



Curriculum decolonisation as a disciplinary process

Introduction

Discussions about decolonising the curriculum illustrate a key challenge facing teachers and policy makers: how to make decisions about curriculum content in a system where knowledge seems, paradoxically, everything and nothing¹. That is to say that knowledge building is increasingly positioned as a primary objective for schooling² and yet it can remain under-theorised in and of itself as an object of study. Curriculum is a vital area of study in education because it “acts as a constraint on what students can learn,”³ therefore the factors that influence selection of curriculum content demand close scrutiny.

Given the spotlight shone on issues of race and coloniality as a result of social flashpoints such as the death of George Floyd⁴ or the Rhodes Must Fall movement⁵ there are numerous calls in the media for decolonisation of the curriculum^{6 7 8}. However, debates about the desirability and means of decolonising the curriculum, as with other curriculum knowledge deliberations, are too often mired in an apparent epistemological impasse: “a false dichotomy between positivist absolutism and constructivist relativism. That is, they posit a choice between understanding knowledge either as decontextualised, value-free, detached and certain or as socially constructed within cultural and historical conditions in ways that reflect vested social interests”⁹. The space between these two positions is often narrow or overlooked entirely.

¹Maton, K. (2014) *Knowledge and knowers: Towards a realist sociology of education*. London: Routledge.

² Gibb, N. (2017) The importance of knowledge-based education. DfE.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/nick-gibb-the-importance-of-knowledge-based-education>

³ Young, M. (2014), What is a curriculum and what can it do? *The Curriculum Journal*, 25: 7-13.

⁴ Elias, H. (2020) ‘Time and race in history education’. *Renewal Journal*, 28 (4). Available at

<https://renewal.org.uk/time-and-race-in-history-education/> (accessed 10th March 2021)

⁵ Ntloedibe, F.N. (2019) ‘Where are our heroes and ancestors? The spectre of Steve Biko’s ideas in Rhodes must fall and the transformation of South African Universities’, *African Identities*, 17 (1), pp. 64-79.

⁶ Gray, J. (2020) ‘Black British History Is Barely Covered: How The Curriculum Could Be Decolonised’, *Huffington Post*. Available at

https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/uk-curriculum-black-lives-matter_uk_5ee21f41c5b6625b095b7eb6

⁷ Okolosie, L. (2020) ‘White guilt on its own won’t fix racism: decolonising Britain’s schools’, *The Guardian*.

Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/jun/10/white-guilt-on-its-own-wont-fix-racism-decolonising-britains-schools>

⁸ Weale, S., Bakare, L., Mir, S. (2020) ‘Calls grow for black history to be taught to all English school pupils’. *The Guardian*. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/jun/08/calls-mount-for-black-history-to-be-taught-to-all-uk-school-pupils>

⁹ Maton, K. (2014) *Knowledge and knowers: Towards a realist sociology of education*. London: Routledge. p. 6.



A heuristic simplification of these positions can be summarised as:

	Positivist absolutism		Constructivist relativism
<i>Typical argument</i>	Truth is a “direct representation of the external world” ¹⁰ . The value of knowledge is fixed by some intrinsic virtue of the knowledge itself. Its origins are not deemed to be significant.	The space between	Knowledge depends on the standpoint of the knower. It holds no explanatory power and exists entirely in the ‘eye of the beholder’. Knowledge is a reflection of the power relations between groups.
<i>Therefore...</i>	Curriculum knowledge just is. It is universal. It is the best knowledge.		The selection of curriculum knowledge should be determined by who we are. There is no better knowledge.

As Young¹¹ argues, this dichotomy tends to pose an ‘educational dilemma’: “either the curriculum is a given or it is entirely the result of power struggles between groups with competing claims for including and legitimizing their knowledge and excluding that of others.”

