UCL Institute of Education

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Teaching about the British Empire, migration, and belonging: A research-led strategy for secondary education in England

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Acknowledgements

Funder:
We are deeply grateful to the Pears Foundation for its generous support of this educational research. Their commitment to fostering honest, inclusive, and historically grounded inquiry has been both vital and courageous.

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Furzeen Ahmed, Shahmima Akhtar, Sharon Aninakwa, Mark Anstee, Bernard Attard, Shamim Azad, Katherine Barber, Peter Brooke, Katharine Burn, Arthur Chapman, Michelle Codrington-Rogers, Nicole Dingwall, Teni Gogo, Katie Hall, Lauren Hammond, Sarah Hartsmith, David Hibbert, Nicole Jashapara, Faye Jones, Richard Kerridge, Paula Kitching, Alison Kitson, Alan Lester, Dan Lyndon Cohen, Mike Maddison, Kiran Mahil, Andrew McCallum, Liberty Melly, Joe Minden, Onyeka Nubia, Fred Oxby, Melanie Rowntree, Tia Shah, Sophie Stone, Becky Sullivan, Sally Thorne, Philip de Tombe.

Project advisory board:
Margot Finn (Chair), Gráinne Hallahan, Wendy Lennon, Hamid Patel, Steve Rollett, Aaron Skepple, Kay Traille, Dan Whittall.

Foreword

Teaching about the British Empire, migration, and belonging is one of the most important and challenging responsibilities facing schools today.

These histories and their legacies are complex, far-reaching, and often contested. They influence the world in which we live, shaping identities, communities, and national narratives. In classrooms, they also influence the ways young people see themselves, their peers, and their shared future.

This report is concerned first and foremost with learning, the learning needs of teachers as professionals and of students as developing thinkers, communicators, and citizens. The themes of this project are encountered across subjects, from English and history to geography, religious education, and beyond. The report shares key findings from an unprecedented evidence base revealing how they are currently addressed in England's secondary schools, the challenges that teachers face in supporting students, and the opportunities for change.

As teacher educators working in different disciplines, we know that meaningful engagement with complex and often contested content requires more than subject expertise. It demands pedagogical skill, emotional intelligence, and the ability to create spaces where all learners can engage with diverse perspectives and experiences. This strategy report provides a research-led roadmap to support schools in meeting that challenge. Above all, we urge policymakers to respond to the recommendations it sets out, so that teachers and students are better supported in engaging with these vital histories.

The partnership between UCL and the University of Oxford brings together a wide range of expertise and perspectives. We hope this report inspires further collaboration across the education sector, ensuring that all young people have the opportunity to develop informed, critical, and inclusive understandings of Britain's imperial past and its continuing legacies.

Professor Arthur Chapman, Professor of History Education and Head of the Department of Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment, UCL Institute of Education.

Professor Velda Elliott, Professor of English and Education and Director for Graduate Studies at the Department of Education, University of Oxford.

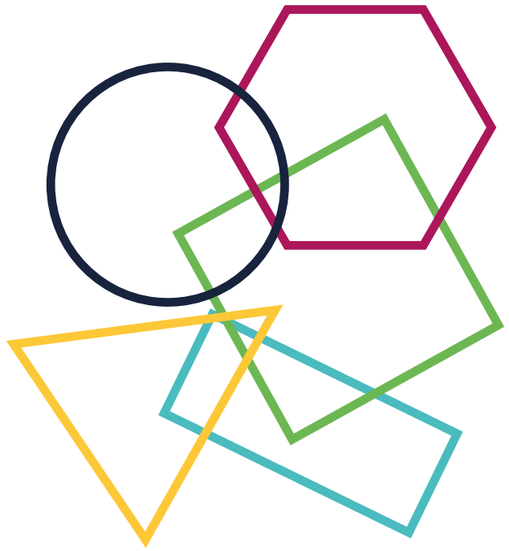
Contents

Executive summary

This report presents an evidence-led vision to support future teaching and learning about the British Empire in England's secondary schools.

Based on an unprecedented, large-scale national study conducted by researchers at UCL and the University of Oxford – A portrait of the teaching of the British Empire, migration, and belonging in English secondary schools (Portrait EMB) – this report establishes practical principles and clear recommendations for teachers, school leaders, and educational policymakers. Grounded in the everyday realities of classrooms across the country, the report highlights urgent gaps, promising practices, and critical opportunities to ensure that all young people can engage meaningfully with this complex past and its enduring significance in the present day.

The interconnected histories of empire, migration, and belonging remain a centrally salient touchpoint for understanding contemporary Britain and its place in the world. Yet these are not only complex histories, but also emotionally charged and often contested terrains that today's teachers must navigate within school systems shaped by wider cultural and political pressures as well as structural constraints. Our recommendations therefore foreground the critical importance of supported teacher learning and strengthened professional development as the foundations of confident, inclusive, and rigorous approaches to this work.



Methodological overview

The findings at the centre of this report are drawn from an extensive programme of multi-method research and analyses conducted between September 2022 and March 2025. Combining national survey data, school-based case-studies, interviews, and documentary analysis, the research includes inputs from over 1,000 teachers and 3,000 students across all regions of England and from a wide range of socio-demographic contexts. Together with further important contributions from academic historians, subject associations, cultural institutions, community partners, textbook authors and exam boards, this constitutes a uniquely rich, and comprehensive empirical evidence base. A summary overview of the final evidence base is also included as Appendix 1 below. A fuller account of the research programme, including expanded findings and methodology, is available in an extended base report on the Portrait EMB project website https://portraitemb.co.uk/.

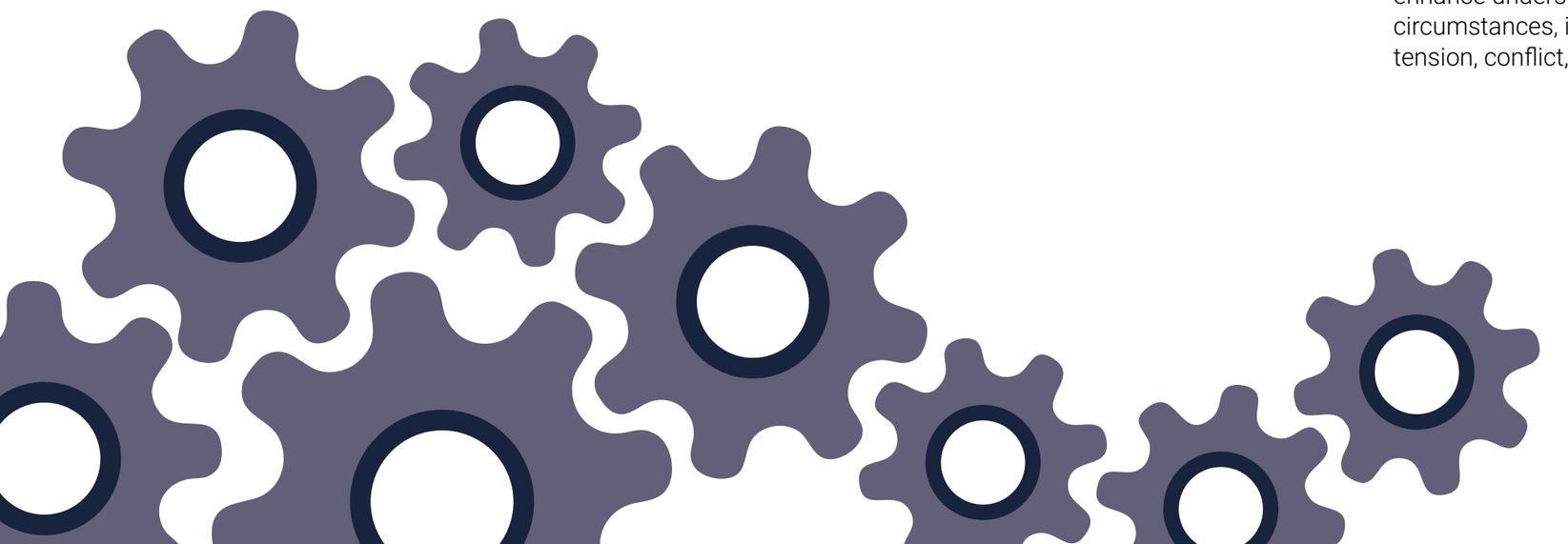
Summary of key findings

A widely valued subject yet to be fully realised

- Across all our research, teachers and students see real value in better understanding Britain's imperial past; 94% of teachers and 79% of students think all young people should learn about this history.
- However, far fewer feel current provision is sufficient. Only 16% of teachers believe young people are taught well enough about the British Empire while almost a third of 14–18-year-olds surveyed said they knew "nothing" or "very little" about the subject.

Common constraints and limitations

- Many teachers are thoughtfully engaging students with both the history and legacies of Britain's empire, but a range of common challenges and structural barriers often constrain the breadth, depth, and nuance that most believe this work deserves.
- For example, both teachers and students regularly emphasised the importance of recognising complexity and learning from diverse perspectives. Yet insufficient curriculum time (reported as a frequent challenge by 70% of teachers) and limited access to suitable resources (reported by 24%) can make this difficult to achieve. Incompatible exam-board priorities and uneven teacher confidence also appear to restrict the scope of which—and whose—experiences of empire are most commonly included in schools.



Personal and political resonance: Sensitivities, opportunities, and risks

- Teachers and students alike regularly linked British imperial history to wider questions of identity, belonging, and present-day relationships with the national past. 60% of teachers, for example, saw the promotion of "Fundamental British Values" as relevant to this work, while 80% felt it important to consider contemporary debate over how this history should be remembered. Students in turn described the importance of learning about empire in helping them better navigate difficult conversations around race, nation, and prejudice, both within school and beyond.
- This is often emotionally and politically complex work. Student perspectives are also shaped by external sources, notably social media, digital content, and family discussion. These could enhance understanding but, in some circumstances, introduced potential tension, conflict, and concern.

Uneven, inconsistent, and often underdeveloped support for teaching

- In a number of schools, teachers stressed the importance of whole-school consideration and senior leadership commitment, especially with regard to addressing the pastoral and safeguarding implications of teaching about the British Empire effectively. This is far from consistent, however: elsewhere others reported feeling underprepared, anxious, and uncertain about available support.
- Strikingly, only 21% of those currently doing this work recalled receiving any specialist input on teaching about Britain's empire within their Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and fewer than one in three felt that this training had prepared them even "fairly well" to teach about this history.

In order for these and other empirical findings to meaningfully inform both current classroom practice and longer-term structural change, the report sets out a two-part response. First, we outline a set of clear curricular, pedagogical, and professional development principles for immediate consideration among teachers, schools, and ITE providers. Second, we offer a series of strategic recommendations aimed at supporting and extending the enactment of those principles through reshaping the structural, contextual, and wider enabling frameworks that too often constrain this work beyond the efforts of individual educators and schools.

Principles for curriculum, pedagogy, and professional growth

Our principles offer the basis for the development of transformative practice in this field based on the data and expertise assembled for this project. They comprise:

1. **Curricular principles** that urge teachers to plan for extensive, coherent coverage and progression in teaching the histories and legacies of the British Empire as complex processes through a spiral curriculum that revisits the subject at each key stage, with increasing complexity. There would be a wide range of spatial and temporal scales and of conceptual themes in economic, political, cultural, and social fields. Teachers' approach to their lesson narratives should ensure that colonised peoples, as well as the colonisers, are humanised and their voices respected.

2. **Pedagogical principles** that connect this wider curriculum work with a transformative approach to classroom practice that builds the confidence and agency of young people in not only building knowledge but also understanding how their identities are being shaped in relation both to past and present, and to local, national, and global connections. We support a rigorous and inclusive pedagogy that pursues meaning-making through enquiry, using a range of sources from indigenous peoples and the colonial nation, fostering dialogue in classrooms and the circumspect consideration of complex ideas and narratives.

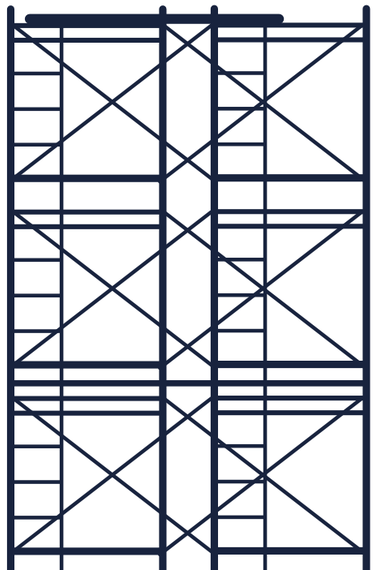
3. **Principles for professional growth** that recognise the considerable demands that will be made of teachers and professionals in galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAM organisations) who seek to transform opportunities for young people to learn about the histories and legacies of empire. These encompass not only subject knowledge developments in curriculum and pedagogy but also wider personal and social aspects of the work, particularly in local contexts.

Our principles offer the basis for the development of transformative practice in this field based on the data and expertise assembled for this project

Recommendations: Building structural support for complex historical work

The headline findings make clear that while there is strong will among educators and students to engage with the history and legacies of the British Empire, meaningful and sustained work in this area requires more than individual commitment. Teachers are often underprepared by their initial training, unevenly supported in schools, and constrained by broader structural and cultural factors. Students, meanwhile, bring curiosity and lived experience to the classroom but often lack the knowledge or confidence to fully participate.

These challenges, taken together, underscore the need for structural, contextual, and wider enabling changes which we outline in our recommendations.



While we hope that the principles outlined above will help and encourage others to join those already involved in adapting and enriching taught content on the British Empire for their students, meaningful engagement with this history should not depend on the passion and effort of individual teachers alone.

To embed this work coherently and sustainably, structural support is needed across curriculum frameworks, assessment policy, teacher education, and professional development. Embracing complexity is not a challenge to be avoided, but a vital strength in preparing students for life in a diverse, democratic society.

Like the principles, our recommendations draw on what is already working in schools and identify what is needed to make inclusive, complex curriculum work more coherent and supported. They are grouped by their role in the educational ecosystem:

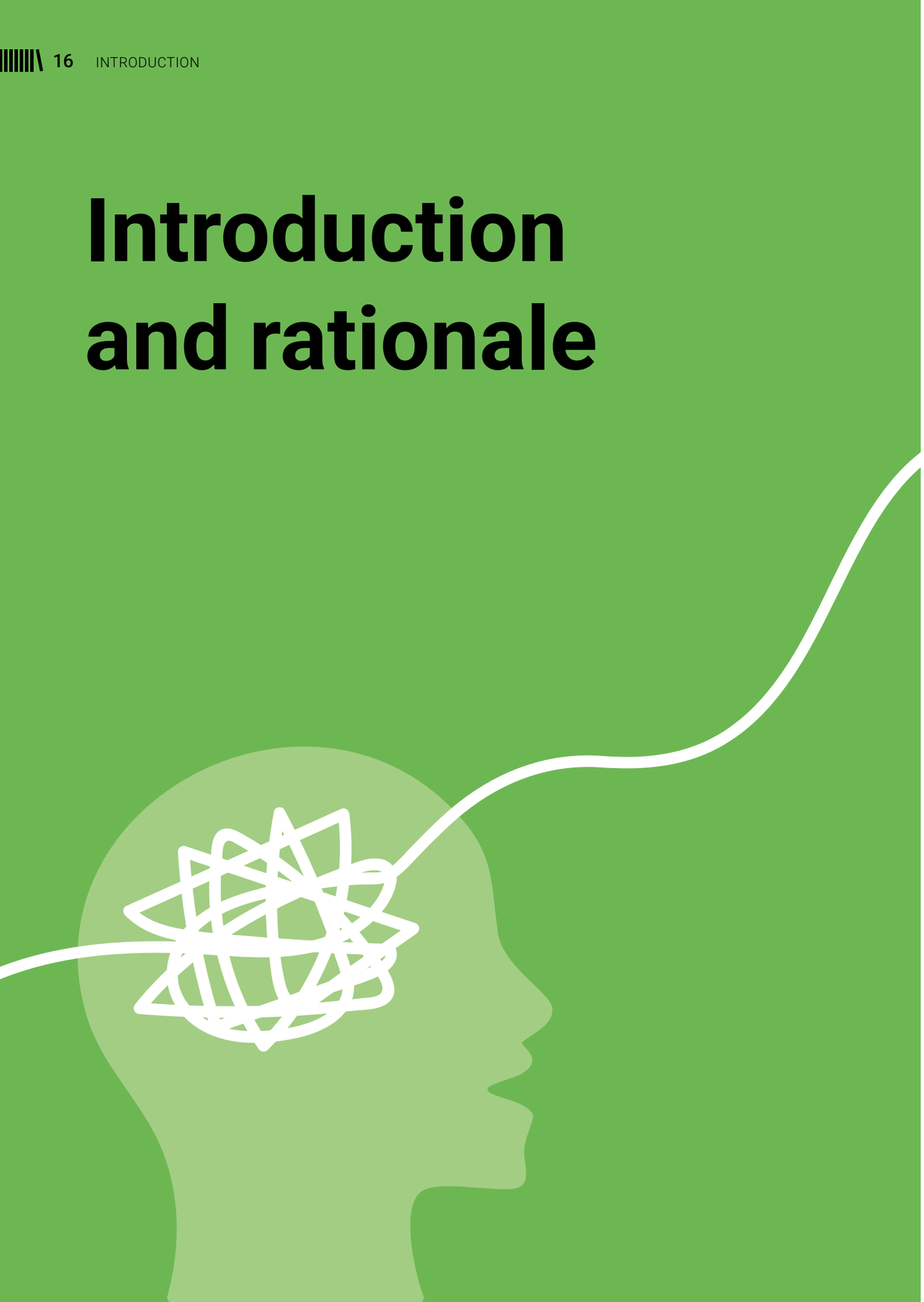
1. **Structural recommendations** address national frameworks for professional learning, curriculum, and assessment (as suggested by Finding 7), for example, through reviewing and revising national curriculum guidance to support coherent, inclusive, and connected learning about empire and also reframing GCSE and A-level specifications to enable more complex and inclusive representations of British history and post-colonial realities.
2. **Contextual and relational recommendations** focus on school and classroom dynamics, including curriculum leadership, student engagement, and professional development. For example, they include embedding structured opportunities, across ITE and ongoing CPD, for teachers to reflect on identity, positionality and safeguarding when teaching sensitive content, and encouraging greater recognition of students' emotional engagement and lived experiences as potential curriculum resources (see Finding 4).
3. **Wider enabling recommendations** highlight tools and partnerships that help sustain and extend this work beyond individual classrooms, for example by providing targeted opportunities to support community-linked curriculum projects and partnerships with cultural organisations to ensure greater parity of access in helping students, and their teachers, recognise the local, national, and international implications of this history.

