

Why I found SCHP so exciting in the 70s And did it achieve what I hoped for?

SHP is fifty years old in 2022, not bad given the initial funding was for just two years. Listening to teachers across the decades I've been aware that there's a surprising range of ideas about its aims and the extent of its success. I first met SCHP in 1973 and first taught it in 1976 so was an early and very enthusiastic convert – so what was it that I found so exciting in the 70s and did SHP achieve what I hoped for?

- *The original Schools Council History 13-16 Project (SCHP) changed its name to the Schools History Project (SHP) in 1983 when funding from the Schools Council ended. I worked for SCHP 1980-1989 and 1996 to c2011.*
- *A major influence on education in the 70s was ROSLA, the Raising of the School Leaving Age to 16 in 1972. ROSLA led to considerable debate about the curriculum and to frustrations amongst several years' worth of students who had expected to leave school for work at 15.*

My inspiration – the original aims of SHP

An extract from an interview with David Sylvester, founding Director of SCHP, recorded in 2009

This was 1971 and I went [to a meeting with HMI to discuss possible directions for a new Schools Council project]. I've kept notes of the points I made I said, 'Well the first thing I want to do, I want to explain to pupils what history was', because I'd asked pupils in schools when I'd gone out on teaching practice, you know, 'What do you think history is?' 'Don't know, sir.' ... The second thing I said was – and this goes back to my teacher training – pupils should do history, not receive it. Use sources, fieldwork, participating in learning. And then I said the third thing I want to do is because [of] raising the school leaving age [to 16], we want to relate the objectives for history to the needs of pupils, try and show them that history will answer their needs.

<https://archives.history.ac.uk/history-in-education/browse/interviews/interview-david-sylvester-7-july-2009.html>

The most important moment in my working life came remarkably early, during my PGCE in 1973-4. We had a guest speaker, David Sylvester, talking about a new project he was setting up, the Schools Council History 13-16 Project. David outlined the aims of the project, much, I suspect, as he did in the quotation above. What was so important to me was that he was offering answers – answers that I thought I could communicate to pupils – to the question that frightened me as a young would-be teacher – ‘Why do we have to do history, sir?’. Until then I had no half-effective answer to that question and that was undermining my confidence in my ability to be a successful history teacher. Listening to David, I felt that his arguments gave me hope of success. More than that, I wanted to try them out – NOW! I really was jealous of a friend on the PGCE course whose placement in an SCHP trial school meant she had the chance to try out these ideas.

It was SCHP’s aims that mattered to me, not its content or its structure. To underline this, here are some key extracts from A New Look at History (SCHP’s rationale) which sum up its core purpose – I’ve picked out lines in bold that felt of particular significance to me:

*It is no longer sufficient justification to say that some school pupils enjoy history, or that teachers are now using a variety of methods on a scale never seen before. There is a need for adequate expression of a philosophy for the teaching of history which will not only convince adult sceptics, whether inside or outside the staff room, but also give history teachers a reason for their belief that history is a valuable component in the school curriculum. Moreover, **pupils in the age range 13 – 16 want to know why they are expected to do certain subjects and so there is also a need for a rationale which teachers can discuss with their pupils.***

*It is important to state at the outset that **any rationale which is offered must encompass both subject and pupils. Justifications for the study of history as a subject in itself, are legion. What is lacking, however, is one which justifies the study of history as a suitable study for adolescents in school. To do this effectively demands some consideration, not only of the subject history, its content and its methods, but also of the pupils, their abilities and their needs.** For if it cannot be shown positively that history does meet some of the educational needs of adolescents, then questions about its continued place in the curriculum may be legitimately raised.*

In general, few adolescents would admit that history was a subject which met their real needs. Either they would define their needs in areas where history plainly has little to offer

*in direct terms; as for example, the young school leavers who in a survey of 1968, rated history as a subject of little use because it did not equip them for a job. Or they would define history in terms which obviously did not relate to their needs; for example, they would describe it in terms of information, of topics, dates and people, some interesting and some perhaps less so, but little of which they would acknowledge as useful to them. As a third year (Y9) pupil once put it: "I don't think it has any use for when I want to start work. What has George III got to do with an apprentice carpenter?" This is not surprising since **most teachers have not consciously emphasised history as a subject which might be useful to their pupils in the sense that it meets some of their needs. Nevertheless, it is possible to see history in this way, and indeed essential to do so if the premise is accepted that pupils should not be subjected to school studies which they cannot be said to need.***

From: *A New look at History, 1976*

This emphasis on both pupils' needs and the nature of the discipline of history dictated the structure of the original SCHP course. Here's a summary showing the relationship between the five identified 'adolescent needs' and the original course structure – though it is over-simplified e.g. work on evidence took place throughout the course:

