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**Principles into Practice: Teaching about the British Empire,
Migration, and Belonging**

**Why the British Empire
matters for schools today**

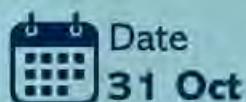




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Principles into Practice: Teaching about the British Empire, Migration, and Belonging



Date
31 Oct



Time
10.30am - 3.30pm



Location
**Dept of
Education**

REGISTER



Jason Todd

PGCE History Lead and
Principal Investigator



Adrian Fernandes

Doctoral Student



Rachel Lewin

Headteacher at the Five
Islands Academy



Holly Cooper

Research Assistant



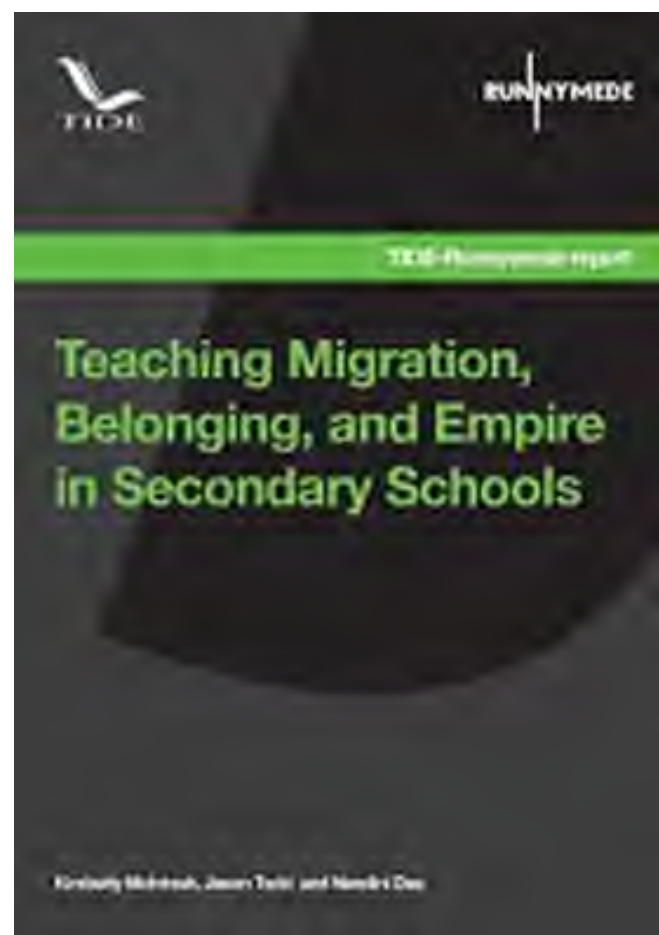
Zaiba Patel

DPhil student



Steve Puttick

Associate Professor
of Teacher Education





[Home](#) > [Traction](#)

Welcome to TRACTION

TRACTION (Teaching Race, Belonging, Empire and Migration) offers training for teachers on issues of race, belonging, migration and empire. The TRACTION platform consists of three specialist, interdisciplinary modules covering the historical timeline to the present day, along with an additional module on educational theory and pedagogy. Created by specialist researchers and education experts at the University of Oxford, these are aimed at teachers of English and History primarily, but not limited to, the KS3 level.

[Register for TRACTION](#)



Personal	Aims	Practice	External	Change environment
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D. Clarke, H. Hollingsworth / Teaching and Teacher Education 18 (2002) 947–967

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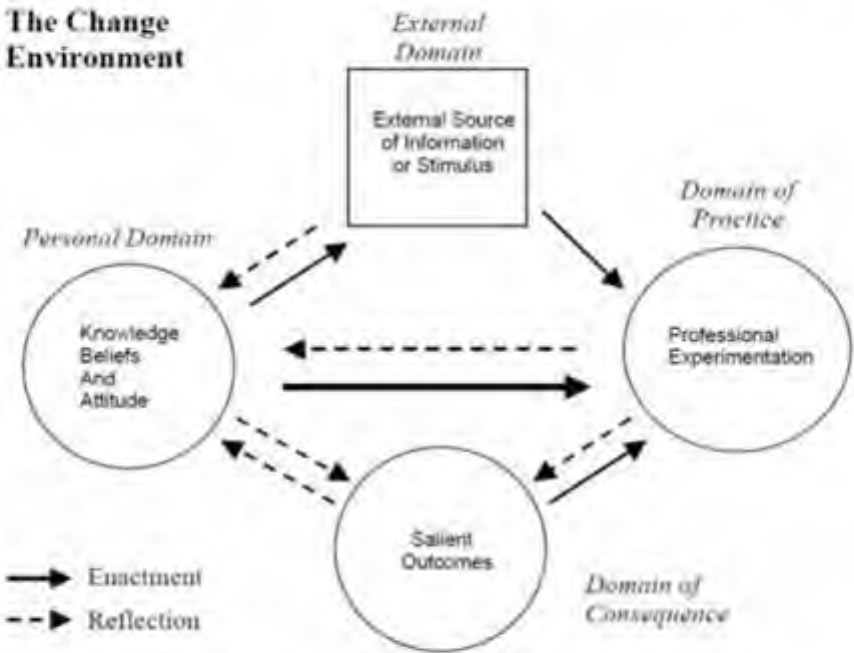