Conclusion

Teaching about the British Empire, migration, and belonging is not a niche concern but a core educational responsibility—vital to preparing young people for life in a diverse, democratic society. This report demonstrates that while there is strong commitment and promising practice, significant structural, curricular, and professional barriers remain. Addressing these challenges requires joined-up action across the education system, underpinned by robust evidence, clear principles, and sustained investment. By supporting teachers, enriching curriculum, and fostering inclusive, critical engagement, we can ensure all students have the opportunity to explore these histories rigorously and meaningfully, equipping them to make sense of the past and their place in the present.

Teaching about the British Empire, migration, and belonging is not a niche concern but a core educational responsibility—vital to preparing young people for life in a diverse, democratic society

Introduction and rationale



Why this project?

The British Empire was a global system that profoundly shaped political structures, economies, cultures, and human relationships across continents and centuries. Its legacies continue to shape the world we live in today. This conviction is shared by many historians we consulted, who stress that understanding empire is essential to making sense of Britain's past and present. Yet there is still no comprehensive, up-to-date evidence showing what young people in England learn about the British Empire, migration, and belonging in schools. This project was initiated to fill that gap, creating the first national evidence base on how these themes are taught and providing the insight needed to inform how they should be taught in the future.

Amid a national conversation often shaped by polarised headlines, from Windrush to so-called "culture wars," public debate frequently reduces empire to a simplistic "balance sheet" of good and bad, obscuring both the historical complexity and the ongoing ways it is made meaningful in people's lives today. Our goal is to illuminate the educational landscape and support more coherent, inclusive, and rigorous approaches to these vital themes.

Why this research matters

Effective teaching about the British Empire depends on more than curriculum content. It relies on teachers feeling informed, supported, and confident in navigating a subject that raises historical, political, and ethical questions. Yet at present, there is no formal requirement for professional development input specifically related to this subject and only a minority of teachers have received any dedicated, specialist support or training in this field.

Without a strong evidence base about what teachers know, do, and need, it is difficult to design meaningful professional development or curriculum interventions that are responsive to real classroom conditions. Our project seeks to respond to that need.

In doing so, we have been guided by the approach developed by the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education (CfHE), which demonstrates how robust research into teacher knowledge and classroom realities can shape impactful and sensitive responses. Our own work draws together historical scholarship, pedagogical research, and empirical insight attending to complexity, multiple perspectives, and ongoing relevance of empire in shaping the world today.

The British Empire is not only a wide-ranging historical topic, but also one that connects to contemporary debates about race, identity, and national memory. Supporting teachers to approach this work with confidence and care requires sustained investment, grounded in research and shaped by what teachers themselves tell us they need.

Framing the themes: The British Empire, migration, and belonging

Neither *migration, belonging*, nor *empire* are merely academic concepts. All three can often act as public flashpoints, sparking political debate, media commentary, and community responses. These are not abstract issues for students: they are part of how many young people understand their own identities and experiences.

As the project developed, the British Empire emerged as the central focus of our research. This was partly because of its prominence in the curriculum, but also because it offers a historical lens through which the other two themes, migration and belonging, can be more fully understood. Both are shaped by imperial histories and continue to be influenced by how those histories are taught, remembered, and discussed.

To guide our work, we used a two-part approach to framing these themes:

- **Substantive (historical content):** We treat the British Empire as wide-ranging and complex, including both formal and informal empire, early imperial activity (such as in Ireland), and the processes of decolonisation.
- **Conceptual (ideas and meaning)**: We also recognise that empire, migration, and belonging are not neutral terms. Their meanings vary across time and place and are shaped by political, cultural, and educational debates. These meanings influence how people think about national identity, citizenship, and the past and how those ideas are communicated in classrooms.

Within this broader interpretive framing, two potentially problematic ways of talking about the British Empire in schools and public discourse stand out:

- **"Balance":** In discussions of the British Empire, *balance* can be reduced to "pros and cons" risking simplistic moral scorecards. Our research suggests that effective pedagogy requires a richer sense of balance, one grounded in evidential reasoning and multiple perspectives, not in symmetry or neutrality.
- **"Legacies":** The term is widely used by teachers, textbook writers, and policymakers to connect the history of empire to present-day issues. But it can also suggest that the impact of empire is fixed or settled. We use legacies throughout this report, but we do so carefully. For us, legacies are not just what remains from the past; they are interpreted, debated, and experienced differently by different people. They are dynamic and ongoing and that is part of what makes them so important for students to explore.

Throughout this report, we refer to these areas of teaching and learning as involving **complex and difficult histories**. We use this phrase deliberately. These histories are complex in that they stretch across time and place, cross subject boundaries, and require careful interpretation. They are difficult because, as educational researchers Gross and Terra (2019) argue, they challenge accepted narratives, raise emotional and ethical questions, and connect to ongoing issues. They frequently involve stories of violence, marginalisation, or exclusion, content that can be deeply confronting. In many schools, these themes also provoke strong reactions and bring to the surface different perspectives and experiences. We use this framing to acknowledge both the intellectual challenge and the emotional and social pressures involved and to make the case for more coherent, well-supported approaches across the system.

This (substantive and conceptual) framing reflects both academic thinking and the real contexts in which teachers work. In history, it aligns with the subject's focus on both content (what happened) and disciplinary thinking (how we know and interpret the past). While other subjects where teaching about empire regularly features such as English or geography do not share this structure, they also involve work that links content to wider questions of culture, identity, ethics, and power. The same is true for statutory subjects such as citizenship, RE, and PSHE, where there is both established practice and strong potential for exploring the legacies of empire, particularly in relation to migration, identity, and belonging.

These histories are complex in that they stretch across time and place... They are difficult because they challenge accepted narratives, raise emotional and ethical questions, and connect to ongoing inequalities.

Context: Education policy and provision

In England, education policy is shaped by a national curriculum that provides minimal direction on empire, migration, or belonging. These themes are not mandatory and appear unevenly across subjects and exam specifications. Despite this, recent data shows growing interest: our 2024 analysis of exam board figures estimates that around 9.6% of GCSE history entries include a module explicitly focused on migration and/or empire—up from 4% in 2019 (McIntosh, Todd, & Das, 2019). While encouraging, this remains only a fraction of the national cohort of students, especially as many do not take history at key stage 4.

While there is valuable work being done by subject associations, cultural institutions, and committed educators, official preparation for teaching these themes is limited. The government's Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Framework (ITTECF) addresses generic aspects of teaching but does not engage with the critical social and historical issues raised by the British Empire, migration, and belonging. Without subject-specific support at a policy level, many teachers are left to build this expertise through informal or ad hoc learning rather than structured professional development.

Research by Smith and Lander (2024) suggests that many new teachers feel underprepared to work with diverse classrooms or address questions of race and representation. Our findings indicate that this lack of preparation can leave teachers without the confidence, knowledge, or frameworks needed to engage with the British Empire, migration, and belonging in meaningful ways.

This combination of limited curricular guidance, high-stakes accountability, and uneven training makes it especially important to understand what is happening in schools and how teachers can be better supported.

Why it matters: Insights from historians

We asked 70 academic historians with teaching and/or research interest in the British Empire based in UK universities: Why does this topic matter?

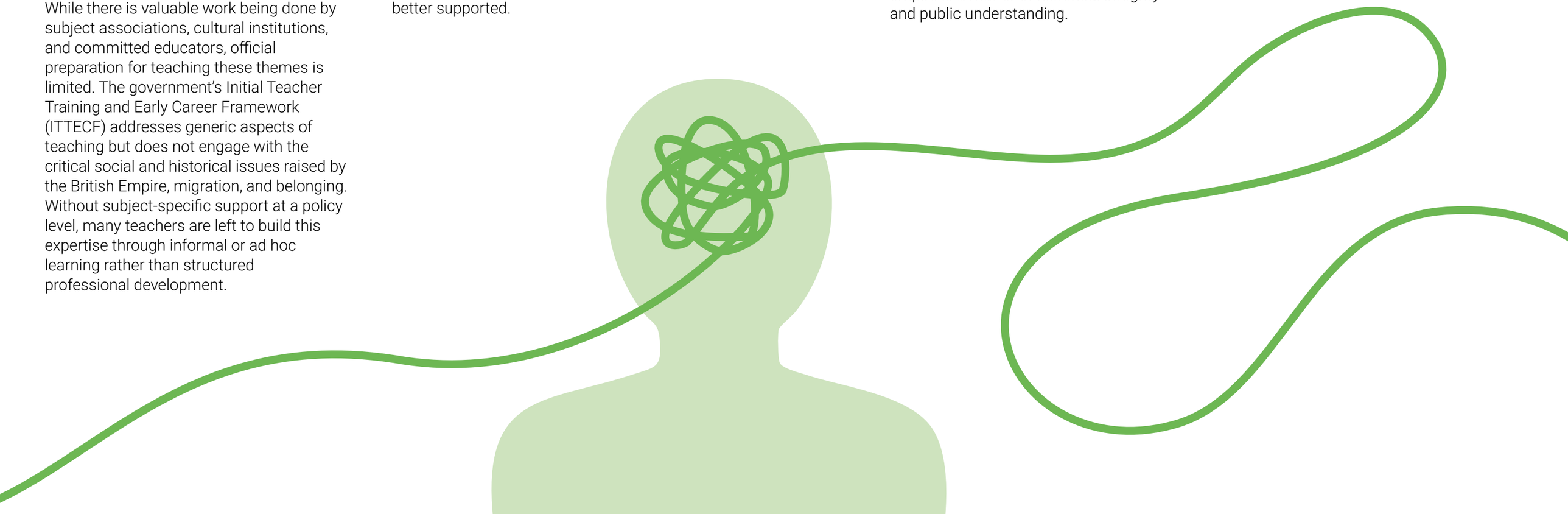
Their responses stressed three key reasons:

- **Contemporary relevance**: understanding race, identity, and inequality today requires engagement with empire's legacies.
- **Curricular accuracy**: British history without empire tells only half the story.
- **Epistemological stakes**: how we teach empire is a matter of historical integrity and public understanding.

As Margot Finn, historian and chair of our project Advisory Board, put it:

'It is impossible to understand modern British history, much less Britain today, without an understanding of the British Empire and its continuing impact.'

These insights reinforce our guiding conviction: that teaching about the British Empire, migration, and belonging is not a niche concern, but a core educational responsibility—vital to preparing young people for life in a diverse, democratic society.



Key findings:

Understanding current practice, commitment, and constraint

The following key findings highlight the core challenges and enabling conditions that must be understood to effectively support future teaching and learning in this field.

This report does not attempt, therefore, to capture the full complexity of everything learned about current classroom practice across the Portrait EMB research; that detail is documented elsewhere.[1]

Together, the key findings presented here reveal a complex but tentatively encouraging picture. Across a wide range of schools, we encountered many examples of thoughtful and creative practice, often developed in spite of structural constraints and inconsistent support. Such examples reflect both the expertise and dedication of many teachers and the motivated interest of students. Wherever possible, we aim to share and showcase such work within this report.

At the same time, however, our research also documents a very clear need for further support: fewer than one in five teachers believe current provision is adequate to teach young people well about this vital but contested history. Throughout survey responses, school visits, and interviews, both teachers and students expressed strong desires for deeper, critical engagement, less polarised public and political framing, and extended resourcing and reach.

In order to potentially effect most change—and to help secure parity of access and opportunity for all students in all schools across the country—we principally focus our findings here on the most pressing issues to be addressed across three intersecting domains:

1. **Structural contexts** – the institutional, temporal, and geographical conditions that shape what is possible;
2. **Classroom agency and individual experience** – the choices, perspectives, and lived experiences of teachers and students;
3. **Curriculum content and knowledge construction** – what is taught, what is left out, and why.

Fewer than one in five teachers believe current provision is adequate to teach young people well about this vital but complex and contested history

[1] These and other key findings are again explored in fuller detail in a longer, base report available via the Portrait EMB project website https://portraitemb.co.uk/

A note on principal data sources and reporting conventions

Although the findings below draw from the entire Portrait EMB research programme, the most regularly cited data-sets are our national teacher and student surveys, together with case study materials including lesson observations, student focus groups, and teacher interviews. In the interest of clear and concise reporting, supporting contextual detail—such as the size of specific subgroups responding to individual survey questions, for example—is not regularly referenced here but can be found within the expanded base report.

It is also salient to note that we are drawing from both quantitative (large-scale and principally numeric) and qualitative (smaller scale and typically more interpretative) data. As such, while relevant percentages are included where appropriate (i.e. where findings are derived from numeric survey data), the following frequency descriptors are used to convey the relative strength or prevalence of a perspective or occurrence when reporting from case study materials and other qualitative sources:[2]

- **Almost all** – with only rare exceptions (indicatively at least 95%)
- **Most** – a clear majority (approximately 65 – 90%)
- **A majority** – more than half
- **Many** – a large proportion, though not necessarily a majority (circa 40–60%)
- **Several**[3] – a notable minority (20–40%)
- **Some** – a smaller but meaningful number of cases (10-20%)
- **A few** – a small number (likely equivalent to less than 10%)
- **Occasionally / rarely** – observed in isolated or infrequent instances
- **Regularly / repeatedly** – recurring across multiple settings or cases
- **A small number** – used when a specific, limited number is known but generalisation is inappropriate

[2] While approximate corresponding percentages are included here it is important to note these are for indicative purposes only and are not intended to suggest it is possible or appropriate to report clear statistical trends from smaller scale, qualitative data sets.

[3] We recognise that this inverts the order of “some” and “several” found in certain applied social research guidance (e.g. Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014) but adopt this usage here to better reflect intuitive understanding.

Key Finding 1:

There is very strong support for teaching about the British Empire, which is delivered across a broad range of subjects and in diverse school settings throughout the country

1.1. Teaching about the British Empire is widely valued by both teachers and students

- 94% of teachers and 79% of students surveyed thought every young person should be taught about the history of the British Empire at school. Indeed, 76% of teachers believed this should be compulsory within the national curriculum. Moreover, this support extends beyond those already doing this work in schools: even among those teaching entirely unrelated subjects, 78% thought all young people should learn this history and 81% its legacies.

1.2. This teaching is already happening in many schools, across a range of subjects and in a wide variety of school contexts

- Across our research, we heard accounts of teaching about the British Empire from well over 300 secondary schools. The majority of teaching reported within our survey took place within history lessons (55%), 10% in English, 8.5% in geography and approximately 4% in RE, PSHE, and citizenship respectively, with additional teaching taking place in a diverse range of subjects from music and art to maths and science.[4] Schools' engagement with this history also extends beyond the classroom and formal curriculum: both teachers and their students described a wide variety of extra-curricular encounters with empire including assemblies, after school clubs, and impromptu student-led discussion, often involving non-subject-specialist staff.
- Our teacher survey data tentatively suggests it may be slightly less prevalent in schools with a religious character and a little more common in independent schools; only 8% of those who took part in our survey taught in schools with a religious character while these account for 18% of all schools nationally and 12.5% taught in independent schools which comprise just 6.5% nationally. However, further research would be needed to explore these patterns in more depth and with greater confidence.

[4] These figures reflect the total number of times teaching within each subject context was recorded within the national teacher survey and do not report total teaching time.

1.3. Many teachers, departments, and even whole schools already critically reflect on and continue to develop this work, but this deserves and demands wider, sustained institutional support

- Within our comparative case study research, teachers at varying career stages, from 7 schools in diverse contexts across the country, regularly identified recent shifts in how they approach British imperial history. In all history departments visited, we heard of increased depth in content, broadened geographical focus, heightened attention to potential sensitivities, and improved curricular coherence. Many characterised this work as a significant departure from their practice a decade ago, suggesting professional momentum towards more critically reflective and inclusive approaches.
- Within the teacher survey, experienced respondents offered practical advice and encouragement to others: "look for opportunities and connections across key stages," for example, "consider your own position in relation to this history," "be brave," "acknowledge the complexity but take your students through it with you."

> Be brave! Build a curriculum that critically engages with the past (across all key stages and topics), which will help students consider why people have different views of the British Empire and its legacy. This can help students navigate the contentious nature of the topic and to challenge ideas and perspectives they may hear outside of the classroom.
>
> History teacher, survey response

- However, these same experienced teachers also acknowledged the challenges, disincentives, and potential risks that can discourage others from engaging with this work. Indeed, our survey captured a small but important number of responses from individuals who wanted to teach about the British Empire but currently felt unable to do so, and many others who wished to teach more about this subject—or do so in a different manner—but faced significant constraints.
- The challenges such teachers perceive or encounter may help explain why only 16% of those surveyed felt English school students are currently taught sufficiently well about this history. These issues are explored in fuller detail below.

Structural challenges (and opportunities)

Key Finding 2:

Current provision, access to specialist training, and external support for teaching about the British Empire is uneven and inconsistent across the country

2.1. Only a minority of teachers across the country have received any specialist training to support teaching about the British Empire

- Just 21% of survey respondents who were currently teaching about the British Empire recalled receiving specific content on this within their ITE. Less than a third felt that overall their training had prepared them at least "fairly well" to teach about the history of empire and even fewer to teach about its legacies (only 19%).

Only 21%

of those currently teaching about the British Empire had received specialist input as part of their initial teacher education

2.2. Access to training and further specialist support varies considerably by geographic region

- These proportions vary significantly by region; over a third of teachers in London and the South West felt prepared to teach about the history of Britain's empire following ITE but only 17.6% in the East of England, and not a single respondent from the North East.
- Teachers in the North East, along with those from the South East, West Midlands, and Yorkshire and Humberside, were also among the least likely to have received subsequent specialist training from an external organisation or even to be aware that such support existed.
- This pattern extends beyond issues of physical proximity: for example, 61% of teachers from the East of England reported using web-based resources to support their teaching, compared to just 16.7% in the North East.

Teachers recognised the value of exploring local links to imperial history but described practical barriers

2.3. Local context can shape both opportunities and barriers for teaching about the British Empire

- Innovative and ambitious teaching, as well as nuanced and reflective student understanding, was recorded across all regions and in a wide range of demographic and socio-economic contexts. However, our research suggests a number of ways in which local context can shape the form that teaching about the British Empire takes. For example, across both teacher and student surveys, the emphasis on local and community history varied significantly: nearly 60% of teachers in the South West encouraged students to connect with local history compared to fewer than a third of those in the South East and just a quarter in the North East.
- Teachers' survey responses also illustrate how different local contexts can offer distinctive lenses on British imperial history and its legacies. While Bristol-based teachers described taking students on a walking tour of recent community murals celebrating the Windrush Generation or to Colston's empty plinth, elsewhere across the country, comparable local opportunities included: the grave of a celebrated abolitionist, a county museum's collection of colonial artefacts, and a visit to regional stately home. Each offers potentially rather different lines of enquiry and perspective.
- Other teachers recognised the value of exploring local links to imperial history but described practical barriers such as a lack of immediately visible local connections, issues of access, and budget constraints.
- Misconceptions about empire's relevance also appeared to risk limiting engagement in some communities. Some teachers actively sought to make the topic resonate with their students, for example, by including the creation of Pakistan in response to local demographics. Our exploratory research with community-school partnerships emphasises how effective these can be in engaging students and their teachers with the histories of empire present in their own locales. However, both survey responses and case study interviews suggest that potential links between schools and their local communities are typically underutilised.

