

Social tensions in studying ancient history

Frances Foster¹ | Juliette Wise²

¹Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

²Independent Scholar

Correspondence

Frances Foster, Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, 184 Hills Road, Cambridge CB2 8PQ, UK.
Email: fjf20@cam.ac.uk

Funding information

No external funding was received

Abstract

This article reports on the findings of an investigation into the tensions perceived by students aged 14–15 studying Ancient History in England, between their interest in the ancient world itself and the status of Ancient History as a curriculum subject. We use Young's distinction between Powerful Knowledge and Knowledge of the Powerful as a critical tool. The empirical data arise from an interview study across three different school communities in England of 14–15-year-old students studying Ancient History as a curriculum subject. 32 students took part in the interview study across the three schools. Students focused on the ancient world's personal relevance for their own lives. They also ascribed value not just to expertise about the ancient world but to understanding how others responded to it. However, the students all felt that studying Ancient History was a sign of an elite and privileged education, an image with which they did not feel entirely comfortable.

KEYWORDS

ancient history, classics, curriculum, powerful knowledge, privilege

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

© 2022 The Authors. *The Curriculum Journal* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of British Educational Research Association

INTRODUCTION

The study of Ancient History at secondary level in the UK has held a marginal place on the curriculum. While an A-Level qualification (national examination) for students aged 16–19 in Ancient History has existed for many decades, the subject does not form part of the 11–14 National Curriculum for England, Wales or Northern Ireland. It is not offered as an option in Scotland at any level. In 2007, the body responsible for running and examining the A-Level qualification in Ancient History nearly withdrew the subject altogether. However, vociferous protests from the subject community took the proposals to the House of Lords, where a cross party committee demanded that the subject be reinstated. It was shortly afterwards in 2009 that the qualification for a GCSE (national examination at 16) was first introduced, available to 14–16-year-old students attending schools who elected to teach the subject. Consecutive UK governments subsequently included Ancient History among the subjects which contributed to the new measures of school performance in England, the EBacc (introduced in 2010) and Progress 8 (introduced in 2016). The EBacc (English Baccalaureate) is a 14–16 curriculum including English, Maths, science, a language and one of history or geography. Progress 8 is a value-added performance measure, which aims to calculate the progress students make in up to 8 subjects between the ages of 10–11 and 15–16. These decisions to include Ancient History in measures of school performance suggest continued government support for the subject as part of an approved curriculum.

Ancient History does not require knowledge of ancient languages, and all source materials are presented in English translations. It was designed to be accessible to students who have no prior knowledge of the ancient world, its languages or cultures. Liddel and Harrison, in their retrospective account of the political rescue of Ancient History refer to the ‘democracy of the subject’. They argue that since Ancient History A-Level (examination at 18+) ‘was [...] disproportionately studied within the FE [Further Education] sector’, Ancient History’s withdrawal would have been ‘socially regressive’ (2013, p. 22). Ancient History GCSE (examination at 16+) is often taught in schools which offer no other curricular engagement with the ancient world.

Ancient History as an examined course potentially stretches across many millennia, from 3000 BCE to 500 CE. The topics covered vary, depending on what schools select from the options offered by the Awarding Body that designs the qualification. Since its inception as a 16+ qualification, it has been possible to study and teach Ancient Egypt, Minoans, Mycenae, Persia, Greece, the Hellenistic world, Alexander’s Empire, the Kings of Rome, the Roman Republic, the Roman Empire and the Celtic world. There is a strong focus on political history in the current specification (examined 2018–2023), but some attention is paid to social history as well. Students are expected to study and engage historically with primary sources—texts (in translation) such as Herodotus and Livy, and material culture such as sculpture, architecture and numismatic sources. Thus, students who study Ancient History acquire broad knowledge about the ancient world and gain the skills to help enable them to evaluate what we know about events which happened during the periods studied.

This article reports on the findings of an investigation into the tensions perceived by students aged 14–15 studying Ancient History in three comprehensive schools in England. It investigates two key questions: how students studying Ancient History at school perceive the ancient world, and how students perceive and understand the status of the study of Ancient History. We use Young’s distinction between Powerful Knowledge and Knowledge of the Powerful as a tool to help us understand the social tensions that the study of Ancient History may raise. We address issues of access, since Ancient History as a discrete subject is not part of the curriculum in every school. We worked with students in three schools from different demographics to explore their thoughts about the ancient world and the study of Ancient History. Our analysis first examines students’ responses to the ancient world, and

the personal relevance they drew from it. Secondly, we evaluate how students perceive the study of Ancient History as a curriculum subject. We ask how these students understand the ancient world, and how they perceive this study as part of their curriculum.

LITERATURE REVIEW: POWERFUL KNOWLEDGE

Like its modern counterpart, Ancient History focuses on the study of written and material sources, as well as developing the historical skills which are required to interpret those sources. These two aspects of Ancient History, the study of primary sources from antiquity and the development of the historical skills to interpret them align to Michael Young's Knowledge of the Powerful and Powerful Knowledge respectively. Young suggests that 'formal education has some kind of monopoly in providing access to powerful knowledge that is unavailable from everyday experience' (2008, p. 182). More recently, Young and Muller have clarified that the 'power' of Powerful Knowledge is 'potentially available to all who acquire it' (2019, p. 198). They are clear that Powerful Knowledge is not simply factual knowledge about things, people and events, the substantive content which Bertram calls 'the substance of the past' (2012, p. 436). Powerful Knowledge is the conceptual knowledge within a subject, the knowledge and understanding of disciplinary norms and substantive concepts. The study of Ancient History involves much more than listing often debatable factual events, and this forms disciplinary or procedural knowledge.

