

‘Making Heritage Matter’? Teaching local mining history in primary schools

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This article presents the findings of research into the teaching of local industrial history in a socially deprived primary school in post-industrial north-east England. The first of the article’s three substantive sections sets out the methodology and rationale. The second, drawing on qualitative data from participant observation, semi-structured interviews and focus groups with teachers and pupils, presents our main findings; that such teaching can fit with the demands of the English national curriculum; that it can be particularly engaging for children and, drawing on the place-based education literature, that it can also enable children to better understand who they are, in relation to their environment. The discussion section finds that the topic can appeal regardless of ethnicity or gender. We further conclude that schools can benefit significantly in the successful delivery of this teaching from partnerships with the local expertise of relevant community associations.

Keywords: place-based teaching; working-class; historical education; identity; teaching history

Introduction

The context for our research is the battles fought over history teaching in British state-run schools from the late 1980s (Beattie 1987; Kedourie 1988; Phillips 1992). The debates over what to teach and how centre on the importance of history for framing nation-states and building national identity. As Crawford (1995:448) remarked; ‘there is little disagreement that an important objective of teaching about the past is to provide children with a sense of identity’. Thus, there was similar controversy over history teaching with Michael Gove’s reforms of English schools’ curriculum in 2010s. Nevertheless, Gove’s reformed curriculum did not retain the strong prescriptiveness of his initial proposals. And, importantly for our research, it still made explicit provision

for the teaching of local history (Haydn 2012; Cooper 2012; DfE 2013a; DfE 2013b; Harris and Burn 2015; Brundrett 2011; 2015; Watson 2019). The main obstacle to teaching such history consequently remains the other demands of the curriculum, particularly the emphasis on Maths and English, and the requirement to prepare children for Statutory Assessment Tests (SATs), which teachers continue to regard negatively (Brown and Manktelow 2015; Williams-Brown and Jopling 2020).

This article presents the findings of ‘Making Heritage Matter’, a project investigating the teaching of local industrial history. It focusses on topics covered, modes of delivery, engagement and the putative wider benefits for pupils in a socially deprived primary school in post-industrial north-east England. We find that there are possibilities to deliver diverse, engaging teaching that allows for coverage of key elements of the national curriculum while maintaining an independent, topic-centred emphasis. Furthermore, and in line with the literature on place-based education, we argue that teaching local industrial history brings wider benefits to the children. This remains the case when the history of the former industry -in this case white, male-dominated coal mining- may in theory offer limited appeal to children of a different ethnicity, or gender, or who do not have roots in the locality. Finally, we argue that partnerships with local community groups can help to enhance the benefits that teaching local industrial history can bring, enriching the experience for all concerned.

1. Materials and methods

a. Theoretical and applied inspirations

Our underlying theoretical approach is inspired by Paulo Freire’s (2005) and bell hooks’ (1994) critical pedagogy, and by practical efforts to apply such ideas in specific contexts such Brazil (Schmidt and Garcia 2010), Nottingham (UK) (Thomson 2010)

and Australia (Prosser et.al. 2010). The latter project was itself inspired by Haberman's (1991) 'pedagogy of poverty', pointing to the underlying assumptions about the apparently low capabilities and limited aspirations of school children from deprived areas (see also Smith 2002; Gruenewald 2003; Gruenewald and Smith 2008).

Inspiration also comes from the 'new history' itself. Developing in the 1960s in reaction to dull and repetitive history classes, and informed by developments in historical methodology (particularly a critique of Whig history and favouring "history from below"), its pedagogy supported teaching and learning based upon the interpretation of historical evidence, and emphasising historical skills and understanding, over the learning of historical information (Booth 1973; Haydn 2012). The 'new history's' emphasis on women's, Black, postcolonial and cultural history has taken on a vital contemporary relevance in the times of 'Black Lives Matter' and debates about the nature and role of public monuments in remembering our past (Haydn 2012). As contemporaneously salient are the possibilities for using history to integrate immigrants into the community (Grever et.al. 2008).

b. Study context

This study explored teachers' motivations for teaching local mining history, observing how they taught, and recording their reflections on this process. We were interested in the various means teachers used, the possibilities that were opened up and to see how, practically, they were able to fit this type of teaching into a busy and pressured curriculum. We also observed the children's engagement with the teaching and sought their ongoing and post hoc reflections. In listening to, valuing and recording the children's views and perspectives, we drew on approaches that position children as active agents in the construction of their social worlds (Harcourt et al. 2011; Moss and Petrie 2002).