Key Finding 3:

Teaching about the British Empire is rarely shaped by individual teachers alone; their work is enabled or constrained by decisions and dynamics at multiple levels, from school level priorities to national policy and wider public debate

3.1 Not all teachers who want to teach about Britain's empire feel able to do so and many others feel constrained in how far they can go

- Although principally focused on existing classroom practice, within our national teacher survey we also heard from over 100 respondents who did not currently teach about the British Empire but wanted to do so. The most commonly cited barriers reported by this group were: constraints of the exam specifications they currently followed; limited curriculum space in general; and insufficient resourcing (such as no appropriate materials relevant to their subject or inadequate guidance on navigating potential sensitivities). Others noted the need for broader cultural or media support, suggesting that greater social consensus would help make the work feel less risky.
- Among those already doing this work, many wanted to go further but described similar barriers to deepening or extending their approach including uncertainty as to the potential limits of institutional support. In case study schools, these concerns were sometimes borne out. Even among headteachers who clearly valued teacher agency and were broadly supportive of teaching about Britain's empire, some expressed hesitation about introducing new content citing anticipated parental resistance and concern over unpredictable educational outcomes. Elsewhere, however, strong commitment from school and trust leadership was critical to the success and sustainability of ambitious, whole-school approaches.

Nearly 70%

of surveyed teachers frequently encountered insufficient curriculum time as a barrier to teaching about the British Empire well

3.2 Limited curriculum time is the most regularly encountered challenge

- Nearly 70% of surveyed teachers reported insufficient curriculum time as a frequently encountered barrier to this work, twice as many as the next most common challenge—students' limited prior knowledge of this history. 43% felt the British Empire was given insufficient time relative to other curriculum requirements and many described difficult trade-offs with one teacher suggesting this history "gets squeezed out."
- 42% of teachers were also concerned that spending insufficient time on this complex subject might do more harm than not teaching it at all and several described making difficult choices over content. The actual number of hours and lessons devoted to empire varied considerably within and between subjects and key stages. Some teachers described spending more than ten lessons on an individual unit related to empire, others appeared to try to cover all their planned content for a year group within just a single hour.

3.3 Cross-curricular and thematic approaches as solutions

- Some teachers and schools responded to time constraints by exploring cross-curricular approaches. However, while most teachers were aware of content on empire being taught in at least one subject other than their own, only 11% reported intentional coordination between departments. Nearly half described coordination as "ad hoc or inconsistent," and 42.5% were unaware of any cross-departmental planning at all. Many teachers saw cross-curricular work as promising for richer learning but cited time pressures, curriculum constraints, and structural misalignment as barriers.
- Where structured cooperation existed, it most commonly occurred between history and geography departments, especially around themes like migration, development, and postcolonial legacies. Other schools pursued wider integration across humanities subjects including English, and citizenship or PSHE. Here and elsewhere teachers outlined innovative approaches shaped by distinctive disciplinary lenses, emphasising the diversity of practice beyond the history classroom.
- In some schools, curriculum was also maximised within a single subject setting where departments were able to embed the British Empire as a recurring theme across programmes of study. As one history teacher remarked:

  *'[It is] a constant thread in our curriculum as it cannot be done well as a discre**te** enquiry. Empire is one of the lenses we employ to view the past with our students and we return to it often.'*

  Others described how this approach emphasised connections between the British Empire and other key topics such as suffrage, war, or British values, that might otherwise compete for limited time. They noted that this not only deepens students' understanding of empire but can also enrich engagement with other major events and themes.

3.4 Where it is possible, progression through multiple key stages enhances impact

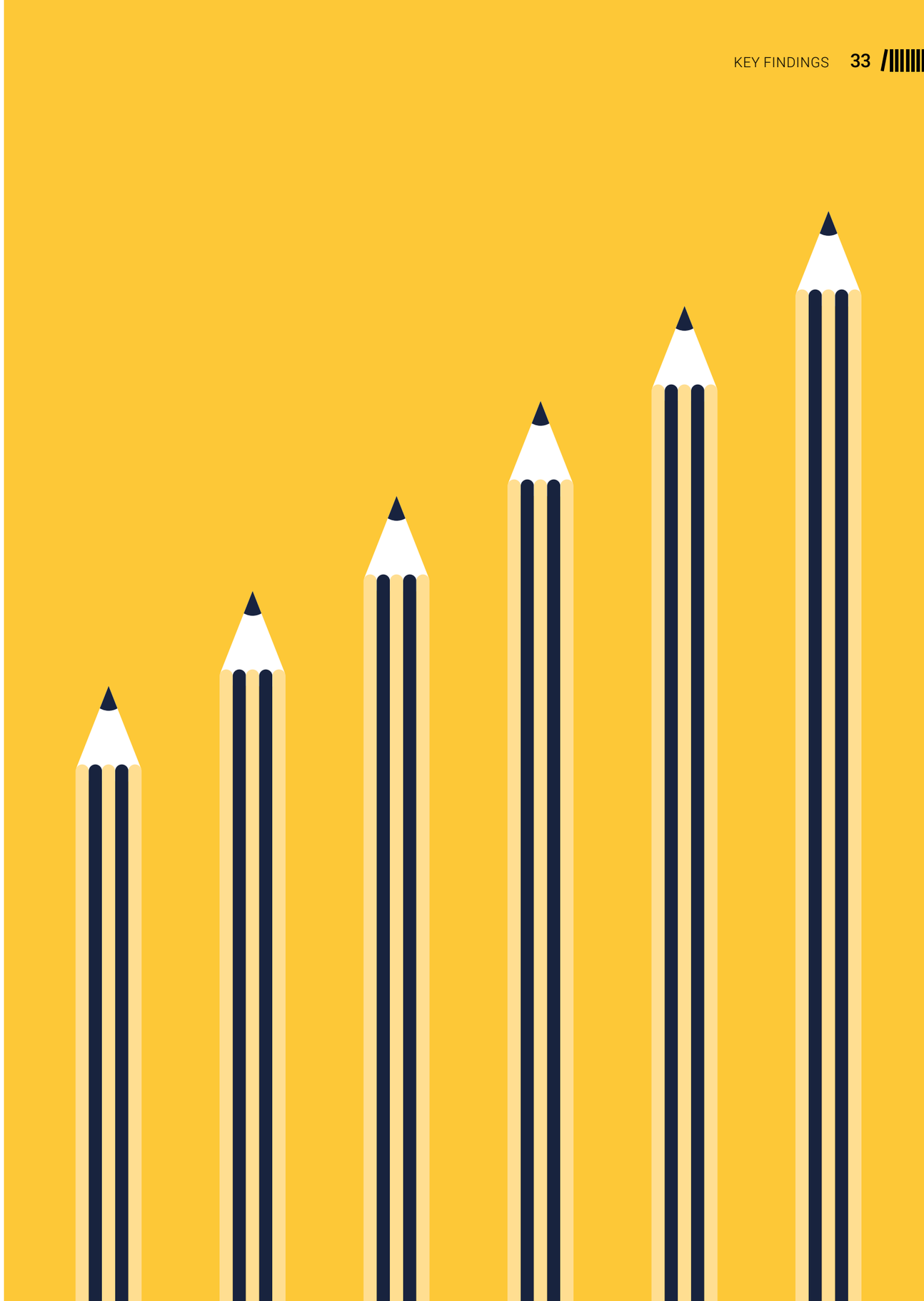
- In comparative case study schools, history departments often focused curriculum reform at key stage 3 to ensure all students developed foundational knowledge, even if they did not continue with history in later years. The same key stage 3 focus was echoed in the survey: 97% of those teaching about the British Empire within history did so at some point during key stage 3, compared to 36% at key stage 4, and 23% at key stage 5. This pattern reflects the structure of current exam specifications which only began to offer explicit opportunities to study the British Empire at GCSE and A-level from 2016 onwards.
- In total 33% of history teachers within our survey taught content related to the British Empire across more than one key stage, and 11% did so across all three. Each of our history curriculum-focused case study schools illustrate the potential impact of a "spiral curriculum," where sequenced content is revisited and developed across year groups to support progression and build increasingly complex understanding over time. In these schools, key stage 4 and 5 students spoke with striking subtlety and nuance about the impact of their learning about empire, particularly in discussion of national identity and patriotism. One department achieved this by centring "identity" as a key concept throughout its 11-18 curriculum.

3.5 Time constraints extend beyond the timetable

- However, it is not only teaching time that felt limited or scarce to teachers. As one survey respondent reflected,

  'I'd say by far the biggest barrier is another time issue related to broader workload pressures i.e. to properly research and plan for these very complex topics. It is a structural issue with the education system that schools do not (or cannot) provide adequate time for high quality CPD and planning - most has to be done in teachers' own time or not at all.'

- Creative cross-curricular and thematic, within-subject planning may create some additional curriculum time, but a broader challenge remains; teachers and senior leaders also identified insufficient opportunity to reflect, to collaborate, and to develop new resources and learn.



Challenges and opportunities related to individual experience, interpretation, and positionality

Key Finding 4:

Students' understanding of the British Empire is shaped by varied prior knowledge, diverse out-of-school influences, and personal biography

4.1 Many students begin formal study of the British Empire with limited and insecure prior knowledge but want to learn more

- The majority of students who took part in our national survey reported very limited knowledge or awareness of the British Empire prior to learning about it at school. Only 5% considered they knew "a lot" before formally studying this subject, while 60% reported knowing "very little" or "nothing at all." Even after classroom engagement, more than half of all students wanted to learn more.
- Indeed, students' "limited or non-existent" prior learning and background knowledge was the second most common challenge reported by teachers, while "firmly held misconceptions and prior misunderstandings" was the third. Almost a third of all surveyed teachers encountered this as a problem often and twice as many at least occasionally.
- Examples of limited knowledge and common misconceptions as perceived by teachers included, over simplified, "one-sided" narratives; stereotyped assumptions about colonised populations; and generalised historical misunderstanding about the roles and relationships between colonial actors or timelines for significant events. Some noted that these and other related misapprehensions often reflected wider societal narratives, dominant media framings, and longstanding curriculum gaps.
- Within our own student survey, one especially notable area of common misunderstanding appears to be the conception of Britain's empire foremost as an extension of its monarchy or military; both institutions featured especially prominently in student definitions of the British Empire, particularly among those who had not yet learned anything about the subject at school.

4.2 Learning about the British Empire occurs both inside and outside of school classrooms and students value each context differently

- Almost three-quarters of students reported learning about the British Empire from sources outside of school. Nearly 10% relied exclusively on external sources. Among those who had learned about empire in both contexts, over a quarter felt they had gained most beyond their classrooms. School lessons were often described as "more detailed," though some students noted that certain topics—the Bengali language movement or the Hijra in South Asia, for example—were only covered in depth outside of school. These students suggested that the "worst" and "most brutal" details of colonial history were given much greater attention elsewhere.

Almost 3/4

of students encountered the British Empire from sources outside of school

- Students also regularly described school lessons on empire as more "factual," and "neutral" than external sources which were typically considered "more personalised," "emotive," or "opinionated." Others contrasted schools' focus on facts with external sources' emphasis on "stories" and personal significance. A smaller proportion directly challenged the notion that school was more likely to be "neutral," describing lessons as either "politically biased" or "sugar-coated."
- Student opinion was evenly divided on whether school or external sources offered a more positive or negative view of the British Empire, and on where they learned most about its legacies. However, one area of consensus was clear: students reported that school-based teaching was most likely to examine the present-day impacts of empire only within Britain itself. The enduring consequences for communities in formerly colonised countries were more likely to be communicated elsewhere.

4.3 Online platforms dominate out of school engagement with this history

- Social media, websites, and family conversations were the most regularly cited external sources of information about the British Empire (among 44%, 37% and 35.5% of surveyed students respectively). YouTube, TikTok, and BBC Bitesize were the most frequently referenced individual platforms, with YouTube alone mentioned by over 200 respondents. The television programme and book series *Horrible Histories* was also named often and valued for its humour and accessibility.
- Students especially appreciated the immediacy, brevity, and clarity of digital content although some at least tacitly recognised that the sheer volume, variety, and sometimes questionable authority of social media sources could be problematic.

4.4 Family and personal narratives are often especially valued resources, but can introduce competing perspectives

- Family conversations were another key influence for students, especially for those with intergenerational connection to this history. Many contrasted the emotional resonance of family narratives with what they felt was a more impersonal school-based approach.
- Both survey and case study data also highlight the ways in which family narratives can complicate, contradict, and sometimes even directly conflict with school teaching, for example where competing accounts were seen as partial, "biased," or incomplete. At its most extreme, students described how school lessons on empire could create "silencing" tensions at home. For some, this stemmed from difficult disagreements with their parents' political views; for others, it reflected the lasting emotional impact of family histories shaped by trauma.

Key Finding 5:

Teaching about the British Empire can open up essential, sometimes sensitive, but widely valued conversations about identity, race, and nationhood

5.1 Learning about the British Empire often serves as a lens for exploring national identity, national values, and national narratives

- Across our research, several teachers approached content on the British Empire as an opportunity to explore questions related to national identity, multiculturalism, and Britain's role in the world today. Many presented imperial history as central to understanding contemporary British society and drew clear links to wider public discussions and debates, from Brexit to Black Lives Matter, exploring with their students how historical attitudes and experiences continue to shape modern political identities.

- Over 60% of surveyed teachers considered it important to address statutory "British values" in the context of teaching about the country's former empire. Rather than presenting these values—democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance for those of different faiths and beliefs—as static or exclusively British, some teachers described encouraging students to engage with them as dynamic concepts, subject to both historical and contemporary debate.

- During teacher interviews and within survey responses, there was a strong professional consensus that history education should move beyond over-simplified binaries of pride or shame, instead equipping students to critically engage with complex pasts and their legacies. As one teacher reflected, "We should learn about it… with neither shame nor pride, but with an historical approach to understand and learn from what happened."

5.2 Many teachers and curriculum leaders anticipate or experience backlash and controversy but remain committed to critical engagement

- Across our research data, teachers working in a range of socio-economic settings described both real and anticipated challenges from parents due to the perceived sensitivity of teaching about this history. Some reported concerns directly referencing "critical race theory" or "woke history" while others described being "berated" for not teaching "enough about the 'positives'" of Britain's imperial past.

- Concerns regarding the risk of controversy are not limited to schools. Our research with exam boards found similar anxieties about possible backlash—particularly from some media outlets—when introducing what could be perceived as progressive new material (for example, the inclusion of references to "migration" in place of "immigration" in previous texts).

- Despite these challenges, the prevailing message from schools who took part in our research was not one of retreat but of careful, critical engagement. One surveyed teacher urged others, "not to be afraid" of causing controversy and to challenge students' preconceived ideas, while another emphasised,

  'Have faith in the knowledge that despite national media conversations, this history is important and needs to be told.'

5.3 The majority of students appear ready and willing to engage with complexity and critical perspectives around notions of identity and patriotism

- In a handful of free-text survey responses, and 2 of our 7 comparative case study schools, we heard from teachers and senior leaders where explicitly racist discourse among students and within the wider community had been identified as very real concerns. However, the overarching picture built across our research is one in which the significant majority of students are willing—and often actively enthusiastic—to engage in even the most potentially difficult conversations about empire and identity in considered and reflective ways.

- Crucially, students themselves often articulated nuanced, critical perspectives when discussing national identity or patriotism. In one focus group, for example, a Year 13 student questioned the "definition of patriotism," arguing,

  'You can be patriotic without loving the empire because it's just a love for your country rather than a love for the history of it.'

> I think it depend[s] on your definition of patriotism . . . I like living in the UK, like the country, but it doesn't necessarily mean that I want the empire to come back . . . You can be patriotic without loving the empire because it's just a love for your country rather than a love for the history of it.
>
> Year 13 Student, History curriculum-focused case study school interview

Elsewhere, others highlighted the evolving nature of Britishness as a concept that "has changed over time" and emphasised the need "to know the mistakes" in order to "enhance … true understanding" of any celebrated past.

- Moreover, our research also suggests there is not a singular, clear relationship between understanding British imperial history and young people's sense of identity in the present. Indeed, while two thirds of surveyed teachers believed it important to consider students' potential sense of pride or shame in British history when teaching about its empire, this appeared to be of far less significance to the majority of students; only a third believed that knowing the histories of Britain's Empire influenced their own sense of national identity in any way at all.

Key Finding 6:

Teaching and learning about Britain's empire involves emotional and pastoral work which is unevenly distributed among students and staff

6.1 Teachers identify a range of emotional, pedagogical, and practical challenges when teaching about empire

- In survey responses and interviews, teachers described the complex and demanding labour involved in teaching about empire. This included navigating student misconceptions—such as potentially offensive stereotypes—managing sensitivities around language and content, and responding to unpredictable or emotionally charged classroom reactions. A number of teachers, particularly those identifying as White British, expressed uncertainty about using appropriate terminology, concerns about causing offence, and discomfort when directly discussing issues of race.
- Language was an explicit focus of teacher discussion in all comparative case study interviews. Here many teachers advocated having explicit conversations with students at the outset of a unit to create a supportive classroom environment in which students felt comfortable using racialised terms. There was greater variety of perspective where teachers considered questions of age-appropriateness when teaching sensitive histories, especially regarding the use of graphic imagery. Some educators avoided graphic images with younger students, while others felt it was important to convey the full reality of what happened.

6.2 Racially minoritised staff often bear a disproportionate emotional and representational burden when teaching about empire

- Across our research, some teachers, particularly those racialised within the histories being taught, related these challenges to their own biography emphasising the added emotional complexity and psychological risk where curriculum content intersects with lived experience. Others described the added representational responsibility of simply existing as people of colour in predominantly white teaching spaces, where they felt both hyper-visible and were assumed to speak with additional authority on this past.
- One teacher reflected on how these dynamics could also shape perceptions of confidence or legitimacy in teaching this history:

  'I find it easier to discuss this topic as I am descending from those affected. Other teachers in the department […] may feel their white heritage puts them in a difficult position when discussing race and conquest.'