This works in opposition to the other half of the dyad, Knowledge of the Powerful, which refers to the interests of that knowledge's originators (Young, 2013, p. 195). Knowledge of the Powerful, therefore, is the substantive knowledge of those in power, and its value lies in its capacity to emulate the powerful. As a result, Young and Muller stress the 'fundamental democracy' of Powerful Knowledge (2019, p. 198), and argue that 'any curriculum should be based on an entitlement' to Powerful Knowledge (2013, p. 231). They point out that the capacity to restrict access to Powerful Knowledge is what creates Knowledge of the Powerful (2019, p. 198). These concepts have created debates about the nature and value of different types of knowledge and its place on the school curriculum. The knowledge gained through studying Ancient History—like that gained in other mainstream academic subjects on the school curriculum—forms part of Young's 'Powerful Knowledge'. It can help students go beyond their everyday experiences because it allows them to reflect, from a safe distance, on a world which is in many ways quite alien from the everyday world. At the same time, the ancient world has played a key part in forming the world students live in today, and so the knowledge gained in analysing and evaluating it also helps them to reflect on their own world.

Beck has suggested that the subject-based curricula of elite schools are strongly grounded in Young's concept of Powerful Knowledge (Beck, 2013, p. 179). The idea that Powerful Knowledge governs curriculum in elite institutions is particularly relevant when considering subjects which focus on the ancient world, such as Ancient History. There is a long-standing association of classical subjects (those studies concerned with the languages and cultures of the ancient world) with elite education. The term 'classical', for instance, stems from the Latin word '*classicus*', which refers to someone 'belonging to the highest class of citizens' (Glare, 2012, p. 365). Thus, the word already suggests that 'classical' Latin or Greek are superior to other, later or earlier forms of these languages, as well as indicating their superiority to other languages. Guillory points out how, already in the eighteenth century, the classical languages of Latin and Greek continued to define the 'most elite educational capital' in contrast to those languages used in everyday contexts and for vocational purposes (1993, p. 119). By the nineteenth century, those few students who were able to access university were required to have followed a curriculum 'based on the classics

(Latin and Greek, Ancient History)' in addition to mathematics, languages, science, history, geography, drawing, and music (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2016, p. 151). This idea has continued, and Schein observes that as a result, classics and classicism have 'served to buttress the authority and privilege of an economic and social elite' (1999, p. 289) who were culturally defined by their knowledge and familiarity with things 'classical'. As a result, there are tensions and paradoxes surrounding the curriculum of a 'classical education'. On the one hand, its association with elite institutions (both in antiquity and more recently) positions it as Knowledge of the Powerful, since it offers the promise of reproducing privilege. On the other hand, the challenges of studying societies and events so far removed from everyday experience can take students beyond their own environments and introduce them to new ways of seeing the world, which is an aspect of Powerful Knowledge. This tension creates an ambiguity about the purpose and status of Ancient History in the curriculum.

Additionally, much of the surviving written material from the ancient world was written by and for the elite and educated minority. In societies where more than basic literacy was an expensive skill, writing was reserved for an elite minority. Writing materials were costly, difficult to use, and so written texts were luxury items. Therefore, the extended texts which survive from the ancient world were produced within the context of an elite literate culture. The authors wrote in a highly literary register of formal language, which is intended to demonstrate their skill and control in using a variety of language far removed from that in which they might hold a conversation. It is often a similar case with material culture, in that surviving artefacts tend to be the more expensive, better made, luxury goods which were owned, built or commissioned by powerful and wealthy individuals. The surviving evidence that provides access to the ancient world thus contributes further to these tensions. The study of the languages, cultures and histories of the ancient world is often a study of the elites and their world, which involves learning about those who held power in antiquity. It involves studying the 'artefacts, activities and institutions' which were validated as 'the objects of aesthetic appreciation, evaluation and criticism by a relatively small, well educated, well trained and well-off segment of the population' (Schein, 1999, p. 294). At the same time, the very otherness of this material and the world it unlocks—as well as the many questions raised by lacunae in the evidence—bring about opportunities for disciplinary knowledge. It also takes students beyond their everyday lives, into a world very different to the one they normally inhabit, and introduces them to new ways of seeing. However, the conflict between the Powerful Knowledge that the study of Ancient History provides and the study about those who held this power is complex and can at times be uncomfortable. The question we seek to investigate is, how do students studying Ancient History understand and justify this curriculum?

ACCESS TO ANTIQUITY

Guillory argues that, in the case of literary study, schooling regulates and distributes curriculum unequally by regulating access to literary texts (1993, p. ix). Ancient History is not part of the mainstream secondary curriculum in any of the nations in the United Kingdom at secondary level, and thus only a minority of students whose schools have chosen to offer the subject at GCSE will have the opportunity to access it. However, in twenty-first century society it still offers what Guillory terms as an overall concept 'knowledge-capital' which can be displayed and 'thereby entitles its possessor to the cultural and material rewards of the well-educated person' (1993, p. ix). Even though Ancient History does not include any study of ancient languages, it nonetheless involves reading texts by authors such as Arrian, Livy and Polybius. These texts are complex, not least because they are steeped in cultural knowledge which was part of the formation and expectation of the elite culture within which

they were constructed. Reading and understanding these texts therefore requires the ability to access what Guillory terms knowledge-capital 'in linguistic form' (1993, p. 71). That is, students need to learn to read and decode a very specific type of literary language and interpret references to social and religious phenomena, before they can then apply the skills of historical analysis.