Social realists, such as Michael Young, resolve this false dichotomy by taking the view that knowledge is produced in a particular context but that it cannot be reduced only to that context; knowledge can have properties of its own that transcend the context of its origins. Along similar lines, Maton¹² argues, “we construct knowledge of the world but not just as we please (or at least not free of worldly consequences), not perfectly, and not simply by ourselves. Put another way, actors construct knowledge but not under conditions or in ways entirely of their own making, and not entirely alone. Rather, knowledge is about something other than itself, draws on existing knowledge, and is produced and judged by socially situated actors...Against positivism, knowledge is understood as inescapably social and historical but, against constructivism, knowledge is not reduced to social power alone, as some knowledge claims have greater explanatory power than others.”

So, for example, a particular aspect of scientific understanding – maybe the sort of thing scientists at the CERN collider are working on – is developed within a context (it is *social*) but it also reflects something beyond that context (it is *real*). Knowledge is both real *and* social, not either/or. When we think in this way we open up the space between the dichotomy and new positions are revealed. New possibilities emerge for how we think about knowledge and, therefore, the curriculum.

Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) extends this by making explicit how knowledge is legitimated and specialized within fields of practice. We might think of this as describing ‘what counts’ in

¹⁰ Young, M. (2008) *Bringing Knowledge Back In: From Social Constructivism to Social Realism in the Sociology of Education*. Routledge, p.25.

¹¹ Young, M. (2008) *Bringing Knowledge Back In: From Social Constructivism to Social Realism in the Sociology of Education*. Routledge, p.28.

¹² Maton, K. (2014) *Knowledge and knowers: Towards a realist sociology of education*. London: Routledge, p.10.

particular fields. LCT theorises that this can be described in terms of various ‘specialization codes’ which explain, in relative terms, how far legitimacy within a field is shaped by:

- Relations *within* knowledge: how knowledge relates to other knowledge.
- Relations *to* knowledge: how people are related to knowledge and each other.

In simpler terms, we can say that what is legitimate is shaped by:

- **What** is known
- **Who** is the knower

Using a sociological realist approach to education, LCT holds that both dimensions are always in play as a means of defining ‘what counts’ as achievement/success in a field, but it’s the relative emphasis of each within a field that requires study in order to understand the ‘rules of the game’ that shape the field. This allows us to act *within* the field but also to act *upon* it.

So, for example, the fields of natural science tend to emphasise relations between knowledge – what is known. Who we are (our class, race, sexuality and so on) are considered to be less important in determining what is/isn’t scientific truth than a mastery of the underlying concepts and theories of science. What matters is that we understand and master the concepts and procedures so we can follow the established processes of the field. Whereas in English literature there is, relatively, a greater emphasis on the knower – who we are more explicitly shapes how we think, interpret and communicate the knowledge of the field.

To give a more concrete example, within science it might be considered a strange perspective if we were to hypothesise that women, men, upper class, working class, White or Asian people would have a different understanding of what gravity was. What gravity is – what is true about gravity – is determined by testing against particular principles established within the discipline. But it would not be as strange to reflect that people of a particular age, gender or race might hold different views on the work of, say, J.K. Rowling or James Joyce. This is because ‘what counts’ in the fields of science and English literature is structured differently. Each field has knowledge and knowers, but what is emphasised within the field can be different. While this might feel intuitively the case, this understanding is often tacit and not always made clear.

It is acknowledged that this paper has started with a rather theoretical slant, but it is my contention that we can’t hope to resolve important curriculum debates, such as those about decolonisation, without understanding the arena we are in. What I hope to have done above is to set out enough of the theory as is necessary without burdening the piece with too much abstraction. As Karl Maton¹³ exhorts, ‘you only need as much theory as the problem requires’. With that set out we are better equipped to explore the issue of curriculum decolonisation.

Decolonisation – what does it mean?

This is not an easy question to answer.

¹³ Maton, K. <https://legitimationcodetheory.com/theory/introducinglct/>



There are several reasons why:

- The meaning and application of the term 'decolonisation' has changed over time. It has a history of its own, being deployed to describe political developments concerning nations¹⁴ as well as more recently being used to describe a process of 'recentring' the epistemic centre of disciplines, particularly on the knowledge of the global south.
- Much of the literature about decolonisation of education is situated within the context of higher education.
- Advocates of decolonisation often recognise it as a process rather than a specific outcome. This can make it hard to provide concrete models of what a decolonised curriculum looks like, or indeed raises the possibility that the process is ongoing and unfinished.

