

History in Schools

Primary Source Analysis

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Interview with Maggie Wilson, 1 July 2010. History in Education Project, Institute of Historical Research: <https://archives.history.ac.uk/history-in-education/browse/interviews/interview-maggie-wilson-1-july-2010.html>

Interview extract:

Dr Nicola Sheldon (NS): *Do you think it's important for history in school to promote a sense of national identity? Is there enough British history?*

Maggie Wilson (MW): I think it's a very, very, very difficult question. I think there is enough British history, I think by and large most of what we do is British history really honestly. We sometimes will look at a more European-based or a world-based topic but basically it's British, English. I was going to correct myself and say British but actually I think we teach English history mostly. And I don't know to what extent it creates national identity and I don't know how successful we are at really looking at the kind of local personal stuff that would give individuals any sense of identity within a community. I don't ... And I don't know how important that is. I think people growing up in this county need to have a context for where they are and their place, and that means that that's the non-white ethnic minority populations as well, they need to have some idea of where they've come from and how they fit in. But I'm frightened of saying, yes, you've got to use history to create a sense of identity because I just think that could become a political agenda and we could then be forcing things, which I wouldn't be comfortable with.

...

NS: *Alongside that, you were saying about the danger of political considerations coming in. You have the mandatory topics that are now in the national curriculum, the slave trade and the holocaust, which has been in from original. Those are two that have been picked out as being important for children. Do you think that history has that role to play of creating values in children, tolerance or appreciating the importance of avoiding, if you like, genocide?*

MW: Well, I think the slave trade and the holocaust ... And I mean, the British Empire's another one that's compulsory, are very, very, very relevant to the context, the global context, now in a kind of political, economic, everything kind of sense. So it's not just the moral and ethical things that make the holocaust and the slave trade important, I don't think it's just from that, but when I teach the holocaust my big driving point is, why did it happen and how can we make sure it doesn't happen again? And I think that's got to be an important part of teaching the holocaust because I think children have got to start reflecting on their own position. And it ties in very, very much when I was in Bradford because there is this kind of underlying racism and I try and ... I mean, I did, I encouraged them to try and see that allowing underlying racism was like underlying anti-Semitism in Germany and it means that if things get much, much worse then turning a blind eye is going to be the easy option if that's what you've always done. If you've allowed racism to creep in then at what stage do you stand up to be counted? And I mean, that's the thing I say to them. And I think, yeah, I think history has got a role to play, but I don't want the government to ... I think it's right that they've made the holocaust compulsory but I don't want the government to start saying exactly how it's got to be taught and using it as a kind of moral tool, I really don't want that kind of political interference.

NS: *So you think it's safer left in the hands of teachers?*

MW: Well, I don't know actually, that's very true, because you could get a really dreadful teacher, couldn't you? I mean, well, the GTC [General Teaching Council] have allowed a BNP [British National Party] teacher haven't they, so I mean who knows if it was in ... ? So yeah, that's difficult. I don't know, I don't know.

NS: *It's a conundrum.*

MW: Yes, very much so.

Analysis

This is a transcript of an interview undertaken as part of a scholarly project run by history academics. The interview was recorded by Dr Nicola Sheldon as part of the 'History in Education' project. It was one of a

series of interviews which the project team made with teachers, pupils and policymakers. The aim was to use these interviews to collect material about the changing status and nature of history teaching in the United Kingdom in the twentieth century. Interviewees were asked a series of questions and their responses were recorded and then transcribed; this document is a transcription commissioned by the project team.¹

At the time of this recording, the interviewee, Maggie Wilson, was a history teacher employed at an English grammar school. She was trained in Glasgow and taught in Scotland, Saudi Arabia, London and Bradford. She specialized in teaching students between the ages of eight and thirteen. We see here an excerpt from the conversation which has been recorded and transcribed. As an excerpt, we are not entirely sure how it relates to the wider conversation (which lasted for nearly an hour) and the degree to which knowledge of that wider context might cause us to rethink or reshape our attitude to the evidence that is placed before us in this short excerpt.