Fig. 3. The interconnected model of professional growth.

however, much of the professional experimental- "acting", on the grounds that acting occurs in the

What is my own relationship to empire?	How does this determine my aims?	How well are my aims reflected in my teaching?	What resources do I draw on?	How do I account for student perspectives?
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What is my own relationship to Empire?

Stories and traces of Empire

- *'Some impression of the event must have been left inside me. Where is it now?'*
- *(Freud to Wilhelm Fleiss, 15 October 1897)*





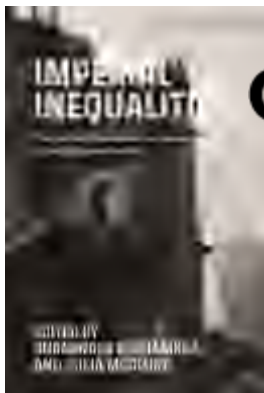
What are your
stories of Empire
and Migration?

No. 27110
 GALATTA
 Date of Birth 26/1/1929
 Hour of Birth 4:02 PM
 Name of Informant Joseph
 Address of Informant
 Race of Informant Tamil
 Registrar's Office
 17/2/1946

Name John
 Occupation
 Race
 Country of Birth
 Date of Birth 22/1/1929
 Hour of Birth 2:00 PM
 Name of Informant
 Address of Informant
 Race of Informant
 Registrar's Office
 17/2/1946

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 17/2/1946



CONNECTED
 SOCIOLOGIES

Why this project matters



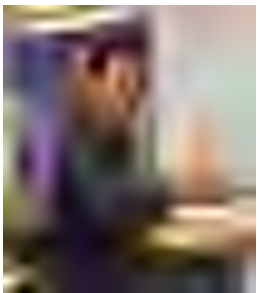
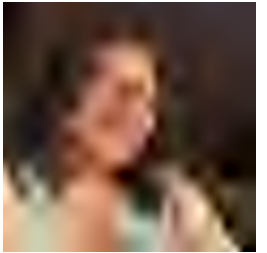
- Empire is **central to understanding** modern Britain:
It is impossible to understand modern British history, much less Britain today, without an understanding of the British Empire and its continuing impact.
(Margot Finn, Professor of Modern British History, UCL)
- There is **strong demand** for teaching and learning about this subject: **94%** of teachers and **79%** of students surveyed believe **every young person should be taught the history of Britain's Empire** at school
- **Filling a critical gap:** Prior to this project, there was **no national evidence base** of exactly what – or how much – teaching and learning was taking place

Who is the team?



Oxford	
Jason Todd	Co-PI
Zaiba Patel	DPHil Researcher
Teni Gogo	MA Action Research Fellow
Kiran Mahil	MA Action Research Fellow
Abigail Branford	Post-doctoral Research Assistant
Holly Cooper	Research Assistant
Pen Woods	Post Doctoral Research Assistant

UCL	
Alice Pettigrew	Co-PI
Stuart Foster	Senior Advisor
Hannah Williams	Project Administrator
Cassie McDermid	Research Assistant
Abdul Mohamud	PhD Researcher
Belinda John-Baptiste	Post Doc Research Assistant
Amy Smail	Post Doc Research Fellow
Robin Whitburn	Associate



