As history teachers we are used to encouraging pupils to think; enabling them to express thoughts with clarity both verbally and in written form. Yet, if history as a school subject becomes purely cognitive, then something is missing. History deals with human behaviour and therefore the affective and the emotional form an important part of the subject. How often, though, do we as history teachers consider the emotional responses of our pupils to the topics we teach? Traille has completed her doctoral research with students of African-Caribbean descent and their mothers on their experiences of and attitudes to school history, specifically the way that black people are sometimes portrayed. It makes for stark reading.

Lessons can be drawn about the inclusion of many pupils traditionally represented only on the edges of our history curriculum whether through race, class, sex or religion. This is essential reading before revising any schemes of work for Curriculum 2008.

Recently the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) proposed that the secondary school history curriculum be expanded to include the emotive topics of Slavery and the Holocaust with the hope of giving pupils ‘social and cultural flexibility’ and a ‘feeling for justice and fairness’. These are laudable goals and remind me that in 1988 one of the key aims of the National Curriculum Working Group on History was to create a sense of inclusion for all students, ‘to help give pupils an understanding of their own cultural roots and shared inheritances.’ I wonder just how close we have come to realising this aim.

This article concentrates mainly on the topic of slavery and how students of African-Caribbean heritage think and feel about the way black people are sometimes portrayed in the history curriculum. It is based on a wider PhD study ‘School history and perspectives on the past: A study of students of African-Caribbean Descent and their mothers’ carried out at the Institute of Education, University of London.

Husbands and Pendry observe that ‘Work in history education may have underestimated the extent to which children's capacity to respond to historical tasks is affected by issues of emotional and affective maturation.’ I would suggest that the problem of the research community is not one of under-estimation, but rather that their interest in other aspects of history education has resulted in the neglect of this particular area of study. My work began with the belief that it was important to understand how a particular subject, history, made students of African-Caribbean descent think and feel about themselves. We know a lot about the academic performance of students of African-Caribbean descent from the point of view of educators. However, we know not nearly enough from the point of view of the students. Exploring whether the pictures of the past those students received about black people in history attracted, engaged or constrained was a necessary aspect of the study.

Methodology

I surveyed 124 students of African-Caribbean descent and non-African-Caribbean descent aged 13 to 17 about their ideas of the past and attitudes towards their history lessons in a postal survey. Following analysis of the survey, a further group of 12 students, six of African-Caribbean and six of non African-Caribbean heritage between the ages of 12 and 17, and their mothers were interviewed. The main interviews took place in July and August 2001, some four years after the main questionnaire. During this period aspects
of the National Curriculum for England had become more inclusive of black people in history. Was an educational outcome of this policy an improvement in the motivation and engagement of students of African-Caribbean descent towards and during their history lessons?

Figure 2 highlights some of the complex and subtle ideas that emerged from students of Afro-Caribbean descent and their mothers concerning their ideas about, experiences of and attitudes towards school history.

These ideas are viewed as significant in that they are concerned with the way these students interpret the past, which may impact on their present and future expectations of history in education. The study did not set out to make generalisations about why students of African Caribbean descent felt motivated or alienated during their history lessons. It did however, explore how these students and their mothers understand, perceive and value an education in history.

**What students and mothers of African-Caribbean descent think history is for**

Comments from the questionnaire sample indicate that students of African-Caribbean descent thought history was for making people feel proud of their ancestors, for giving people a sense of knowing where they came from, for bolstering self-esteem and helping academic performance. In the interviews both mothers and their children focused on history as a compass used for navigating the self and society. History taught lessons of respect, of 'never again' and of gaining a feeling of self-respect from ancestors. It helped people fit in. History was also a subject that incorporated a 'feel good factor.' For the respondents of African-Caribbean descent the empirical data indicated that they saw history as having power to grant legitimacy or illegitimacy, pedigree or lack of pedigree. This they assumed was a key factor in accounting for the way people perceived other people. They thought that, along with this legitimacy often came status and glory, or, stereotyping and ignominy.

**What history lessons sometimes did**

1 ‘Imposed identity’

Students of African-Caribbean heritage referred to content in history lessons where teachers or peers imposed identities on black people in the past that they rejected. They brought up instances when they felt implicitly and explicitly negatively stereotyped by teachers and peers because of their black heritage. The imposed identity often reflected a value judgement of a particular 'out group' in direct contrast to the positive attributes of an 'in group'.