There were two facets of the topic and the context which, we hypothesised, would either make it difficult to teach and/or potentially less appealing to some pupils, and thereby exclusionary. The first facet was the specific geographical and historical contexts of the former pit village where the school is located. A formerly geographically distinct pit village had been subsumed into the much larger Tyneside conurbation during the post-war housing boom, rendering it atypical of ‘miners’ towns’ (Gilbert 1995). Furthermore, the village colliery shut down permanently in the early 1970s without controversy, meaning the community had not been galvanised in the same as those whose collieries were victims of the controversial pit closures of the Thatcher period (Douglass 2010). This also meant that the village, like the rest of the post-mining districts in the Tyneside area, was not included under the rubric of New Labour’s ‘Coalfield taskforce’ that sought to regenerate 1980s former pit villages after 1997 (albeit with at best very limited results) (Townsend and Hudson 2005). Like many of the more recently pre-1981 de-industrialised mining communities, the village still ranked among the 20% most deprived neighbourhoods in Britain in 2010, explaining why over a quarter of the school’s pupils were eligible for free school meals (well above the national average and a deprivation indicator). The lack of funding for industrial preservation, exacerbated with the 2010 Coalition government’s austerity agenda, had consequences for the village’s industrial heritage. While there are still some physical remains of one of the village’s collieries, these are dilapidated, innocuous and crumbling away. Nevertheless, these discouraging features of the locality did not prevent the emergence of a local miners’ banner community group keen to work with schools in teaching local industrial history (Stephenson and Wray 2005).

The second facet concerning us was the gender dimension; working in the mine was a solely male occupation in the north-east. We were intrigued to see if and how

teaching the topic would appeal across the genders. We were also intrigued by how the teachers could make local mining history seem relevant to children who had moved into the area in more recent times, who were unlikely to have direct familial links with the area's mining past.

c. Research Questions and Methods

Our research questions were:

- (1) Why is local mining history taught at the school?
- (2) How is local mining history taught at the school?
- (3) How is local mining history engaged with by the children?
- (4) What wider benefits (if any) did the children gain from this place-based pedagogy?

To answer them we adopted a qualitative, ethnographic approach. We conducted semi-structured interviews with four teachers and teaching assistants at the school and the past and present headteachers, asking them to reflect on their practice. This allowed us the flexibility to pursue fruitful lines of enquiry, should they emerge, that we had not anticipated before the interviews (Mason, 2002). We conducted second reflective, debriefing interviews with teachers who had delivered the local mining history topic once the teaching was complete. Ours approach was dialogic and collaborative in these interviews, using our fieldnotes to pursue lines of enquiry whilst avoiding confrontations over practice (McIntosh 2010). We carried out participant observation of Key Stage 2 (KS2; 7-11 years) classroom activities and school trips to explore how the local mining history topic was taught and to capture the children's engagement with it. We moved between individuals and groups of children working with them on their various tasks related to the sub-topics, asking them questions and taking notes. The

topic was taught in two classes, one Year 4 (8-9 years old) and one a combined group of Years 4 and 5 (8-10 years old) by two different teachers who taught essentially the same classes. All children went on field trips at the same time.

At the end of the topic we conducted four focus groups with a total sample of twenty-one children from the classes; children volunteered and then were selected by the teachers to gather their experiences and perspectives. Through our ethnographic approach, we had built a rapport with the children. Our friendly, casual approach helped make all the children seem to feel comfortable in focus groups, happy to talk to us and open with their thoughts and reflections, though individual group dynamics (and the time allotted us) meant they varied in length from between 18 and 38 minutes. The focus groups enabled children to interact, thereby reminding each other of particular events or specifics of the topic (Hennessy and Heary 2005; Heras et.al. 2020). That their classmates were also present and willing to participate furthered focus group engagement.

While we placed the children's class work on the table to stimulate discussion, in practice a catalyst was not always needed to get the children to engage. Indeed, in one of the focus groups the children effectively took over, which we took as an indication that they were comfortable with us and with their task (it was also a Friday afternoon). In all cases, while we had a clear idea about the aims of the focus groups, we were also flexible enough to pursue any strands of enquiry suggested by the children's interventions. We recorded all the interviews and focus groups digitally and had them professionally transcribed. We carried out thematic analysis of our data (Braun and Clarke, 2006) coding separately and then collaboratively and drawing out the salient themes for our findings, which we present below.