The limited availability of Ancient History on the 14–16 curriculum—since schools may opt to offer the subject but are not required to do so—restricts access for the broader student population. While individual school leaders may have particular and localised reasons for their choices behind their curriculum offering, the result is that access to the ancient world through Ancient History is often determined by chance for young people. That is to say, it depends on the choices of curriculum designers in schools within a local area, which determine which young people will have access to the course of study. This exemplifies Young's idea of Knowledge of the Powerful, since the Powerful Knowledge gained through studying Ancient History is restricted by those people who control the curriculum. Around 90% of young people in England, Wales and Northern Ireland attend state funded comprehensive schools. These schools are funded entirely by the government, charge no fees and do not select students on the basis of attainment or aptitude. Instead, they offer education to all students living within a certain geographical area local to the school. These schools were set up in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s with the express aim of providing all students with access to all curricula. And yet, among these schools, access to part of the curriculum in the form of Ancient History is restricted. In practice, an uneven distribution of subjects in different parts of the country governs young people's access to this curriculum area, leading to unequal access to Powerful Knowledge. Harris has demonstrated that issues of unequal access affect mainstream school history (2020, p. 121), which, unlike Ancient History, is a curricular requirement for state funded schools in England, Wales and Northern Ireland for students aged 11–13. Harris observes a concerning correlation between access to a disciplinary approach to teaching history and the socio-economic status of an area and school type (2020, p. 122). This suggests that issues of curriculum access are more complex than the simple availability of different subjects, although the total absence of a subject closes off access in an even more absolute sense.

Ancient writers of history, who operated within conventions which were very different from what we understand as historical conventions today, raise particular questions about how and why they report history as they do. The skills and understanding developed through this study provide Powerful Knowledge. At the same time, ancient writers of history provide access to the substantive knowledge of those in power, particularly in the formal framework of curriculum. However, increasingly there are other, less formal ways in which young people (and the population in general) may gain access to information and substantive Knowledge of the Powerful about the ancient world. Popular culture offers many young people a way into the ancient world, and over the past twenty years a huge number of cultural artefacts in different media, which may be classified as popular culture, have been produced, taking aspects of the ancient world as their subject matter. For example, video games such as the *Assassin's Creed* or *Total War* franchises allow players to explore different ancient societies. The various *Percy Jackson* franchises provide access to Greek, Roman and Egyptian mythology. Caroline Lawrence's *Roman Mysteries* series and sequel series enable young readers to learn about Roman daily life and social history, albeit heavily fictionalised. Setting aside aesthetic value judgements from cultural significance, popular culture offers increasing access to familiarity with aspects of the ancient world. However, despite their huge popularity, such artefacts are frequently dismissed as 'banal and quotidian' (Martindale, 2006, p. 11) by curriculum designers, rather than being considered a formal method of acquiring knowledge capital and familiarity with the ancient world. More recently, Keen has argued that dismissing popular culture in this way reinforces a cultural canon of privileged

texts (Keen, 2014, pp. 5–6; Keen, 2019, p. 13), which in turn upholds the hierarchy of elitism. Some of the familiarity which young people have about the ancient world comes from outside formal educational environments, and as a result lacks authorisation as a form of knowledge capital.

DESIRE FOR POWERFUL KNOWLEDGE

Despite the difficulties associated with achieving it, Powerful Knowledge is still a highly desirable commodity. Hayward and Williams found that young people who had failed in extreme ways in mainstream education nonetheless wanted to study mainstream subjects, they ‘wanted access to powerful knowledge’ because they knew it would help them to achieve more (2011, p. 183). Subjects are accorded authority by their inclusion into the school curriculum, and thereby allowing students to gain what they may perceive as the same ‘capital’ as other students at their own school, and as students at other neighbouring schools. For students whose only encounter with the ancient world has been through popular culture, unendorsed and outside of the authorised curriculum, formal study of the ancient world may appear either as beyond their reach or not suitable or worthy of study. In both cases, this attitude results from the absence of the availability of these subjects from the curriculum to which students have access.

Baker and Mastin, teachers of Ancient History at comprehensive schools, have argued that the ancient world ‘holds a natural fascination’ for students, since it includes mythology, adventures and heroic characters who are the focus of the stories (2012, p. 8). These are all features that books, films and games marketed at young people capitalise on. Yet, Ancient History often holds a marginal place on individual schools’ curricula for many reasons. It is a relative newcomer onto the 14–16 curriculum, and so in schools with no established Classics department it is often taught by history teachers, who may lack confidence in dealing with entirely new material. Since 2013, there have been around one thousand candidates entered for Ancient History GCSE across England, Wales and Northern Ireland each year. This number has remained very stable, although it is a very small proportion of the overall numbers taking GCSE examinations, around 750,000 candidates each year.

While there may be a desire among young people for Powerful Knowledge, as Hayward and Williams note, it is not always accessible or available to all students. Bleazby has argued that there is a distinct hierarchy among the subjects on the curriculum, in which some subjects are accorded more status or value than others. Vocational subjects are at the bottom of the list, while maths and science are ranked the highest, with history, Ancient History and languages directly below them. Within that hierarchy, Bleazby points out that ‘high status subjects are aligned with middle-class culture, university and lucrative professions’ while ‘students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are excluded from elite curriculum in various ways’ (2015, p. 677). This is often the case for Ancient History, since it is offered in a relatively small number of schools. But, since it can be taught within a history department by suitably confident history practitioners, it provides an opportunity for greater access to knowledge about the ancient world. Young argues that ‘access to powerful knowledge in its diverse forms is an entitlement for all pupils and students’ (2013, p. 196), and it is the focus of this article to investigate how students perceive that opportunity to access Powerful Knowledge and culture from what is often perceived as an ‘elite’ curriculum, a curriculum which thus also represents Knowledge of the Powerful.

METHODOLOGY

In order to explore students' attitudes to the study of Ancient History, we visited three state funded comprehensive schools England. We conducted interviews and focus group discussions with students studying Ancient History GCSE in Year 10 (aged 14–15) during January 2018. We used qualitative data collection methods to find out about these students' perceptions of the ancient world and their perceptions of studying Ancient History as an academic subject.