This definition of decolonisation within higher education reflects some of this complexity:

*"Whilst 'decolonisation' is a concept that can be understood in different ways: in our usage, it connects contemporary racialised disadvantages with wider historical processes of colonialism, seeks to expose and transform them through forms of collective reflection and action. 'Decolonising SOAS' therefore refers to thought and action within the university to redress forms of disadvantage associated with racism and colonialism."*¹⁵

Such definitions tend to foreground the social relations and identities of groups of knowers. So, decolonisation may be thought of as giving voice to the knowledge of marginalised peoples. In this way, decolonisation of the curriculum can be seen as being about redressing often longstanding factors that have, sometimes deliberately and consciously, ensured that curriculum, pedagogy and assessment protect the interests of a dominant group whilst marginalising others by portraying them as inferior (sometimes by not portraying them at all). Decolonisation of the curriculum, therefore, requires us to be cognisant of where unequal power relations between groups have established structures where the ways of knowing and being of one group are held as a norm while others are found to be in deficit according to those norms.

Steinberg¹⁶ takes this further to ask whether decolonisation requires us to dispose of the very notion of curriculum, in which particular knowledge is codified and valorised: "Do we interrogate and destroy the concept of curriculum? Could curriculum itself be the ultimate attempt to reproduce and rebrand that which has never worked?"

While such sentiments might appear on face value to be liberating for the marginalised, they can also be problematic. If curriculum is collapsed into *only* the arbitrary expressions of power

¹⁴ Webb, E. (2020) What have historians been arguing about...decolonisation and the British Empire? Teaching History 178. Historical Association.

¹⁵ SOAS. (2018) 'Decolonising SOAS Learning and Teaching Toolkit for Programme and Module Convenors', University of London. Available at <https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/decolonisingsoas/files/2018/10/Decolonising-SOAS-Learning-and-Teaching-Toolkit-AB.pdf> p 3

¹⁶ Steinberg, S. (2020) Say What, Sisyphus? Decolonising our attempts at decolonisation. BERA Research Intelligence. Issue 142, Spring. p.26.





held by particular groups, what does this mean for schooling and the curriculum? Have we inadvertently drifted into relativism and if so what is the potential loss to the education of all children if we subscribe to the view that knowledge is only a reflection of its origins? What of maths? What of science?

In fact, what this really illustrates is the tendency for discussions about decolonisation, like other curriculum debates, to fall into the dichotomous trap outlined above. However, this is not the inevitable destination for decolonisation of the curriculum. This paper seeks to explain why decolonisation of the curriculum need not be at odds with the established disciplines that are recontextualised within the school curriculum. Such a position, played out in the space between the ‘big dichotomy’¹⁷, allows us to be attentive to the inclusion of a diverse range of knowers while maintaining the substance and structure of disciplinary knowledge. It is this understanding that is reflected in Stewart & Thompson’s¹⁸ assertion that a broader exploration of ‘powerful knowledge’ is required: “Omitted from Young’s analysis, however, is a requirement for discussions surrounding powerful knowledge to include a range of voices, rather than being based solely upon the ideas of the ‘dominant culture’”. Seeing both knowledge and knower is important in helping us to enact a more diverse, or even decolonised, curriculum, and avoiding falling into the ‘big dichotomy’.

#ScienceMustFall – A case study from South Africa

There is a video¹⁹ of a 2016 debate about the discipline of science, held at a South African university. The video shows a student asserting that the field of science is a Western construct and that it should be removed from the curriculum. She goes further to assert an alternative view, unexplained by science, that a person can will a lightning bolt to strike another person. At this point, at the request of the discussion’s chair, a fellow student who had interjected by shouting “it’s not true” was forced to apologise.

