

Unpacking the suitcase and finding history:

doing justice to the teaching of diverse histories in the classroom

It has become a truism that Britain is a multi-cultural society yet, as Mohamud and Whitburn argue, there is still a great deal of thinking to be done by history teachers in accounting for this diversity in the classroom. Mohamud and Whitburn consider approaches to both curriculum and pedagogy when it comes to teaching about the Somali community in the United Kingdom. Throughout this article, several important principles are raised which might well seek to guide history teachers who wish to consider more carefully their approach to teaching about British cultural diversity.

This article focuses on the development of one historical enquiry for Key Stage 3 students on an almost completely invisible aspect of British history: the British Somali communities. In the context of a big picture of migration and multicultural social development, this enquiry considers key substantive concepts of assimilation and autonomy alongside the second-order concepts of continuity, change and causation. The enquiry has been taught and evaluated in five London comprehensive schools since early 2012 and we are beginning to consider lessons from the impact of the work that could help research the wider development of multicultural 'hidden' histories in Britain. Throughout this article, we emphasise issues in both curriculum design and classroom pedagogy that need to be considered by history teachers. First we consider how teachers should be responsive to their local, national and global communities in the way in which they design appropriate relevant curricula for their students. Then we look at how the demands of preparing such history curricula would call for teachers to engage resourcefully with realms of research. Finally we examine how this work connects with the development of a rigorous 'history pedagogy' that teachers must resolutely claim for all their students.

Curriculum design: relevance and responsiveness

Justice and teaching history

We are convinced that to truly appreciate your own society you must first acknowledge and appreciate its diversity. Living in London, possibly the most diverse city on the planet, offers a great deal of benefits but, at this current stage of its existence, it also contains special challenges, especially for history teachers.¹ If it is indeed part of everyone's full education to understand and debate the complex human story in which we all participate then how do we decide what the complexities are and how do we go about debating them? Our view is that good historical learning takes place in a classroom where justice is central. Moreover, we would follow Amartya Sen's principle that pursuing justice has to involve the tackling of injustice, rather than establishing a perfectly just initial base.² This raises the important question: whose responsibility is it to challenge injustice? In schools the answer must be the teachers whom wider society has entrusted with the general responsibility of establishing a sense of dignity for the young people in their care.

A number of pivotal events since the turn of the current century have brought questions about education and identity firmly into national prominence. Prompted by growing debates in British society about the relationships between race, religion, culture and identities, the Ajegbo report of 2007 highlighted that 'more can be done to strengthen the curriculum so that pupils are taught more explicitly about why British values of tolerance and respect prevail in society and how our national, regional, religious and ethnic identities have developed over time'.³ In our experience, six years on from that report, the landscape remains largely unchanged. This places a considerable weight on history teachers to offer students the opportunity to construct a meaningful sense not only of what it means to be British, but also the role of migrant settlers in constructing this notion. A rigorous history education inducts young people into the process of creating historical accounts, but we must also ask ourselves how are we going to teach the kind of history that can build strong communities and a sense of shared heritage.

The long history of immigration to Britain uncovers a common trend in the way that immigrants are received. The process commonly begins with general indifference followed

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Figure 1: Scheme of work

The British Somali History Enquiry: lesson outlines	
	Why did Somali people finally decide to unpack their suitcases in Britain?
1	The Somali Presence in Cardiff in 1950 & the enquiry question Students examine the photographs of Somalis and work with ideas of assimilation & autonomy, continuity & change, & the suitcase metaphor. End with enquiry question.
2	What factors have shaped Somali life and culture? An examination of the impact of the Indian Ocean, Islam and the desert on the Somali people. Students also look more closely at the enquiry question, continuity & change.
3	When did the first Somalis come to Britain? The lesson begins with an exploration of the British Empire & the Suez Canal in the 19 th C. and the significance for Somalia. Then we look at Cardiff's race riots in 1919.
4	What factors pushed Somalis to settle in Britain from the 1980s? This lesson looks at the history of Somalia from independence in 1960 through to the dictatorship of Siad Barré, his downfall and civil war.
5	The lives of the Somali Elders in Cardiff
6	Continuity and change in the Elders' lives The lesson includes a look at Mo Farah, assimilation and autonomy