The project received institutional ethical clearance and then approval from the school's headteacher, after close consultation. The school informed all parents about the project and all but two consented for their children to participate. These two were subtly excluded from our research although took part in all the learning activities. After a discussion about the aims of the research, the children participating in focus groups were asked to assent to their participation, and asked if we could record them. All were informed that they could leave the focus group at any point and return to class. To offer the children a little more ownership over the process, we invited them to choose their own pseudonyms, which they all did at the start of the session. This caused some amusement amongst the children, helping to relax them, and explains some of the unusual pupil pseudonyms below.

2. Results

We present our results arranged according to our research questions, set out above.

a. Why is local mining history taught?

Mining history had been taught at the school for many years but the impetus for a local specific focus came when the local miners' banner association contacted the school and suggested a collaboration. The then head teacher (A), who had a local mining heritage, was keen to address what she regarded as a lack of understanding among the children about their local community: that its very existence was due to coal mining. That the locality lacked monuments to mining -even in comparison with other parts of the region- was another element to the teachers' motivations in pursuing this teaching and to explore, along with the children, what did remain. The school heads took the lead on this subject and there was evident passionate support from some of the teaching staff, many of whom had childhood memories of growing up in a mining environment, even

if their own ancestors had not been miners.

Another important element of the teachers' motivations was their understanding of the wider benefits of place-based teaching. These are considered below. But there were also the practical considerations of finding a place in the teaching timetable for such topics, even though Gove's final new curriculum did have a place for local history (DfE, 2013b). The school is a National College school, which helps to train young headteachers. Many trainees, on visiting the school, were impressed by the displays developed during the local mining history teaching but invariably they would ask the 'same challenging question';

“This is lovely that you've done this but, you know, it's taking away from the fundamentals isn't it really, the English and the Maths?” [...] And I said, “No, not at all because [...] if you're asking children to do writing, they've got to have something to write about, and if they've got no experiences, then how can you inspire children to write meaningful stuff”? (Headteacher A)

The topic is taught ordinarily to Year 5 children (the year before SATs) partly due to the pressure of SATs (in Year 6) but also because the headteachers felt that this was the year children were sufficiently mature to understand the topic and retain the knowledge for years to come.

b. How is it taught?

Local mining history was taught by a combination of classroom activities delivered by the teachers, or visiting freelance teachers delivering specific sessions, and through field trip, led by the teachers (visits to mining museums) or experts from the local mining banner association (local 'learning walks'). A creative approach enabled teachers to

stretch the teaching of a 'local history study' permitted by the national curriculum (DfE 2013c) and teach about coalmining history across the curriculum in subjects including history, geography, science, art and design, and music. Lessons worked across subjects and developed a number of key skills expected for children of KS2 (DfE 2013b) with the core subjects of English, Maths and Science interwoven throughout. Our project website outlines details and resources for specific lessons. Our purpose here is to demonstrate how local mining history connected across the curriculum.

The topic began with teachers asking the children what they wanted to know about coal mining and their input was incorporated into material then covered. Many children immediately revealed their curiosity and a few used the opportunity to share knowledge of their family histories of mining. Initial lessons focused on understanding key events in mining history at national and local levels. Timelines were used in the classroom to place events in chronological order. The children used a variety of secondary sources of information on the interactive white board to chart the history of coal mining from its Victorian peak to its modern decline. The class was tasked to discuss and then arrange specific moments chronologically. The teacher, with pupil support, generated a structured timeline on the whiteboard.

Figure 1. History: Chronology of coalmining events (Example of Year 4 work)

Key events included coal mining disasters, with their tragic and moving lists of casualties (including many young children) which offered various engaging teaching possibilities. A lesson on historical causality and change, for example, began with the

children being shown newspaper style headlines of a mining disaster in their local area. Asked if they already knew about it, one third of the class had seen the Blue plaque commemorating the disaster and most had some knowledge of it. The children were instructed to discuss the newspaper report in small groups. The mining disaster in question was caused by a naked flame igniting firedamp (methane) in the mine and it stimulated the invention of the miner's safety lamp. The children then discussed why the safety lamp's invention was a positive change for mining. After that, they were told to imagine they were journalists living at the time, and to write a newspaper article about the disaster, fulfilling English literacy as well as History requirements of the national curriculum (DfE 2013b and c).

