

Oral history in schools: practice as reflected in the Historical Association's professional journals

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Abstract

This article examines how 'oral history' has been represented in the professional journals published in the UK by the Historical Association for its primary and secondary teacher membership. The framework for analysis was designed to explore specific themes raised in discussions hosted by the Oral History Society (OHS) concerned with promoting the use of oral history in schools. Every issue of the journals *Primary History* and *Teaching History* published since September 2007 was reviewed in order to identify whether and how changes to the National Curriculum and to public exam specifications have influenced the scope for, and focus of, history teachers' use of oral history approaches. Implications are drawn for the on-going work of the OHS in this area.

Key words: oral history; schools; history teachers

This article examines how 'oral history' has been represented in the professional journals published in the UK by the Historical Association (HA), for its primary and secondary teacher membership. This analysis was stimulated by Kate Melvin's reflections in a recent article¹ on a number of themes underpinning debates about oral history in schools; reflections to which I was invited to respond as Deputy President of the HA and as a history teacher educator. The debates began in September 2017, at an event held in the British Library, but remained 'largely unexplored' as participants focused on the immediate goal of developing resources² for teachers and oral history practitioners working with young people. In producing those resources, attention focused mainly on the benefits arising from children's engagement in oral history, the practicalities of running projects; and the specific kinds of guidance that teachers might require. But discussion of these issues and of other, more intractable, challenges continued, and it was the themes from these discussions that Melvin reported in her recent article.

Among suggestions made by Melvin were proposals to promote greater awareness and knowledge of oral history and its techniques among teachers 'through already established channels such as the

networks of the Historical Association or through workshops and training events and possibly as part of teacher training'.³ In responding to these suggestions and to the wider issues mapped in the article, it seemed helpful to examine experiences in school that would reflect the practice and perspectives of teachers across both the primary and secondary phases. I therefore undertook a systematic review of the HA's professional publications, examining how oral history has been discussed in articles written specifically for (and often by) primary and secondary teachers of history. Since the analysis was informed by the themes that Melvin had identified, I begin by briefly explaining those themes before outlining the analytical framework used and reporting on the findings and their implications for those interested in supporting oral history in schools.

Themes from discussions coordinated by the Oral History Society about oral history in schools

The first theme is related to the *nature of the practitioners* involved, raising questions about who is best placed to take forward initiatives to make oral history more commonplace in school. Teachers and oral history practitioners each have distinctive kinds of knowledge and expertise that could prove invaluable when combined in supporting children's engagement with oral history. While working in partnership would seem to be the most productive way forward, discussions drew attention to significant tensions experienced in practice, with the agendas of both partners poorly aligned, and difficulties exacerbated, on occasion, by the requirements of particular funders.

The second theme, broadly concerned with barriers and realities, is essentially focused on the *scope for oral history offered by the school curriculum for pupils of different ages*. Discussion highlighted the different purposes that oral history might serve within different 'key stages',⁴ but also acknowledged that teachers' particular perceptions of the nature of oral history might affect their willingness to engage with it. While specific changes to the school curriculum are obviously important here, so too are teachers' interpretations of the degree of freedom allowed by the curriculum, which, it was suggested, might vary in relation to the length of teachers' experience and their level of seniority.

The third theme reflects competing views about the *extent to which oral history is already being practised in schools*, with some participants contending that engagement is actually widespread and that oral history is being undertaken in a variety of formats, with a range of different purposes.

The validity of this claim cannot be tested without engaging with the fourth theme: the question of *what counts as oral history* in a school context. Acknowledging that the concept is simply ‘too amorphous’ to make it possible to ‘determine or place parameters around it’,⁵ Melvin recognised that the OHS would struggle to act effectively to facilitate oral history in schools without establishing more clearly how teachers currently conceive of it and understanding the purposes that teachers are seeking to achieve in their use of it.

Reasons for examining the Historical Association’s professional journals

The decision to undertake a review of the HA’s publications was informed by the questions within the third theme about *the extent to which oral history is already being used in schools*. While the HA certainly cannot claim to represent all those who teach history in schools in the UK, it is the only national association for the subject established on the basis of membership subscriptions. Its membership has grown rapidly in recent years and in March 2020 when the analysis was conducted, the association had around 3000 primary and 3000 secondary members, receiving hard copies of the relevant journal, *Primary History* or *Teaching History*, and with online access to all previous issues. The figures include individual teachers paying private subscriptions as well as corporate memberships which provide access to the journals for several teachers within a school.

