

Research impact: making a difference

Influencing the cultural diversity of the UK history curriculum

An LSE-Cambridge research collaboration helped give voice to Bengali and other ethnic communities and influenced the history curriculum in Britain's schools.

What was the problem?

Over 20% of Britain's population is now of minority ethnic background, with nearly 25% of the school age population of Black or minority ethnic heritage. Despite this, according to a review of the national curriculum by Ofsted, the Schools inspection service for England, cultural diversity and multiculturalism are poorly taught in schools.

The UK Coalition Government has placed history as central to the formation of British identity and citizenship and has redefined the national curriculum, placing greater emphasis on British 'island' history and neglecting the contribution of Britain's ethnic minority communities to that history and to British identity.

What did we do?

From 2006 Claire Alexander, then LSE Reader in Sociology (now at Manchester), set out to explore the links between the 'big histories' of nations and the 'little histories' of individuals, families and communities, whose stories are rarely reflected in national policies or in the 'grand narratives' of national histories.

With funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, Alexander and Dr Joya Chatterji (now at Cambridge) set up a three-year study looking at Bengali migration and settlement, aided by researchers Annu Jalais and Shahzad Firoz.

The interdisciplinary study combined Alexander's sociological research on ethnicity and identity in Britain with Chatterji's historical expertise in the 1947 Partition of Bengal between India and Pakistan (with East Pakistan later becoming the country of Bangladesh).

Using a mix of oral history, interview and archival research in India, Bangladesh and Britain, the study focused on eight sites – four in Asia and four in the UK – and documented the life histories of over 180 migrants whose ages, backgrounds and life stories varied significantly.

Among the project's many insights was the finding that personal and community (his)stories play an important role in developing a sense of belonging and 'home', and that oral histories can counter dehumanising beliefs about migrants and immigrants and about the impact of migration on contemporary society.

Research impact: making a difference

What happened?

Having unearthed such a rich seam of material, the researchers then sought to bring their methodologies and people's individual stories to a wider audience. They were particularly keen to reach young people who had not experienced migration themselves but whose lives, families and communities had been shaped by it.

With funding from LSE's Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) and in partnership with Runnymede Trust, Alexander developed the Banglastories website for young people aged 11 to 14, accompanied by a teachers' resource pack. Runnymede is an independent think tank working for racial justice and equality, and in 2000 produced a report on The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain which called for a more inclusive and diverse 'national story'. The purpose of the website and resource pack was two-fold: to illuminate the history of Britain's Bengali community with its links to Britain's imperial past, and to encourage young people to think about how today's multicultural Britain was formed.

Launched by novelist Amitav Ghosh in December 2009, the Banglastories website has received more than 66,500 'hits' since 2010, two-thirds from outside the UK. The British Library has deemed it worthy of preservation for its permanent UK Web Archive, both for its content and for its innovation as a website.

Alexander, Chatterji and Runnymede continued their fruitful collaboration in a follow-up project called 'Bangla Stories: Telling Community Histories about Migration and Belonging'. The project team worked in four schools and a youth centre in three cities – Leicester, Cardiff and Sheffield – which were chosen because of their disparate demographics and histories of migration.

The team introduced over 120 young people aged 12 to 15 to a variety of social research methods designed to explore the history of migration and its effects on contemporary society. Students produced films, animations, journalism, poetry and artwork, which were edited and then uploaded onto a new website, Making Histories. The launch of this website took place at the House of Commons before an audience of MPs and community activists.

The project was successful at many levels. Individually, students were found to have gained self-confidence and transferable skills, and the participative approach was effective with students of different ages, abilities and backgrounds. The approach was integrated into the history curriculum of the Cardiff and Leicester schools.

The project also inspired collaboration between a variety of community and national organisations. Both Runnymede and the Arts & Humanities Research Council regard it as a

Britain's history curriculum is causing social division because “the Asian story is missing” and “the Making History project is finding a gentle way through a fraught subject”.

North Herts Interfaith Forum

Research impact: making a difference

template for research and knowledge transfer and cite it for its 'high impact', having already inspired another educational website that deals with diversity issues called 'Romans Revealed'.

Based on their research and the success of the Making Histories and Bangla Stories projects, Alexander and Chatterji with Debbie Weekes-Bernard of Runnymede sought to influence future policy and practice with a paper called Making British Histories: Diversity and the National Curriculum (2012). Among their proposed reforms of the national curriculum were redrawing the boundaries between British and world histories, giving schools the resources to engage students in living history, and including the teaching of family and community research.

Direct influence on the National Curriculum did indeed occur in 2013. In the furore that greeted the Government's proposal to drop historic ethnic minority figures such as 'pioneer nurse' Mary Seacole and the African abolitionist Olaudah Equiano from the national curriculum, Runnymede produced a policy briefing paper based on the Making Histories research. Advocacy by Runnymede, Operation Black Vote and race equality organisations and discussions with then Education Secretary Michael Gove resulted in both historical figures being retained in the curriculum. The briefing paper was also successful in making a convincing case for giving African and other world histories a legitimate place in the pre-11 national curriculum.

In place of a monolithic and misleading history of Britain, the approach exemplified by Bangla Stories and Making Histories showed how history could be taught in a way that recognises diversity and multiculturalism, instils critical thinking and ultimately leads to a more tolerant and cohesive society.

Claire Alexander worked in the Department of Sociology at the London School of Economics and Political Science from 2003-2012. Her primary areas of research are race and ethnicity in Britain. She has written extensively on issues of youth identities, masculinity and the South Asian/Muslim diaspora. She is Vice Chair of the Runnymede Trust and Editor of *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*. She moved to a Chair in Manchester in 2012.

Email: claire.alexander@manchester.ac.uk

LSE gratefully acknowledges the following for support of this research:

Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)
Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)

<http://www.lse.ac.uk/researchImpact>

©LSE2014