A follow-up class shifted the focus to the science of the mining disaster and of safety lamps. The teacher introduced the Stephenson ('Geordie') and Davy miners' lamps with pictures and asks the children: who were Stephenson and Davy? And who invented the first miners' safety lamp? There was a controversy at the time as the two men produced very similar designs almost simultaneously but without contact with each other (George Stephenson was from north-east England, Humphry Davy from Penzance in West Cornwall). The debate about who got there first remains to this day. The children worked in pairs to research the questions using the iPads, recording what they found and discussing their answers. The focus on key events and the controversy surrounding these two inventors combined national curriculum requirements in relation to developing knowledge of how local people have shaped national history, and developing written and spoken literacy skills. The lessons also furthered IT and Design and Technology skills, thus meeting specific curriculum requirements on both (DfE 2013b:178 and 182). This was a very interactive and collaborative lesson with a relaxed atmosphere, with the children happily chatting and sharing with each other what they

were discovering. During the lesson, some children said they thought the Stephenson lamp was first because he was local and was self-taught, though another favoured Davy as they had been to Cornwall on holiday. In focus groups the children said they enjoyed this lesson, and it was one teacher's favourite lesson too, due to the independent researching element of it: 'Rather than them all getting the same thing so they get a much more broader view of things. [...] Although I did catch one of them on a game!' (Teacher E)

Figure 2: Certificate for each child on completion of their miners' safety lamp task

The lessons around safety lamps were enhanced by a member of the local mining banner association, who brought his collection of mining lamps into the school. This eye-catching display, combined with his expertise and passion made his an engaging intervention. He was impressed that

the children were able to understand the different kinds of lamps, what the science of the lamps was; the amazing discovery of how the gas could ignite inside the lamp but not get back out into the atmosphere to blow the pits up (Association Activist G).

Talking about the lamps took the discussion into other areas of mining-related science;

The science of underground ventilation [...] And the science of coal – what is coal? Where did it come from? What does it do? How does it work? How does coal actually catch fire? (Association Activist G)

External freelancers ran specific classroom sessions and their energy and interactivity, as well as the subject material, made them popular with the children. One historian used a picture of a gravestone of a dead miner as a starting point, asking the children to speculate on what his life had been like and how he had lived and died. A key resource used to trace the dead miner's life history was the UK Census, which can be accessed online. This task developed the children's research skills. But the session was also very physical, with the children dressing up as miners and being shown how cramped and tough conditions were working underground, using classroom chairs to give an idea of how low many coal seams in the region were. The children were also taught new vocabulary, which is part of the literacy curriculum (DfE 2013b). They learnt names and roles of types of underground mineworkers. It was remarkable in the focus groups how many had remembered the names and roles of the 'putter' (pushing coal tubs), the 'hewer' (the person who actually cuts the coal from the face) and the 'shot-firer' (who sets the explosive to break up the coal). Many of them wanted to be 'shot firers'.

Throughout the teaching of the topic the children were keen to know more about child labour: there were some discussions of what children did in the mines and why they stopped working there. Child labour is often covered in KS1 and early in KS2 as part of learning about the Victorian era and some of the children already had some knowledge of this. In terms of dangers for child miners, the biggest impact came during a 'learning walk' (described in more detail below) that called by a monument to the big mining disaster in a local church yard. Many of the children were noticeably moved by noting that the ages of many of those killed, recorded on the monument, were their own. In a follow-up, integrated classroom based activity, they were tasked to write diary entries after imagining what it was like to live in a coal mining family and the jobs that

miners and their families did.

The local mining history topic also lends itself easily to the geography and maths curriculum. The use of historical maps focuses on changes to the national and regional environment. The children use maps to find out about the location of UK coal deposits and the reasoning for their position. Maps were used to understand distance, scales and keys. Children also used historical maps of the local area to develop mathematical skills, plotting coordinates to locate coal mines' entries, and using the scale to calculate distances between mines. This lesson initiated a discussion amongst children about how close their own houses were to old mines.

Learning was often scaffolded, recapping and developing knowledge from KS1. Field sketches were reintroduced by one teacher, discussed and then children were asked to complete field sketches of an old local coalmine thus fulfilling national curriculum geographic skills requirements for KS2 whilst also using artistic techniques. As the mine no longer exists, the children were shown an old photo of it and asked to imagine they were outside.

As introduced above, science was interwoven into lessons about coalmining for example, in relation to rocks and solids. Teachers explained how coal is formed, what it is (carbon) and the different types and quality of coal. Learning walks (see below) helped the children to understand the relevance of coal to their local environment developing their geography skills and knowledge. Learning about coal mining was also used to understand in part where electricity comes from in preparation for learning about how electricity works. Part of the science curriculum is to be able to explain levers and to make more complex designs to includes belts and pulleys (DfE 2013b). Learning about how coalmines worked provided an opportunity for teachers to link to

the science curriculum to help students understand the importance of these mechanisms (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Levers and pulleys (class activity reproduced in researcher fieldnotes):