SAMPLE AND DESIGN

The three selected schools represent different degrees of diversity among their student body in terms of ethnicity, cultural backgrounds and levels of disadvantage. All schools have been fully anonymised, and we refer to them by pseudonyms. Hammitt school is a large inner-city school with an ethnically diverse intake and high levels of deprivation. Kinghaven Academy is a coastal school with lower levels of ethnic diversity but high levels of deprivation and geographical isolation. Hardale High is situated in an affluent commuter town near a major airport, and the intake has higher aspirations and greater advantage than the other two schools in this study. The UK government measures school performance through subject based criteria and attainment, and the government publishes this data about all schools in England. Data showing student intake and performance are shown in Table 1.

Each of these schools offers Ancient History as an option at GCSE, but within different curricular structures. In Hardale High, there is a team of two specialist teachers who teach Latin throughout the school to A-level, as well as Ancient History GCSE and Classical Civilisation A-Level. They offer numerous school trips to museums and ancient sites in the UK and abroad, and the student population is largely affluent enough to afford the cost. Kinghaven Academy has had a specialist Latin and Classical Civilisation teacher for many decades, but this teacher is undergoing a phased retirement. He introduced Ancient History GCSE and recruited a respected senior member of staff in the school to teach it. Thus, when we visited the school in 2018, 14–15-year-old students were able to study Latin, Classical Civilisation and Ancient History if they wished. Ancient History was offered as an 'after school' enrichment to this cohort while the school transitions to a curriculum model in which Ancient History will replace Latin and Classical Civilisation on the mainstream timetable. In Hammitt School, Ancient History GCSE is offered by the history department, and it is the only access students have to studying the ancient world on the curriculum. At the time of this study, students in the target cohort who chose history for GCSE were randomly allocated either Modern or Ancient History. Subsequent cohorts have been given a choice between the two routes, and numbers have remained similar to those generated by random allocations.

TABLE 1 Student intake and performance in the three schools

	Size	Demographic indicators		School performance indicators		
		English as additional language (%)	Free school meals (%)	EBacc (%)	Progress 8	5+ English and Maths (%)
Hammitt	1719	58.3	36	36	41.6	29
Kinghaven	1249	24.3	26	27	40.6	30
Hardale	1224	6.5	6.8	74	61.2	69
Average for England	–	16.9	27.7	40	46.7	43

Hammitt School has the largest number of students studying Ancient History at this level (partly because of the size of the school), but the nature of the random allocation in this cohort does not reflect student interest and engagement with the ancient world.

DATA COLLECTION

In each school we first carried out a questionnaire broadly to assess Ancient History students' family and cultural background. We asked students about their parents' and guardians' education and occupations, whether they had visited any museums or ancient sites with school or family, and what exposure they had to the ancient world outside school. Students undertook the questionnaire during our visits to Hardale High and Kinghaven Academy, and teachers gave them ten minutes to complete it. Staff at Hammitt School requested that we sent the questionnaire in advance and students filled it in prior to our visit. This questionnaire was a basic qualitative study with demographic background data, to allow us to profile the student population of the three different school communities. We then intended to conduct larger focus groups with ten students and interviews with four students in each school. In Hardale High and Hammitt School we were able to conduct focus groups with ten students and then follow up interviews with four students. Environmental constraints of the school day in Kinghaven did not permit a focus group, but we were nonetheless able to conduct an interview with four students.

In Hardale High the sample for the focus group was randomised, chosen by an online name generator. In Hammitt School, a teacher selected a mixture of students from the two Ancient History classes to give a diverse and representative group of participants for the focus group, ensuring a range of gender, ethnicity and socio-economic backgrounds. In all three schools, teachers chose the students for interviews beforehand, selecting students from a range of backgrounds who demonstrated different levels of engagement with the subject, in order to obtain a cross-section of students.

Focus groups lasted for twenty minutes, and we spoke to all ten students in each school together, asking general and open-ended questions, so that participants could bounce ideas off each other (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 376). These were followed by interviews in groups of four, since constraints of the timetable did not allow enough time for students to be interviewed individually. These interviews lasted between 20 to 30 minutes and our questions were structured in two sections: firstly, we asked about their impressions of the ancient world, and then we asked about their perceptions of studying Ancient History as a subject. The focus groups and interviews form the main sources of qualitative data collection.

The qualitative data gained from these discussions allowed us to see what these young people thought about the ancient world and how they felt about studying Ancient History, and enabled them to consider any stereotypes they had faced. Such perceptions are not quantifiable, clear-cut values, and so focus groups and interviews allowed us to gain insight in a context-oriented (rather than measurement oriented) perspective. In order to do this, we focused on their experiences and emotions, by using interactive and humanistic methods. To build rapport and credibility with the participants, interviews occurred in a natural setting (within school classrooms) where students would have felt at ease (Eder & Fingerson, 2003, p. 35). Interviews occurred during lesson time in order to have access to the largest sample, although there were some criteria constraints. Group interviews allowed comments made by students to act as a stimulus which provoked further or contrasting remarks by other participants, giving rise to reactions that may not otherwise have been revealed (Bickman & Rog, 2008, p. 590). This gave a richer and more detailed insight to their experiences and opinions.

Although this method of obtaining qualitative data did produce a lot of data, there were also limitations that we must acknowledge. In both focus groups and interviews, students listened to each other's responses and this might have influenced their own, as they may have wanted to conform to social norms of their school context (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 375). The limitations on students' time and the space constraints of the classroom were beyond our control. However, we acknowledge that participants may have responded differently if interviews had been conducted individually. Focus groups allowed us to gauge more holistic feelings among participants, while the interviews provided more individual comments, and the smaller group size slightly mitigated the social and peer pressures of a group situation (Eder & Fingerson, 2003, p. 35). In Hammitt School, the teacher was present during the focus group, which may have affected participants' responses, since they may have tempered their comments to conform to the teacher's expectations. The teacher was not present during the interviews, and thus the interview situation was consistent across the three schools. The number of students who participated is small, and their responses are all specific to their school environments, and so we exercise caution in generalising from their comments. However, despite the small numbers, we chose schools and participants carefully, and with regard for their contexts and backgrounds.