Each journal’s editorial board includes practising teachers as well as teacher educators and education consultants (often former history advisors). Most articles within *Primary History* are written by teacher educators or those working in advisory roles. While their guidance is often based on specific examples of practice, comparatively few articles are written by current classroom teachers, reflecting the fact that even history coordinators in primary schools tend not to see themselves as subject experts. In contrast, the majority of *Teaching History* articles are written by secondary history teachers, usually reporting on schemes of work taught for particular purposes. While the articles are intended to share examples of good practice, the journal also serves to promote teacher engagement in and with educational research and to strengthen connections between history teachers and those working as academic and public historians. University-based history teacher educators and researchers also contribute, as do education consultants and educators in the heritage sector, but their contributions are in the minority. Despite these

differences between the two journals, both provide a show-case for practice and are intended to offer examples of effective as well as innovative history teaching. It is made clear that articles do not necessarily represent the views of the HA, but since the journals constitute a key benefit of membership, the editors actively encourage submission of the kind of content that members have indicated (in regular surveys) that they would find helpful. For *Primary History* in particular, the editorial board often commissions articles, particularly in response to changes in the curriculum or in the framework for school inspection that create new expectations of teachers.

Thus the journals can be seen as broadly representative of the kinds of history teaching that the HA has sought to promote. Reviewing the range of articles presented in recent years offers insight into the examples of oral history that have been shared with large numbers of practitioners and that may have informed their understanding of what oral history is and of how it could be practised in schools. Obviously there are other outlets, including this journal and the OHS website, through which history teachers report their engagement in oral history projects, and such outlets are likely to prove much more attractive to oral history practitioners sharing their experiences and findings. It is also true that focusing on journals related specifically to *history* teaching will perhaps overlook projects committed to cross-curricular objectives and that practice in other areas of the curriculum, such as English, drama or PSHE, may be very different. I fully accept these limitations and do not claim that the examples discussed below present either a full picture of practice across the history education community or even the best practice within that community; merely that they represent the kinds of assumptions and ways of working that have been shared over time with a significant proportion of that community, particularly those who express a strong commitment within their role to the teaching of history.

Reasons for reviewing articles published over the past fourteen years

The scale of the review was largely determined by consideration of the second theme – *the scope for oral history offered by the school curriculum for pupils of different ages*. Encompassing at least two successive versions of the curriculum would make it possible to identify changes in the kinds of practice reported that could be attributed to the revisions. Unfortunately, curriculum changes have been introduced on different time-scales for different age ranges. Within the primary sector, the National Curriculum remained officially unchanged from 2000 until 2014, when the Coalition Government introduced significant reforms. (A new framework for the Early Years and Foundation

stage was published at the same point and revised as a statutory framework with effect from April 2017). At secondary level, substantial revisions were made to the Key Stage 3 curriculum by New Labour, with effect from 2008, and by the Coalition government with effect from 2014. Although various structural changes have been made to public exam specifications since 2000, significant changes to the content to be taught were only introduced from 2015 for A-level and from 2016 for GCSE.

In order to encompass a sustained period of practice before the reforms across all phases of the National Curriculum that occurred in 2014 and to allow some consideration of the impact of more recent reforms to public exam specifications, I chose to begin the period of review in September 2007 and to extend it to the present. This span made it possible to at least analyse six or seven years of practice within each of two versions of the National Curriculum, beginning from the point at which secondary teachers were preparing for implementation of the 2008 curriculum⁶.

The framework for analysis

The first step in conducting the analysis was to identify all the articles in each journal that made any reference to oral history. Article titles were initially reviewed to select those most likely to encompass oral history (including all those explicitly concerned with periods within living memory, or dealing with family and/or local history), which were then scanned to check their relevance. A more systematic search followed, checking all uses of the words 'oral' and/or 'interview' in any of the remaining articles. Given the uncertainty acknowledged in the fourth theme about *how 'oral history' was understood in schools*, I chose to include any reference to 'oral histories' or 'oral tradition' in the sense of stories of the past handed from one generation to another, rather than simply focusing on the oral testimony of those recounting their own lived experiences. This meant that a very small number of articles discussing the use of folk tales in England and elsewhere and the role of oral histories or tradition within African history were included in the review.

The next step was to focus on the first theme concerned with *who the practitioners were*, establishing whether the author(s) were: teachers (and if so whether they held senior leadership positions); former teachers now working as advisors or education consultants; teacher

educators/researchers based in universities and likely to be engaged in teacher education; or those working in the heritage sector. Although I was alert to the involvement of oral history practitioners, only one contributor (to *Teaching History*) appeared to be an oral history specialist. One other article was, however, co-authored by a university-based historian who had committed to a local project in part because he recognised the value to historical scholarship of oral accounts elicited and archived by young people.

Analysis then focused on the explicit purposes of the practice and on any other outcomes reported, as well as on the issue of expertise: identifying whether reference was made either to the existing knowledge and skills of those leading the oral history and or to ways in which they sought to develop the necessary expertise. The sources of any funding were noted along with any constraints attributed to the funders' requirements. References to other constraints were also acknowledged, as were specific ideas about how those constraints could be, or actually were, overcome.