by suspicion and in some cases demonisation ending with acceptance and inclusion.⁴ The current status of the Somali community lies somewhere between the second and third stages. The misfortune of the Somali community is that their attempt to integrate into British society comes at a time when there is no shortage of negative stories associated with their homeland, from extreme poverty to terrorism and piracy. If one were only to use the mainstream media as a guide for understanding the Somali community then it would seem that nothing good could possibly come from that corner of the globe. For the 30,000 Somali pupils studying in London's secondary schools this perception can create difficulties.⁵ Since the media seldom attempt to present balance, in a school context that challenge falls on these same young people and it is one that many, understandably, may relinquish. The double injustice is, first, to be unfairly portrayed and, second, to have to disprove the negative portrayals of your community. This can prove to be a crushing burden on many young people who have this responsibility unjustly thrust upon them. History teachers are in a strong position to challenge these injustices through shaping curricular approaches that undermine prejudices with valid historical accounts.

British Somali history and the enquiry process

If students are to receive the full benefit of exploring such hidden histories then it is imperative that they engage with the material in a reflective, meaningful way. For us, this would always be achieved through approaching the history through enquiry. The challenge with teaching hidden histories will always be getting the students to care about what they are learning. There is an acceptance among many students of the value of studying the commonly-taught topics; often these topics have large-scale global implications and so conveying their significance can be relatively straightforward.⁶ Getting a diverse range of students to care about the lives of Somali migrants would be a more difficult task. To get students to care about the history and not take the path of least resistance, they first need to be presented with historical problems that are relevant to them and that they have some interest in understanding.⁷ Based on this belief, we designed the lessons around an 'enquiry question', an idea that had been developed in many English schools in the past decades, building particularly on the work of Riley and Counsell, and the Schools' History Project.⁸ Enquiry, according to Dewey, should begin with a problem; in order to lay the ground for reflective thought the process must begin with 'some perplexity, confusion, or doubt'.⁹ For us this 'felt difficulty' was trying to understand when the nature of the Somali community in Britain changed from a nomadic, male-dominated one to the more settled community that exists today. The felt difficulty for many, we believed, would arise from the fact that there were Somalis in Britain even before the 1990s and it was on this belief that the enquiry was rooted.

Our own realisation of the nature of this problem came about while preparing a series of Black History Month talks for the Greater London Boroughs of Merton and Sutton

in October 2011. Abdul had decided to speak about the general challenges facing the Somali community while also exploring the origins of the most prevalent myths about Somalis at a time when coverage of Indian Ocean piracy was almost reaching fever pitch. Despite having a strong sense of Somali identity, Abdul found the prospect of delivering Somali history to a British audience a daunting one. Like most nomadic peoples the Somalis have a rich oral tradition, with the elders of each community entrusted with preserving the collective memory. As we did not have large-scale access to these oral sources we had to rely on alternatives such as immigration statistics and media reports. The talks were well received and we had a feeling that this history belonged in the classroom. However, it was quite clear that we would have to broaden our search for sources; government statistics and newspaper articles simply wouldn't be enough to fully involve school students in the kind of history we wanted to develop. We were committed to the first key principle of our approach to developing history curricula in schools: they should be *relevant*, and teachers should be *responsive* to the ways in which modern British society is developing, but this was just the start.

Curriculum preparation: research and resourcefulness

Our second vital principle for developing history curricula that will explore hidden histories is *research*. One of the greatest barriers to a more diverse school history curriculum is not external (in the form of policy documents or a didactic secretary of state) but internal: hard-pressed teachers often teach what is readily available to them, usually through existing materials in their department, textbooks or the internet. There is a limited amount of high-quality material available at present on the teaching of Black history in schools, but very little on the teaching of Black *British* history. So, Black history in so many schools remains tied to the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the African-American Civil Rights Movement; for children in British multicultural classrooms this has limited relevance.¹⁰ Activists like Dan Lyndon have given teachers access to innovative materials

Figure 2: The story of Mohamoud Kalinle



Mohamoud Kalinle

I was born in Arabsiyoo in 1912. Arabsiyoo is a small town west of Hargeisa and is known for its many farms. My father owned many horses. I was born near a famous tree called Agamso in Arabsiyoo. We used to live in a Somali traditional tent. We used to have a lot of camels but we didn't spend much time with them. There is no Somali without camels.