Adendorff and Blackie²⁰ conclude that “the opinions expressed in the four-minute video clip can be characterized as a *knower code*. We see stronger social relations with statements such as ‘the whole thing is a product of Western modernity.’” They contrast this position with the ‘typical’ response produced by the science community, exemplified by Professor Tim Crowe, which asserts the neutrality of science²¹. Adendorff and Blackie determine that Crowe’s position is a *knowledge code*. Thus, they identify a ‘code clash’ between the ‘Fallist’ student in the video (and presumably others who take the same position) and the scientific community.

¹⁷ Maton, K. (2018) LCT 2 Opening Keynote Address. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1CAF8NnaeSM>

¹⁸ Stewart, F. & Thompson, J. (2021) Powerful Knowledge as Social Justice. Confederation of School Trusts.

¹⁹ UCT, University of Cape Town (2016) ‘Science Must Fall?’ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C9SiRNibD14>

²⁰ Adendorff, H. and Blackie, M.A.L. (2020) ‘Decolonizing the science curriculum: when good intentions are not enough’, in Winberg, C., McKenna, S. and Wilmot, K. Building Knowledge in Higher Education. London: Routledge.

²¹ Crowe, T. (2016) Science decolonisers “reprehensible”, says top UCT scientist after watching THIS video. BizNews. <https://www.biznews.com/mailbox/2016/10/18/science-decolonisers-reprehensible-uct>



Two significant points emerge from Adendorff and Blackie's exploration of the debate:

1. The position suggested by the 'Fallist' would probably not be seen as compatible with the field of science. Legitimacy in science is arrived at by mastering and following the specialized knowledge and methods of the field. This goes to the heart of the subject of science. A school curriculum which didn't reflect this would probably not be deemed to be legitimate science.
2. This need not, however, mean that science is 'neutral'. In particular, the narrative around scientific discovery tends to valorise the discoveries of White people while too often overlooking the contributions of ethnic minority scientists to advancement of the field.

Taken together this suggests that decolonisation of the science curriculum does not necessitate the rejection of scientific principles – indeed, such a curriculum may not be deemed to be 'science' at all. But, equally, this does not prevent us from asking important questions, such as 'who's science story are we not telling?' 'Who is being silenced within science?'

Perhaps we might help pupils to understand some of the social context of science; to help them to know why, for example, historic privileges have meant that many scientific discoveries are credited to men rather than women, and White rather than ethnic minority people. And, importantly, more can be done to strengthen the representation within the curriculum of key scientific knowers from ethnic minority backgrounds. Incorporating this thinking within the curriculum might help more children to see themselves within the curriculum, or at least to understand some of the social factors that have limited the representation of particular groups within science.

Such opportunities suggest it is possible to strengthen social relations (emphasis on the knower) within science without rejecting science itself. We do not have to fall into the dichotomy outlined at the start.

Decolonisation within 'knower code' subjects

Basil Bernstein²² distinguished between fields with hierarchical and horizontal knowledge structures:

Hierarchical knowledge structures – knowledge “develops through integration towards ever more integrative or general propositions.”²³ Scientific fields tend to be good examples of this; the subject is built and mastered through the ongoing integration of relatively few concepts, with one building on another.

²² Bernstein, B. (1996) *Pedagogy, symbolic control and identity: Theory, Research, Critique*. Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield.

²³ Muller, J. (2006) On the shoulders of giants: verticality of knowledge and the school curriculum. In Moore, R. et al *Knowledge, Power and Educational Reform*. Oxford. Routledge, p. 13.



Horizontal knowledge structures – “consisting of a series of parallel incommensurable languages. Progress in horizontal knowledge structures occurs not through theory integration (or at least not primarily) but rather through the introduction of a new language which constructs a ‘fresh perspective, a new set of questions, a new set of connections, and an apparently new problematic, and most importantly a new set of speakers.’”²⁴ Humanities subjects tend to be good examples. For instance, in history new standpoints tend to be proliferated which reinterpret the subject matter in very different ways, often seeking to replace rather than integrate previous works.

As described earlier, LCT extends this by conceptualising hierarchal knowledge structures as being structured primarily by relations *between* knowledge, and horizontal structures as being structured primarily by relations *to* knowledge.