In both questionnaire and interview the students of African-Caribbean descent stated that they felt more linked to a
particular history topic because of a direct family or ancestral link. It seemed that being able to make tangible connections with an ethnic group or family members in the past gave an added sense of connection and ownership within history lessons. Thus, perhaps not unsurprisingly, having being taught or having it implied by peers or teachers that black people were inferior or victims did not increase feelings of involvement in a positive way for some of these students. Figure 3 shows an example of this.

The interviews illustrated that emotions of hurt and anger did not solely surface when dealing directly with emotive issues such as slavery. However, slavery was a main issue as four of the African-Caribbean students interviewed referred to it. Three did so without a direct question being asked about the topic.

2 Stereotyping and insensitivity
In the main interviews Shannon, (17) an African-Caribbean student, commenting on the teaching of slavery remarked:

Well maybe you should talk to the teacher making sure that the teacher [pause] says ‘yeah this is how it was, but don’t let this put you off’. ‘Cos really this was still children they are teaching it to. As long as they are explaining it well, then there is no reason why that shouldn’t be shown. It’s the truth.

The students of African-Caribbean descent thought teachers should not be afraid of tackling emotive issues in their history classrooms, as they wanted to be made aware of such factors within history. Again this finding is similar to other research observations. Ideas expressed by the respondents in my study indicate that some students of African-Caribbean descent thought of negative attitudes of peers and teachers about black people in history as personal attacks on their identity. Their responses indicate that the resulting hurt, anger, bewilderment and feelings of temporary exclusion could impact adversely on their learning experience. Researchers have argued that the experience of school must present students with learning experiences which hold their attentions not only briefly, but also can command their loyalties and passions. However, the key issue for students of African-Caribbean heritage and their mothers was that they thought teachers should do so sensitively. The evidence indicates that these students and mothers assumed that teachers should realise the people that they were teaching were ‘still children’. This is a central observation in my study. Learning environments should be safe enough, and curricula wide enough, for views and understandings to be aired and challenged, thereby perhaps making the learning experience more satisfying for all those involved.

3 Teacher attitudes and sins of ignorance
Turning to the issue of good pedagogical practice, educators must become more conscious of affective concerns and develop a more culturally relevant stance when teaching history to students of African-Caribbean descent. First and foremost, there must be a more explicit process that encourages teachers to examine and face their own prejudices, attitudes and beliefs towards others in society. Admittedly this is not a groundbreaking observation, but
When we did a history skit, this wasn’t during my GCSE course it was the year before. It was just slavery. And my Mum actually ended up going in and complaining. Because all of the people that I was with they ganged up on me and were like, ‘well Jodi you’ve got to be the slave. You don’t have a choice about it. You are the slave’. And it was quite funny because I then pointed out that a girl ended up playing a male captain. So the girl can play the male captain [pause] I couldn’t play a white person. So I just you know [pause]. So there is definitely [pause]. And the teacher didn’t pick up on it. She went through the whole topic very unsympathetically and very [pause]. I don’t think she even thought that I might feel uncomfortable for one second. And I definitely was. Very [pause]. I mean you know they talked about when they had dysentery and stuff like this and everyone was going ‘ugh,’ ‘filthy’ and it did make me feel very uncomfortable.

the data in my study suggests that some teachers are creating contexts of misunderstanding, hopefully not because they set out to alienate, but because they are probably unaware or do not understand. It seems quite obvious that the discipline of history often uses language infused with emotion. ‘Imperialism,’ ‘slavery,’ ‘civilised,’ ‘Palestine,’ ‘Israel,’ are words that trip lightly off the tongue and can immediately raise the hackles of some, while enthusing others. A prime example of a lack of awareness or care was demonstrated a few years ago by pictures of Prince Harry attending a ‘colonial and natives’ party wearing a swastika, arousing a furore that he apparently did not realise he would cause and perhaps more recently by ‘Big Brother’ contestants in the row about racist attacks of others. Perhaps even more damaging is the image of the child afraid to speak, as noted by Fred, (13) (interview) who said that he felt forced to remain silent about his black heritage, so as to stop ‘funny looks’. In the eyes of minority groups silence from teachers may imply a measure of complicity to injustice and may leave students feeling vulnerable and open to the attacks of others.