Where possible, the age range of the pupils involved was also coded. While this was usually made clear within *Teaching History*, articles within *Primary History* often included quite generic recommendations. Further categories were included to identify the relationship of the project or scheme of work both to the history curriculum and to any particular wider-school or cross-curricular objectives.

The way in which oral history featured in the article was obviously a central focus for analysis and several categories (beyond the reference to folk tales and oral tradition already noted) were identified within each article. These ranged from reference to using the products of other's oral history research (drawing on audio or video recordings for example or on written transcripts of interview), through opportunities to listen directly to stories shared by those who had lived through or witnessed specific developments, to more formal interviews conducted by the pupils. While pupils might be invited to ask questions of those who came into school to share their stories, the interview category was reserved for references to deliberate preparation of the questions to be asked, even if the responses were not being formally recorded in any way. A final code was added to identify the creation of some kind of archive in which the accounts of the eye-witnesses (and not just the findings from them) would be preserved for others to examine. Attention was also paid to more general reflections that illustrated how the author seemed to regard the oral history practices that

they were proposing or reporting. Melvin had suggested that it might be helpful to consider practice within schools as positioned on a spectrum, with those at one end insisting that it is important to adhere to a strict methodological approach that includes transcription and archiving, and those at the other adopting a far more pragmatic approach, recognising the need to work flexibly and with creativity to sustain teacher engagement and pupil interest. Where material within the articles helped to identify authors' position along this continuum, it was useful to examine their reasons and points of reference. In order to analyse the extent and nature of the curriculum's influence on the possibilities for oral history, it is necessary to relate the focus of the practice reported or proposed to the version of the curriculum in play, or about to be formally introduced, at the time when the article was written. Tables 1 and 2, presented within each of the relevant sections below, summarise the main features of the curriculum for the relevant key stages, particularly highlighting the scope it offers for study of periods of time within living memory – periods for which oral history could perhaps provide an appropriate means of investigation, or at least appropriate source materials.

The use of oral history in primary schools as reflected over time in *Primary History*

As Table 1 illustrates, the Key Stage 1 curriculum has consistently required young children to focus on the experience of change over time in the lives of people local to them. An emphasis on change within lived experience present in the curriculum in force in 2007 remained essentially unchanged after 2014, although new terminology particularly stressed the importance of focusing on changes 'within living memory'. This distinction was emphasised in 2015 in a *Primary History* article by education lecturer Karin Doull, who made explicit the assumption that young children should be given the opportunity to ask their own questions of adults:

'Changes within Living Memory' has a couple of key issues to be aware of. First, 'living memory' refers to the memory of the community that the child lives in not just that of the child him/herself. Consider as a baseline that you should be able to find someone alive to ask about the theme.'⁷

Doull also noted the distinctive requirement for pupils to relate the changes that they were examining at a local level to the 'national context'. A concern for balance between focusing locally and looking wider was also evident in the way in which teaching about 'significant historical events, people and places' in pupils' own locality was complemented in the new curriculum by a focus on those (*beyond* living memory) that are regarded as significant nationally or globally.

Table 1: Key features of the primary curriculum in relation to oral history

Version	Phase	Scope offered within the official curriculum
2000 National Curriculum	Key Stage 1	One of 4 'areas of study' focus on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes in [children's] own lives and the way of life of their family or others around them No specific reference to oral sources but using 'eye-witness accounts' is mentioned within the process of historical enquiry
	Key Stage 2	Two of 7 'areas of study' focus on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local history: investigating how an aspect in the local area has changed over a long period of time, or how the locality was affected by a significant national or local event or development or by the work of a significant individual. • Britain since 1930: a study of the impact of the Second World War or social and technological changes that have taken place since 1930, on the lives of men, women and children from different sections of society. No specific reference to oral sources, but pupils should be taught to 'to ask and answer questions, and to select and record information relevant to the focus of the enquiry'.
2014 National Curriculum	Key Stage 1	2 of the 4 kind of topics about which pupils should be taught: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • changes within living memory • significant historical events, people and places in their own locality No specific reference to oral sources, but pupils are expected to 'ask and answer questions' and to 'choose and use parts of stories and other sources'.
	Key Stage 2	2 out of 9 topics focus on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A local history study • A study of an aspect or theme in British history that extends pupils' chronological knowledge beyond 1066

A first glance at the Key Stage 2 curriculum gives the impression that the scope to include oral history also remained largely unchanged across the fourteen-year span. Both versions of the National Curriculum included two units that provided opportunities for local history and for some study of the recent past (although in both cases it would also have been perfectly possible to fulfil the requirements without focusing on events within living memory). It is important to note, however, that in the 2014 version these two units constituted a smaller proportion of the curriculum as a whole. In the version implemented from 2000, they were set alongside five others (and thus seemed to account for nearly 30% of the time allocated by schools to history); from 2014 they were competing with seven other curriculum units (and thus appeared to require only 20% of the time).