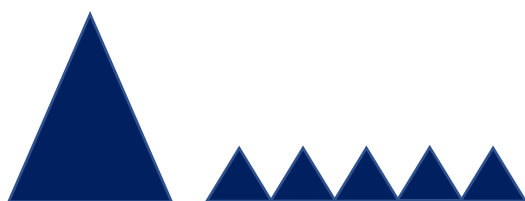


Figure 1. Hierarchical & horizontal knowledge structure. Drawn from Maton, K. (2014) Knowledge and knowers: Towards a realist sociology of education. London: Routledge.

Hierarchal knowledge structures tend to be shown as tall triangles, representing the ongoing extension and integration of theories and concepts within the field. Horizontal knowledge structures, on the other hand, could be shown as a number smaller triangles, representing the range of ‘languages’ that exist within the field, each making their own way, not integrating or building on one another.

With this in mind we can start to see why in the section above it was considered important that decolonisation of the science curriculum did not come at the expense of scientific methods and knowledge – these are the things that make science what it is. Bernstein would likely have called science a subject with a strongly hierarchical knowledge structure, LCT would consider it a ‘knowledge code’. For simplicity we can use the two interchangeably here. The point is that ‘truth’ or ‘legitimacy’ in science are derived from observing its specialized principles and theories. As noted, there is important work to be done to represent a broader range of ‘knowers’ within science but this is not about exploring different ‘versions’ of science.

However, what might decolonisation of the curriculum look like in subjects with horizontal knowledge structures, or what LCT would describe as ‘knower codes’? In these subjects, such as history or English literature, there tend to be a wide range of ‘perspectives’, ‘approaches’ and ‘voices’. Indeed, these structure the field. That a Marxist historian has a particular interpretation of the origins of the First World War, and that this might be different to that of a post-modernist or a feminist historian is of little surprise.

²⁴ Muller, J. (2006) On the shoulders of giants: verticality of knowledge and the school curriculum. In Moore, R. et al Knowledge, Power and Educational Reform. Oxford. Routledge, p. 13

Furthermore, within such subjects we might more readily expect characteristics of knowers themselves to determine which knowledge is created and ultimately recontextualised into the school curriculum. This helps to explain why calls for decolonisation of the school curriculum are often situated in horizontally structured subjects, where the knower is foregrounded. Indeed, it is noticeable that calls for decolonisation of the school curriculum often fall back on the history curriculum or refer to the canon of English literature curricula.

In fact, the notion of canon is potentially a useful means of considering what decolonisation within these subjects might look like. Maton²⁵ suggests that within knower (horizontal) structured subjects it's possible for works of significant knowers to build on each other, analogous in some ways with the way that theory is integrated and extended within hierarchically structured subjects. He argues that immersion in such a canon builds a common 'community of experience' which provides the intellectual framework and material through which debates can be held which both reflect the canon but also allow for it to evolve. This is the means, he argues, through which a 'cultivated gaze' of knowers can be developed – the dispositions that are deemed to be the outlooks and sensitivities of legitimate actors within the field. For example, what are the legitimate dispositions and perspectives of historians? Or, of artists? And in terms of schools, what are the dispositions of history students and art students that we wish to cultivate? What are the ways of seeing the world that we wish them to develop?

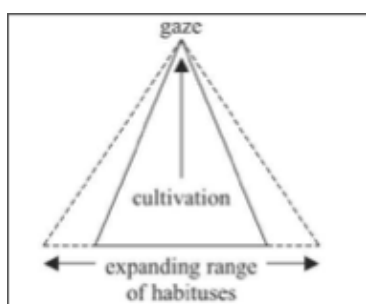


Figure 2. Growth of hierarchical knower structure with a cultivated gaze (Maton 2014)

Accordingly, rather than seeing 'horizontal' subjects as being flat, we can understand that hierarchization exists in how knowers are developed. Knowers can acquire the 'cultivated gaze' of the discipline, adopting the dispositions and sensitivities that are valorised and forming an appreciation of these from across a widening range of social contexts (what Bourdieu²⁶ referred to as 'habitus'). This raises the possibility of cultivating a decolonised gaze; a way of knowing²⁷.