Eventually I sold my boat and went to Marseilles, France, to look for jobs. I worked in the ports and travelled all around the world. I left Marseilles and went to Paris and from there to Le Havre and eventually I came to Dover. From there I came to Cardiff in 1937 and have lived here ever since.

I joined the Merchant Navy and later the Royal Navy and worked as a fireman and donkeyman in the engine room. I worked on ships and destroyers; I fought in the Second World War, helping to destroy some ships and two fighter aircraft in Malta.

I was the leader of the Somali Community in Cardiff and also one of the Trustees of the Mosque on Maria street. My wife, Doreen, (her Somali name was Halima) was Welsh but she died in 2004- we have a son called Jama.



The map shows a red line connecting Hargeisa in Somalia to Cardiff in Wales, with a stop at Dover in England. Pins are placed on each location.

on some important, yet little-known Black British history figures, such as John Blanke, the Black Tudor trumpeter and Walter Tull in the First World War, which some people have accessed, but nobody has provided materials on the history of the Somali communities in Britain.¹¹ We knew that if we were to try to do justice to the history of the British Somali people, we would have to undertake the historical research ourselves.

When Lawrence Stenhouse talked about the importance of *teacher-researchers* in the 1970s, he was thinking principally of action researchers who would investigate the pedagogy of their classrooms and the impact of the enacted curriculum therein; he was probably not considering that the teacher would have to research the content of the curriculum that was to be learned.¹² This is an enormous undertaking for teachers: to take up the challenge of developing innovative and less conventional histories, with no folders of university notes to rummage through for knowledge and no textbooks to inspire thinking, let alone to furnish entire schemes of work. The 2008 History National Curriculum in England encouraged teachers to select aspects of diverse histories, particularly reflecting the different cultures and ethnicities in contemporary Britain, but it is very challenging for teachers to develop this work with limited subject knowledge.¹³ For us, the 'felt difficulty' that had developed since the Merton and Sutton presentation gave an overriding impetus to find materials to use in school, however meagre at the start; we would have to develop our own subject knowledge, and quickly. We realise that teachers have to be highly *resourceful* if they are to find adequate sources for such enquiries without falling behind in all the other responsibilities that call on their time.

We had begun with Abdul's knowledge from his British Somali community in North London, but this would not be enough to engage young people in an enquiry, so we strove to find visual sources that might work as *stimulus material*.¹⁴ We found two photographs from Cardiff in 1950 that showed Somalis in a traditional setting in a mosque and in a westernised setting in a house.¹⁵ We had already considered the impact of native nomadic life on the lives of Somalis who came to be settlers in Britain, and these two pictures consolidated the two key concepts of assimilation and autonomy. These ideas could be applied to any immigrant communities, but had stark relevance to the circumstances of these Somali people who had traditionally often lived without ties to a fixed western notion of settlement and community, but who nonetheless had a vibrant culture and sincere religion. Moreover, the year of the photographs challenged the idea that Somalis were very 'new arrivals' in Britain, and the pictures would intrigue the students in both time and place. We had the basis for an interesting lesson to take to a school, and in November 2011 George Mitchell School in Leyton invited us to work with Year 9 classes for one lesson using these resources. The success of our few hours with this lively and respectful school community inspired us to develop that single lesson into a full six-lesson enquiry; many more resources were needed for such sequential development.

The pictures pointed us to Cardiff, so we undertook a visit to the Butetown History and Arts Centre in Cardiff Bay in January 2012. We were introduced to Glenn Jordan and his book documenting images and stories of Somali elders in the area; this proved inspiring and convinced us that we now had

the material to develop a historical enquiry.¹⁶ The lives and images of the men revealed a diversity of experience across the twentieth century, and the dual notions of assimilation and autonomy were evident in dress, demeanour and dialogue. We believed that Key Stage 3 students would be able to sustain engagement over a number of lessons with real-life characters whose stories encompassed: passage to Britain across the seas; participation in wars fighting for Britain; building families sometimes in Britain and sometimes in Somalia. This is illustrated in the case study of Mohamoud Kalinle, whose story and picture appear in Figure 2. We were initially drawn to Kalinle because of his picture and the idiosyncratic way that he wore his medals; some of our more astute students were able to pick up on that and lead the class in a discussion of the limits to his assimilation suggested by the casual dispersal of medals across his jacket. His story also contains a blend of diverse elements in a very active life. The idea that a tree marked his birthplace evoked a very traditional nomadic society, but his marriage to Doreen in Cardiff was a rather audacious move in post-war Britain in both communities; her own assimilation in taking a Somali name was an additional talking point.