Science and DT in coalmining teaching

The children found the art and design lessons some of the most enjoyable. Studying coalmining allowed the children not only to create art by experimenting with materials and techniques but also to learn about great artists, as stipulated in the national curriculum (DfE 2013b). The children were introduced to the Pitmen Painters, a well-known group of north-east coal miner artists. Teachers, an external artist and a visit to a local mining museum/gallery all used the Pitman Painters to develop the children's artistic knowledge and skills. The children produced their own pictures of miners using oil pastels and the techniques learnt, such as perspective, they were also encouraged to critique and evaluate theirs and others' work (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Examples of the children's art

Teaching mining history through folksong can also meet national curriculum aims for music. The rich and diverse traditional (and some modern) songs about mining are an excellent way to engage the children. The lyrics often tell stories of mining work and life and can be sung and discussed to develop knowledge of mining history and wider themes.

I like the music [...] cos, like, you didn't just talk about and learn about it, you were actually singing it, the information. (Tiddles No.2)

As one of the oldest worked coalfields in Britain, the north-east has its own rich history of mining songs (Hobbs 1999). The original lyrics of the 'Blackleg miner', for example, thought to have been written about the 1844 lockout, references proximate Northumberland pit villages.

Oh, Delaval is a terrible place / They rub wet clay in the blackleg's face, [...] So, divvint gaan near the Seghill mine/ Across the way they stretch a line, /To catch the throat and break the spine/ Of the dirty blackleg miner.

With lyrics in local dialect, learnt to sing 'the Blackleg Miner' allowed the children to learn new vocabulary. Singing various songs in the music lessons inspired diverse discussions; about the science of singing and lung capacity of Welsh miners; the migration of Scots to English coalmining areas; the history of the welfare state and pre-NHS healthcare when miners suffered injuries and the wider industrial and railway heritage of the region. This was in addition to discussions about national and local social and political history related to child labour, pit disasters and strikes. The latter topic, sparked by singing 'the Blackleg Miner', involved the children in a mini drama as they acted out the roles of the strikers, strike leaders, mine owners and the 'blackleg miners' themselves (strike breakers). The sounds of the coalmines could be reimagined through rhythms created in class by children on percussion instruments. The children even engaged in some Northumbrian clog dancing (dance is part of PE in the national curriculum).

literally every part of the songs we could actually teach different aspects of what mining was about, but the chronological history of what happened and how things

have changed throughout the time, by using the songs [...] You don't realise until you actually physically get into it how many different branches you could bring in to one set of teaching. Fantastic. (Teacher C)

An important part of the topic was to develop a broader perspective placing coal mining within the wider industrial context of the north-east. Music lessons, and learning other local songs that had grown out of other industries, facilitated this very readily. In order to further develop this broader view of the children's heritage, learning also went outside the classroom. A 'learning walk' designed and led by a banner association activist started at the school and took the children, over the course of a school day, to various local sites of interest related to mining. Moving through the landscape and having it explained is a powerful way to teach and learn about local history and connect to learning in the classroom (Thomson 2010).

you see statues and models of pits and pit wheels and things and the children don't connect them to them actually being where they're standing. [...] when they see it and you say to the children, "It's 'cos it was there, you're standing on the pit", it makes it more real for them. (Teacher D)

Well, I think the children have more ownership. You know, they feel as if it's part of them [...] it's actually happened here. [...] And I think it has more relevance, that it was something that was local (Headteacher B)

The learning walk was integrated with classroom activities. The children took what they had learned as material for a 'Did you know?' project that they then presented to their parents at a special assembly.

So, the kids learnt this and were able to be more knowledgeable than their parents

really who'd either forgotten or didn't know. (Association Activist G)

The sheer array and diversity of lines of educational enquiry sparked by the teaching on local mining history is remarkable. But, as we have demonstrated, they can be made to interweave very effectively with central requirements of the national curriculum.

c. How does local mining history engage the children?

We observed widespread and sustained interest and engagement in the local mining history topic and this came through in the focus groups. Some children appreciated learning basic things. Sam, for example, commented 'It's quite good to know [...] what coal is actually used for.' For Jim-Bob there was an important spatial element to the local presence of coal: 'Like, underneath us I thought it was just, like, ground and beneath us, I didn't know, like, how they used to make coal and stuff'. Bob named a specific highlight (the miners' lamps') but was generally engaged: 'all of the lessons were fun [...] in their own different ways'.