In other words, Maton theorises that *knowers* are themselves are developed within horizontal fields; knowers with particular ways of seeing the world. These dispositions are not arbitrary in the sense that they reflect dominant ways of knowing, negotiated by those within the field. The canon is the means through which these attitudes and perspectives are encountered,

²⁵ Maton, K. (2014) Knowledge and knowers: Towards a realist sociology of education. London: Routledge.

²⁶ Bourdieu, P. (1977) Outline of a theory of practice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

²⁷ G Giloi, S. (2017) 'The Benefits of Incorporating a Decolonised Gaze for Design Education', Design Education Forum of Southern Africa. Available at <https://www.defsa.org.za/sites/default/files/downloads/2017conference/Giloi%23decolonise.pdf>



evaluated and built upon – or replaced. So, any attempt to decolonise horizontally structured subjects is likely to necessitate critical engagement with that canon.

This means that in subjects like history, art and English literature, we might ask questions like:

- Whose stories are being foregrounded?
- What power relations are being depicted?
- Which people are depicted in good light?
- Are people from dominant groups praised for being benevolent and paternalistic towards the marginalised, and what is the effect of this?
- Who or what is at the centre? Who or what is at the periphery?
- Whose interests are being served?

Critical engagement with a more diverse canon might be a means through which decolonised dispositions can be cultivated. This speaks to calls for teachers to work in disciplinary communities, made by people like Young et al²⁸ and Counsell²⁹, as such communities might allow for the critical engagement of teachers with such a canon.

One might, therefore, offer the conjecture that decolonisation in such subjects might require two conditions to be met:

- i. Critical engagement of teachers within disciplinary communities
- ii. A more diverse canon as the object of this critical engagement

Such a position is important because it locates teachers within their professional field of colleagues – they are not having to ‘go it alone’. This might help to build confidence among teachers but it also provides the wider public with some protection against unforeseen or unhelpful approaches to decolonisation taking hold in classrooms which have not been rigorously debated and tested by the community of practitioners. The development of knowers through the curriculum is powerful territory, in the sense that it can confer power to students that they can take with them into the world, but it is also powerful in the sense that the decisions schools and teachers make is itself a form of power, and one which needs to be wielded with appropriate care. It is high stakes for individuals and for society.

This is why, as noted above, but particularly in relation to horizontally structured/knower code subjects, it might be important to engage teachers in disciplinary communities. Within such fields there tends to exist greater room for what might be viewed as subjectivity in curriculum decisions, or what we would call a greater prominence of social relations to knowledge. So, anchoring the curriculum decisions of teachers to the discourse of the community is one means of helping to make sure the choices teachers make are legitimate in terms of how the discipline works and also not inappropriately political (accepting that all curriculum decisions confer power and thus are not entirely separable from the concerns of

²⁸ Young, M., Lambert, D., with Roberts, C. and Roberts, M., (2014) Knowledge and the future school: Curriculum and social justice. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

²⁹ Counsell, C. (2020) ‘Better conversations with subject leaders’, in Sealy, C. (Ed) The ReasearchED guide to the curriculum. Woodbridge: John Catt.





the day). Communities of expert teachers can help to ensure that curricular changes are in keeping with the established but evolving disciplinary and substantive knowledge and processes of the subject. Perhaps counter-intuitively this is not about saying to teachers in these subjects that ‘anything goes’, rather it is about engaging the community in discourse so that a collective disciplinary sense of decolonisation within the subject can be shaped, debated and built upon. All of which suggests that decolonisation is not something that can be arrived at through ‘top-down’ generic approaches. Rather, it might be seen as a disciplinary process, the processes and outcomes of which might look different across the range of subjects.

And what of the curriculum itself in ‘knower code’ subjects? We are already seeing examples of what a decolonised curriculum might look like. In history, for example, the journal *Teaching History* is a useful reference point for teachers. Davies³⁰ describes why it is important to ensure children’s understanding of slavery is not only oriented towards the experiences of enslaved peoples in the Deep South of the USA: “Recent scholarship has sought to elevate the differences within and between the islands and thus to overcome a flattening effect that generic talk of slavery can engender. It was this generalised caricature of ‘the slave’ and their miseries that I was seeking to complicate.” Note how he points to *scholarship* – an evolving canon – as being pivotal in helping him to see why what has too often been oversimplified needs to be re-complicated.