Pedagogy: rigour and resolve

Finally, the teaching of more diverse relevant history must always be *rigorous*. This is not merely to placate the sceptics who might marginalise the work as ‘politically correct’: rather it is integral to its value. Since the 1970s when Black studies emerged on a major scale in colleges and schools in the USA, there has been a call to ensure that any such curricular

innovations keep tightly to the disciplinary approaches to history that were acknowledged as the essence of the subject.¹⁷ It was not enough that new curricula were relevant to those who had been ignored by mainstream academics, they must also satisfy the commonly-accepted protocols of the latter, so that they would have respect and longevity; so with our work on Black history in Britain. It must not sit alone in the month of October, even though the stimulus of Black History Month was critical for the inception of all this work; it must be an integral part of the regular work of a school history department.

Having established a felt difficulty that had relevance for our students, and then gathered some stimulating resources that illustrated well the key concepts we wanted students to explore, we came to the fashioning of an engaging enquiry question. We wanted a question that would intrigue and engage the students across six lessons and several weeks, so we needed to find something more than a simple question that focused on our key second-order concept of continuity and change. ‘How far did the experiences of Somali men in Britain change during the twentieth century?’ simply would not do. During the initial talk in Merton and Sutton in October 2011, Abdul had introduced the metaphor of a suitcase to illustrate the difference between a nomad and a settler, and related it to the lives of the Somalis with the idea of ‘packed’ and ‘unpacked’ cases. So the question we used emerged as ‘Why did Somali people finally decide to unpack their suitcases in Britain?’ We chose the word ‘finally’ to establish the ideas of change and continuity; even though the initial word of the question is ‘why’ rather than ‘when’