Levstik’s research highlighted ‘safety in silence,’ where teachers avoided ‘topics that make them feel uncomfortable or that they think will disturb their students.’ But their ‘students expressed interest in exactly those aspects of the past that teachers and teacher candidates found profoundly disturbing.’ It seems almost churlish to suggest that some teachers may well sometimes be avoiding dealing with uncomfortable aspects of the past that impact on the present. But, responses in both the early questionnaire and the later interviews in my study suggest just that. One conclusion from this research is that in both the questionnaire and interview sample students indicated that they had pre-existing ideas about uncomfortable aspects of the past and present. Therefore, can we really shield our students from issues that may be controversial and still give them valid pictures of the past? Part of the answer must lie in the way they understand, and we teach, history. Acknowledging, affirming and exposing students to alternative and controversial versions of the past should be part and parcel of ‘good’ history education.

5 Classroom Practice and Academic Performance

The findings in my study indicate that students are unlikely to relate well to a lesson if they feel excluded or belittled by the topic or how a topic is being taught. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that academic performance will probably be negatively affected, since the way students are made to feel in the classroom can impact on their behaviour. In the questionnaire sample students of African-Caribbean descent wrote about history lessons that made them feel ‘like I was going to have a nose bleed’ and be ‘brain dead’. Over eighty per cent of the students of African-Caribbean descent in the questionnaire sample said they did not feel involved during their history lessons. Eighty four per cent of the male
students of African-Caribbean descent in the questionnaire sample claimed that they were ‘bored’ and in the interview sample they complained of feeling belittled and excluded.

There has been much research into the academic performance of African-Caribbean students. At present the poor performance of black males gives considerable cause for concern. Within this study male students of African-Caribbean descent in the questionnaire sample said they felt ‘anger and ‘hatred’ about lessons on slavery. In the interview sample male students of African-Caribbean descent recounted instances when they were ‘dissed’ by teachers and their ancestors were belittled by their peers.

What’s in it for me?
My findings suggested that in cultures where the group, family, the ancestors were valued, people expected to find them in the formal teaching of history. If your notions about history saw it as ‘experience’ then you might need to be able to pick out things that you could easily identify from the past that would help you function in the present and perhaps lend direction for the future. If you were unable, or found it difficult to do this from what you were being taught, you might think formal history was unable to meet your needs and was therefore of little value. If, as suggested by my research, history was viewed mainly in terms of something that celebrated and affirmed the achievements of societies or in terms of progress you would probably look for instances of this in your history lessons. Not seeing self, or being able to include self, as part of those achievements or seeing self as a victim always on the receiving end of beneficence from others might make the discipline seem belittling and irrelevant.

Importantly none of the students interviewed rejected the history that they were studying solely on the grounds of content. However, in the interviews there was rejection of derogatory attitudes held by peers and teachers about black people in history. The often-prescribed medication of including more black historical figures in history lessons as the cure to students of African-Caribbean descents’ alienation from the subject was only a partial answer. Just including more black people in the history curriculum might well become as ineffective as antibiotics that are prescribed for a virus. The History National Curriculum did allow for more inclusion of ‘others’ in history lessons. However, mere inclusion without examining the attitudes, beliefs and the learning experience that children were exposed to and the attitudes that teachers might bring to the classroom may well become as ineffective as mere inclusion of ‘others’ in history lessons. However, mere inclusion without examining the attitudes, beliefs and the learning experience that children were exposed to and the attitudes that teachers might bring to the classroom may well become as ineffective as antibiotics that are prescribed for a virus.

They also rejected what they perceived as negative identities imposed on black people in history trickling down to them in and outside of the history classroom. The way the inclusion of black history material was approached in lessons, and the attitudes displayed by teachers and peers were scrutinised by students of African-Caribbean descent. They would reject or ignore messages that appeared to demean them or what they perceived to be their history. Perceptions of history lessons in terms of celebration and affirmation were perhaps in some ways an inevitable counter-balance to history lessons of the past that were often wholly Euro-centric in nature. If students of African-Caribbean descent were unable to marry what they were being taught, with what they perceived as reality outside the classroom, or what they experienced in the history classroom, then the subject might become in many of their eyes, a waste of time. Intrinsic motivation and positive attitudes towards the discipline of history are probably more difficult to awaken and sustain if students cannot clearly answer the selfish unspoken question ‘what is in it for me?’ Students of African-Caribbean descent may need a framework and the tools to begin to answer that question. We may need to meet them where they are in terms of their understanding of the subject. It may be helpful if students