What emerges from the identification of relevant articles in *Primary History*, is the frequency with which reference is made to oral history. Across the first phase of analysis, thirty-nine articles made some kind of reference to it and only one of the eighteen issues published did not mention it at all. The frequency was similar in the second phase, with oral history mentioned in forty-three articles,

although it was not considered at all in six of the twenty issues published. Frequency of reference does not, however, necessarily translate into detailed discussion. Two-thirds of the relevant articles in the first phase and more than half in the second made only a limited reference to ‘oral history’ or ‘interviews’ or ‘oral sources’ without offering any details of how the authors had engaged in the process or how others might do so. More detailed explanation is provided in the second phase – with sixteen articles offering some specific exemplification or guidance, compared to just five in the first phase. But this distribution is reversed in relation to articles that engage in a sustained way with the specific demands and rich potential of oral history as a means of exploring the past. Across the first phase, seven articles engaged in such discussion: three dealt with substantial, well-funded community projects (in one case encompassing several schools); two involved visits from one to school to another, bridging inner-city/rural divides, and two were undertaken not directly by pupils, but by student-teachers (in one case closely guided by their education lecturer) as a means both of generating oral testimonies that could be used by pupils, but also of providing appropriate training in oral history techniques for the student-teachers to take into their subsequent practice. In contrast only three articles in the second phase engaged in sustained discussion of the specific potential and distinctive nature of oral history and in two cases, this was discussion of ‘oral tradition’ in relation to the history of Benin. (The latter did, in one case, involve a follow-up task in which pupils asked about oral histories passed on within their families). Thus only one article in the period from 2014 to 2020 engaged in *sustained* discussion of the specific value of exploring stories shared by relatives or visitors about ‘changes within living memory’ – the article by Doull, which focused on shopping as an example.

It is also important to note that the number of articles that refer to pupils simply working with the products of (someone else’s) oral history research (rather than actively asking their own questions) increases from just four in the first phase to twelve in the second phase, where they account for more than a quarter of the relevant articles. In part, this increase is explained by a continuing focus on the Second World War and/or the Holocaust, even as those with direct memories of these events become increasingly scarce. More positively – and as might be expected with pupils of this age – the most common approach, mentioned in just over half of the relevant articles in each phase, was for pupils to listen to the recollections and stories of older people, with a chance to ask questions of them. In about a quarter of the articles in each phase, attention was clearly focused on the development of some kind of ‘interview’ schedule that pupils might use individually (with family members, for example) or that the class would use collectively with a visitor.

Only four articles in the first phase and none in the second phase made any reference to preserving a record of the interview in some kind of community archive, online exhibition or web trail. The most significant example, developed through the Leeds Community History Project, which involved several schools, was supported by significant funding from the Nuffield Foundation and received substantial support from the local authority as well as from academics within Leeds University and Bretton Hall College, a teacher education college that subsequently merged with the university. Another collection was created not by pupils, but by student-teachers guided by their lecturer. While it is encouraging to note that the other two projects were conducted by teachers or school leaders, illustrating the fact that teachers can indeed undertake substantial enterprises, even without funding, comparatively few of the articles' authors (eight in the first phase and four in the second) were simply based in schools with no wider responsibilities or advisory role. Over half of the relevant articles in each phase were written or co-written by teacher educators within higher education, while advisors or education consultants wrote or contributed to just over a quarter. A small number of articles (two in the first phase and five in the second) were written by those working in the heritage sector, but none appeared to involve an oral history specialist.

Overall, very few of the articles reported on funded projects: just four in the first phase and none at all in the second. In two cases, the funded projects had an academic or research element that involved universities, while the other two received grants from the Heritage Lottery Fund. Both of the latter (led by head teachers) successfully galvanised supporters from within their local communities who helped with drafting successful applications, in one case to several local grant-making bodies. There was no suggestion in any of these cases that the demands of the funders had created any particular tensions.

Although most authors did not specify the key stage or year group to which the practice related, the influence of the National Curriculum was generally clear from the focus of the work and became more pronounced in the period after 2014. Articles in the first phase focused most commonly on the local community (sometimes with an emphasis on the school itself or other specific buildings) or dealt with the impact of the Second World War II. While these elements also featured prominently in the second phase, articles from 2014 onwards also included more explicit consideration of significant local individuals and offered a range of suggestions for themes (such as shopping, food,

poverty, leisure and technology) that could be explored over time. Other prominent examples of the influence of the 2014 National Curriculum were the attention paid to 'oral tradition' in the context of the history of Benin (listed as one of three studies of a non-European society from which schools were permitted to choose) and the fact that only one article explicitly exhorted teachers to look beyond the prescribed content.