FINDINGS

The questionnaires provided us with a broad indication of the demographic and cultural background of all the students studying Ancient History at each of the three selected schools. Table 2 shows the basic quantitative data gained from the questionnaires, reflecting the demographic background of the three towns in which the schools are situated.

This breakdown reveals significant differences in the three school communities. Hardale High contains the largest proportion of respondents who identified their family background as professional. The professional communities have some stake in the Knowledge of the Powerful, since this forms the knowledge that distinguishes the professions. By contrast, the communities in Kinghaven Academy, where respondents identified their family background as predominantly either nonprofessional or not in employment have negligible stakes in the Knowledge of the Powerful. Hence the young people from these communities are more reliant on the school to enable them to access these areas of the curriculum. Nonetheless, these figures show that even at Hardale High, which is much more affluent, few students had relatives who had studied any aspect of the ancient world at school. Many students referred to school trips to museums and ancient sites, particularly at Kinghaven, perhaps

TABLE 2 Basic demographic data of participants

	Kinghaven	Hammitt	Hardale
Cohort size	11	43	22
Completed questionnaires	11	36	22
Family occupational background: professional	8%	18%	37%
Family occupational background: in employment (skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled)	62%	74%	63%
Family occupational background: not in employment	31%	9%	0%
Family members have attended university	18%	39%	77%
Family members studied ancient world at school	18%	14%	23%
Visited ancient sites	36%	19%	73%
Visited museums	82%	47%	82%

accounting for the large number of respondents who indicated they had visited museums. This highlights the impact that cultural opportunities provided by schools can have on young people from potentially disenfranchised communities.

POWERFUL KNOWLEDGE AND PERSONAL RELEVANCE: THE ANCIENT WORLD

In this section, we focus on students' perceptions of the ancient world, and the Powerful Knowledge they displayed from their study as evidenced during focus groups and follow-up interviews. Students at all three schools expressed feelings that there were many things that interested or intrigued them about the ancient world often because of the temporal and geographical distance, which opened up new perspectives for them. They were generally very impressed by the survival of ancient material, even if at times frustrated by the fragmentary or uncorroborated nature of many of the sources they were studying. Many students identified aspects of the ancient world that they felt held personal relevance for them. Students at Hardale High spoke about visiting ancient sites, either with the school or with their families. One respondent admitted that when she was eight a family visit to Bath was the first time she really became interested in ancient history because she could see that 'everything was still there', and that gave her a sense of connection to the past. Another student described her visit to Turkey:

We went to this ancient site, I don't even know what it was, it had loads of, like, preserved buildings, and I thought it was cool how it was still there from like literally so many years ago.

While this student was unable to recall the details of what she had seen, the fact that what she saw had lasted for such a long time made a lasting impression on her. All those students who had been on trips appreciated being able to see surviving material firsthand, since it gave them direct and tangible evidence of—and contact with—the past. This direct contact with material culture and geographical sites prompted the students to see things in new ways and to gain greater understanding of the temporal distance while also connecting with the past. It is an important reminder of the crucial role played by museums and heritage sites in developing Powerful Knowledge for young people.

Students at Kinghaven Academy expressed ideas of contact with the past more generally, foregrounding a reflection on the present through the past:

All the stuff we do nowadays comes from what they invented, and we're still using it today. It shows they were really clever back then and it's been built on.

This student emphasises the links between the ancient world and now, arguing that these connections demonstrate the importance of the thinking and inventions created centuries ago. The comment 'it shows they were really clever back then' indicates a defensiveness against potential accusations of primitivism or simplicity, which are sometimes levelled at ancient societies. While this response does not entirely challenge notions of historical progress, since the conclusion is that subsequent generations have 'built on' the achievements of the past, it does nonetheless show some attempt at problematising narratives of progress. This more complex understanding of the relationship between the past and the present demonstrates ways in which students make use of the Powerful Knowledge they gain from studying antiquity. At Hammitt School, one student described the ancient world as 'like the source of a river',

Like the source is the beginning in a way, and it's the most important part, because without it there's no river.

This articulate response explores a similar idea, although also hinting at a narrative of progress. The simile suggests that this student identifies that the ancient world is important because it enables them to understand where everything else has come from and to situate themselves within a wider context.

The Ancient History specification includes a unit of study on the Persian empire of the fifth and sixth centuries BCE. For some, this held particular personal relevance. One student of Middle Eastern descent at Hammitt School felt that such study had given her a background into a particular type of knowledge:

I'm quite interested now in the Middle Eastern areas, and it's just something I think is good for me to have knowledge about.

Although she struggled to articulate the details in English, study of the Persian empire and the ancient Near East sparked her interest, and she was able to connect this with her home background. She explained how her brother encouraged her to read about it outside of school, and her father showed episodes from a television documentary series about the Persian Empire to her family at home. Studying the ancient Persians enabled her to identify relevance of the ancient world to her home culture, and this was enhanced by the interest displayed by members of her family. This was an aspect of study that she particularly valued, since it held personal relevance for her which related to her life outside school, and enabled her to reflect on her background from a new perspective.

Other students foregrounded different aspects of study as their rationale for the importance of the ancient world. Two students at Kinghaven Academy tried to recall something about the impact of an ancient history text that evidently fascinated them.