Similarly, the novelty and diversity of material covered was a positive for Rhiannon: 'we got to learn different things about it and there wasn't anything that we like didn't like because it was, like, new stuff each time'. Several children commented on the relatability of the topic, comparing what they had learned about the lives of those who lived locally before them with their own lives:

I enjoyed learning, like, where mines used to be in the local area and how [...] the miners' daily life was [...] I always get curious about [...] what old people used to do, when, like, they didn't have technology or anything. I used to think; what did they do? How did they get through the day without thinking "ah, I'm gonna watch TV"? (Abby)

A significant element was the hardship and danger of the lives they learned about. Cody remarked that: 'It was interesting, because, like, for the facts and what sacrifices they've been through and what their daily life was.' Charlie commented in a similar vein: 'Like, it was interesting 'cos you didn't realise how dangerous the mines could actually be'.

The teachers were also keenly aware of the topic's relatability:

The children have been shocked at the length of time people worked down the pit, compared to the length of time their parents go out to work today. So, that's been the big impact on the kids. [...] They say, "Oh, I wouldn't like if my dad did that. If my mam or dad came home that dirty". I don't know, it's a bit harsh for them [...] They're very interested and they want to know more... (Teacher D)

they couldn't believe children as young as ten were working, not so much on the pit face but, you know, on the surface at the front but that they actually didn't go to school. (Teacher C)

As Kit recognised, it was possible that the children were not merely learning about people who lived in their community in the past, they were learning about their own forebears:

it's a good thing to learn about cos you know your history, you might have ancestors and then you know how your ancestors felt and you know how they worked, what they had to wear because of where they worked, what it was like.

Building on this, and demonstrating an understanding of a central purpose of historical study, Sarah remarked: 'To, like, know what, like, what happened before you lived and [...] if people made mistakes you can learn from their mistakes'. Bob's perspective

focused not on ancestors but rather of future generations and historical legacy:

I think it's important to learn it because [...] [our] great, great grandchildren might want to know what mining was like [...]but if no-one learns about it now then it won't be able to be passed on through generations and it'll end up being forgotten.

One of the most exciting aspects of the evident impact of teaching was the intellectual empowerment of some of the children. When we introduced ourselves at the start of the topic, we talked about a book on mining that one of us had written, using the front cover's image of two fourteen year old pit lads on their first day at work in 1910 as a means to engage them (Mates, 2016). Many of the children picked up on the pride and braggadocio suggested in the demeanour of one and the look of abject terror on the face of his young workmate ('marra' in the language of the local pits). This introduction was only ten minutes at the start of the topic and yet two children commented directly (and unprompted) on writing books in a focus group several weeks later.

I liked learning about mining [...] when we hadn't even started learning about it, I wouldn't have had a clue of anything around mining. But now, I'd totally be able to type up a whole book about mining (Bob)

it's better to learn it when you're young and like littler [...] when you get an adult you could, like, learn more and more stuff and you could be able to, like, write a book or something like that. (Tiddles No.2)

These examples suggest teaching local history was helping to overcome Haberman's (1991) 'pedagogy of poverty'.

d. Are there wider benefits from this place-based teaching?

Bob's remark about future legacies and the subtext of many others of the children's observations, point to a wider and considerable benefit, recognised in the literature, of place-based pedagogies: that they can help children gain a better sense of their own identities. Our research further underscores the importance of place-based learning. In learning about the history and geography of where they live, the children also develop a stronger sense of who they are, where they come from and how they fit. As well as a sense of identification, a sense of pride in their 'place' can also develop. A recognition of the importance of engendering this understanding in children, and how teaching local industrial history can facilitate identity formation, came through strongly in the teachers' motivations for teaching this topic in the first place. Headteacher A commented that it is;

really, really important that children had that sense of understanding why [...] their community was there and to [...] give them some sense of ownership and care and respect as well, because increasingly, you know, it was like the North East was [...] a place where you went if you couldn't go anywhere else, you know, and there was no value placed on it

Significantly, the teachers felt they were battling a particular stigma that a north-east England (working-class) identity is associated with: the idea of the region as a post-industrial backwater, and, in recent times, as the place of the so-called "left behind worker" who voted 'Brexit' in 2016 (Goodwin and Heath 2016). Headteacher A remarked on a specific case of regionalist classism experienced by the schools' teachers and children on a recent trip to London. She regarded the local mining history topic as a way of 'valuing those people who died down the pit in the mining explosion, who

fought, you know for the rights of the working class people [...]and getting them to have an understanding of how important those people were'; people who, as many of the children recognised, were very much like themselves.

These themes -of class and regional stigma, the need to combat it, to validate the children and even engender pride in them- also came through strongly in the testimony of Teacher C. She spoke of a classist incident she experienced as a college student that clearly stayed with her. Observing that the knowledge and (direct) experience of mining was dying out in families in the region, she noted that another manifestation of a vanishing heritage was a decline in local accents and dialect.