Figure 3: Using a timeline to keep the chronology clear

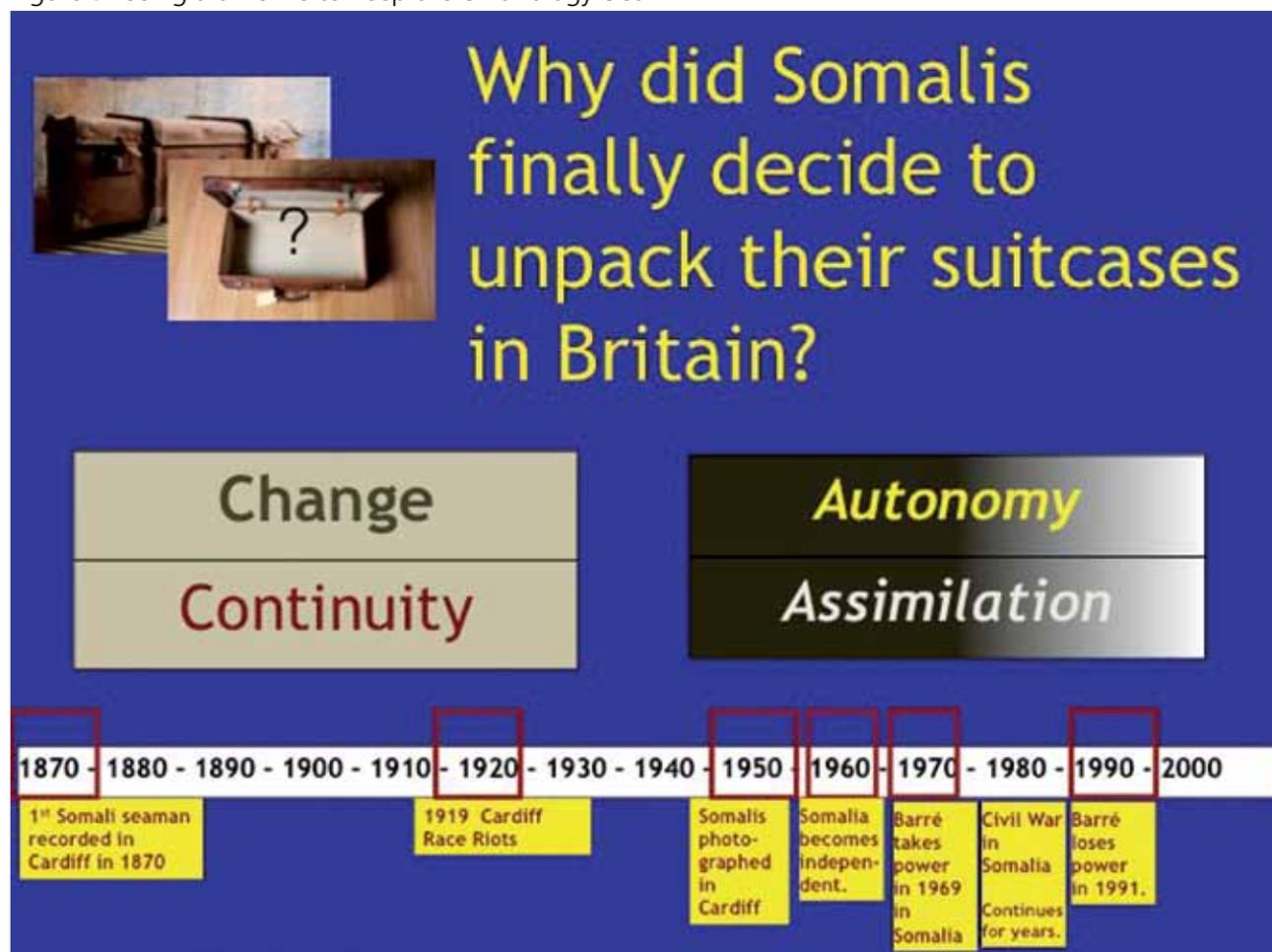
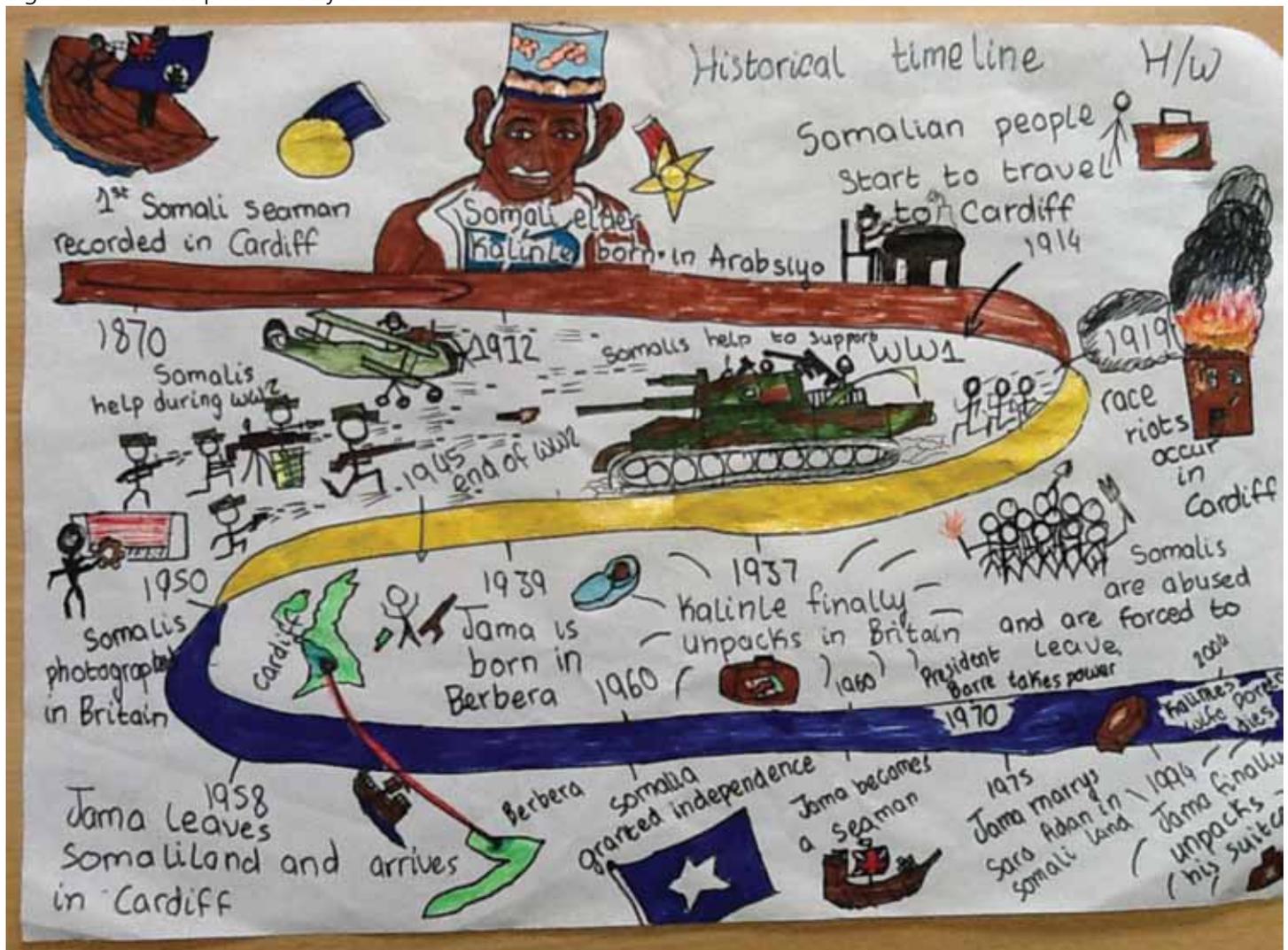