While in another school a white teacher appeared to affirm this expectation:

'I worry that I will not have the empathy and understanding I need to cover these topics with enough understanding of the non-white experience and family histories of the students I teach.'

Although no teacher directly voiced this as a grievance, the pattern in our data indicates that, however well-intentioned or legitimate their concerns, when some teachers withdraw from this work, the responsibility for navigating it often falls further, and disproportionately, on racially minoritised colleagues.

Teachers and senior leaders in several schools acknowledged that complex or contentious discussions sparked in history or English lessons rarely stayed there

6.3 Support for appropriately sensitive teaching and learning about the British Empire needs to extend beyond individual subject teachers and their lessons

- One of the clearest insights from our comparative case study research is the importance of recognising the wider school-level implications of teaching about empire, even if or when the content might appear confined to a single curriculum subject. This includes identifying potential interdependencies and consequences across the school and reviewing—and where necessary, revising—existing safeguarding procedures, behaviour policies, and wider whole-school systems that support students' personal development and emotional wellbeing.
- Teachers and senior leaders in several schools acknowledged that complex or contentious discussions sparked in history or English lessons rarely stayed there. These conversations often continued in corridors, resurfaced during break times, or were taken home to parents and family members. In response, many schools had developed or were developing whole-school strategies such as: revising behaviour policies to better address racist language; scheduling coordinated tutor time discussions; involving senior leaders in collaborative planning; and introducing CPD for all staff focused on language and representation.
- However, these responses varied significantly across settings, particularly in terms of follow-through and implementation. Despite many schools' efforts, some teachers still noted that "support is not always easy to find."

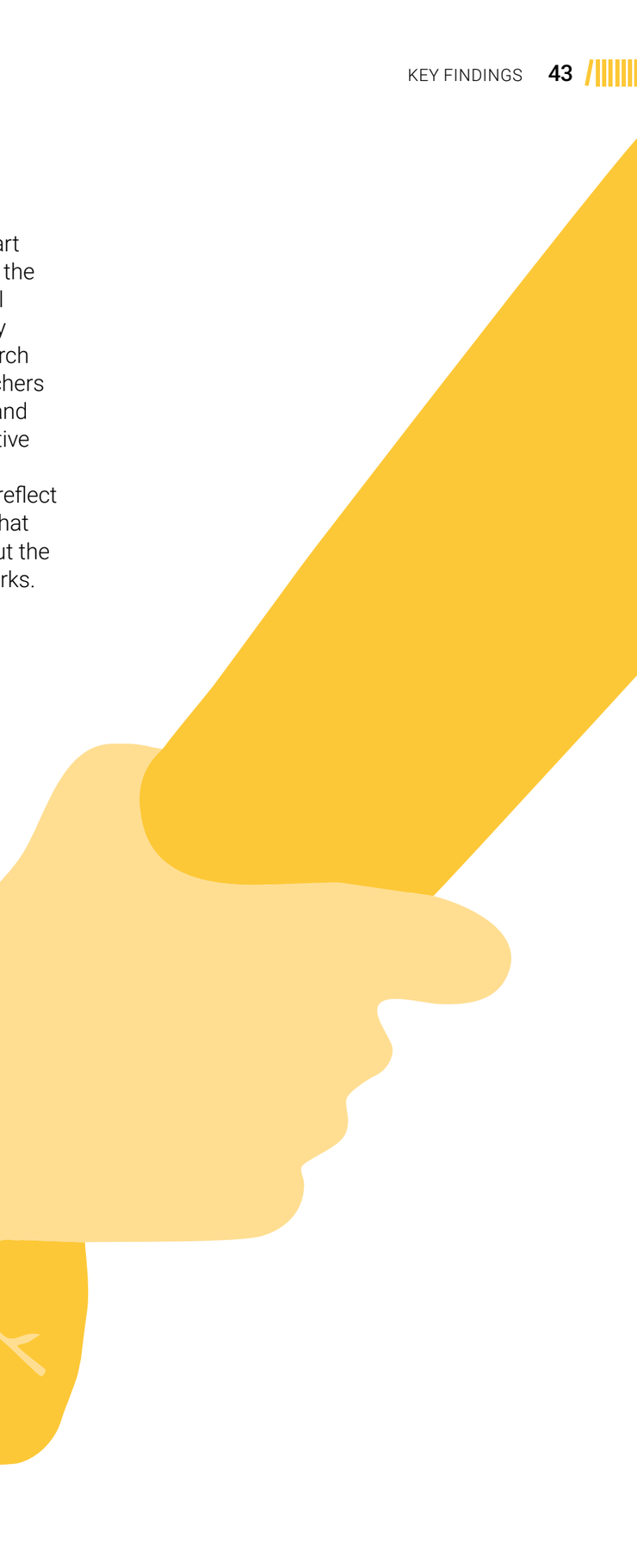
6.4. Some students actively seek support to confront potential tensions or points of disagreement with families and peers

- As already identified in Finding 4.4 above, in some contexts, learning about the British Empire at school could expose or create tensions at home. In more than one case study school, students described struggling to reconcile what they were taught in class with perspectives they increasingly saw as outdated—and, in some cases, actively racist—among close family members. Teachers noted that it was not always possible to anticipate which students might be carrying the most emotional weight or feel least able to speak openly about these topics at home.
- However, some of these same students also shared that formal lessons on empire gave them the language and confidence to talk more openly about issues like racism, migration, and national identity. They suggested that "conversational" approaches in the classroom were especially helpful in supporting discussion beyond the school gates. Many actively sought guidance on how to express perspectives that might conflict with those of their families, and wanted greater assurance that they could substantiate and defend their own views.

6.5 Very few teachers have received targeted training or support to help navigate challenges such as these

- Perhaps of most significance, there is very limited existing support or guidance beyond individual school or departmental colleagues to help teachers navigate challenges and potential tensions such as these. And while approximately half of all teachers with relevant experience indicated that their ITE included a specific focus on teaching emotive or controversial topics, only one in four had received content related to the discussion of race and/or racism within a school context.
- In this regard, it is instructive to note conclusions from the community-school partnership element of our research. These suggest that, when conducted meaningfully and sustainably, such partnerships can have a positive impact on students' self-identity and sense of belonging, while also directly supporting teachers to deliver sensitive and representative curriculum content. This support comes through opportunities for critical reflection, such as considering insider and outsider identities and experiences, and by providing an additional safeguard to help reduce the risk of unintended harm.

- A doctoral study conducted as part of our research further highlights the emotional demands of decolonial and antiracist teaching, especially for teachers of colour. This research exposes the difficulties such teachers often face in accessing support and identifies a clear need for generative professional opportunities where teachers can share experiences, reflect openly, and explore approaches that work in their own contexts without the imposition of restrictive frameworks.



Curriculum content and coverage: challenges and opportunities in knowledge selection

Key Finding 7:

Many teachers strive to diversify and deepen their teaching about Britain's empire, but curriculum content often remains constrained in important ways

7.1 Teachers face difficult challenges determining what content to include and how this should be organised

- Given the vast scale and complexity of the British Empire and its legacies, teachers regularly described confusion and uncertainty about how best to select and organise content. Two recurring challenges were identified during case study interviews: the "period vs place problem" (should content be sequenced chronologically, regionally, or thematically) and the "key takeaways conundrum" (wherein teachers struggled to identify clear learning goals without damaging oversimplification).
- Early-career teachers and those required to closely follow prescribed content were often especially concerned about unwittingly reproducing bias or omitting key perspectives.

7.2 Historians and teachers alike emphasise the importance of centring the voices and experiences of those who were colonised

- Overwhelmingly, the academic historians consulted during our research emphasised the importance of re-centring colonised voices to avoid perpetuating over-simplified, one-sided narratives. Most favoured "bottom-up" approaches over "top-down" ones, advocating what was often described as "not (just) a British perspective." They highlighted the value of portraying mutual (albeit unequal) agency between colonisers and the colonised, and of including diverse strategies of resistance, accommodation, and collaboration. Many also noted that empire profoundly shaped Britain itself, citing New Imperial Histories as a key influence on the field.
- These same priorities were in fact echoed by many classroom teachers. Among those surveyed, 90% identified "encouraging students to recognise and remember the full humanity of the individuals and communities involved in these histories" as a high or essential pedagogical priority, second only to ensuring accurate awareness of key facts. Over half considered this aim "essential." The same concern was evident in history curriculum-focused case study schools, where one teacher described her aim as "put[ting] that emphasis on the human effects of colonialism […] so that the tone is set where we value humanity."

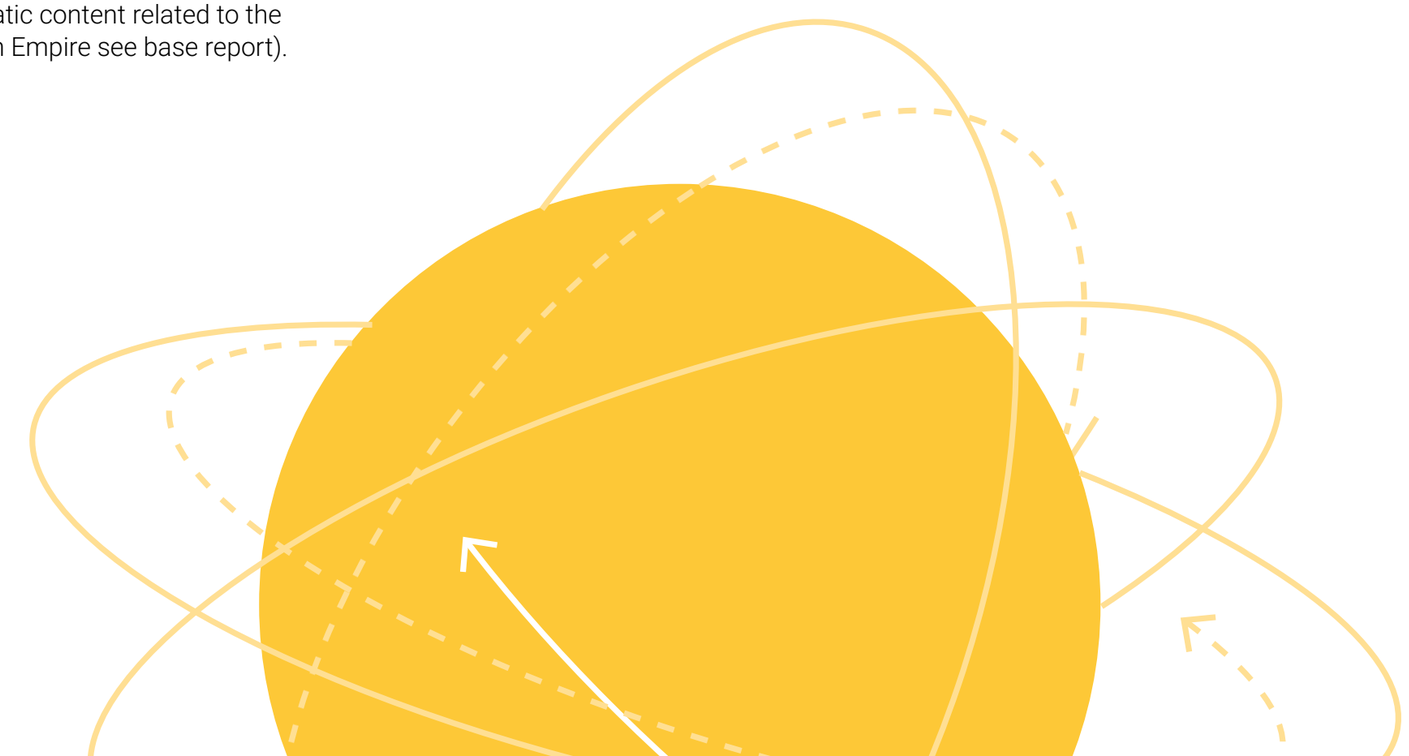
7.3 Textbooks and exam specifications continue to reinforce narrower perspectives, despite growing consensus on the need for change

- Despite this broad agreement among academic historians and teachers on the importance of centring colonised voices and restoring human perspectives, the realities of curriculum design and assessment often constrain how fully these aims can be realised in practice. These perspectives do not always receive equal weight in classroom resources, exam specifications, or schemes of work, limiting opportunities to challenge dominant narratives and diversify historical framings.
- In fact, our analysis of the most widely-used textbooks and current exam specifications suggests that a somewhat narrower range of perspectives continues to dominate, and teachers described textbooks as "outdated" and "Eurocentric," specifically citing limited representation of colonised and enslaved people's experiences.
- Interviews with textbook authors, some of whom are also practising teachers, offered additional insight into the tension between classroom realities and historical "truth." As one author explained: *'You want to tell the truth, but you also want the book to be usable […]. How do we do justice to the history but also make it work in the classroom?'*
- Other authors pointed to structural limitations beyond schools, including Ofqual's opposition to increasing the volume and variety of questions on non-British histories within exam specifications—a constraint which, in turn, affects textbook commissioning and sales.

Overwhelmingly, the academic historians consulted during our research emphasised the importance of re-centring colonised voices

7.4 Enacted curriculum content appears to skew towards certain themes and perspectives which are in turn reflected in students' understandings

- In spite of teachers' intended convictions, to a significant extent some of these structural constraints continue to appear reflected in the themes and figures that dominate actual classroom teaching. Certain thematic content appears almost universally prioritised in classroom lessons on the British Empire. This includes, most notably, "Trade and commerce," "reasons for British expansion," and "British violence against colonised populations". Other themes, meanwhile, are far less likely to be included: for example, "the consequences of imperial rule for health and social welfare," "the effects of empire on indigenous languages or knowledge practices," and "the development and impact of ideas about race and racism." (For a fully ranked list of potential thematic content related to the British Empire see base report).
- Curriculum emphasis on coloniser rather than colonised accounts and perspectives also appears to be reflected within student understanding. When asked to name significant figures from colonial history, students surveyed at key stages 4 and 5 could identify only a small range of individuals. Among Year 10 students, monarchs including Queens Elizabeth and Victoria were common responses, despite their limited direct involvement in empire-building. Older students at key stage 5 more often named imperial agents like Cecil Rhodes, but again, the range was narrow. Most notably, far fewer students could name or describe an indigenous person subjected to British colonial power than a coloniser. The exception here is Gandhi, with this response dominating responses across all year groups and especially at key stage 5.



7.5 Despite constraints, many teachers' planned units of work reflect diversity and innovation

- Within the teacher survey, respondents shared titles and brief descriptions of units on the British Empire, often including key questions used with students. In contrast to our overarching, quantitative data on content selection, analysis of these free-text responses—more than 450 in total—in fact suggest a wide range of thematic approaches across year groups and key stages. The five most frequent areas of focus were: India, Slavery, Indigenous Peoples and Resistance, the Origins of Empire, and the Legacies of Empire. Fewer units addressed decolonisation, the Empire in the World Wars, or moral judgements about the Empire (e.g., good/bad or pride/shame).
- Even within popular topics like India or Indigenous peoples, there was considerable diversity in approach. For example, units on India included varied foci such as:
  - Why did Britain leave India, 1947–50?
  - Gandhi, Nehru, Jinnah
  - Mughal India and the East India Company's role; Indian Independence; British involvement in the Opium War; and the Boxer Rebellion
  - The Jallianwala Bagh Massacre and its impact on India-Britain relations

  Across these and other free-text survey responses as well as case study interviews, there was compelling evidence that many teachers are actively innovating and not simply relying on the more traditional approaches that are still reflected in most published classroom materials.

Many teachers are actively innovating and not simply relying on the more traditional approaches that are still reflected in most published classroom materials

Key Finding 8:

Teaching about the British Empire very often focuses on a small number of key regions, potentially limiting students' awareness of its wider global geography

8.1 Classroom coverage of the British Empire is typically dominated by a small number of regions

- Though the British Empire spanned over 50 countries, teaching focuses mainly on the Caribbean, West Africa, and South Asia (and, as is considered further below, most specifically on India). These are the clear, shared foci for most teaching in both history and English classrooms, especially at key stages 3 and 4, while teaching about empire in geography classrooms has a more distinctive regional profile. Here greater attention appears to be given to North Africa and the Middle East together with East Africa in place of the Caribbean and South Asian subcontinent which both feature relatively infrequently. (For a comprehensive breakdown of the geographic focus of teaching across all subjects see base report.)

- Given the central significance of the transatlantic slave trade and British colonial rule in India as pillars of the empire in the 18th century and then, in the 19th-20th centuries, the Caribbean, West Africa, and South Asia, these are not a surprising, nor inappropriate emphases. It is notable, however, that the range of regions covered during lessons about the British Empire does not expand substantially even when additional curriculum time is available.

  Analysis of key stage 3 teaching shows that these three regions are treated as "fundamental" content, almost always included regardless of time constraints. By contrast, regions such as South East Asia, East Asia, and Australia are more likely to be added only if extra time allows, while others—including Southern Africa, North Africa, and the Middle East—get relatively little coverage, irrespective of how much time is available.

- Teachers appear to be influenced by a number of conscious and unconscious factors when prioritising specific geographical (and other) content. This includes, exam board specifications, departmental guidance, the availability of specific resources, student interest, and personal confidence or expertise. Notably, the same three, most regularly featured geographic regions also top the list of content that teachers already feel most confident about, while the least commonly included regions—North Africa, the Middle East and South East/East Asia—featured much more prominently when survey respondents were asked what they currently feel least confident teaching about.

8.2 Students' knowledge of the geography of empire typically appears concentrated rather than comprehensive

- Students' knowledge of the geography of the British Empire also appears somewhat truncated and is often cantered on a few major colonies like India, Australia, and North America. Only a minority of all surveyed students were aware of the full global reach of the British Empire; only 35.5% of those who had formally studied this history at school (and 17% who had not) recognised that it had once extended across all major continental regions of the globe.

- India in particular appears to dominate many students' spatial imaginary of the British Empire. The student survey asked respondents if they could name any parts of the world—across the entirety of Britain's empire—where specific events had taken place. By some margin, India was the single most commonly offered response across all questions: 1.5 times more often than Ireland for "a period of great hunger," more than double North America for "non-violent protests against taxes," and ten times more often than Sri Lanka/Ceylon as a location of tea plantations.

- While India was indeed an appropriate answer in many contexts, the comparative absence of other countries or regions potentially suggests a somewhat narrow and uneven awareness of the Empire's vast and complex geography. By point of comparison, although 77% of students recognised that the British Empire extended into continental Africa, across all event related questions, very few references were made to specific African countries. A small number of students offered Kenya as an alternative location of tea plantations and South Africa in relation to non-violent protests against taxes. However, in both cases a striking 14 times as many students referenced India. Elsewhere, a similarly small proportion of students made vague or generic reference simply to "Africa" as a location for a period of great hunger, a war of independence, and a rebellion against slavery.