The discussion is a form of 'oral history' and thus needs to be approached slightly differently from standard models of textual evidence. This is a report of a conversation rather than a considered reflection that is the product of time and revision, as is the case with most written sources. It is also the case that we need to consider the reliability of these statements. The teacher being interviewed has an effective audience of one – the interviewer who is a professional academic – however, they will be aware that their responses will be part of a wider project and might have a much wider audience later on. It is difficult to ascertain whether they were 'self-censoring' in their conversations as a result of this wider future audience, or whether they were fully relaxed and open in their discussions. A consideration of the full transcript might help us understand this issue a little better. Having said that, the flow of the conversation, the pauses, halting nature of the discussion, self-questioning, self-revision and the like, seem to indicate that the interviewee is being honest but perhaps somewhat guarded in some of her responses. As such, there may be omissions about the whole truth of her attitude towards curriculum changes and her experiences of teaching. Moreover, she was, at the time of the interview, still a teacher, and so presumably needed to be cautious about voicing any overt criticism of teaching practices or government policy.

Despite these reservations, however, this is a valuable source for exploring the attitudes, constraints and choices of historical education in the secondary school classroom during the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This is a report 'from the coalface' of the profession, as it were, and the interviewee articulates some of the dilemmas associated with choices about teaching history 'from the bottom up'. The report allows us to see how policy translates into the classroom and to examine the experiential nature of history curriculum choices, rather than inferring them from government policy documents. It is useful, for example, to see the manner in which the interviewee struggles with the question about whether there was 'enough'

British history in the curriculum, when a politician, by contrast, would likely have a rather dogmatic and black-and-white public perspective on such an issue. If we were listening to the recording rather than reading the transcript, we might pick up on other signs that the interviewee finds this topic difficult – changes in her tone or the pace of speech, for example.

It is also useful to see the manner in which the teacher parses ‘British history’ as ‘English history mostly’. Again, this suggests something of a gap which likely existed between the government policy concerning ‘British history’ and the manner in which this was *actually* translated into practice. This discussion is also helpful in that it highlights how something as apparently uncontentious and homogeneous as ‘English history’ actually requires careful consideration and local contextualization, particularly in a diverse community such as Bradford. With ethnically diverse populations in schools, questions about what constitutes ‘English’ and ‘British’ are very far from straightforward and thus the teaching of history (whose history?) needs to be handled sensitively.

This interview is also particularly valuable in seeing how policymakers’ ideas about history as a critical bond in society was viewed from a teacher’s perspective. Here, the teacher agrees that history can form an important collective bond, but she is sceptical of the degree to which it simply ‘creates national identity’. Moreover, she is anxious both about the government directing history education *and* about allowing full autonomy to teachers in this regard. This is a very valuable perspective from outside the usual commentariat of policymakers and history ‘professionals’. It illustrates how history is seen as critical for forging senses of identity, yet simultaneously problematic and controversial because of the often fraught question of which identity (or identities) should be fostered among schoolchildren at an impressionable age.

This interview thus provides a very useful perspective on history teaching in (some) English schools, but we should recognize that it represents an individual experience and one that is perhaps only representative of a small subsection of the profession. As is the case with the wider project on ‘History in Education’, we would need to recognize the teacher’s perspectives as valuable and informative, but perhaps also cross-reference her positions alongside and in contrast to interviews from other teachers. We should also, of course, allow for the potential distortions of memory and the somewhat artificial dynamics of an interview process in assessing her comments. Nevertheless, this interview extract constitutes a unique and insightful view of the way in which those at the frontline of history in schools wrestle with the questions of history and identity which are often found at the forefront of political debates.

Works cited

‘History in Education’ Project: <https://archives.history.ac.uk/history-in-education/browse/interviews.html>. This includes 68 interviews with teachers, pupils, policymakers and academics: <https://archives.history.ac.uk/history-in-education/browse/interviews.html> (accessed 5 August 2025).

Note

- 1 ‘History in Education’ Project: <https://archives.history.ac.uk/history-in-education/browse/interviews.html> (accessed 5 August 2025). An audio recording of the interview with Maggie Wilson is also available at this weblink.

Further reading

David Cannadine, Jenny Keating and Nicola Sheldon, *The Right Kind of History: Teaching the Past in Twentieth-Century England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

Corinna M. Peniston-Bird, ‘Oral History: The Sound of Memory’, in Sarah Barber and C. M. Peniston-Bird (eds), *History Beyond the Text: A Student’s Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 105–21.

Donald A. Ritchie (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).