Figure 4: timeline produced by a student



(the conventional start to such questions), we think ‘finally’ has such a strong temporal sense that it impels students to consider the notion of change as well as the idea that there would have been a long period without change. Using ‘when’ might prompt the students to consider particular moments in the narrative of their lives, rather than focusing on the complex nature of their changing thoughts and attitudes, which may not actually be fixed at a particular moment. We are still debating this aspect, However, and readers’ comments would be most welcome.

Another key aspect of our pedagogical approach to the students’ rigorous historical thinking in the enquiry was the chronological dimension. Having established the ‘felt difficulty’ by using pictures from the centre of the narrative, we intended then to go back to the late nineteenth century and consider Somali sailors arriving in Cardiff after the construction of the Suez Canal. Then we would move forward to the First World War period and beyond. To help the students keep a sense of this shifting time focus, we included a time-line on our presentation slides during lessons, and the students also had that in their books; an example can be seen in Figure 3. At the end of the enquiry one of the final outcome tasks we asked the students to undertake was a time-line for the lives of one or more of the Somali elders we had studied; the example in Figure 4 was produced by a Year 8 student at Westminster City School and incorporated general events as well as key moments in the

lives of two of the elders, Kalinle and Jama. The students there were also asked to write an answer to the enquiry question, and the students commented at the end of the lessons about the way the enquiry approach had helped them to produce that final assessment (see Figure 5).

Undertaking this work with groups of young people who are new to engaging with history in a rigorous way is a particular challenge, and taking our British Somali enquiry to academies in challenging circumstances compelled us to look particularly at the literacy demands of the work and find ways in which they could convey understanding apart from lengthy written assessments. There is a good deal of evidence of schools seeing history as a subject that higher-attaining students should be pursuing beyond Key Stage 3; it is often seen as inappropriate for those who are not guaranteed higher GCSE grades.¹⁸ We did not want our enquiry to fuel that kind of thinking, but rather to show ways in which the full range of students can engage with historical rigour. Working with relevant researched histories in a rigorous way will require history teachers to be absolutely resolute, sometimes in the face of formidable challenges and arguments that would deprive young people of the history that they would be proud of. We decided that a more imaginative writing framework might help, and, prompted by our own task of producing a book proposal on teaching Black history in schools, we decided to get the students in one school to produce a book proposal for the

autobiography of one of the Somali elders (see Figure 6).¹⁹ The choice of book title produced the delightful 'Kalinle Unpacked' from one student, and the smaller blocks of text required enabled students to convey their ideas without being too daunted. The context of a book proposal maintained a sense of academic rigour, whereas some other contemporary contexts, like 'Tweets' and 'Facebook posts' can sometimes detract from that.