S1: There's this point that Sir made about something that's still used nowadays. Think it was Cyrus, I know he wrote a book, and it's still used in government today.

S2: Yeah, of like how to rule an empire.

S1: I think it was literally called how to rule an empire.

S2: And how world leaders today still refer back to such a long time ago, where everything was so different, but the basic ground line and ideas are still the same.

S1: Winston Churchill had like 4 or 5 copies of this one book and he used it all the time. It's pretty cool that one of our best ever leaders copied something from two thousand years ago.

Their recollection of the details is confused—it's not clear which text they might be referring to, since no book by Cyrus the Great has survived, only texts about him. Nonetheless, what the students try to articulate is the impact of an ancient text, and the events it describes, on a figure they perceive as a key figure within modern history. They show a real engagement with the gap in time, and admiration for the quality of a text that not only survived for two millennia, but was still fundamentally useful to a government in another time and country. They attribute value to the ancient text partially because Churchill used it, and in this sense what they admire

is to some extent the Knowledge of the Powerful. They were proud to show off their knowledge about Cyrus and Churchill during the interview, as key figures in political power. However, their understanding of the survival and continued relevance of the text across time and place indicates the Powerful Knowledge they have gained about antiquity and its continuing legacy.

Students expressed some frustration with the ancient sources and the levels of ambiguity and uncertainty that arose from the nature of what survives from the ancient world. They tended to phrase their comments in contrast to what they understood about modern history, which they identified as 'straightforward' because they felt it was possible to ascertain what happened, when and why. Students at Hammitt School complained,

S3: With Ancient History, Livy says this but Polybius says this.

S4: You don't know whether one is correct or not.

They found it frustrating that they could not corroborate either statement because of the lack of further evidence, which they thought might 'prove' the veracity of events. At Kinghaven, one respondent explained the problem,

Like you have to take word of those who tell us about it, even if it's 100 years after something happened.

This student demonstrates an understanding of historical distance, and that someone reporting things 100 years after the event produces an account which is very different to an eyewitness account. The student recognises that there is no single narrative because historical knowledge is necessarily contingent and contentious, and this understanding shows the Powerful Knowledge they have developed through their study of Ancient History. However, their response also indicates that they found it difficult to cope with the uncertainty generated by the limited nature of the sources. In asking for a single narrative account, they are asking for an inert fixed notion of knowledge which history cannot provide. The student's response reflects the difficulties and challenges of gaining Powerful Knowledge, such as operating within changing and interpretive parameters. Overall, students' responses highlighted different curricular rationales for the importance of the ancient world from their perspective. They admired the survival and sophistication of the ancient world, focusing on its personal relevance to them and their lives today. At other moments, they ascribed particular value to knowing not just about the ancient world directly, but about how others have used and responded to it as well. Many of their comments about antiquity demonstrated an understanding of antiquity and a keen awareness of the deficiencies of the evidence. These comments indicate the Powerful Knowledge, the disciplinary and conceptual understanding, that these students have gained through their academic study of Ancient History at school.

KNOWLEDGE OF THE POWERFUL: STUDYING ANCIENT HISTORY

The study of Ancient History is restricted to those schools that have chosen to offer it and have the capacity to teach it. The resulting inequitable access shows how students' perceptions of Knowledge of the Powerful may play out in the school curriculum. During our conversations with these students in focus groups and follow-up interviews, students all expressed ideas or stereotypes that studying the ancient world was part of a privileged and elite education, and that such study conferred the appearance of intelligence on the learner. In each school this became a topic of debate among the students, both in focus groups

and interviews. We therefore examine how these students perceive the *study* of the ancient world, rather than the subject matter itself. We examine how they feel they are seen by others as a result of studying Ancient History, and how they position themselves in relation to those perceptions. All the students were very conscious about how they were perceived by their peers, both within their own school, and by those attending other schools in the same area.

Students at all three schools conflated ideas of social prestige with academic achievement. At Hardale High, one student observed,

[Ancient History] is perceived as quite an intelligent subject because a lot of schools don't offer it as an option. It's like when you say, 'I do Ancient History', people kinda judge you and think, oh, you must go to a posh school or something.

This response contains several themes which students echoed in all three schools: academic achievement, availability of the subject and the social prestige attached to those students who study Ancient History. Students found it difficult to separate these ideas, often linking them or suggesting a causality between them, such as the student from Hardale above. At Hammitt, one student said that knowing things about the ancient world 'shows you're more clever' than others who do not share this additional expertise. Here, the student applies the word 'clever' as a status marker, as they suggest that gaining unusual expertise about the ancient world allows someone to seem as if they have had more education. What they allude to—without stating this—is the restricted access to Ancient History, and its consequential association with the curriculum of elite schools. Students at Kinghaven tried to separate the ideas of academic achievement and study of the ancient world:

S5. Anyone can like it, and it's not to do with intelligence.

S6. I agree, a lot of people will know something about the ancient world, even if it's Romans or the Egyptians.

The first student challenges these ideas by focusing on personal enjoyment, since liking a subject does not need to be linked to perceptions of achievement. The second student takes this further by connecting to wider representations of the ancient world. The Romans and the Egyptians feature as topics taught in primary education, but they also appear in popular series such as Terry Deary's *Horrible Histories* (for example, *Awesome Egyptians*, *Ruthless Romans*). These responses draw on wider cultural access to antiquity beyond curriculum. These students highlighted a tension between their thoughts about antiquity in general and other students' perceptions about Ancient History as a subject. A number of students said that they perceived Ancient History as more difficult than modern history, which they justified by explaining that they were more familiar with events from the twentieth century because they had already studied them at school. But they also identified that because Ancient History is a less common subject on the school curriculum, access to it and any expertise gained about it would mark out the bearer as being different. In particular, they associated it with the curricula of elite establishments. This was a stark contrast to their claim of antiquity's more universal appeal.