8.3 Curriculum materials and exam specifications can further entrench familiar priorities and omissions

- Textbook analysis also highlights a significant focus on India and less emphasis on other former colonies. Across 17 key stage 3 history textbooks, India received more than double the coverage of the next most featured region, Ireland, followed by South Africa, Israel/Palestine, and North America. Newer textbooks are beginning to include more content on Australia and West Africa but, again, our research with both textbook authors and exam boards suggests any change is likely to be slow here, especially beyond key stage 3. This is due to exacting exam board accreditation processes and their stipulation for a majority focus on somewhat narrowly defined "British" over "world" history.

- Many of the academic historians and teachers consulted during our research problematise the strict and restrictive division between British and world history, arguing that it obscures the global interconnections and historical relationships within the Empire. Nonetheless, the distinction remains a significant structural and symbolic barrier to fuller classroom exploration of the complex and expansive geography of British imperial history.

Key Finding 9:

Classroom engagement with the British Empire is moving beyond reductive "balance sheet" framings, but ideas of even-handedness and objectivity continue to shape practice in complex ways

9.1. Textbook representations of empire appear to be shifting away from "balance sheet" framings, but earlier approaches endure

- Over recent decades, school textbooks have often framed the British Empire using a "balance sheet" approach, inviting students to list "positives" and "negatives" of imperial history. This method implicitly suggests that the benefits and harms of empire can be weighed evenly. However, our analysis suggests a shift in recent years. A widely used 2014 key stage 3 textbook included an explicit "positives" versus "negatives" table on British rule in India; by 2020, this had been replaced with a more complex section presenting contrasting interpretations. This is not to say that earlier versions of this and other, older textbooks, are necessarily now out of circulation. On the contrary, given the pressures on school budgets, textbooks from pre-2014 often continue to be used in schools.
- Amongst the newest relevant textbooks, one major publisher's 2023 title explores the Empire from the perspective of the colonised. One of its authors of colour cautioned against the risk of further oversimplification in opposition to approaches that had gone before,

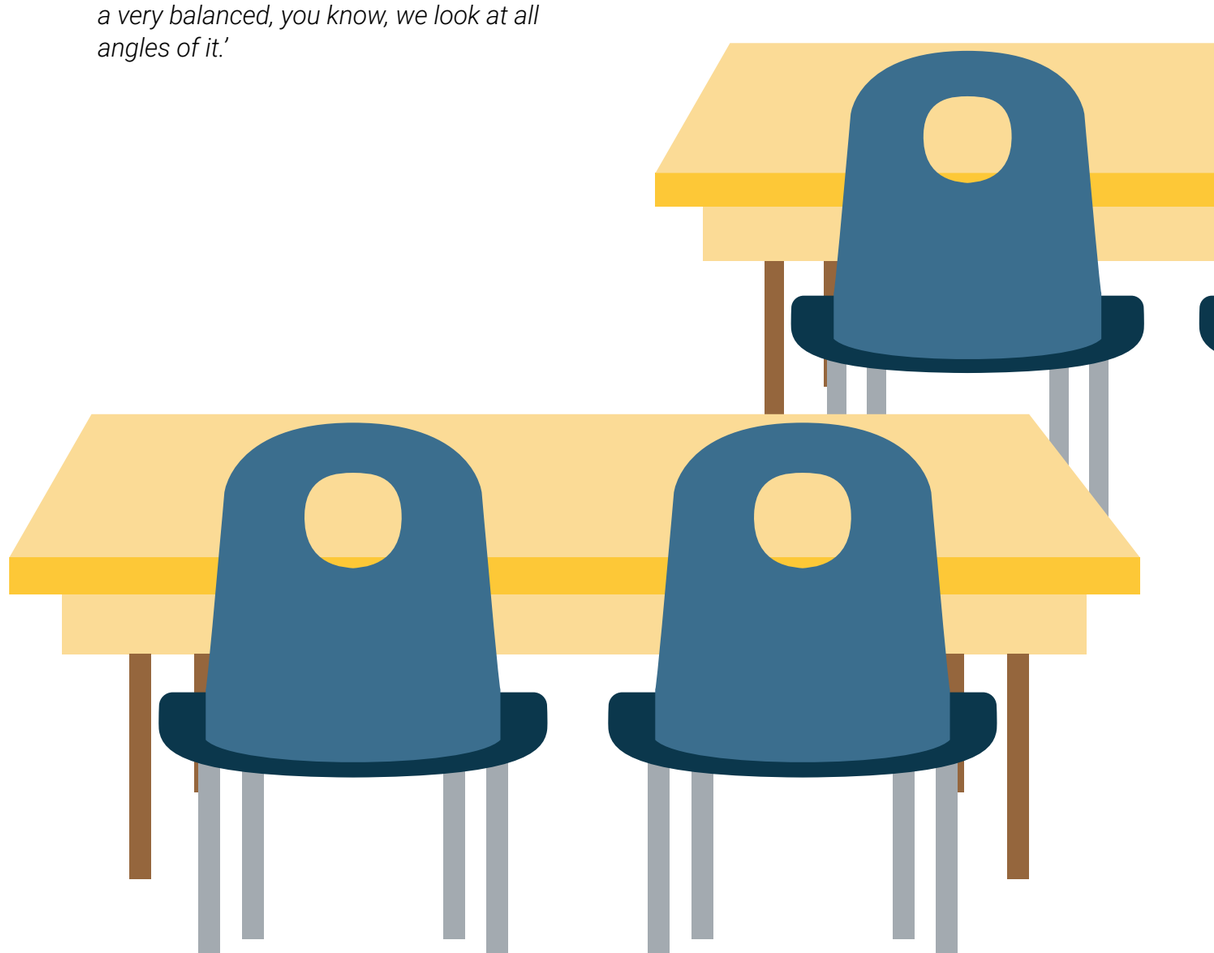
'There's this tendency to only want to tell good stories about people of colour. But... we need to humanise everybody. And that means seeing both the good and the bad.'

9.2. Most teachers reject simplistic binary framings but still navigate complex pressures around presenting a "balanced" account

- Among the teacher-constructed enquiry questions, already referenced in Finding 7.5 above, only a small minority (4.5%) employed a "good vs. bad" or comparable framing. Elsewhere in the teacher survey, history teachers ranked "I want to try to provide a 'balanced' account of this history" among the comparatively least important of their pedagogical priorities although it was still considered a high priority or essential by 60% of all those surveyed. A rather larger proportion of teachers (88%) considered wanting "to support students' critical thinking about imperial histories" to be a high priority.
- Findings from the comparative case study schools present a particularly nuanced and complex picture. Only one school used anything explicitly named as a "balance-sheet" framing, and even there, teachers described trying to move away from that approach. In another, a Head of Department reflected that attempts to reduce complex history to a simple pros versus cons list are perhaps especially deeply rooted in teaching about empire, partly due to historic prejudice and partly reflecting the difficulty of attempting to cover the entirety of the subject in just a few lessons.
- In both survey responses and case study interview, other teachers described how they occasionally invoked the language of "balance" strategically, especially when responding to external scrutiny or concerns about bias. As one explained:

'I overheard one conversation once at an open evening where we were talking about empires, and I'm sure I heard a dad say, I bet they only teach the bad stuff or something. And I was able to say, we teach a very balanced, you know, we look at all angles of it.'

- Elsewhere—especially in areas where racially exclusionist, nationalist discourse was increasingly vocal—teachers also described the need to be especially mindful of "pride versus shame" binaries that could overdetermine even the most evidence-based, reflexive engagement with this history. In these settings, the language of "balance" was sometimes used instrumentally to manage potential sensitivity, often serving as a proxy for objectivity or even-handedness, particularly in response to concerns about bias or political controversy.



9.3 Students can also recognise and reject reductive notions of "balance" in their engagement with British imperial history

- It is important to recognise that not all uses of the term "balance" are reducible to the "balance-sheet" logic outlined above. Importantly, in a number of case study schools, teachers also described critically reflecting on the notion of balance directly with their students, using it as a starting point for discussion rather than an intended outcome.
- Students, especially those in key stage 4 and above, were often able to recognise and critique the limitations of this approach. Some students expressed frustration in situations where they felt expected to produce "sanitised" or "balanced" accounts of periods and events they understood primarily in terms of historical injustice—a concern also shared by their teacher. Others problematised what the notion of "balance" should mean in the context of empire.

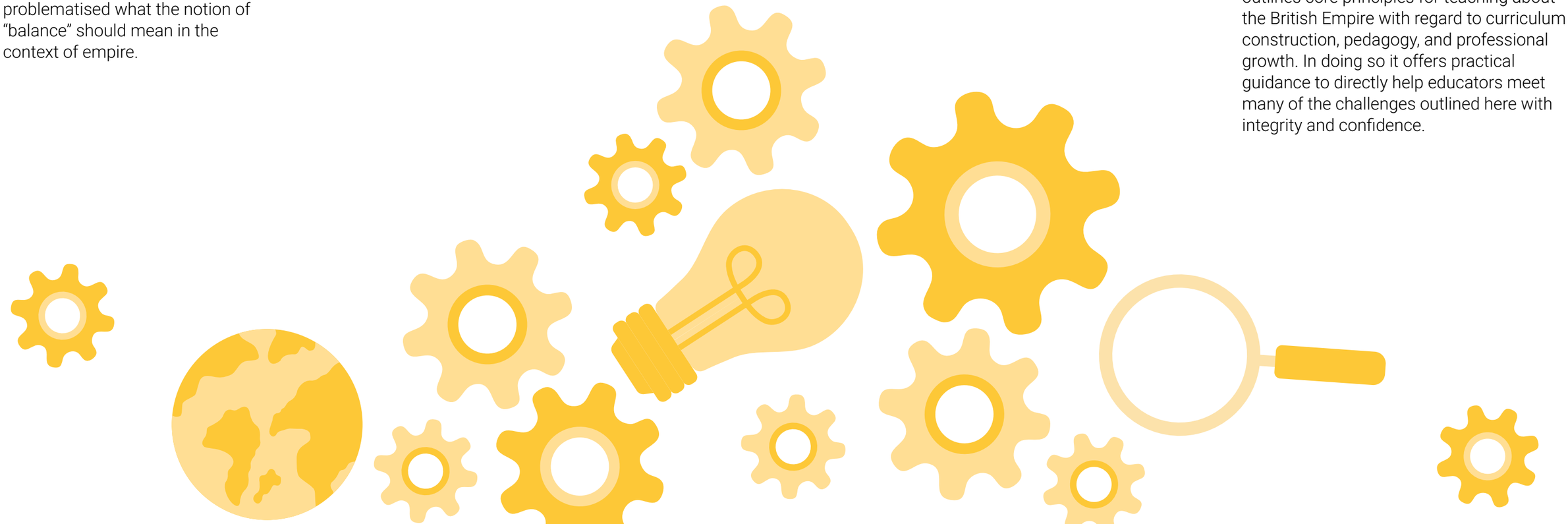
> I think balance shouldn't be gratuitous. Don't do it for the sake of doing it… okay, you should have a balanced view of things, but not to the extent of millions of people died—some people got rich—oh, that's balance. Because that's clearly not.
>
> Year 13 Student, History curriculum-focused case study school interview

9.4 Responses to "balance" are shaped not only by classroom dynamics, but can also be influenced by wider controversies and debates

- 30% of all teachers surveyed reported that students' potential sense of pride or shame in British history was an important consideration for them when preparing work in this area. However, more than double that proportion—80%—said the same of "contemporary debate or controversies on how the British Empire should be remembered." This would at least tentatively suggest that, while teachers' experience of managing—or anticipating—students' emotional responses to this history is not insignificant, the influence of wider public and political discursive frameworks, so often structured around opposition, may have even greater significance.

Complexities and tensions surrounding the concept of "balance" as it relates to teaching about the British Empire highlight broader challenges for educators: navigating diverse student backgrounds, contested public narratives, and limited curriculum resources, all while trying to foster critical engagement with the past. As this findings section has shown, both teachers and students are themselves often acutely aware of the limitations and pressures that accompany calls for "balanced" history, and many are already moving beyond reductive binaries in favour of more reflective, nuanced and thoughtful enquiry.

These and other findings underline the need for clear, principled approaches to curriculum design and classroom practice that empower students to grapple with complexity, question inherited narratives, and connect historical understanding to their own lives. In response, the following section outlines core principles for teaching about the British Empire with regard to curriculum construction, pedagogy, and professional growth. In doing so it offers practical guidance to directly help educators meet many of the challenges outlined here with integrity and confidence.



Principles

Curricular principles

Curricular principles guide education professionals in deciding what they should select from a vast field to teach young people. These principles have relevance not only to teachers but also those who direct and/or support teachers, including examination authorities, textbook authors and publishers, and GLAM organisations (galleries, libraries, archives, and museums).

Principle 1:

A spiral curriculum

Schools should teach the histories and legacies of the British Empire across the 11-18 age range, revisiting themes and extending the scope of students' studies by key stage

Britain's empire should be considered as a process, rather than a "thing," and its causes, consequences, and legacies seen as complex and varied across time and place (see Principle 3). Teaching all these aspects through a single sequence of lessons (an enquiry) rarely allows for the complexity and variation to be adequately explored. Rather, teachers should plan for multiple units of study across the 11-18 age range that focus on aspects of the British Empire's histories and legacies.

This can produce a "spiral curriculum" that allows for progression in the intellectual and ethical demands of subject pedagogy (see Figure 1 for such an approach in a history department). This allows for more complex and nuanced analysis of imperial themes to be undertaken when students are older and beginning to reflect more deeply on questions of their identity and relationship with contemporary British society.

The starting point for the spiral should be the study of indigenous societies before the processes of the British Empire impacted on them. Time may only allow for one of the societies of the Global South in the initial year of key stage 3, but that can help to dispel the myth that Britain's expansion was a boon to hitherto "uncivilised" peoples.

A spiral curriculum approach to teaching the histories and legacies of the British Empire

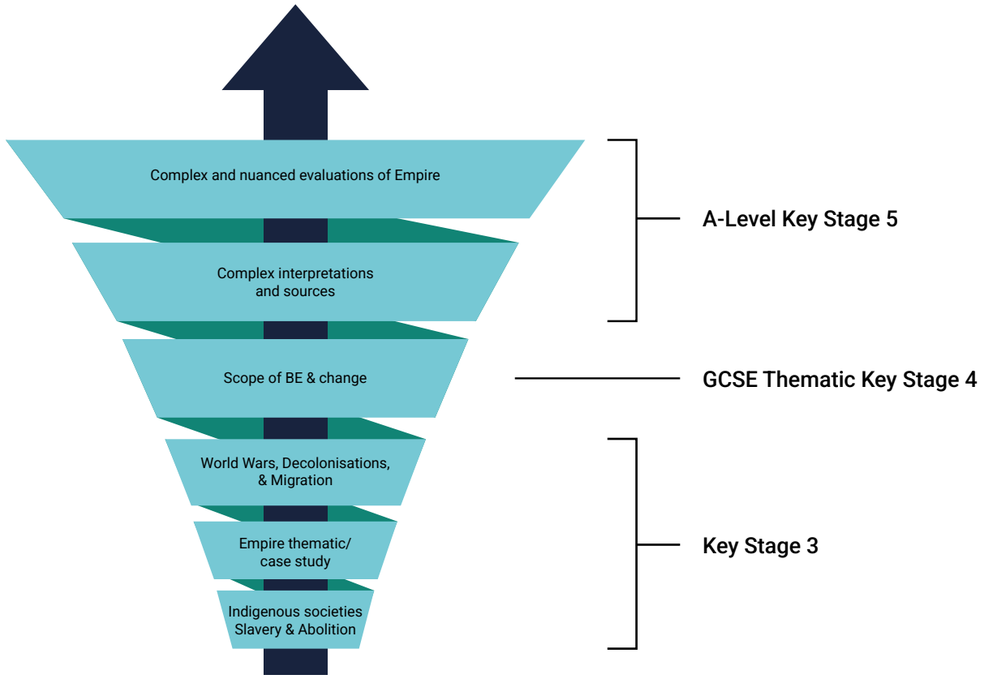


Figure 1 An example of a spiral curriculum for teaching about the British Empire

The histories and legacies of the British Empire can not only be considered in dedicated enquiries, but also through units primarily focused on other well-established connected topics, including transatlantic slavery and abolition, the Industrial Revolution, the World Wars, and migration.

CASE STUDY

St. Michael's Catholic College, in southeast London, teach aspects of the histories and legacies of the British Empire in all three key stages, including the AQA GCSE unit on Migration, Empires and the People. The history department have a clear sense of a "spiral curriculum" that is centred around themes of "identity" and the construction of notions like nationalism; older students regularly make use of ideas such as "Durkheimian identity" in class discussions.

Principle 2:

"Legacies" of the British Empire

Teachers should teach about "legacies" to connect the histories of the British Empire to our contemporary world but be aware they are complex and controversial

Legacies can be cast in terms of the long-term impacts and consequences of British colonialism, both for Britain and for formerly colonised states. These legacies have aspects that are **material** (such as infrastructure and economic organisations) and **interpretative** (how empire is remembered or contested). It is not helpful to think of legacies as bequests that have been handed down from the centuries of British imperial rule; these have sometimes been interpreted as gifts endowed by Britain to its former colonies which they continue to enjoy, and at other times as shackles that impeded independent growth and development. Furthermore, nostalgia and patriotism can become unhelpful terms if they channel students and teachers into moral judgements about empire and they should generally be avoided.

Contemporary debates about British cultures and identities have clear connections to migration from within the British Empire and Commonwealth and the development of multicultural Britain. Similarly, racism in society is rooted in colonialism: materially, in enduring structures of advantage and disadvantage, and interpretatively, in the ways these structures are remembered, explained, or contested. Nonetheless, teachers need to be wary of implying that contemporary problems are solely and simply linked to Britain's imperial past; for instance, immigration in the twenty-first century has important connections to broader global dynamics.

Because interpretations of legacies often draw as much from the work of social scientists as from historical scholarship, teachers can find them more challenging to teach than the histories of empire. Subject specialists may need to enhance their knowledge from the fields of sociology, economics, and political science, drawing on scholars such as Paul Gilroy (2013), Priyamvada Gopal (2019), Stuart Hall (2021), and Mahmood Mamdani (2020).