... twenty years ago most of the children still talked with a broad Geordie accent. Very few of the children now that I teach in and around Gateshead have a Geordie slant on anything. They speak much more clearly without any colloquialisms at all.

Teacher C attributed this in part to 'the diversity of teachers, the language skills, the phonics they're taught, the way they're taught'. Teaching music for this topic, dominated by local songs in dialect, was a powerful way of validating and reinforcing local identities. Indeed, there was a sense that, with the music classes in particular, the children were being reintroduced to local cultural practices that their own parents were too young to have known about and thus be able to expose them to:

[it's] a heritage that a lot of them don't hear at home [...] often, the only way they know about it is if we teach it and have access to it. And if we don't [...] it's forgotten about; it's not remembered. (Teacher C)

Teaching the children local mining songs in local dialect thus allows for something of a

subversion of school rules and norms (for the teacher as well as the children), and even, perhaps, subversion of rules at home as well:

a lot of the songs that we sing that have the Geordie words in, the children think it's great cos they can say things that they wouldn't be allowed to say in the classroom and they think it's fun. And they think, "Eeh, I'm getting away with saying, me Mam tells us off for saying things like that". (Teacher C)

In contrast Teacher C's perspective, we were struck, on the contrary, by the ubiquity of the local accent among the children; middle-class children included. By way of illustration, all the quotes from the children in this article are verbatim. This explains the preponderance of the word 'like', which acts as a verbal comma in the local accent. Clearly, rather differing yardsticks for what constitutes a broad local accent are at play here.

That this wider aim of helping to instil a sense of local identity and pride in the children had had some impact was plainly evident in this remark:

Well I found it a bit more interesting but one of the reasons I found it interesting because it's something about *our history, my history, my community's history* and it also tells us how far it was back in them, back in them times, so it gives us, it sort of, it really helps. (Kit) [Our emphasis]

Here, Kit recognises that mining was not simply a fun subject to learn at school; it was part of her own history; and that this also meant she saw herself as part of a community over which she felt ownership, and belonging. In this respect the teaching had demonstrated an outcome of place-based pedagogy; to strengthen children's 'connections to others and to the regions in which they live' (Smith 2002:594).

3. Discussion

This final quote, from a female pupil in our focus groups, leads us into tackling a research sub-question; whether this topic appeals to all children. Specifically, we wondered whether teaching about what was a male occupation in the region would appeal across the sexes. Kit's quote above shows that the topic clearly resonated at a profound level for her. Undoubtedly, she 'got it'. And, as illustrated by many of the children's quotes above, the girls were as, or more, engaged at a general level than the boys. The appeal of central elements of the topic - hardship, struggle, danger, disasters - united the sexes. When looking at names on the mining disaster monument, for example, shared surnames caught the girls' attention, as they did the boys'. Another aspect was that child labour was talked about in general terms; women and girls did work underground in other British Victorian coalfields. While this possibly helped further the gender appeal of the topic, it did also mean that several children in the focus groups mentioned girls working in mines below ground: it was unclear if they knew that there was no female labour in Durham mines.

In addition to this, the whole social world of a mining community was taught. Much of this came through the music classes. The folk songs were not just about strikes, or the hardships and dangers of working below ground, but about life more generally too. They also brought in links with other local industries that employed female workers:

the songs themselves were [...] an easy link in to teach them about the life of the people who worked down the pits. Talking about the music of clog dancing and the wives and the clog dancing, and then the pits of the time, taking the coal and all of the fishwives along the Tyne talking about how they all, all of the industries

interlinked. So, you'd go from the pit, to the Tyne, out to sea. [...] So, we would bring in a general thing of north eastern songs [...] so they actually don't just see it as mining. They actually see it as a broad heritage of their, the whole of their north-east. (Teacher C)

As there was only one BAME (Black Asian Minority Ethnic) student in the classes we worked with, we cannot make generalisations about engagement from our own observations. But we can say that she was notably engaged throughout, and volunteered for and participated very well in one of our focus groups. In general, as noted above, engagement was impressive and widespread throughout the topic from most of the children, and there was no noticeable differentiating factor determining levels of engagement, save general (in)ability to pay attention in class. Indeed, there were some children the teachers remarked on in feedback interviews who were noticeably more engaged by this topic than they were expected to have been. The school also has children of recent migrants to the area, especially a small Filipino community of families mostly working as doctors or nurses in a local hospital. The teachers testified that considerable involvement in the school choir, where they sang local folk songs, helped to integrate the children into school and community life. The cross-curriculum approach involving multiple aspects of local mining history being taught across a variety of subjects meant that there was something for every child. This is supported by Freire (2005), who claims that a sense of identity develops first through the locality, and recognises the diversities and inequalities endemic in social reality that are understood by people in different ways.