For these young people, the idea of being marked out as different to others was a source of stigma, applied both from within their own school and also by peers who attended other schools. All respondents reported being stigmatised by their peers because they were studying Ancient History. Students at Kinghaven Academy stated that because their Ancient History lessons were scheduled after the end of the main school day they received negative comments, 'oh no, he's got that again, oh he's a clever clogs'. Since both Latin GCSE and Classical Civilisation GCSE are offered to this cohort on the mainstream timetable at

Kinghaven, it was the timing, rather than the subject matter, which caused the comment. However, the way in which the students phrased the comment was again focused on perceived intelligence—if they stay after school to do an additional subject they must be ‘clever’ or ‘smart’, and they presented this as negative, since it is different from their peers. At Hammitt School, students identified the stigma they received as particularly strong within their school, both from their peers and those in other year groups. These students were not given a choice between Ancient and Modern History, but were allocated one of the two, and the school does not currently offer any other study of the ancient world at this or any other level. As a result, respondents reported significant negative attitudes towards Ancient History by their friends and sometimes also their families. They described that among the student community in the school Ancient History has a ‘stigma or stereotype that it’s really boring or much more work’, and that students felt those who were allocated Ancient History were ‘unlucky’. Some students described reactions from friends and family where they were told ‘it’s gonna be so bad, I feel sorry for you’. One student thought that ‘ancient has an implicit meaning of boring, classical, dull’ for people who have not studied it. The stigma these students report from within their schools as well as from family members reflects a social tension that aligns students of Ancient History with access to Knowledge of the Powerful. The students’ school peers seem to perceive Ancient History as belonging to elite curricula and they ascribe labels of ‘cleverness’ to those who study it and ‘boring’ to its subject matter. The school communities of both Hammitt School and Kinghaven Academy are predominately drawn from nonprofessional backgrounds. Their families have limited stakes in the Knowledge of the Powerful as the distinguishing feature of the professions. The resistance these students report from their family members highlights the importance of schools in providing this access for those young people who do not receive it outside school.

Students at all three schools identified that the ‘difference’ of studying Ancient History was even stronger outside their own school environments. They felt that studying Ancient History marked them out, ‘like, wow, you’re different’. They linked this difference with intelligence, elitism and privilege.

That’s the way it’s perceived as, only posh people or academic people or intelligent people do it.

(Kinghaven Academy)

It just sounds elitist. A lot of people would assume you’re elitist by choosing that GCSE, like from—you’re from an upper class. They see Ancient History as this snobby thing. It just seems snobby to many people, especially around this area.

(Hammitt School)

People perceive it as posh because ... It’s not common ... It’s rarer ... I know a lot of private schools have the option of taking it but I don’t know any other school in this area that has Latin or Ancient History.

(Hardale High)

The students all identify a social distinction underlying the study of Ancient History, even though they struggle to find words they feel comfortable with to articulate this. The words they use (posh, snobby, elitist, upper class) are all very negative words to describe social privilege. The comment from Hammitt School indicates an unease with this perception, since the speaker feels that people would 'assume' students subscribed to feelings of social superiority. In all three schools, students showed considerable concern with the ways in which they might be perceived socially within their local area, and wanted to fit in. They identified that people around 'this area' did not belong to such socially elite groups. However, it is interesting that they all shared the feeling that their local area was not elite: while Hammitt is located within a multicultural city with relatively high levels of deprivation, and Kinghaven is located in a small coastal town with relatively high immigration and similar levels of deprivation, Hardale High is not. It is in an affluent commuter town which has high employment, much of which is skilled due to local industries, and the family occupational backgrounds declared by students on the initial questionnaire reflect this. Despite this, students at Hardale were just as insistent as students at the other schools that 'at least around here it's not very common', since their friends at other schools 'didn't even know what it was'. The students at all three schools thus identified that they were receiving an education which was different to their peers in neighbouring schools, and which they linked to social privilege.

Students felt uncomfortable about how others perceived them in the light of these perceptions, since their vocabulary made a clear delineation between 'them' ('posh', 'snobby') and 'us' ('round this area'). Yet despite this, they identified that the understanding gained from studying Ancient History added value to their skills, 'if you know something about the ancient world, it's like wow, you know something that they don't'. This student ascribes value to the ways in which this curriculum subject can mark out those who have experienced it as different, giving Ancient History value as Knowledge of the Powerful. By contrast, other students pragmatically stated that Ancient History was just another qualification, and that any qualification was going to help them find employment. This kind of pragmatism does not focus on the distinct advantages or disadvantages of different types of knowledge. Instead, it ascribes equal value to studying *any* subject because of the recognition gained through qualificatory certificates, all of which are of equal worth. These students potentially perceive that the value of qualifications rest with the grades they are awarded, rather than the subjects which they have studied. Many students felt that Ancient History gave them access to a level of privilege which was not available at other schools, and they spoke about feeling 'privileged' to have the chance to study it. Students at Hammitt School described Ancient History as granting them a level of 'exclusivity' over their peers at other schools who had never heard of the subject. These feelings of privilege and exclusivity reflect perceptions of Ancient History as Knowledge of the Powerful. As a result, these students were not entirely comfortable with this privilege and agreed that it would be better if everyone had the opportunity to study it. The students at all three schools thus felt that they had been given access to part of an elite curriculum by studying Ancient History. They were acutely aware that this exemplifies an unequal access to curriculum and this caused their discomfort. The unequal and restricted access exemplifies Knowledge of the Powerful at work, potentially alienating many young people from part of their curricular entitlement.