Conclusion: impact and futures

The most delightful response that we had for our work on British Somali history came in George Mitchell School, right at the beginning of the research and development stage. A group of white working-class boys had been sitting together in a group in one of the Year 9 classes and had been thoroughly engaged in the one-hour pilot lesson we had shared with them. After the lesson they told their history teacher that they had really appreciated the lesson because it 'had taught us about our friends'. Too often the value of multicultural history has been presented in terms of individual identities and the importance of inclusion of particular hidden histories to boost the self-esteem of that heritage group. By contrast, these boys reminded us that community identity can have an integrated plurality that means the hidden histories of one ethnic minority community can engage the wider community in appreciation of how far the 'nation' has come.²⁰ The 'felt difficulty' in our multicultural classes can transcend narrow views of identity, and students can find social cohesion in plural

diverse histories rather than with a homogeneous diet of 'Our Island Story'.

The most surprising and cautionary response came from Somali students. Our simplistic notions of the value of diverse histories to encourage participation and progress of ethnic minority students were exploded when we found that the most disengaged students in the classes that studied the enquiry were Somali boys, who often adopted a sceptical and disengaged stance in the lessons. More surprising was that these same students expressed satisfaction with the lessons in subsequent discussions after the lessons finished. When questioned about this incongruity some mentioned a fear that the lessons would bring up aspects of their history that could make them the focus of ridicule, or that they personally may find difficult to take pride in, and it was only at the end of the six lessons that they realised this was not the case. We think that the cause of their reticence in class related directly to the dominant media agenda concerning Somalis: piracy, unrest and famine. Their anxieties were probably further compounded by the fact that the lessons were deliberately constructed to maintain intrigue and to allow for development through the disclosure of information in stages. This may have had Somali students afraid of the next slide of the presentation: would it be a hostage-taking pirate? Or a malnourished child or some war-torn landscape? Although our aim was to use current news items as a means of engaging students in the positive history we were to explore later, in the words of Sam Wineburg 'taking them from the familiar to the strange', we were in fact at risk of opening up a Pandora's box of social and cultural anxieties.²¹