Legacies have aspects that are material (such as infrastructure and economic organisations) and interpretative (how empire is remembered or contested)

Principle 3:

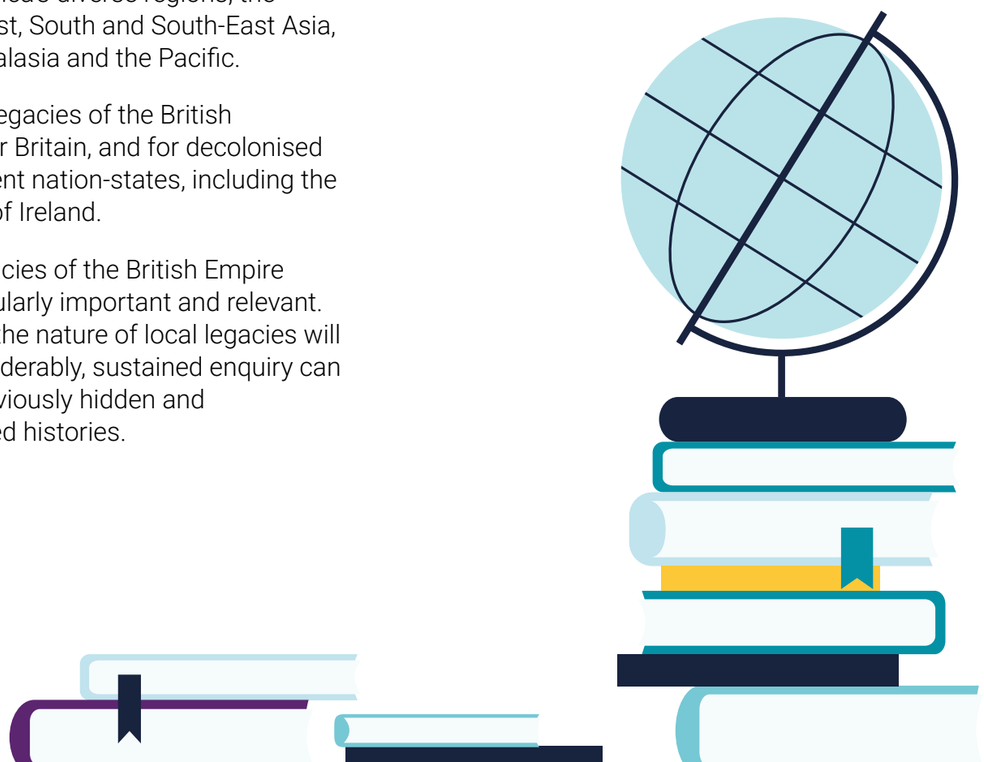
Spatial scope and coverage

Students should learn about the histories and legacies of the British Empire at all significant levels: global, regional, national, and local

The British Empire encompassed vast geographical regions and spanned centuries, making it inherently complex. The selection of material for the classroom in teachers' plans should aim to build a picture for students of the scale and significance of the Empire through a spiral curriculum, recognising the:

- **Global** reach of the British Empire to every continent.
- **Regional** dynamics of British imperialism, particularly in the Caribbean, across Africa's diverse regions, the Middle East, South and South-East Asia, and Australasia and the Pacific.
- **National** legacies of the British Empire, for Britain, and for decolonised independent nation-states, including the Republic of Ireland.
- **Local** legacies of the British Empire are particularly important and relevant. Although the nature of local legacies will vary considerably, sustained enquiry can reveal previously hidden and unexpected histories.

A binary designation of "British and non-British" in the shaping of national curricula and assessment can help to secure a place for the histories and legacies of the British Empire in the curriculum, but the meaning of "British" should be a broad one. The latter should encompass "all peoples within the United Kingdom, its colonies and Commonwealth," so that the histories and legacies, including literature, of formerly colonised peoples can be included alongside the colonisers.



Principle 4:

Conceptual themes

Students should be taught about a range of core aspects of imperial expansion, rule, and decline across the curriculum

There are essential aspects of the historical processes and narratives of the British Empire that should feature in secondary school students' learning. The following categories are based on our consultations with historians:

- **Power dynamics and resistance.** The forms and mechanisms of control by the British and the various forms of resistance by colonised peoples, including careful consideration of the use and impact of violence.
- **Economic and social connections and impact.** The exploitation of resources; the development of trade networks; labour, both forced and voluntary; the growth of businesses; infrastructure and profound changes in local economies and societies.
- **Indigenous peoples in colonial areas, their culture and societies.** The flourishing of polities and cultures in Asia, Africa, and Australasia before contact with the British. The perspectives and varied responses of those people subjected to colonisation and imperial rule, including the complexities of accommodation and resistance.
- **Race and racism.** Britain's imperial connections with the world played a central role in the development of ideas about race and racism.
- **Cultural exchanges and contributions.** The recognition of the cultural richness that emerged from colonial exchanges, as well as the cultural impositions and erasures that accompanied imperial rule. This could include considerations of language and knowledge construction and the silencing of many colonised peoples.

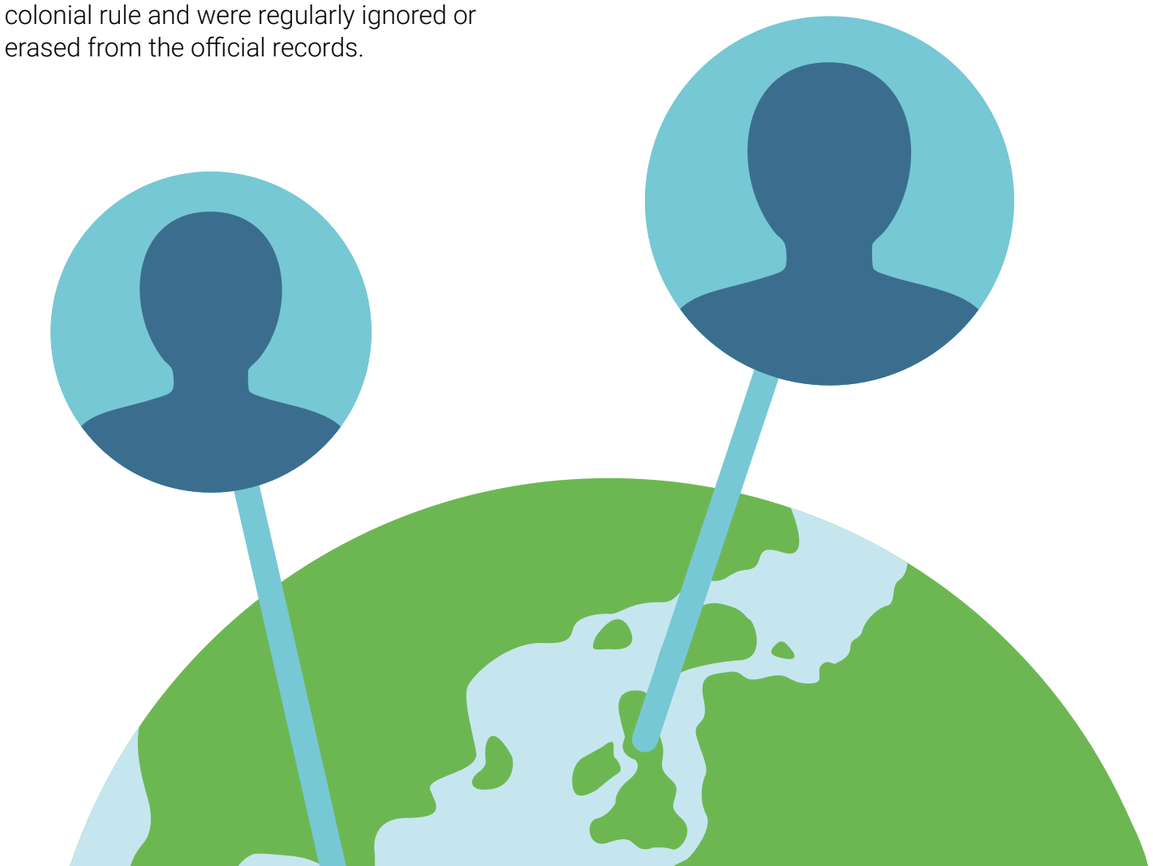
Principle 5:

Humanising the peoples of empire

Teachers should ensure that lessons about the British Empire explore lives of peoples involved to embody factors and concepts

It is both ethically and epistemically important to study individuals involved in British colonialism, allowing students to explore and appreciate the human agency and impact of empire. They should be presented as authentic characters, recognising that people are multi-faceted, rather than merely mentioning names of historical actors under the binary titles of "colonised" or "colonisers." Teachers need to make a deliberate effort to include peoples who were subjected to the excesses of colonial rule and were regularly ignored or erased from the official records.

Nonetheless, explorations of colonised peoples should include both those who adamantly resisted British colonial authorities and those who attempted to accommodate them. It is also important to recognise the diversity within British society wherein some people actively opposed the processes of the Empire. However, while always recognising complexity, teachers should avoid false equivalences: a symmetry of sympathy between the colonised and colonisers is not legitimate.



Pedagogical principles

Pedagogical principles guide education professionals in deciding how they should be teaching young people, including the range of both academic and pastoral aspects of the learning process.

Principle 6:

Enquiry and meaning-making

Teachers should plan their lessons in enquiry sequences that involve students investigating powerful questions to build knowledge and understanding

Students' engagement with the histories and legacies of the British Empire should move from the acquisition of knowledge to the critical consideration of issues that were not only important in the past but that fundamentally shape the present and future. Students should be positioned as co-constructors of understanding within the disciplinary frameworks of our national curriculum rather than passive recipients of knowledge.

Through the processes of enquiry, students should build their own narratives using evidence, interpretation, and reflection, and thereby develop meanings that engage with the economic, social, political, cultural, moral, and emotional aspects of empire. This work demands considerable time for students to develop their thinking, so should be taught in lesson sequences, guided by an overarching "enquiry question" that focuses and guides the complex learning.

CASE STUDY

Jasmine Kaur's enquiry introduces Year 8 SEN students at the Centre Academy, South London, to the economic history of empire through the question: *How important was lascar labour for British merchant ships during the interwar years*? Using contemporary parallels such as the gig economy and modern supply chains, students build understanding before exploring P&O shipping routes, interwar trade, and the roles of various seafarers associated with the British Empire.

Principle 7:

Diverse sources and interpretations

Teachers should use sources in enquiries that include a range of voices and types of remains from the past and interrogate interpretations of the histories and legacies from more than one perspective

Narratives of the British Empire have usually been constructed from the colonisers' perspectives and the British state exercised tight control of both the creation and the survival of colonial records. Therefore, teachers need to seek out sources created by indigenous peoples that can give voice to their various perspectives. Teachers should explore the opportunities in 20th-century studies to include actual voices in audio recordings and film clips. Images are also a powerful means to prompt intrigue, involvement, and speculative thinking from students. Teachers should be most careful in handling depictions of colonial violence and brutal treatment of subjects.

Objects can facilitate navigation of complex ideas, through simple immediacy and personal engagement, and can also help to move from "the familiar to the strange" in a lesson. Objects can secure a personal, inclusive and visceral engagement with the past and make story-telling vivid. This would ideally involve physical objects, usually in connection with GLAM organisations, but visualisation of objects can also work.

CASE STUDY

The British Library's *Discovering Historical Sources* project has curated and presented a range of material from their collections that show the operations of the British Empire and its legacies across the globe and within Britain. Collection items range from the original subscribers' list for the East India Company to the Lascari-Bat phrasebook used to command the colonised sailors on merchant ships in the industrial age. Alongside contextual labels, teachers can access images, transcripts, and sometimes short videos of these sources for use in their classroom.

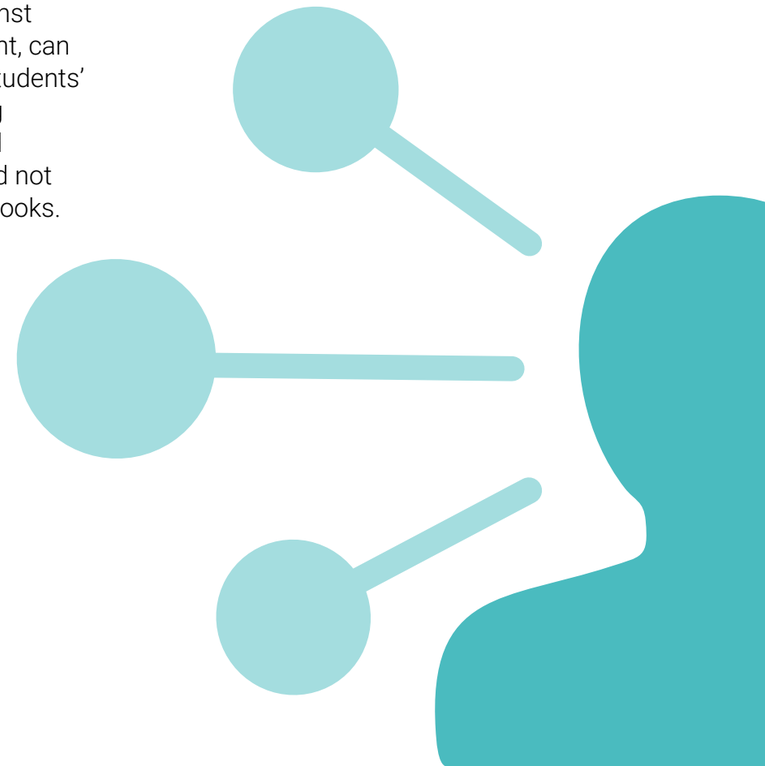
Principle 8:

Balance and judgement

Students should be taught to consider a range of different ideas in their enquiries but not asked to produce an equivalent "balance" as a final learning outcome

It is essential for teachers and students to appreciate the difference between "balancing various perspectives and claims" within an enquiry and the notion of "drawing a balanced conclusion" that does not necessarily do justice to the historical context. Intellectual notions of balance within critical thinking—such as the critical evaluation of competing interpretations or examining a range of different consequences—are central to historical studies and should play an important role in the pedagogies of enquiry. However, attempts at binary moral arithmetic, such as the weighing of "positives" against "negatives" for an overall judgement, can be ahistorical and risk distorting students' understanding and oversimplifying complex histories. These so-called "balance sheet" approaches should not appear in lesson plans nor in textbooks.

Nonetheless, teachers could ask students to make overall evaluations of the consequences and impact of the British Empire that encourage circumspection rather than equivalence; it may be helpful for teachers to avoid the word "balance" altogether, preferring terms like "multiple perspectives" to encourage a range of ideas. Furthermore, judgements should be linked to clear criteria, so that vague terms like "good" and "bad" are replaced with specific ideas of "economic impact" or "political stability."



Principle 9:

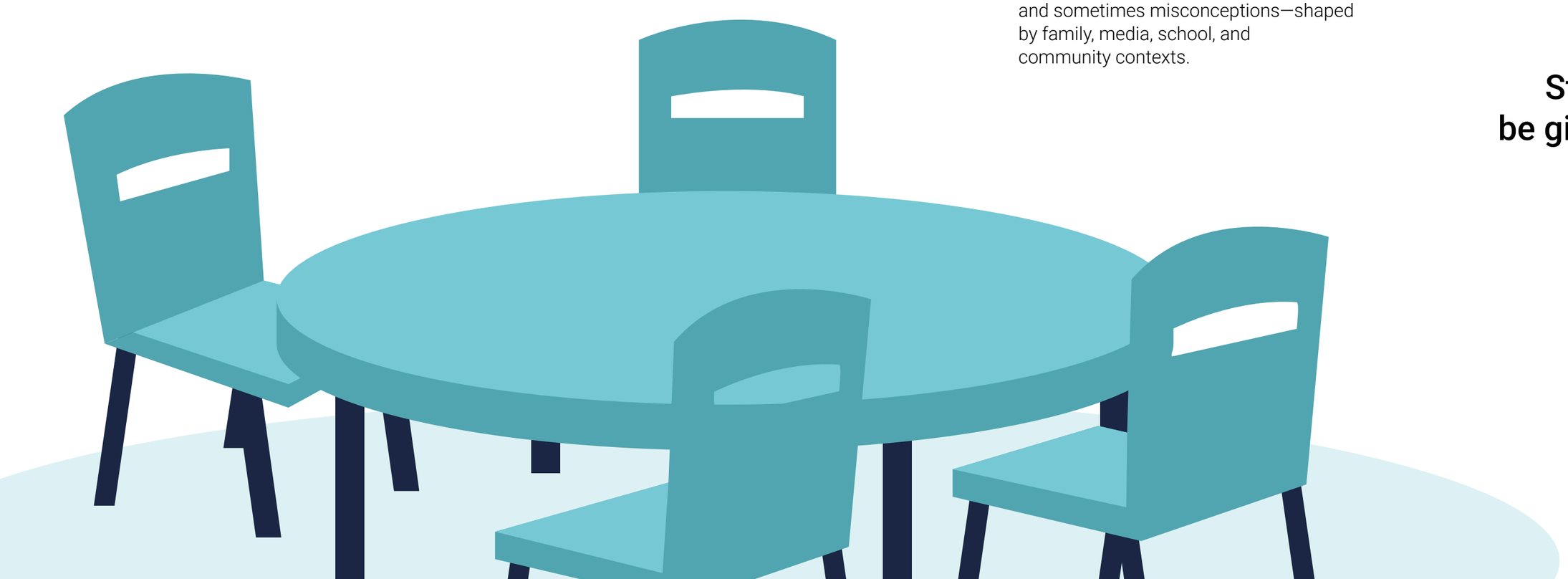
Students' agency and dialogue

Students should be actively involved in the exploration of enquiry questions through dialogue with their peers and teachers

Students develop their knowledge and understanding of this complex area of study through their independent engagement with their teachers and with fellow students in dialogue, as well as through accessing texts and artefacts. Using Burbules' (1993) definition of dialogue as "an activity directed toward discovery and new understanding, which stands to improve the knowledge, insight, or sensitivity of its participants..." (p.8), this gives agency to students in the direction of the enquiries.

This demands sufficient time in various grouped settings for students to develop questions and share in the directing of their enquiries.

Teachers maintain their classrooms as safe and respectful spaces in which hurtful and demeaning language and attitudes are prohibited, and they need to be aware of the particular discomfort, resistance, or pain that can result from talking about some aspects of these histories and legacies.



Principle 10:

Identity and locality

Teachers should incorporate local dimensions in their enquiries and consider how their students' identities might be connected to the histories and legacies of empire

The legacies and histories of the British Empire have contributed significantly to the formation of ideas about identity for citizens of the United Kingdom. For young people, their learning in this field can therefore impact their being as well as their knowing. Students should be given co-agency in enquiries to ask questions and to discuss sensitive and challenging aspects of this work. Teachers should recognise that students bring into the classroom their own lived experiences, prior knowledge, and sometimes misconceptions—shaped by family, media, school, and community contexts.