CONCLUSIONS

We opened this article with an account of Ancient History's uneven position within the 14–19 UK curriculum. We used Young and Muller's distinction between Powerful Knowledge and Knowledge of the Powerful as a critical tool to help us break down and explore the social tensions within Ancient History as a curriculum subject. We talked to students aged

14–15 studying Ancient History in three comprehensives with different demographics. We explored students' perceptions of the ancient world, the personal relevance they found in it, and the Powerful Knowledge they gained from studying it as a curriculum subject. We also examined the social tensions the students perceived about their study of Ancient History as part of their curriculum. It was here that we found tensions emerged, since the students we spoke to were acutely aware of the fragile and uneven place that it occupies on their curriculum. As a result, they noted that among their peers, both within their schools and also their local communities, there was a perception that study of Ancient History was the mark of a socially elite and privileged education. These feelings of exclusivity and social privilege align Ancient History to Knowledge of the Powerful, since the restricted access allows it to become a distinguishing marker of the elite. In those communities which identify as predominately nonprofessional and hold negligible stakes in the distinguishing marks of the professions, young people are especially reliant on schools to provide access to Knowledge of the Powerful. The resistance that these students encounter from outside school contributes towards their ambivalence to receiving a curriculum identified as elite. The students at all three schools were uneasy with what they had suggested since they did not see themselves as part of a socially elite and privileged group. The tension and discomfort that the students describe tests the aspirations behind comprehensive curriculum policies.

If Ancient History was available as a curriculum subject across all comprehensive schools, it would not have the stigma that students described. While it often involves studying past elites and those in power, Ancient History provides students with broad Powerful Knowledge, disciplinary knowledge of a world very different to their own in space and time. Such study can open up new ways for students of reflecting on the world around them. The subject community of classics teachers in the UK is extremely aware of the problematic perception of the study of antiquity at secondary level, and they are working hard to combat it. The subject community's protests in 2007 lead to the political rescue of Ancient History, and organisations such as the Classical Association, the Cambridge Schools Classics Project and Classics for All are all working hard to widen access to study of the ancient world at secondary level. The students in our study felt that it would be better if everyone had the opportunity to study Ancient History.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest disclosure.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical clearance for this work was granted by the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge.

GEOLOCATION INFORMATION

United Kingdom.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

No data set is available.

REFERENCES

- Baker, B., & Mastin, S. (2012). Did Alexander really ask, 'Do I appear to you to be a bastard?'. *Teaching History*, 147, 8–13.
- Beck, J. (2013). Powerful knowledge, esoteric knowledge, curriculum knowledge. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 43(2), 177–193.
- Bertram, C. (2012). Exploring an historical gaze: A language of description for the practice of school history. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 44(3), 429–442. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2012.668939>
- Bickman, L., & Rog, D. J. (Eds.). (2008). *The Sage handbook of applied social science research* (2nd ed.). Sage.

- Bleazby, J. (2015). Why some school subjects have a higher status than others: The epistemology of the traditional curriculum hierarchy. *Oxford Review of Education*, 41(5), 671–689.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2007). *Research methods in education* (6th ed.). Routledge.
- Eder, D., & Fingerson, L. (2003). Interviewing children and adolescents. In J. A. Holstein & J. F. Gubrium (Eds.), *Inside interviewing* (pp. 33–54). Sage.
- Glare, P. G. W. (Ed.). (2012). *Oxford Latin dictionary* (2nd ed.). Clarendon Press.
- Guillory, J. (1993). *Cultural capital: The problem of literary canon formation*. Chicago University Press.
- Harris, R. (2020). Disciplinary knowledge denied? In A. Chapman (Ed.), *Knowing history in schools: Powerful knowledge and the powers of knowledge* (pp. 97–128). IoE press.
- Hayward, G., & Williams, R. (2011). Joining the big society: Am I bothered? *London Review of Education*, 9(2), 175–189.
- Keen, T. (2014). Foreword to the special issue: Fantastika in the Greek and Roman worlds. *Foundation: the International Review of Science Fiction*, 118, 5–8.
- Keen, T. (2019). More 'T' Vicar? Models and methodologies for classical receptions in science fiction. In B. M. Rogers & B. E. Stevens (Eds.), *Once and future antiquities in science fiction and fantasy* (pp. 9–17). Bloomsbury.
- Liddel, P., & Harrison, T. (2013). 50 years and two crises: JACT's Ancient History. Fifty years of the Joint Association of Classical Teachers, 20–24.
- Martindale, C. (2006). Thinking Through Reception. In C. Martindale, & R. F. Thomas (Eds.), *Classics and the Uses of Reception* (pp. 1–13). Blackwell.
- Maxwell, P., & Aggleton, C. (2016). Schools, schooling and elite status in English education—Changing configurations? *L'année Sociologique*, 66(1), 147–170.
- Muller, J., & Young, M. F. D. (2019). Knowledge, power and powerful knowledge revisited. *The Curriculum Journal*, 30(2), 196–214.
- Schein, S. L. (1999). Cultural studies and classics: Contrasts and opportunities. In T. Falkner, N. Felson, & D. Konstan (Eds.), *Contextualizing classics: Ideology, performance, dialogue: Essays in Honor of John J. Peradotto* (pp. 285–299). Rowman and Littlefield.
- Young, M. F. D. (2008). *Bringing knowledge back in: From social constructivism to social realism in the sociology of education*. Routledge.
- Young, M. F. D. (2013). Powerful knowledge: An analytically useful concept or just a 'sexy sounding term'? A response to John Beck's 'Powerful knowledge, esoteric knowledge, curriculum knowledge'. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 43(2), 195–198. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2013.776356>
- Young, M. F. D., & Muller, J. (2013). On the powers of powerful knowledge. *Review of Education*, 1(3), 229–250.

How to cite this article: Foster, F., & Wise, J. (2022). Social tensions in studying ancient history. *The Curriculum Journal*, 00, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1002/curj.150>