A similar narrowing can also be seen in the fact that cross-curricular objectives, such as the development of communication skills, tended to be less evident in articles published during the second phase. This is not to suggest that all wider outcomes were ignored or down-played. Objectives that might be seen as linked to citizenship, such as intergenerational links, community cohesion and building a sense of belonging, continued to be acknowledged (particularly in the more sustained accounts) but history-specific objectives were more pronounced in the second-phase and were expressed more clearly with reference to disciplinary concepts. This was particularly evident in the increased frequency with which children's understanding of 'change over time' was mentioned (fifteen times in the second phase compared with just two in the first) and in a more moderate increase in references to pupils' awareness of enquiry processes and the use of sources (nine references in the second phase, compared with four in the first). The idea of linking the local to the national and the global was only addressed explicitly in the second phase, although other disciplinary concepts, such as the idea of there being different interpretations of the past, featured occasionally across both periods, as did the fundamental need for children to recognise the reality of people in the past.

Relatively few articles explicitly acknowledged challenges associated with oral history approaches. In the first phase two articles did so: one referring to lack of time as an issue (at a time when it was claimed that repeated policy initiatives and curricular change had sapped teachers' capacity for innovation) and another to the fact that the requirement for local research made it difficult to use existing, pre-prepared resources. More challenges were acknowledged in the second phase, with eight articles referring, variously to: the potential sensitivity of some themes (migration, poverty); the lack of survivors from the Second World War; the need for teachers' own research; and the potential difficulties in working with a visitor (such as ensuring age-appropriate responses). Suggested solutions in both phases focused on using local record offices and heritage bodies and on ensuring that visitors were carefully prepared. While articles in the first phase pointed to the benefits of funding that allowed teachers to buy in supply cover, giving time for research,

preparation and liaison, one type of suggestion that appeared only in the second phase was to direct readers to existing collections of oral testimonies.

When the findings related to *Primary History* are considered across all four themes, it is clear that both versions of the National Curriculum across the fourteen-year span provided scope for the use of oral history. In its explicit emphasis on ‘changes within living memory’ at Key Stage 1, the 2014 version has brought an increased emphasis on young children asking their own questions about specific aspects of the past. At Key Stage 2, the retention of a local history unit provides some scope, but schools’ continued interest in the Second World War’ (rather than other aspects or themes in British history) seems to have reduced pupils’ *direct* engagement in asking their own questions of living witnesses of the events studied. Moreover, both these units now vie for time within a more crowded history curriculum, with less attention given to cross-curricular initiatives, such as the promotion of speaking and listening. As might be expected across the primary age range, there has been little emphasis on preserving the records of interviews, but the limited evidence of this process in the first phase (evident in four articles) has been entirely lacking since 2014. In relation to the continuum of practice outlined in Melvin’s article, a ‘pragmatic’ approach, with pupils listening to shared stories and given some opportunities to ask their own questions – of visitors and/or family and friends – now seems to be most common and is strongly endorsed as means of exploring change over time with young children.

The use of oral history in secondary schools as reflected over time in *Teaching History*

At secondary level, an intensification of curriculum content and therefore increased pressure for curriculum time is very evident in the changes made to Key Stage 3 in 2014. These revisions, outlined in Table 2, also reflect a significant alteration in the curriculum’s structure. Where the 2008 version had presented the ‘range of content’ in terms of different themes over time, the 2014 revisions reverted to a clear chronological format, dividing British history from 1066 to 1901 into four periods, and switching to a focus on ‘Britain, Europe and the world’ from 1901 to the present. Although the geographical breadth of the latter makes it difficult to justify a local dimension within it, the 2014 National Curriculum did provide two other units within which oral history could be accommodated: a local history study and a thematic study over time (stretching back before 1066 – but with no stipulation about its end date).

Table 2: Key features of the secondary curriculum in relation to the scope for oral history