It may mean trying to find out about the multiple identities that children bring to the classroom, in order to work towards identifying and challenging misconceptions. Above all it means trying to understand both how our students think and how our students feel.

include self, as part of those achievements or seeing self as a victim always on the receiving end of beneficence from others might make the discipline seem belittling and irrelevant.

Shannon (17) interview 2001:
*Well everyone has different backgrounds and its important to learn about what all of their pasts have been like. That really shouldn’t cause any conflict. It is not fair just one person learning about just one thing. If it doesn’t really involve your past you are not really as interested, well for some people.*

Paige, interview 2001 a mother of African-Caribbean heritage:
*We live in a more multicultural society nowadays, no matter where you are, whether it is in London or Leeds or Scotland…Schools have to try to accommodate everyone in their history lessons. Obviously you can’t do everyone-everyone all of the time, but there should be some way of incorporating in the syllabus somewhere along the line, other cultures.*
are guided into seeing history in terms of all humanity being intrinsically linked and seeing themselves as part of the wider picture of the past in all its forms.

**The significance of the findings for history in education**

The implications of these findings for teaching and the learning of history in schools are many. First and foremost, evidence from this study indicates that educators may need greater awareness of the ideas and prior conceptions that students of African-Caribbean descent bring to the history classroom. These include cognitive and emotional conceptions about what these students think history is for. A better understanding of the informal versions of history that students may bring to the classroom will enable us to improve the tailoring of the formal curriculum that we have to offer. Second, there is the need to put more effort into getting children of African-Caribbean descent to see the importance of the discipline in answering their questions. We need to work towards improving the ability of students of African-Caribbean descent to engage in analytical thought processes about formal and informal history learning, to evaluate all versions of the past critically and comfortably. This does not mean ignoring unpleasant issues, but it may mean trying to be more sensitive to the impact that our attitudes or turn of phrase towards people of colour may have on all the children we teach. It does mean striving towards building a conceptual framework that enables all our students to gain a firm grasp of history as a discipline. We need to help them understand what pictures of the past are by giving them a firm conceptual framework to work from and to guide them. We need to help them develop skills that enable them to arrange, retrieve and apply knowledge. It may mean trying to find out about the multiple identities that children bring to the classroom, in order to work towards identifying and challenging misconceptions. Above all it means trying to understand both how our students think and how our students feel.

In summary this appraisal of history teaching should not be seen as a pessimistic evaluation of history teachers. Wonderful things are happening in history classrooms and students of African-Caribbean descent did have good things to say about their history classes. The empirical data indicated that the majority of students taking part in the study liked their teachers and most of what they studied. The students were very protective towards most of their teachers in all sections of the investigation. This indicates that issues of students feeling excluded and alienated from the subject are probably deep seated, not simply a matter of day-to-day personal school relations and history lesson content.

**Implications for policy makers**

The History National Curriculum urgently needs to be rethought to address more fully the identity needs of students of African-Caribbean descent. This research indicates that delivered in certain ways aspects of the History National Curriculum, particularly *Black People of the Americas* is a fertile breeding ground for promoting narrow-mindedness and prejudice in some non-African-Caribbean students. Furthermore, some students of non-African-Caribbean descent found it easy to impose their own distorted readings on the topic. And for a majority of students of African-Caribbean descent this particular topic promoted feelings of alienation, hurt and anger and they found it difficult to identify with black agents that were often either invisible or victims on the periphery of national narratives. Part of the reason for this was possibly that students were not taught to see the big picture or the complexity of the topic. Therefore, there is an urgent need to redress aspects of *Black People of the Americas* especially as this topic almost inevitably seems to focus on slavery.