1. The need to understand the world in which they live. (Modern World Study – chiefly causation)
2. The need to find their personal identity by widening their experience through the study of people of a different time and place. (Depth Study – chiefly empathy)
3. The need to understand the process of change and continuity in human affairs. (Development Study, chiefly change and continuity)
4. The need to begin to acquire leisure interests. (History Around Us, chiefly evidence, other concepts depended on the site studied)
5. The need to develop the ability to think critically, and to make judgments about human situations. (Evidence, assessed chiefly through the unseen evidence paper)

Note: to avoid misunderstanding, 'empathy' for SHP never involved 'imagine you were ...' activities – empathy was always a means to constructing a world-view, to understanding motivation and therefore contributing to understanding choices and decisions.

So that's what excited me so much – the focus on pupils learning how they could use their knowledge of the past and their understanding of how history is studied to understand and interpret their own world – for example, being willing to look for complexity, not simplicity in situations, becoming less vulnerable to propaganda, able to make better informed choices and decisions based on understanding of evidence.

Looking at this again it feels ambitious beyond words in the context of the 1970s, something which may not be at all apparent to younger generations of teachers. Little of this work had been done before and the new project faced considerable opposition, even derision. A professor in the Department of Education at Leeds accosted David with the words 'You're the young man who thinks he can teach plough-boys to think are you? Well, it won't happen.'

One focus for this opposition was extreme scepticism about using sources in the classroom. While some well-informed and positive arguments had been put forward for using sources they'd had limited impact on classrooms by the 60s. In David's words:

'there was a real problem getting an O level board [to examine the SCHP course] ... no O level board had thought about using documents ... after all, ninety per cent of teachers found [using sources] very hard to stomach. They were used to giving notes to children and giving them facts and they got good O level results. And a lot of my colleagues in history method departments up and down the country were against – and in particular ... Burston, who was the great guru at the Institute of Education was very antipathetic. [The historian Sir Geoffrey] Elton had written in the seventies that sources are for adults at university, they're not for children. My view was well, if sources are the basis of history [then] we're not teaching history, we're ... I don't know what we're teaching.'

How do I assess SHP's success in achieving its main aim?

Assessing the success of SHP is an area where it's clear that teachers tell different stories. For example, I've heard two arguments that suggest SHP has been a great success, neither of which in my view show much understanding of what SHP was trying to achieve. The first argument is that SHP has succeeded because everyone now studies 'second order concepts', the other argument suggests SHP has been a success because GCSE now embodies what I long ago christened the 'discontinuous syllabus' – Theme, Depth etc – rather than being a 1485 to 1603 single period style specification.

What these arguments don't take into account is that the structure of the syllabus and the focus on individual concepts were not ends in themselves but means to the central aim of students appreciating how studying history can help them understand and interpret their world. In addition the tendency of GCSE specifications to focus on individual concepts at the expense of a broader understanding of the discipline of history means it's very hard for students to relate the use of historical method to their own lives.

In contrast, my assessment of SHP's success is based on the extent to which it achieved that original central aim. In practice only individual teachers can know whether their students do appreciate how they can use their knowledge of the past and their understanding of how history is studied to understand and interpret their own world. However by the time I retired I had serious doubts about whether SHP had succeeded in its central aim. Research undertaken by Richard Harris and Terry Haydn into these issues in 2005 suggested that progress since the 1970s had been limited if variable:

'Although the proportion of pupils reporting that they found history useful appears to have increased substantially since the [1968] Schools Council survey, pupils' explanations of the utility of the subject tended to support Fink's finding that 'they have difficulties in defining what it is useful for.' There were also echoes of Biddulph and Adey's study which found that many pupils had a 'disappointingly uninformed' understanding of the purposes of school history, and that their views are often influenced by direct and naïve reference to forms of employment'.

The questionnaire asked pupils 'Why do you think that they have history on the school curriculum? Can you try to explain your ideas about in what ways it might be useful for people to do history at school?' This was also an aspect of the subject that was followed up in the focus group interviews. In the light of the Adey and Biddulph finding (2001) that only a handful out of 1,400 year 9 pupils could articulate any plausible reason for studying the past, this was one of the most interesting facets of the survey, and ... was one of the areas where there were the most striking 'school effects'. ... In one school, there were virtually no comments that went beyond tautological or very vague responses, whereas in another school, a substantial number of pupils could put forward some valid/sensible reasons for studying history in school, sometimes going beyond qualifications and vocational arguments, and pointing to the wider benefits of history beyond school.'

Extracts from: *T Haydn and R Harris, Pupil perceptions of history at Key Stage 3: Final Report*

<https://archive.uea.ac.uk/~m242/historypgce/qcafinalreport.pdf>

Why was it so hard from SHP to achieve its main aim?