Green³¹ charts how the treatment of precolonial history has changed over time, opening the eyes of teachers to the understanding that history is not a stagnant discipline – it evolves, often in response to concerns of the present. He explains that in the past 10 years there has been an increased awareness of the need to move beyond narratives that cast African history only through the lens of slavery. Again, this speaks to the need for those designing curricula to be connected to the discourse about the subject.

Some calls for decolonisation articulate the need to recentre the curriculum so that content is not only drawn exclusively from Western perspectives – this includes challenging the tendency in history curricula to start with the history of another people but only as a means the of tying it back to Western history. This has the effect of positioning other histories as being only a form of prelude for the arrival of Westerners onto the scene. Oladehin observes that this tends to be how students encounter other histories, so much so that when the teacher avoids this the children notice: “Emma explicitly mentioned that she enjoyed the fact that it was just about Africa because ‘normally we have to link everything back to Britain, or how it affects us’.”³² Such sentiments reinforce why decolonisation is about more than re-shaping the national curriculum; it is also about how teachers bring their students to knowledge and how knowledges are brought into relation with each other. Such considerations go further than what can be set out centrally by government via the national curriculum.

³⁰ Davies, N. (2020) *Staying with the shot: shaping the question, lengthening the narrative and broadening the meaning of transatlantic slavery*. *Teaching History* 180 HA TH180, p.23.

³¹ Green, T. (2020) *What have historians been arguing about...African history in the precolonial period?* *Teaching History* 181. Historical Association.

³² Oladehin, T. (2020) *Beyond slavery: considering pupils’ responses to a new starting point for Black history at Key Stage 3*. *Teaching History* 181. Historical Association, p.33.

An article on the Historical Association website³³ provides useful prompts to help teachers consider the history that is represented in their classrooms:

1. *Are the pasts of the students we teach represented in our curriculum?*
2. *Are the pasts of the people of modern Britain represented in our curriculum?*
3. *Do we help students to understand why some past topics are still highly emotional and sensitive for some groups of people?*
4. *When students finish their history studies with us will they have learnt that:*
 - *Women made up 50+% of people in the past?*
 - *Non-white people have long lived in these islands?*
 - *Non-white people have not only been victims of white oppression?*
 - *There have always been less visible minority groups, such as LGBTQ+ and people with disabilities?*
 - *People were more rounded and complex than the labels people in power/society gave them?*
 - *The diverse past helps to understand the diverse present?*
5. *Do the topics we teach start and end in the right place in order to understand people as fully human people even if they were not white, rich, British and male?*
6. *Do all the visuals we put in front of students in textbooks, on PPTs etc, reflect the past as diverse as it was and respect people's dignity?*
7. *Do our students understand that the school curriculum itself is constructed, selected and therefore an interpretation of a very diverse past?*

This is not to say that those disciplinary communities themselves are at all times and in all places manifested with the 'answer' to complex issues like decolonisation. As Dennis³⁴ points out, disciplinary communities need to be reflective about the subject but also about the stories the community holds about itself. However, it is hard to see how else decolonisation can be meaningfully enacted without situating it within the discourse of communities of subject teachers. This speaks to the 'process' of decolonisation, and within such a process perspectives like those of Dennis are important in offering necessary challenge, lest that process becomes less than the reflective and analytic crucible it needs to be.

As a final point, it is also worth noting that, as Stewart & Thompson³⁵ point out, a sensitive consideration of curriculum content should not be solely focused on issues of race: "In a recent meeting, we were reminded of this as educational colleagues working in a different trust kept referring to the need to be inclusive but entirely understanding this from a point of having non-white authors represented in their English curriculum. We repeatedly drew them to the point that this was the same blind-alley thinking that had led to the absence of multiple voices in the first place. Why only non-white? Why only race? Why only English? Were they considering gender, disability, sexuality – every subject, every day?"