Version	Phase	Scope offered within the official curriculum
2008 National Curriculum Key Stage 3	Key Stage 3	The 'range of content' is presented in terms of several themes <i>over time</i> (e.g. development of political power; impact of the movement and settlement of diverse peoples to, from and within the British Isles) The key process 'using evidence' explicitly refers to the inclusion of 'oral sources'.
2014 National Curriculum Key Stage 3		3 units out of 8 focus on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • challenges for Britain, Europe and the wider world 1901 to the present day • a local history study • the study of an aspect or theme in British history (extending far enough back to 'consolidate and extend pupils' chronological knowledge from before 1066').
2000 → Various GCSE specifications	Key Stage 4	'Modern World' specifications offered by the 3 main exam boards focus exclusively on 20 th century history. Tightly specified content leaves little scope for pupils' own research.
		'Schools History Project' specifications (offered by all 3 boards) include a thematic study of an issue (such as medicine or crime and punishment) extending to the present, although tight specifications give little scope for pupils' own research. Study of a local historical site chosen by the school could draw on oral history, but in most cases the 'history' associated with the site is located in the distant past.
2016 GCSE (9-1) specifications		Every specification includes 5 elements (as opposed to 4 previously) increasing the amount of prescribed content and reducing scope for pupil research. All specifications include a thematic study and study of a particular historical environment, but only one board allows schools to choose their own local site.
2000 → Various A-level specifications	Key Stage 5	All specifications include a coursework element, in <i>some</i> cases requiring independent research using primary source material (providing scope for oral history). Some schools allow students to choose their focus, while others specify particular periods or topics.
2008 Extended project qualification (EPQ)		This qualification – for an independent project – can be achieved in any subject (or with a topic that crosses subject boundaries.). The requirement for students' own research provides scope for work with oral sources, but this has to be undertaken as an individual. <i>The EPQ was retained in 2015.</i>
2015 A-level reforms		These reforms focus on extending the <i>range</i> of students' knowledge (to span at least 200 years) and reintroduce final exams (encompassing the whole course, rather than assessing the first half separately at AS- level). All specifications retain an independent investigation, in <i>some</i> cases involving original research (providing scope for oral history) but in others focusing on historians' interpretations.

Before examining the curriculum's impact on teaching at Key Stage 3, it is worth noting that the same coalition government that introduced the 2014 National Curriculum had already absolved all academies and free schools from the obligation to follow it. This freedom, combined with the rapid expansion of the academies programme (freeing state-maintained schools from local authority control), means that around 32% of primary schools and 75% of secondary schools⁸ are no longer obliged to comply with its demands. Nonetheless, it continues to be regarded as establishing a benchmark for judging the quality of a school's own curricular provision.

In many respects, the effect of reducing schools' obligation to follow the National Curriculum has been to strengthen the influence of public exam specifications on what is taught in the early years of secondary education. Until the Ofsted inspection framework was revised (with effect from September 2019) to include a judgement about the 'quality of education' offered by the school, the most important accountability measures were pupils' achievements at GCSE, measured across a range of subjects. This emphasis on GCSE outcomes lay behind many schools' decisions (reported in successive surveys conducted by the HA⁹) both to begin teaching GCSEs in Year 9 (rather than Year 10) and/or to design curricula that would, at best, contextualise and, at worst, simply replicate the content to be taught at GCSE.

As Table 2 outlines, the scope for making use of oral history within the GCSE curriculum has been extremely limited over the whole review period. Despite the existence (until 2016) of 'Modern World' specifications, the tight specification of content (and schools' tendency to focus on the first half of the twentieth century) meant that there was little scope in practice to draw on living memories. All exam boards also offered a 'Schools History Project' specification' with a unit focused on a local historical site, as well as a thematic study over time and, in some specifications, study of a modern world issue or problem. In practice, however, the focus of the site study tended to be the built environment and/or landscape features, while the extent of the thematic study (covering at least a thousand years in most cases) precluded any detailed investigation of the theme within living memory. The fact that the modern world issues that were offered were deliberately selected by the boards because of the controversy that they generated meant that few schools would have considered it appropriate to engage directly in generating oral evidence about their recent history.

Although one effect of successive A-level revisions has been to include more recent history within the units offered, the tight specification of content in examined units has tended to deter teachers from examining recent developments using oral sources that the students themselves are involved in generating. Indeed, the only reference to oral history by contributors reporting on practice in England related to students' use of existing oral accounts (the products of *others'* oral history research). While it would appear that the greatest scope for oral history lies within students' independent investigations (or within the Extended Project Qualification, which is often supervised by history teachers), none of the articles made any reference to encouraging an oral history approach.

Overall, the identification of relevant articles in the secondary journal *Teaching History* reveals that oral history has been discussed much less frequently than in the primary journal. Across the twenty-four issues examined in the first phase, only ten articles were found (in nine different issues) that included some reference to oral history. Ten relevant articles (all in different issues) were also found in the twenty-seven issues published across the second phase. These figures mean that around two-thirds of the issues published in each phase included no mention of oral history. There is however, quite a lot of detail provided in those published in the first phase, with five of the ten articles providing some explanation or description of the strategy used and four more including sustained discussion of oral history. Three of the latter reported substantial projects, committed to creating (or exploiting a newly-created) oral history archive, and all had received support from beyond the school, provided variously by a local (Caribbean) community association, an oral history specialist and an academic historian. The fourth (which dealt with African resistance to European invasion and slave raids) was concerned with the use of oral tradition. With the obvious exception of the last example, the more detailed discussions of oral history tended to be associated with projects or schemes of work in which students conducted their own interviews (three articles) or at least asked more questions of those sharing their stories (three articles), rather than simply using the products of others' oral history research (which was presented with no specific consideration of such sources in four articles).