There is another important feature of the perhaps surprising ability for the topic of local industrial history to unite the student body. This is the sense in which the subject matter, including its central themes of collective struggle, solidarity and community,

feeds into the ethos of the school itself, with beneficial consequences for all members of the school community. Headteacher A linked her observation that the children's behaviour is 'absolutely rock solid' to the 'pride in our school and I mean it's a community pride [...] So, value each other, look after each other, and that's one of the mission statements that we've got'. Thus, what the children learn about their local history directly translates into how they think about the world and themselves. Their respect for others and themselves that this engenders plays out, in turn, in terms of their behaviour at school.

I think that is all about the curriculum that we have and the values that we have and it's not just about teaching by rote you know. That's why the outdoor learning week's [when the 'learning walks' happen] so important. And it gives children a sense of what's possible. (Headteacher A)

Our other interest, and our second discussion point, is around the observation that the locality's mining past and the memory connected to it had potentially faded rather more than others in the region: this being manifest in what we hypothesised would be the low likelihood of the children having relatives who had worked in the industry. There is also a lack both of preserved physical remains of mines and of knowledge about what does remain. On the familial connections aspect, some of the children did talk to grandparents or great grandparents who had a mining backgrounds and came into class eager to share their stories (and again this was as likely to be a girl as a boy). There were, however, few of these children. In one respect this small number was useful as it meant that there was not a significant experiential divide in the classroom between those children with and without relatives who had worked in the industry. The children of parents from outside the area, including the small BAME population, were in this respect not disadvantaged, as many children from long-standing families in the area,

who were likely to have had more distant miner ancestors, did not necessarily know about them and certainly could not talk to them directly. Again, that good engagement was not limited to those children who knew they had mining in their families' histories was a testament both to the broad appeal of the topic and to how it was taught.

The lack of obvious physical remains, and of knowledge about them was overcome with the help of local experts. Specifically, this was the secretary of the local miners' banner association: an ex-miner who grew up in the area before moving away for work but who retained extensive local knowledge. He was able to chart engaging 'learning walks' and furnish the children with anecdotes about his own childhood growing up in the community as well as offer expert insights into the mining-related geography of the locality. One example was his description of the 'dillyways'; the tracks that used to carry the coal from South Tyneside pits to the river for shipment abroad. To the untrained eye these now look like little cycle paths between the houses, but the local history expert was able to make them come alive, talking about, for example, the excitement and danger of playing near them when they were still carrying coal in the 1950s and 60s.

Conclusion

To conclude, we reiterate our four main findings. Firstly, that teaching local industrial history at primary level (in this case coal mining history) is possible, even in the context of stringent government demands for specific standards in English and Mathematics.

Key elements of the curriculum can be covered if the local history is approached imaginatively. Second, that teaching this history is not only possible but *desirable* as it has the capacity to sustain a strong engagement from the children. It means they can take knowledge gained in the classroom and use it to help them better understand their

surroundings; as well as grasp more firmly the nature of their community and, in some cases, the history of their own families. Not only this, but that some children are capable of recognising explicitly that this is what the topic offers them. This is a topic that needs 'to be revisited to give children an ownership and an identity quite of where they are. And we know that they like that' (Headteacher A).

This leads us onto the third finding; that the topic is fun and engaging in part because the children recognise that it is telling them about themselves. It helps them to become 'experts on their own lives' (Prosser 2010:8). This is particularly important in a deprived community in a neglected region and can help teachers combat the stigma they see attached to a north-east working class identity. It can help instil some pride in the children, as they come to better appreciate the strands that comprise their own identities, of which place and accent are essential. And, as we have argued above, the maleness and whiteness of coal mining historically does not exclude children who do not identify this way; far from it. This unifying recognition and ownership, and the nature of the topic itself, can have positive benefits for the school ethos and, instrumentally, for the children's behaviour in school, helping to build a school community.

Our final finding is that the teaching of this type of local place-based industrial history is augmented if schools can draw upon external visitors and local community groups to work with. Collaborations with such people and groups also offers the possibility of applying for funding to support, for example, school trips and wider community engagement. Not every post-industrial locality will have an active miners' banner group, but very many have, for example local history societies with members who would surely be keen to share their local knowledge and passion for the history of their community with the younger generations.

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