Figure 5: Student comments

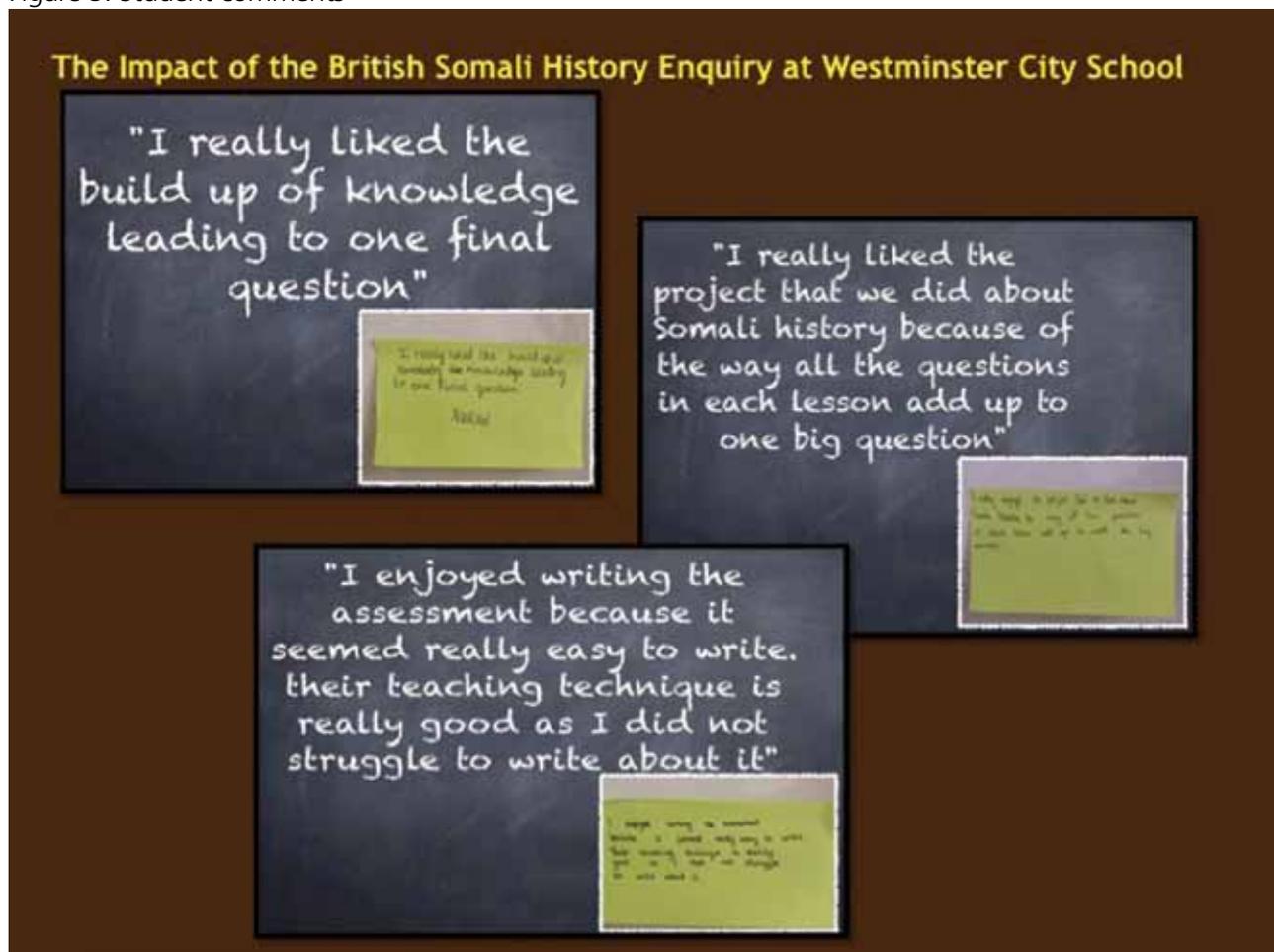


Figure 6:

A Somali Autobiography – an assignment

answering the question:
Why did the Somalis finally decide to unpack their suitcases in Britain?

You are going to produce the outline of a book that publishes the story of one of the Somali Elders that we have studied in this unit: Kalinle or Jama, or you could include both of them in your book. You need to consider how the story (or stories) can be used to answer the question about ‘unpacking the suitcase’, so you should try to include key words in your work: assimilation, autonomy, continuity, change, nomad and settler.

You need to choose different parts of the book: the title, the chapter headings, pictures, and a summary of the story of the author. You should also add some comments from important people who have read the book and are recommending it to other people.

Complete the flyer sheet for your book.

In discussing the development of Black history in schools, we were well versed in critiques of curricula that are filled with uncomfortable narratives of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, and the problems that these cause for students of the African continent and its diaspora, but we had naively assumed that a positively-oriented enquiry would not have such challenges for students, especially where the history had not been considered in any other academic context.²² We were reminded that narratives are constructed outside the classroom, in playgrounds, households and numerous social gatherings, and that our young people absorb these narratives and often make use of them to tease and provoke their peers. So, in the same way that young Black students can be deluged with ‘Kunta Kinte’ jokes in the playground when their teacher announces the class is going to study slavery, the Somali students would now be vulnerable to mocking when Somali history becomes the focus.²³ Unfortunately the mockery may extend beyond the students themselves; we were stunned to hear that a teacher who wanted to develop our enquiry in a school was faced with an incredulous head of department who scoffed at the notion of teaching six lessons of ‘pirates’ for a Somali history enquiry. The resolution that is needed for teachers who want to develop this history is not only in relation to the rigour of its pedagogical processes but also in defending the relevance of a potentially maligned and misrepresented community. In developing better history education in our schools, there has been an emphasis on handling the misconceptions that our young people have in relation to key metacognitive historical concepts, such as causation and change, and a good deal of attention to overcoming them has been given in *Teaching History* articles over the years.²⁴ Less attention has been given to misconceptions that impede students’ grasp of substantive content, but this is essential for the development of strong

culturally-responsive pedagogy and curricula.²⁵ We hope that teachers will be ready to look beyond the preconceptions about communities such as the British Somali people, and guide their students through enquiries that explore such hidden histories. We have recently formed an organisation that seeks to work with teachers to do this, and have called it ‘Doing Justice to History’.²⁶

If all young people are to benefit from relevant, well-researched, rigorous history the teachers not only have to be responsive to the needs of the community, and resourceful in developing hidden histories, they finally need to be absolutely resolute, sometimes in the face of formidable challenges and arguments. Doing justice to history is giving young people history they would want to take home with pride.

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