Effective pedagogy involves surfacing, interrogating, and expanding these starting points, while enabling students to build deeper, more complex understandings of empire and its legacies. Teachers should seek to integrate local connections into their enquiries, partnering with community projects, including those that curate oral testimonies and diasporic memories.

Students should be given co-agency in enquiries

Principles for professional growth

These are shaped by knowledge, relationships, and context-awareness and so are more than simply “training needs” or external CPD priorities. Following Barnett (2009), we understand dispositions—such as a will to engage, to listen, to question—not as static traits, but as cultivated energies, central to any authentic engagement with knowledge and with others.

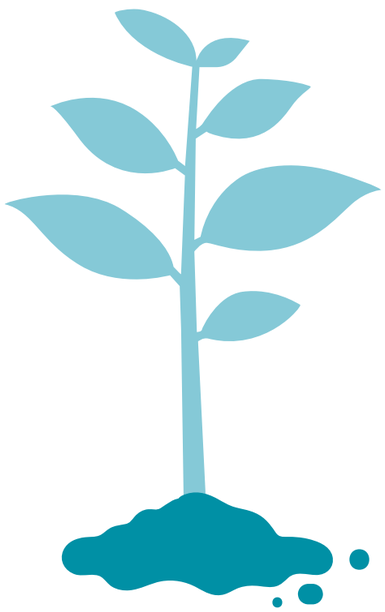
Principle 11:

Range of programmes and resources

Development opportunities for professionals within both academic and heritage sectors should broaden and deepen their understanding of pedagogical and curricular work in relation to the histories and legacies of the British Empire

The groundwork of teachers’ preparation should feature in their ITE where space should be made for thinking about teaching some of the challenging dimensions of the histories and legacies of the British Empire, particularly around identity, patriotism, race, and violence. However, teachers can only really start to appreciate the pedagogical principles of teaching this work when they have established strong relationships with students in a particular location that can foster agency and dialogue. Therefore, a portfolio of accessible differentiated provision, both online and face-to-face, should be developed across various academic and professional institutions, including university departments, subject associations, museums, and libraries.

Although subject disciplines will provide the foundations for this work in schools, the knowledge behind it is inherently interdisciplinary. From their ITE stage onwards, teachers should engage with interpretations of colonialism, race, identity, and other concepts from a range of social science and humanities disciplines.



Principle 12:

Local perspectives

Development opportunities for professionals within both academic and heritage sectors should include connections to their locale and region

Teachers should explore the histories of empire and migration in their school’s local area, seeking opportunities available through GLAM organisations, all of which provide support for education. Some areas also have community groups that are connected to the legacies of migration and empire, and school partnerships with their projects can open up rich resources from cultural legacies, oral histories, and family archives. It is also valuable for teachers to be supported in anticipating possible anxieties and challenges that might arise about the teaching of these topics in their particular location and in considering appropriate responses.

CASE STUDY

Joe Cauldwell, head of history at Mosslands School, in Wallasey in the Wirral, created an ambitious enquiry based on local historical connections between Lever Brothers’ Port Sunlight village (seven miles from the school) and colonial exploitation in the Congo. He developed this resource for key stage 3 students for the Historical Association’s Teacher Fellowship on the Economic History of Colonialism, working with the London School of Economics.

It is also valuable for teachers to be supported in anticipating possible anxieties and challenges that might arise

Principle 13:

Identities

Development work should pay attention to the personal and social demands, challenges, and opportunities of working in the field of histories and legacies of empire, for both adults and young people

Teachers should reflect on their own identities, values, and lived experiences in relation to the British Empire and how these shape their understanding of the past, their aims, and their position in the classroom. As teachers reflect on their own formation, they should also consider the support their students need in navigating their own journeys of becoming historical, cultural, and political subjects. The racialised identities of both the teachers and the students impact on the ways in which they encounter and carry these responsibilities and challenges. Therefore, schools need to ensure that their power dynamics allow for the creation of a culture in which people are enabled and comfortable to engage in these matters without fear.

Since this work will involve consideration of potentially unsettling issues such as racism, violence, and injustice, teachers should be supported in building confidence and expertise in navigating difficult conversations without oversimplifying the issues or overwhelming those involved. It is important for subject departments to share their plans with the school's leadership team and pastoral support staff as appropriate, and to discuss the vulnerabilities of particular students and of colleagues, and the possibilities for their support.

Principle 14:

Solidarity

School leaders should support teachers to work collaboratively in exploring the challenges and opportunities of this field, in both subject groups and cross-curricular settings

Collaborative working can spark and sharpen new ideas through supportive interaction and critical engagement, consolidating the vision and purpose of a subject department. Planning in concert impels teachers to grapple with curricular and pedagogical challenges that can be too easily avoided when working in isolation. Students across a school will benefit from the greater consistency of values and approaches in subject lessons that can develop through this teamwork.

Collaborative working can spark and sharpen new ideas through supportive interaction and critical engagement

Recommendations:

Building structural support for complex educational work

Our findings highlight that this is complex work, not only because the topic is historically vast, geographically dispersed, and publicly contested, but also because of the structural and institutional constraints teachers face.

Many teachers are already working thoughtfully within existing frameworks to make this history meaningful without oversimplifying it, but this work cannot rely on individual effort alone, nor can it be sustained without national investment. Dedicated funding is essential to provide the time, resources, and professional infrastructure teachers need. Coherence, sustainability, and wider reach require systemic support through curriculum design, assessment policy, teacher education, and ongoing professional development. Complexity is not a problem to be solved, but a strength to be cultivated. This report is grounded in the belief that helping students engage with complex and difficult histories is essential preparation for life in a diverse, democratic society.

These recommendations reflect both what is already working in schools and what is needed to make an inclusive, complex curriculum more coherent, supported, and sustainable. Rather than viewing these issues in isolation, we group the recommendations by their function within the educational ecosystem:

- **Structural recommendations (1-3)** focus on the national infrastructure that supports professional learning, curriculum and assessment frameworks.
- **Contextual and relational recommendations (4-6)** focus on the dynamics within schools and classrooms including how teachers lead curriculum work, how students engage with it, and how professional development can bridge the two.
- **Wider enabling recommendations (7–9)** highlight tools and partnerships that can sustain and extend this work beyond individual classrooms.

Many teachers are already working thoughtfully within existing frameworks to make this history meaningful without oversimplifying it, but this work cannot rely on individual effort alone, nor can it be sustained without national investment

Strategic and structural recommendations

Recommendation 1:

Ensure that the school curriculum is structured to support progression and coherence

A coherent and inclusive curriculum requires more than adding content: it requires rethinking how knowledge, including historical, cultural, and geographical perspectives, is structured, sequenced, and made meaningful across key stages.

Current curriculum frameworks often treat themes such as empire, decolonisation, and migration as discrete or optional, rather than recognising their centrality to Britain's past and present and, indeed, to the development of many school subjects themselves.

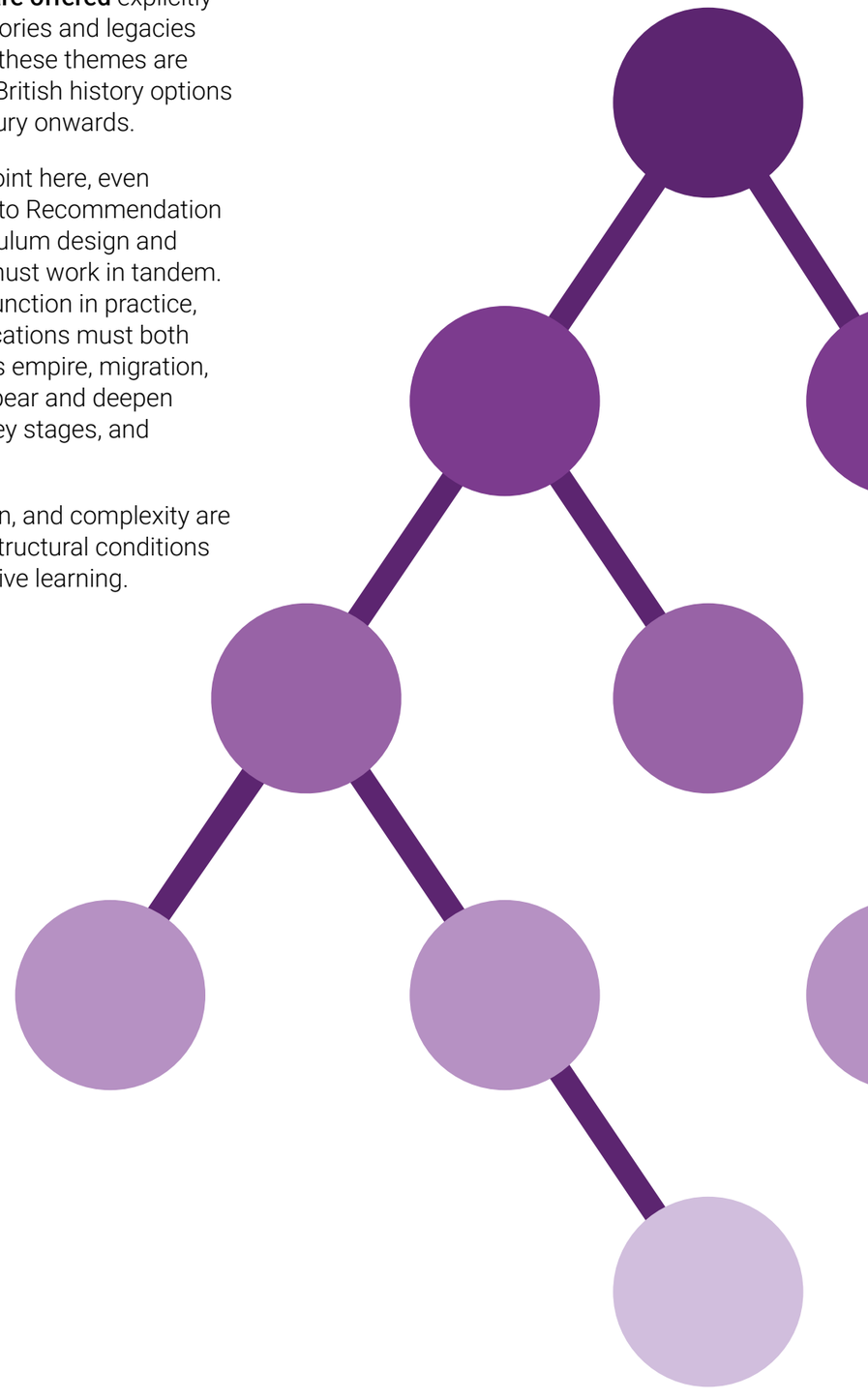
Teachers in our research described the difficulty of building coherent narratives across key stages. Time constraints, inconsistent transitions, and the marginal status of some empire-related content mean these topics are often introduced early on (typically year 8), briefly, or unevenly. This makes it difficult to revisit and deepen understanding.

To support the spiral curriculum approach (see Principle 1), we recommend:

- **That national curriculum bodies (e.g. DfE, curriculum review panels) review national curriculum guidance and expectations at key stages 2–4**[5] to support cumulative and revisited engagement with themes such as empire, migration, and belonging;
- **That school leaders supporting Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) and subject leaders co-develop curriculum maps and progression frameworks** that help teachers build coherent knowledge over time, with students' developmental needs in mind;
- **That MATs, curriculum leads, and subject associations provide curriculum designers with time, guidance, and exemplification** to plan for both breadth and depth. This includes enabling MATs and curriculum leads to create protected time for collaborative design work, and encouraging national bodies (such as subject associations) to publish high-quality models that structure knowledge through concepts such as empire, decolonisation, or migration.
- **That awarding bodies ensure GCSE and A Level units are offered** explicitly addressing the histories and legacies of empire and that these themes are embedded across British history options from the 16th century onwards.

We include this final point here, even though it links directly to Recommendation 2, to reflect how curriculum design and assessment content must work in tandem. For spiral learning to function in practice, curriculum and qualifications must both enable themes such as empire, migration, and belonging to reappear and deepen across time periods, key stages, and subject boundaries.

Coherence, progression, and complexity are not luxuries; they are structural conditions for rigorous and inclusive learning.



[5] We recognise the foundational role of key stage 2 in shaping students' historical understanding and sense of identity. While our empirical focus was 11–18, further work is needed to strengthen transition between KS2 and KS3, particularly to ensure continuity and progression in how students encounter the histories and legacies of empire, migration, and belonging.

Recommendation 2:

Review subject content criteria to reflect Britain's global history and diverse cultural heritage

In GCSE and A level qualifications, assessment content is shaped by subject content criteria set by the Department for Education and regulated by Ofqual.

We recommend that the Department for Education initiate a review of subject content criteria across key humanities subjects to support the teaching of more complex, connected, and inclusive representations of Britain's past and its global entanglements.

Across subjects, current content frameworks often limit teachers' ability to treat themes like empire, decolonisation, and migration as central parts of the curriculum. These constraints also hinder efforts to build curricular coherence and progression, as outlined in Recommendation 1.

A coordinated review should support:

- **Greater curricular flexibility** to reflect global and relational dimensions of British history and culture;
- **Clearer guidance and exemplification** to support the teaching of inclusive and contested histories, including key features of the British Empire;
- **Alignment with curriculum aims** that promote critical thinking, cultural understanding, and preparation for democratic life.

We outline below subject-specific actions that would align with these shared aims:

History

The current subject content requires:

- At least 40% of content to be "British history"
- That British and wider world depth studies derive from different eras

These guidelines limit integrated teaching of empire as both a British and global experience. While Ireland can be included "as appropriate to the historical context," it is unclear whether this flexibility extends to other colonised territories.

We recommend the DfE/Ofqual:

- **Clarify** that histories of colonised peoples and territories may count toward the "British history" requirement, where framed appropriately;
- **Reconsider** the requirement for era separation between British and wider world studies;
- **Expand** exemplification to include late empire, decolonisation, and postcolonial migration.

English literature

Current guidance emphasises the "English literary heritage," with a focus on Shakespeare, 19th-century novels, and post-1914 British fiction. While valuable, this can limit inclusion of postcolonial and diasporic texts essential to understanding Britain's cultural development.

We recommend the DfE/Ofqual:

- **Broaden exemplification** to include high-quality postcolonial and diasporic texts as illustrative examples within official guidance and specifications;
- **Clarify how such texts**, particularly those addressing empire, migration, and belonging, can fulfil the "British literature since 1914" requirement.

Geography

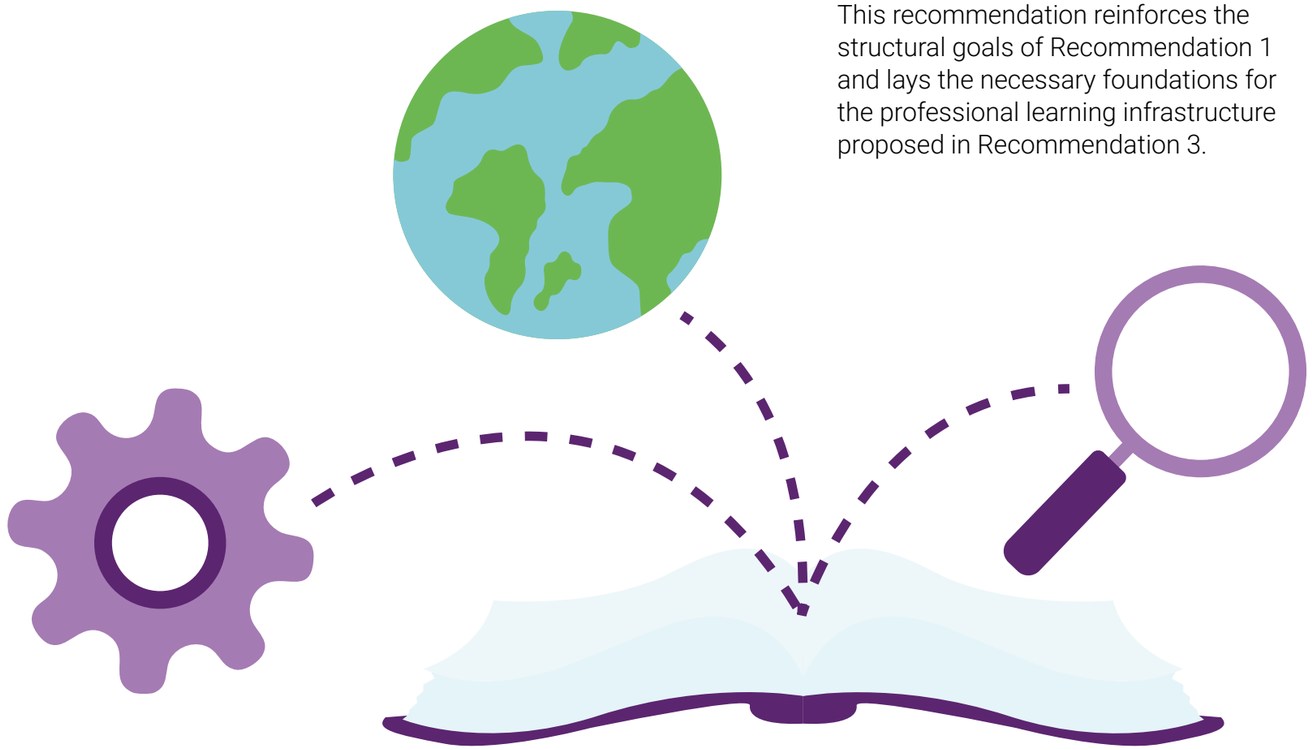
Specifications currently rely on binary case study framings (e.g. "developed vs developing") that risk reinforcing deficit narratives.

We recommend the DfE:

- **Review content exemplification** to support plural, relational understandings of development, place, and global interdependence;
- **Enable content** that allows students to explore the geographical legacies of colonialism and migration.

This is not a call to reduce national content. It is a call to reflect the full complexity of Britain's past and present and to support teachers to do so through curriculum structures that enable rather than constrain.

This recommendation reinforces the structural goals of Recommendation 1 and lays the necessary foundations for the professional learning infrastructure proposed in Recommendation 3.



Recommendation 3:

Build career-long professional development to support curriculum leadership in teaching complex and difficult histories

This recommendation directly supports the previous two. Without a clear and inclusive content structure (Recommendation 2) or a coherent curriculum framework (Recommendation 1), professional development risks fragmentation. Conversely, without deep and sustained investment in teacher learning, even the most well-designed curriculum cannot succeed in practice.