Within the second phase, very limited references to forms of oral history were more common than in the first, accounting for five of the ten articles. Again, these limited references tended to be to using the products of others' oral history research. Of the remaining five articles, four included a sustained analysis or evaluation of the potential offered by oral history, and all referred to students conducting interviews (rather than just listening to stories), but none appeared to be concerned with creating an archive. Two of these articles pointed particularly to the capacity of oral history approaches to democratise or decentre historical knowledge, while the other two were concerned, respectively, with the challenges associated with studying the very recent past, or with the value of adopting a multi-perspective approach to the history of international conflict. Two of these articles, it should be noted, reported on projects in schools outside the UK (one in the Netherlands and one in Greece).

Teachers played a larger role as (co-)authors than was the case for *Primary History*. In both phases there were at ten teachers among the authors (and only one article had no teachers among its authors). The balance shifted somewhat from heads of history and senior leaders in the first phase to classroom teachers in the second, although newly qualified teachers reported on two occasions in the first phase on work they had done during their training. Co-authorship of articles meant that university-based teacher educators also played a significant role, contributing to two articles in the first phase and five in the second. Two articles published in the first phase had authors from the heritage sector, while the academic historian and the oral history specialist involved in substantial projects in the first phase also each co-authored articles with the heads of history with whom they had worked.

In total, five articles referred to funded projects: three in the first phase and two in the second. In two instances in the first phase funding came from the Heritage Lottery Fund, while the other donor was the East of England Education Development Network. Funding for the projects reported in the second phase came either from the British Council, for a project that involved teacher exchanges with schools in Pakistan or from a fund commemorating a victim of the 7/7 terrorist bombs on London transport in July 2005 by creating a range of curricular resources. As with the primary school projects, no tensions were reported to have arisen as a result of the funders' stipulations.

In examining the scope offered by the school curriculum, most articles reporting on work in British schools were related to Key Stage 3, although the first phase included five articles related to A-level students. The latter dealt mainly with the products of oral history research, with the one exception being a Heritage Lottery-funded project that drew on expertise from the National Archives to train their students in conducting interviews. The only two projects in the first phase that included students at GCSE level or beyond were run as extra-curricular options (in lunchtimes and after school) and had no bearing on the taught curriculum. In the second phase, only one article about practice in the UK was focused students above the age of 14 and that simply referred to GCSE students' use of the products of oral history research (related to the Second World War).

Within the first phase, the topics that featured most prominently were related to the Second World War and/or the Holocaust (referenced in five articles), but two articles dealt with the history of

migration and reflected the authors' declared intent to include a more diverse approach to their curriculum. This emphasis, which intensified in the second phase of analysis, clearly reflected the inclusion of a theme within the 2008 curriculum related to the 'movement and settlement of peoples'. Although this theme was not explicitly included in the 2014 National Curriculum, it seems to have taken hold within Key Stage 3, since migration proved to be the most frequent focus of the articles published after 2014 (featuring in five of them). Studies of the local area, which had not featured at all as taught units in the first phase (appearing only as extra-curricular projects), were also included in three articles in the second phase, sometimes deliberately chosen as a means of examining the theme of migration over time.

In looking at the objectives and valued outcomes reported from using oral history, it is clear that most articles were focused very strongly on disciplinary objectives, but that the emphasis on diversity and strengthening community cohesion, particularly linked to a focus on the examining the history of migration, was sustained and strengthened in the second phase, despite the fact that it had become less prominent within the 2014 National Curriculum. Objectives associated with citizenship, such as strengthening community links, building intergenerational friendships and challenging negative perceptions of immigrants, featured in around half the articles in each phase, while the second phase included four articles making explicit reference to identity formation. The most regularly cited disciplinary objective related to students' use of sources and understanding of the research and enquiry process, which was emphasised in at least half the articles in each phase. While the range of other disciplinary concepts addressed in the first phase tended to vary – with single references, for example, to interpretations, change over time and consequences – the second phase saw a more pronounced emphasis on interpretations (a focus in three articles); similarity and difference (three articles) and on the process of connecting the local to the national and global.