³³ Historical Association (2019) How diverse is your history curriculum?

<https://www.history.org.uk/primary/resource/9620/how-diverse-is-your-history-curriculum>

³⁴ Dennis, N. (2021) 'The stories we tell ourselves: History teaching, powerful knowledge and the importance of context', in Chapman, A (Ed), *Knowing History in Schools*, London: UCL Press.

³⁵ Stewart, F. & Thompson, J. (2021) *Powerful Knowledge as Social Justice*. Confederation of School Trusts, p.11.

Conclusions

There are compelling reasons why decolonisation of the curriculum needs to be taken seriously. However, decolonisation need not lead us to fall into the dichotomy between positivist absolutism and constructivist relativism. There is a space between these two positions where a process of decolonisation can be pursued without collapsing disciplines in on themselves. This paper makes the case that the important work to decolonise the curriculum might best be situated within disciplines, but that it is necessary for those disciplines to develop a decolonising gaze.

What I hope to have done in this paper is to set out some propositions for considering decolonisation of the school curriculum. In particular:

- The meaning of ‘decolonisation’ is not universally agreed, although it might be that such a definition is in any case impossible because;
- Decolonisation is likely to mean something different and look different in different subjects because of the structure of their disciplinary ‘parent fields’;
- In which case, particularly if we understand decolonisation to be a process, we need to understand the disciplinary element of this process of decolonisation better. Supporting teachers to engage with and participate in communities of disciplinary practice is likely to be important in establishing a ‘gaze’ that is both decolonised/decolonising *and* considered to be legitimate within the discipline.
- Through such disciplinary communities, teachers can acquire access to what are likely to be discipline-specific ways of decolonising the curriculum, reflecting the differences highlighted above in relation to how the curriculum within ‘knowledge code’ and ‘knower code’ subjects is selected and constructed. This is different from ‘top-down’ generic approaches to decolonisation and diversification as it recognises that knowledge-knower structures differ across disciplines.
- This means that while, across the range of subjects, curriculum planners can ask themselves questions like ‘whose knowledge is being obscured?’, what this means and how it is addressed may look different subject-by-subject.
- This paper offers some tentative suggestions for what decolonisation of the curriculum might look like in science and history. For example, in science it may be important to explore silenced knowers so that students can more readily see themselves in the curriculum. In history it is plausible that a decolonised gaze might be developed through critical engagement with the canon of disciplinary scholarship.
- More work needs to be done by subject communities to explore how decolonisation can be meaningfully enacted within each discipline.
- Schools and Trusts should consider how communities of subject teachers might be engaged in this work, drawing on promising examples, such as the sections of the history teacher community illustrated above.

Steve Rollett
Deputy CEO
Confederation of School Trusts
June 2021



Confederation of School Trusts

Tel: 0115 917 0142
Email: admin@cstuk.org.uk
Address: Suite 10, Whiteley Mill
Offices, 39 Nottingham Road,
Stapleford, NG9 8AD



[@CSTvoice](https://twitter.com/CSTvoice)
cstuk.org.uk

The Confederation of School Trusts (CST) is the national organisation and sector body for school trusts in England advocating for, connecting and supporting executive and governance leaders. We are a membership organisation of organisations. This means that the organisation – the Trust – is the member. Our mission is to build an excellent education system in England – every school part of a strong and sustainable group in which every child is a powerful learner and adults learn and develop together as teachers and leaders.

The Governance Advisory Service is delivered by CST Professional Development Ltd on behalf of CST. CST Professional Development Ltd is a wholly owned subsidiary of CST.

The Governance Advisory Service is a safe, confidential and quality-assured service run by specialists in School Trust governance and draws on the daily experience of CST as the national organisation and sector body for school trusts. We provide bespoke advisory services to match your current and future needs as a trust, helping you to keep your governance fully aligned to the expectations on trusts, the operational reality of your schools and with national best practice.

The Voice of School Trusts

Selflessness | Integrity | Objectivity | Accountability | Openness | Honesty | Leadership