If, as the QCA suggests we are to teach the topic of slavery it should be taught to students as a major phenomenon of human history that has been a feature of all major civilisations from the ancient world until the present day. It should not be segregated as a phenomenon of the New World. There are at least four key things that students need to understand about the history of slavery. First, that for long periods in the past the muscle power of humans and animals were the only means of energy that people could use. Second, human nature is such that once in a superior position often though military success the use of slaves became both feasible and practical. Third, once this happened slavery became a normal economic activity. This has not stopped. In the twenty-first century some women and children are still exploited in this way. As we mark the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act it has been a huge achievement for people to think that slavery is not normal and for this we must acknowledge the role of Christianity. The Christian notion that we should ‘do unto others as we would ourselves’ was key for individuals and societies coming to the belief that slavery was wrong. Finally, there is the question of why some people become slaves at any point in history. The past demonstrates that most people have enslaved people from their own ethnic group. White people were used as slaves by
non-white societies when they were in ascendancy. When Europeans began to modernise they joined in the enterprise. Black slavery was a joint venture between African, Arabs and Europeans. Now slavery has shifted and gone back to something that is perpetrated by whites on whites, blacks on blacks and Arabs on Arabs. Any teaching of the subject must incorporate these key background factors. If this is done students may begin to grasp the complexity of the issue and see it in terms of a long ranging human dilemma rather than in terms of ethnicity and as a relatively recent problem. (We would hopefully not teach Jewish students about the Holocaust without detailing the history of anti-Semitism, nor should we teach about slavery without giving a coherent broad picture). We must make sure that the history National Curriculum is inclusive and appropriate for all ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, there is a pressing need for the History National Curriculum to include content material that deals with black British Caribbean history, not American history masquerading as the former.

**Conclusion**

This analysis of the ideas held by students of African-Caribbean descent about the past and their history lessons amplifies the need for action in curriculum, pedagogy and future research. The majority of students, whether of African-Caribbean descent or not, enjoyed their history lessons. For a significant number of students of African-Caribbean descent, both alienation and a sense of belonging stemmed from their own preconceptions about history. Feelings of alienation and apathy were compounded by inappropriate and untrue pictures of black people that have trickled down from society and into our classrooms. Because students of African-Caribbean descent were more likely to think of history in terms of their own ancestors they expected to find them in the history curriculum. Ironically when they did come across ‘their own history’ it was the history of enslaved people at the mercy of others and their peers and some teachers were often quick to reinforce negative stereotypes. Expectations of belonging, when disappointed, make alienation all the more powerful and damaging perhaps especially for young people who are trying to find out who they are or may become.

We could choose to ignore emotive and challenging subjects in history lessons, we could choose to argue that personal and social aims as outlined in this study should fall within the field of Personal or Social Education or Citizenship Education. And there is some validity in that argument. Arguably some of the issues that children and mothers of African-Caribbean descent wanted addressed by history lessons may fall outside of the discipline, such as wanting society to afford black people social respect. However, if we take the view that we need to show notions of piety and respect towards the past then perhaps it is partly a role of history lessons (Walsh, 1992). But some issues do not fall outside the remit of the discipline, such as teaching emotive topics sensitively. It is probably to the detriment of history classrooms and ultimately society if all students are not given the tools for exploring and challenging their preconceptions by learning how to accommodate a broad awareness of the past. If students (whether of African-Caribbean descent or not), fail to see the big picture and to grasp properly how history works, then there is a danger that they will form collective memory ghettos with highly distorted 'feel good factors' or become cultural amnesiacs with little sense of direction to the detriment of themselves and society. Borrowing Wertsch's language of mediated action, we might say that students will be deprived of the tools they need to function efficiently in society.11

If we only pay lip service to diversity in the history curriculum, if we alienate through ignorance or disenfranchise through our teaching, if we ignore and remain silent through indifference or fear of causing disharmony, then it should not surprise us when the history have-nots take what they have not been given and create historical narratives that clash with the ideals of democratic societies. Young people hold the future in their hands and the way they think and feel about history is relevant to the present and probably significant in shaping futures. We can, if we are daring enough, teach history in ways that will give them tools to view the past, the present and future, through a variety of windows that will empower them.14 Ultimately democratic societies can only benefit from such a process.

**Figure 5:** Teaching the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade

- Present the topic of slavery as an important phenomenon of human history.
- Highlight that it was to be found in all major civilisations from the ancient world to the present day.
- ‘Remember and emphasise that African-Caribbean history starts centuries before the Middle Passage and continues long after.

**REFERENCES**

10. Ibid.