Reference to challenges and constraints associated with the use of oral history were evident in most of the articles that involved students in conducting interviews or asking questions, but were also acknowledged in relation to sensitive topics when the students were working with oral testimony generated by others. In the first phase, the acknowledged challenges related to staff confidence and willingness to take risks, for which the advice was to draw on the expertise offered by local experts (libraries, archives, advisers, community associations). While running projects as extra-curricular activities allowed teachers to get round the constraints of the curriculum, the two projects of this kind depended on external support (from an oral history specialist in one case and an academic

historian, with personal ties to the school in the other) and one of these reported considerable pressures on students' time. In articles within the second phase (which dealt more frequently with the history of migration), attention was drawn to the potential sensitivities of topics and the ways in which they connected with young people's experience. Although there were occasional references to logistical and safe-guarding issues associated with young people conducting interviews, such challenges were not regularly mentioned, perhaps because the focus in this phase tended to be on interviewing family members. A new concern in the second phase, that seemed to be related to the curriculum's greater emphasis on secure substantive knowledge, was reference to the students' need for contextual knowledge to be able to make sense of the issues they were exploring.

In looking across all four themes in relation to the secondary phase, it appears that direct use of oral history research techniques by students themselves is relatively rare. Although *Teaching History* includes some inspirational examples of such practices, articles dealing with it appear infrequently (fewer than one a year) and some of them have been written by overseas authors. Another disappointing finding is the fact that none of the UK-based examples published in the second phase involved students above the age of 14. The GCSE curriculum appears too crowded to accommodate students' own research (even though the history of migration has featured as a thematic study since 2016). Although A-level specifications continue to include an independent investigation, no teacher has shared accounts of student projects using oral history techniques. Funding (or the engagement of a professional historian) played an important role in the more substantial projects, but this was particularly rare in the second period, when the only two examples were supported by cross-curricular initiatives in which a place for history was then found. In relation to the continuum noted by Melvin, most practice appears to be located towards the pragmatic end of the scale, a tendency that was more pronounced in the second phase, when none of the articles reported on the creation of a collection or archive of oral sources.

A more positive trend to note, however, is that the emphasis on the history of migration introduced in the 2008 curriculum has been sustained beyond 2014 in many schools and provides a new focus for oral history work that links history-specific objectives to citizenship objectives concerned with young people's identity formation and community cohesion. The local study unit included within the Key Stage 3 curriculum also provides specific scope for oral history that some teachers have recognised and sought to exploit.

Implications for the Oral History Society

For the schools group within the OHS seeking to determine how best to proceed in promoting its objectives, these findings offer important insights. Within the primary sector, the curriculum already has a strong emphasis on children asking questions of those with lived experience of change, but this applies specifically to the youngest children (aged 5–7). Within Key Stage 2, where specialist help might be more appropriate, scope is provided within units on local history and the thematic unit. Examples of how change over time within particular themes might be addressed through oral history would perhaps be particularly welcome here. At secondary level, Key Stage 3 seems to offer the most scope for development, perhaps with a particular focus on migration, which has taken hold as an important theme (often linked to local history). Since there have been no accounts of A-level students pursuing oral history approaches within their independent investigation, it might be worth exploring how the OHS could alert both teachers and students themselves to this possibility and illustrate its potential. The value of a focus on teacher training is demonstrated both by the fact that so many of the published articles were written (or co-written) by history teacher educators, some of whom have involved their students in conducting oral history research specifically to develop their knowledge and confidence in using oral history methods.

Notes

1. Kate Melvin, 'Oral history in schools – an ongoing discussion', *Oral History*, vol 47, no 2, 2019, pp 117-120.
2. 'A guide to oral history for schools and youth groups' Accessed online at <www.ohs.org.uk/informationfor/schools> 31 March 2020.
3. Melvin, *op. cit.* p 120
4. The term 'key stage' is used within the National Curriculum (first introduced in 1988) to demarcate different phases within primary and secondary education. Key Stage 1 includes Years 1-2 (ages 5–7), Key Stage 2 Years 3-6 (ages 7–11) and Key Stage 3 Years 7-9 (ages 11–14), although some schools limit Key Stage 3 and begin GCSE teaching in Year 9. In history, the curriculum beyond Key Stage 3 is determined by the public exam specifications – most commonly GCSE (16+) and A-level (18+).
5. Melvin, *op. cit.* p 119.
6. Primary teachers went through a similar phase of preparation when a review of the primary curriculum was published in 2009, but the planned changes were abandoned when the Coalition Government came to power in 2010.
7. Karin Doull, 'Planning for "Changes within Living Memory"' *Primary History*, no 71, 2015, p 14.
8. DfE, 'Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2019', 2019 p 4. Accessed online at <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/812539/Schools_Pupils_and_their_Characteristics_2019_Main_Text.pdf> 31 March 2020.
9. See, for example, Katharine Burn, Richard Harris and Marc Sarazin 'Historical Association Survey of History in Schools in England 2018', 2019, Accessed online at <<https://www.history.org.uk/secondary/categories/409/news/3698/survey-into-history-in-english-secondary-schools-2>> 31 March 2020.