It was always going to be very difficult for SHP to achieve its core aim because it's not the kind of thing that's ever been formally assessed and therefore was always likely to fall victim to the triumph of assessable objectives over desirable ideals. However there were other factors limiting SHP's ability to keep its central aim in the forefront of teaching:

1. It's rarely remembered now but the prior existence of a Schools Council Project on Social Studies 8-13 required the 13-16 project to stay away from the early years of secondary schooling until the Schools Council's funding ended in 1983. SHP would have had a better chance of achieving its major aim if it could, from the beginning, have produced resources and ideas for the whole of KS3.
2. That said, there was little discussion of SHP's core aims in its materials for students, even in the earliest resources. Discussion was in the teachers' guides, a deliberate policy, I think, as the Project's initial resources contained few questions and tasks but sadly a teacher's guide is too often a graveyard of good ideas that would be more frequently used if in the students' material.
3. SHP became too popular too quickly, with take-up rising to 35% or more of exam candidates by the 1990s. This was exciting but at a huge price. Far too much of my job with SHP in the 80s involved briefing new schools via CPD courses or information sent in the post. Other 'of the moment' tasks included being involved in the trialling of GCSE and producing the first revisions of Project texts on Medicine, Ireland and China. There was little time left for thinking about longer-term issues such as how to help teachers implement SHPs aims – or maybe I didn't see the importance of this clearly enough. Either way, those original aims began to fade from view, hidden by immediate demands.
4. More 'of the moment' tasks took priority when external funding ended in 1989/90 and new funding was needed for SHP to survive. As Director, Colin Shephard, created new income streams from the new conference and from royalties from a new publishing contract

with John Murray (royalties from all earlier books had gone to the Schools Council). Colin's income streams undoubtedly saved SHP but required us to focus on tasks which delivered income but didn't directly achieve that initial core aim. This was exacerbated by regular revisions of the National Curriculum and exam specifications which generated more and more publishing.

5. Changes in assessment and the loss of SHP's original structure also played an important part. In the 70s assessment was much more experimental, enabling assessment by coursework for History Around Us and Modern World Studies units. However achievement of SHPs aims became vulnerable to changes in the culture of assessment. The cutting back of coursework made achieving the aims of the Modern World Study and History Around Us much harder and as pressure to achieve as many top grades as possible became all-important, teachers were far less likely to spend time on course aims that were not assessed, particularly that core aim of SHP of why is it worth studying the past.

Taken together, these factors link to another finding in Terry Haydn and Richard Harris's research – teachers' dialogue with pupils about the purposes and benefits of school history. Their conclusion reads:

This is another area where there may be a wide variety of practice. Several recent surveys suggest that many pupils have only a very limited understanding of why they do history in school (Biddulph and Adey, 2001, Fink, 2004, QCA, 2005). Many of the teachers involved in the first phase of the research expressed surprise at the number of their pupils who did not appear to understand why they had to do history, and said that they had paid more attention to this in curriculum planning, often with pleasing and positive results in terms of pupils' responses. However ... Whereas nearly all history departments seem to have taken a keen interest in the effect of teaching approaches on pupil engagement and KS4 take-up, it seems that far fewer departments have extensively explored the possible benefits of being more explicit with pupils in discussing the purposes of school history, both in terms of the overall benefits of studying history, and in terms of the benefits of studying particular topics.

T Haydn and R Harris, Factors influencing pupil take-up of History post Key Stage 3, Final Report September 2007

<https://archive.uea.ac.uk/~m242/historypgce/qca3report.pdf>

How do I feel about all this?

That excitement I felt a long time ago is, surprisingly perhaps, still there when I re-read A New Look at History. I still believe that achieving SCHP's core aim is vitally important for students, for the health of history in schools and for society as a whole, even if those five adolescent needs of the early 70s need regular rewriting for new generations. That's why I still applaud David Sylvester's vision and ambition and hope new generations of teachers will take up the challenge of exploring, as Terry Haydn and Richard Harris put it 'the possible benefits of being more explicit with pupils in discussing the purposes of school history, both in terms of the overall benefits of studying history, and in terms of the benefits of studying particular topics.' This really is an area where teachers working together, sharing ideas online and in person at conferences could make a huge difference.

Notes

The full text of A New Look at History, SCHP's rationale, can be found at:

<http://www.schoolhistoryproject.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/NewLookAtHistory.pdf>

The interview with David Sylvester, SCHP's first Director, (part of the History in Education project) in both oral and transcript form:

<https://archives.history.ac.uk/history-in-education/browse/interviews/interview-david-sylvester-7-july-2009.html>

Other interviews linked to SHP from the History in Education project

<https://archives.history.ac.uk/history-in-education/browse/interviews.html>