Every student should have a well-rounded view of the past, and one that does not reinforce injustices.

Sankofa

Calicia's maxim also shows the value that a considered history curriculum offers our students. For her, there is a desire to learn histories that resonate and empower students. 'Sankofa' is a word in the Twi language of Ghana which translates as 'go back and get it'. It is represented by a mythical bird who is moving forward while simultaneously looking back. Its is an apt concept for our curriculum philosophy. It has the power to transform the experiences

and raise the critical consciousness of our students. The philosophy of Sankofa suggests that knowledge of the past is a crucial prerequisite to move forward successfully into the future. We believe that history is empowering for our students. It can promote both intellectual excellence and critical reflection. We have therefore sought to design a curriculum that explicitly centres on these two key pillars.

Finally, as well as the benefit that a carefully considered and constructed curriculum philosophy provides to students in our classrooms, it can motivate and inspire us as teachers, as a crucial guiding light for our work in the classroom.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Halpin, D. (2003) *Hope and Education: the role of the utopian imagination*, London: Routledge.
- ² Raw, L. (2011) *Striking a Light: the Bryant and May Matchwomen and their place in history*, London: Continuum.
- ³ Justice to History seminar, 15 July 2019 at the Convent of Jesus and Mary Language College
- ⁴ <https://justice2history.org/>
- ⁵ Todd, J. (2019) 'HA Update: thinking beyond boundaries' in *Teaching History*, 176, *Widening Vistas Edition*, pp. 4–8.

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