Professional learning is the engine of curriculum change. Teachers need sustained, career-stage support to develop the knowledge, confidence, and pedagogical tools required to teach complex and difficult histories. This includes time, collaboration, and recognition, not only at the start of their careers but throughout.

Currently, much of this work happens informally, with teachers developing new content and navigating sensitive classroom moments without structured training or professional development. Even where strong practice exists, it is often isolated, under-resourced, and difficult to scale.

The next step is to move from isolated examples of innovation to a coherent professional learning system that is both sustainable and responsive. This means embedding support for complex curriculum work across all stages of teacher development, from ITE to subject and pastoral leadership. Policy must recognise that complexity in the curriculum is not a problem to be simplified, but a resource to be harnessed. Supporting teachers to engage with contested histories is essential to preparing young people for life in a diverse and democratic society.

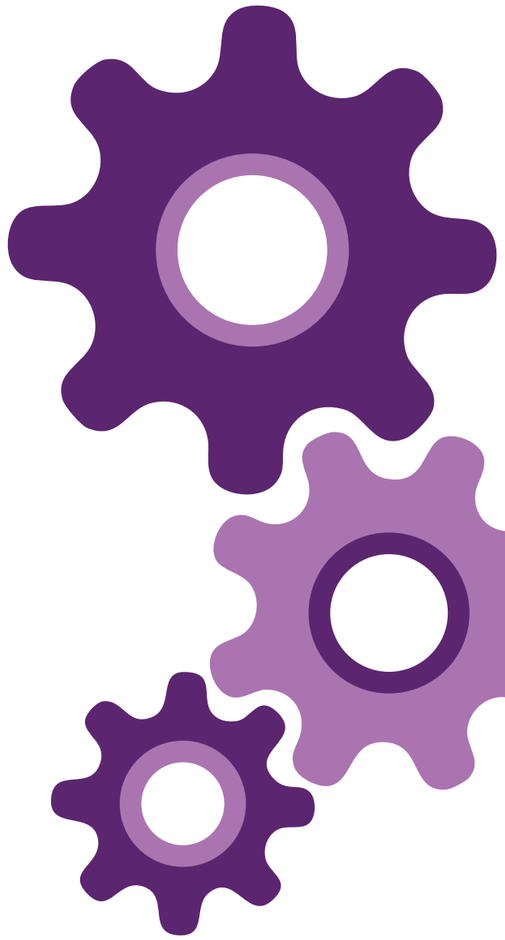
To address this, we recommend:

- **Embedding inclusive and critical knowledge** including Britain's imperial history, racial formations, and their legacies into ITE across relevant subjects. This prepares early-career teachers to engage with complex and sensitive content confidently and responsibly, and helps fulfil their safeguarding duty to create informed, inclusive, and reflective learning environments;
- **Developing career-stage CPD models** that support progression from introductory understanding to curricular leadership, including specialist and interdisciplinary routes;
- **Investing in modular, hybrid, and context-sensitive professional development,** delivered in partnership with schools, trusts, subject associations, universities, museums, and communities;
- **Making space within CPD structures for identity, positionality, and safeguarding**, as outlined in Recommendation 4, so that teachers are equipped not only with content but with the reflective tools to teach it responsibly and relationally.

Teachers cannot teach what they have not been supported to learn. A confident, well-prepared profession is the infrastructure that holds an inclusive curriculum together.

These structural recommendations respond to what teachers told us they need and what students have shown they value. When supported, teachers are helping students think historically, engage with contested narratives, and relate the past to the world they live in now.

As one teacher told us: "This work is not about taking a side. It's about helping students think historically, understand context, and engage with difference."



Teachers cannot teach what they have not been supported to learn. A confident, well-prepared profession is the infrastructure that holds an inclusive curriculum together.

Contextual and relational recommendations

This set of recommendations focus on the conditions that enable effective and responsible teaching within schools and subject communities, including leadership, safeguarding, and student engagement. They build on the structural proposals above by recognising that curriculum reform alone is not enough: teachers also need support to navigate the emotional, ethical, and relational dimensions of this work.

They draw directly from our findings with regard to teachers' professional realities and the institutional contexts in which they operate to offer practical ways to value and support the pedagogic expertise already present in schools, and to create environments where inclusive curriculum work is not exceptional but expected.

Recommendation 4:

Support teachers to reflect on identity and power in the classroom, and embed this thinking into training and safeguarding practices

Teaching complex and difficult histories requires more than subject knowledge, especially when those histories are the subject of contested interpretation and much current political debate; it demands emotional intelligence, ethical awareness, and reflective practice. Teachers need structured opportunities to explore how their own identities and experiences shape what and how they teach, particularly in relation to sensitive content.

From our case studies, teachers described uncertainty about how they would be perceived by students and how their own positionality, including race, beliefs, and lived experience, shaped what and how they taught.

Yet opportunities for structured reflection were often informal, under-recognised, and reliant on local leadership discretion, capacity, or expertise.

While safeguarding training is a mandatory component of all ITE programmes and school-based CPD (as set out in *Keeping children safe in education*, DfE 2024), it is rarely framed in relation to curriculum content or teacher identity. We suggest a broader conceptualisation of safeguarding, one that recognises the interpersonal, and knowledge-based risks involved in teaching histories and topics such as empire, migration, and belonging. This includes not only supporting teachers to manage emotionally charged content with care and confidence, but also protecting staff wellbeing when navigating contested public narratives.

Crucially, this approach recognises that not addressing these histories may itself be a safeguarding concern: young people who lack historical context are more vulnerable to online misinformation, racialised harassment, and social exclusion.

To support this, we recommend:

- **Embedding identity-focused reflection into ITE and CPD**, not as an optional add-on, but as an essential professional responsibility;
- **Equipping teachers to respond appropriately to emotionally charged classroom moments**, especially where curriculum content intersects with student identity, trauma, or lived experience;
- **Recognising and protecting staff wellbeing** as part of a safeguarding-aware approach to teaching contested topics;
- **Providing time and structured support for teachers to rehearse difficult conversations**, using tools such as lesson plans or guided discussion protocols;
- **Explicitly linking this work to safeguarding policy and leadership responsibilities**, so that schools and trusts treat it as part of their statutory duty of care.

This recommendation complements the professional learning infrastructure outlined in Recommendation 3, but goes further by recognising that teaching contested content requires emotional as well as intellectual preparation and that this is both a safeguarding and a professional competency issue.

Embedding reflective practice in this way supports not only effective teaching, but also teacher resilience and professional integrity.

Recommendation 5:

Recognise, support and develop teachers' expertise in shaping curriculum in response to their students, school communities, and the demands of complex and difficult histories—and embed this in leadership development and CPD

Our case studies illustrate why this recognition is so important. We found that some of the most effective curriculum work was led by teachers who combined deep subject knowledge with the ability to navigate sensitive content, respond to diverse classrooms, and collaborate across departments or communities. However, this work was often undertaken without formal recognition, dedicated time, or sustained institutional support.

Teachers are not just deliverers of curriculum, they are curriculum-makers. Our research, supported by international findings such as the *TALIS 2018 Results* (OECD, 2019), shows that effective teaching often involves adapting content to local context, engaging with students' identities, and navigating personally charged or politically contested material. Yet this work is frequently carried out without structural recognition, protected time, or access to formal development pathways.

The *Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy* (DfE, 2019) also highlights the need to value curriculum expertise and offer career progression routes that go beyond traditional leadership roles.

Further, while current NPQs, such as the NPQ for Leading Behaviour and Culture and the NPQ for Leading Teacher Development, already emphasise inclusion, knowledge-building, and adaptive pedagogy, they do not yet explicitly address the curricular and emotional demands of teaching complex and difficult histories or contested topics. These qualifications offer a valuable opportunity to integrate this work more fully into national leadership development pathways.

Clearer recognition of curriculum leadership as a core professional capacity is required. Here, we refer to adaptive expertise conceptually distinct from the adaptive teaching defined in the *ITT Core Content Framework* as the relational and curricular judgement required to respond to diverse contexts, student voice, and emerging knowledge.

To support this, we recommend:

- **Embedding curriculum leadership development into formal progression pathways**, including the NPQ suite, with a focus on understanding content selection, emotional risk, and balancing disciplinary rigour with local relevance;
- **Framing relational adaptive expertise as a core professional strength**, especially the ability to revise planning in response to context, student voice, and new knowledge;
- **Investing in teacher-led curriculum innovation**, including both subject-specific and interdisciplinary approaches, together with collaboration across phases and communities;
- **Allocating time and structural support for collaborative curriculum work**, including CPD aligned with disciplinary knowledge and the relational demands of teaching sensitive topics;
- **Expanding NPQ content** to address inclusive curriculum design, teacher wellbeing, and safeguarding-informed approaches to teaching sensitive and politically contested topics.

This recommendation builds on those focused on reflective practice (Recommendation 4) and professional learning infrastructure (Recommendation 3). Curriculum leadership in this space requires deep disciplinary knowledge, emotional acuity, and structural support and it must be recognised as a mainstream leadership concern, not a peripheral one.

The task is to recognise the existing leadership, resource it, and embed it within professional learning at every level.

Recommendation 6:

Support teachers to work with students' lived experiences and emotions as part of curriculum planning and professional practice

Students do not arrive in the classroom as empty vessels. They bring questions, perspectives, and emotional responses that can enrich curriculum thinking, if recognised and supported. Addressing complex histories requires a pedagogy that sees students as meaning-makers and prepares teachers to guide that process safely and skilfully.

In our research, students described drawing on family histories, community contexts, digital media, and lived experience to make sense of empire, migration, and belonging. These informal sources, while often partial or fragmented, form a rich interpretive landscape. Students spoke of navigating hybrid identities and discovering unexpected connections to empire, even in the absence of formal curriculum links. This personal engagement can deepen historical learning, but it also introduces ethical, relational, and sometimes challenging dynamics. Without institutional recognition or guidance, teachers are often left to manage contested narratives, personal disclosures, and difficult classroom moments on their own.

These student perspectives must be recognised not only as valuable curriculum resources, but as demands on teacher expertise and institutional care. To ensure that schools are equipped to support this work, we recommend:

- **Framing emotional engagement as a legitimate and valuable part of learning**, particularly when addressing questions of identity, injustice, or belonging;
- **Supporting the development of safeguarding-aware pedagogies**, so that teachers are equipped to respond to classroom emotion and political sensitivity with care, clarity, and confidence;
- **Creating space for students to reflect on how histories relate to their lives,** including through oral history, community partnerships, or collaborative enquiry projects;
- **Encouraging curriculum planning that draws on student perspectives and questions**, without placing the burden of representation on individual students or expecting them to speak for particular communities;
- **Building narrative literacy into curriculum materials and teaching practice**, helping students understand how historical accounts are constructed, contested, and connected to the present.

This recommendation reinforces those on professional learning and safeguarding (Recommendations 3 and 4), by making clear that inclusive teaching is not just about what is delivered but how students engage, respond, and make meaning from it.

Students' questions, emotions, and lived experiences are part of what makes this curriculum work both vital and challenging and must be met with professional skill, support, and curiosity.

Wider enabling recommendations

These extra-contextual recommendations complement the structural and relational tier above by focusing on wider enabling conditions (funding, collaboration, and co-creation).

Recommendation 7:

Support community-linked curriculum projects to connect local histories and school learning

We recommend that the Department for Education and relevant arms-length bodies (e.g. Historic England, Arts Council England) together with subject associations, support teacher- and school-led curriculum projects developed in collaboration with local communities, cultural organisations, and archives.

Evidence across our different research strands indicates that teachers and students benefit from curriculum work grounded in local stories, sites, and relationships. Yet these initiatives are often underfunded, short-lived, or reliant on individual capacity.

To support this, we recommend:

- **Providing ring-fenced funding** for community-linked curriculum projects, including through heritage and culture grants;
- **Encouraging MATs and local authorities** to broker partnerships between schools and local GLAM organisations and community history groups;
- **Building on existing programmes** (e.g. the Local Cultural Education Partnerships; Local History Hub) to support schools in developing place-based and historically grounded curriculum content.

Local curriculum work helps students see the relevance of national and global histories to their own communities. It also enables schools to engage with histories that are often absent from textbooks, strengthening belonging, curiosity, and historical understanding.

Recommendation 8:

Enable cross-subject curriculum planning to deepen understanding of shared themes

We recommend that curriculum leads, MATs, and school leaders support structured opportunities for subject teams to collaborate, particularly in relation to themes such as empire, migration, and belonging which cross disciplinary boundaries.

This is not a call to dilute subject expertise. Done well, interdisciplinary collaboration deepens disciplinary thinking and improves curriculum coherence. As argued by the Royal Historical Society (2018) rich curriculum work arises not from erasing disciplinary boundaries, but from moving purposefully across them. This is especially valuable when addressing histories that intersect with questions of identity, justice, and community.

Our research found that small-scale collaboration between subjects like history, English, RE, and geography helped students revisit key ideas, make connections, and deepen narrative understanding. It also created space for teacher learning and shared enquiry, particularly when supported by school leadership.

To support this, we recommend:

- **Embedding time for interdepartmental curriculum thinking** and possibly planning within CPD and school development structures;
- **Encouraging curriculum design that identifies points of conceptual overlap**, such as identity, power (especially in thinking about race), or cultural memory, while maintaining disciplinary integrity;
- **Supporting leadership and accountability frameworks** that recognise and reward joined-up thinking across subjects.

When paired with community partnerships and cultural institutions, this approach can expand both the reach, relevance, and the richness of the curriculum.

Recommendation 9:

Enable teachers, publishers and communities to co-create high-quality and responsive teaching resources

We recommend that national resource providers (e.g. publishers) collaborate with teachers and community organisations to co-create inclusive teaching materials that reflect Britain's imperial history and its diverse legacies.

Teachers told us they often have to create or adapt materials to reflect the realities of their students' lives and the demands of complex history. But many lack the time or support to do this work well and few trusted, high-quality resources are available at scale.

To address this, we recommend:

- **Creating national opportunities for teachers to co-design resources with communities**, students, and cultural organisations;
- **Ensuring quality assurance mechanisms** include criteria for historical rigour, inclusivity, and cultural relevance;
- **Developing funding and publication pathways** that allow diverse voices and local histories to be scaled up without losing authenticity.

Teachers need access to materials that reflect both the diversity of British histories and the expertise of those closest to them. Co-creation is not just a matter of equity; it is a matter of quality.

Recommendation 10:

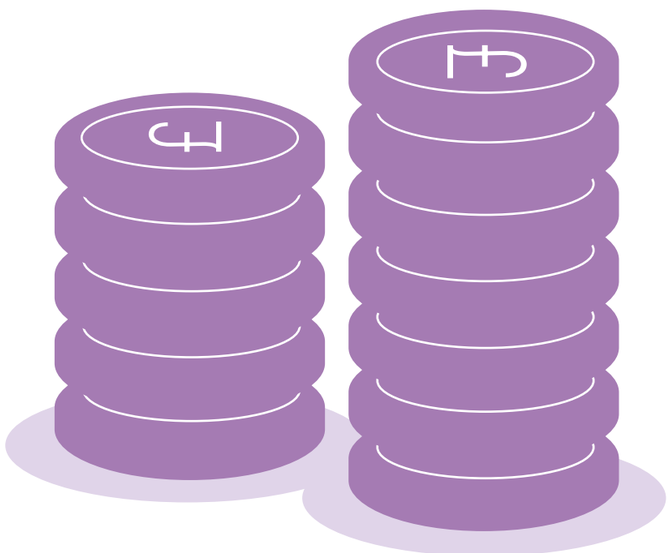
Fund and coordinate further research to evaluate and extend effective practice in education on the British Empire, migration, and belonging

To build a sustainable, inclusive, and coherent national strategy, further research is needed into how the British Empire, migration, and belonging are currently taught, learned, and understood in and beyond the classroom. While this report presents the most comprehensive evidence base to date, there remain gaps, for example, in understanding informal learning, digital cultures, and the impact of existing provision.

We recommend that research funders (e.g. AHRC, ESRC, Nuffield Foundation), together with the Department for Education, support a programme of further research and evaluation. The following are indicative areas of focus:

- **Mapping and evaluation of current provision:** Support collaborative efforts to map and evaluate existing professional development programmes, teaching resources, and subject association offers. This work should aim to identify areas of strength, share effective models, and highlight where further investment or coordination could help meet national needs, for example, by supporting the development of a national hub, grounded in high-quality research, that brings together resources and coordinates professional development.
- **Investigate regional and institutional variation in teaching and CPD access:** Further research is needed to understand how teaching about the British Empire, migration, and belonging varies across different school types and in different regions of England. Our initial survey data suggests some variation, but more robust research is required to map how both institutional and regional contexts shape teachers' opportunities to engage with this work. These insights could support the design of professional development that is more context-sensitive, better targeted, and more equitably distributed across schools and regions.
- **Research into students' informal learning:** Studies on how family, community, and media shape students' knowledge, including the emotional and narrative dimensions of that learning.
- **Digital ethnographies of student engagement:** Qualitative and mixed-methods research into how students encounter and interpret content relating to the British Empire, migration, and belonging on platforms like YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and podcasts, and how these shape their historical consciousness.
- **Exploration of under-researched regions and topics:** Studies that investigate less commonly taught geographies of empire, including East and Southeast Asia, and themes such as environmental impact, gender, or cultural erasure.
- **Practitioner-led enquiry and collaboration:** Funded opportunities for teachers to co-design and conduct research with universities, cultural institutions, and communities, including through fellowships or collaborative networks.

Further research should be co-produced where possible, methodologically diverse, and designed to inform both practice and policy. Sustained enquiry will ensure that education about the British Empire, migration, and belonging continues to evolve in ways that are evidence-led, inclusive, and grounded in the real lives of students and teachers.



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Appendix 1: Project participants

	Instrument	Count	Total
Students	Pilot survey	419	3,523
	Final survey	2,839	
	Comparative case studies in schools (7)	120	
	History curriculum-focused case study schools (3)	53	
	Youth symposia (2)	66	
	Autoethnographies	23 (all from youth symposia)	
	GLAM focus groups (3)	26	
Teachers	Surveys	1,066	1,153
	Comparative case studies in schools (7)	64	
	History curriculum-focused case study schools (3): history teachers	10	
	History curriculum-focused case study schools (3): English teachers for comparative purpose	2	
	GLAM case studies	6	
Academics	Survey	70	75
	Interviews	20 (15 from survey)	
GLAM professionals	Survey	37	47
	Interviews	10	
Others	Subject association specialists	20 (estimated)	31 (estimated)

Appendix 2: Acknowledgements - roles and affiliations

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