Phases and strands

Strand A: Mapping the current context of teaching and learning about Empire, Migration and Belonging in English Secondary Schools: policy frames, popular political discourse and contemporary scholarship.	Strand B: Empirical research with teachers	Strand C: Empirical research with students	Strand D: Analysis of textbooks (and associated classroom resources)
<p>Aim 1: to identify & consult with a broad range of groups particularly teachers and subject associations.</p> <p>Aim 2: to complete a comprehensive literature and policy review to support understanding of scholarship and current policy.</p>	<p>Aim: to produce robust empirical data and analyses able to answer, 'How, when, why and by whom, are issues of empire, migration and belonging currently approached in English secondary schools?'</p>	<p>Aim: to produce robust empirical data and analyses able to answer, 'What do English secondary school students know and understand about EMB and how do they come to this knowledge and understanding?'</p>	<p>Aim: to chart and reflect upon changing representations of empire and migration within English textbooks from 1890 to the present day.</p>

Filling a critical gap: What we did and who we spoke to



Our mixed methods approach included:

- National surveys involving over 1,000 teachers and 3,000 students
- Observations, interviews and focus groups at 7 comparative case study schools
- Teacher and student interviews within three further history department case study schools
- 2 youth symposia across 4 schools involving 23 students in yearlong autoethnographies
- A survey and of 70 academic historians and follow-up interviews with 20
- Case study research of 3 GLAM sector/school partnerships
- Community workshops and exploratory research around school-community partnerships
- Focus groups and interviews with exam boards and textbook authors

Key findings



A widely valued subject yet to be fully realised



Common constraints and limitations



Personal and political resonance: sensitivities, opportunities, and risks



Uneven, inconsistent, and often underdeveloped support for teaching

Key Finding 3

Teaching about the British Empire is rarely shaped by individual teachers alone; their work is enabled or constrained by decisions and dynamics at multiple levels, from school level priorities to national policy and wider public debate

Not all teachers who want to teach about Britain's empire feel able to do so and many others feel constrained in how far they can go

Nearly 70%

of surveyed teachers frequently encountered insufficient curriculum time as a barrier to teaching about the British Empire well

42% of teachers **worried** **spending insufficient time** on this complex subject **could do more harm** than good

In several schools, **cross-curricular and/or thematic approaches** offered opportunities to increase total teaching time. But time constraints extend beyond questions of timetables:

”

I'd say by far the biggest barrier is another time issue related to broader workload pressures, i.e. to properly research and plan for these very complex topics. It is a structural issue [. . .] that schools do not (or cannot) provide adequate time for high quality CPD and planning - most has to be done in teachers' own time or not at all.

(History teacher, East of England, survey response)

Recommendations



Strategic and structural recommendations

1. Ensure that the school curriculum is structured to support progression and coherence
2. Review subject content criteria to reflect Britain's global history and diverse cultural heritage
3. Build career-long professional development to support curriculum leadership in teaching complex and difficult histories

Contextual and relational recommendations

4. Support teachers to reflect on identity and power in the classroom, and embed this thinking into training and safeguarding practices
5. Recognise, support and develop teachers' expertise in shaping curriculum in response to their students, school communities, and the demands of complex and difficult histories—and embed this in leadership development and CPD
6. Support teachers to work with students' lived experiences and emotions as part of curriculum planning and professional practice



Wider enabling recommendations

7. Support community-linked curriculum projects to connect local histories and school learning
8. Enable cross-subject curriculum planning to deepen understanding of shared themes
9. Enable teachers, publishers and communities to co-create high-quality and responsive teaching resources
10. Fund and coordinate further research to evaluate and extend effective practice in education on the British Empire, migration, and belonging



Key Finding 5

Teaching about the British Empire can open up essential, sometimes sensitive, but widely valued conversations about identity, race, and nationhood

Over 60% of teachers considered it important to address statutory teaching on **British values** in the context of learning about the country's former empire.

Many teachers and curriculum leaders anticipate or experience potential backlash and/or controversy in relation to teaching about empire but are committed to doing so and the prevailing message across schools in our research was of careful, critical engagement rather than retreat.

Have faith in the knowledge that despite national media conversations, this history is important and needs to be told, even if it makes people uncomfortable. Emphasise that history is not meant to make you feel comfortable but rather to confront the past.

(History teacher, London, advice shared in survey response)

The majority of students also appear ready and willing to engage with complexity around notions of identity and patriotism as they relate to this history.

It's the concept that being British has changed over time. It doesn't mean accepting . . - it can mean so many different things, depending on what point we are in the Empire.

(Year 11 student, History Dep Case Study 3)

Key Finding 6

Teaching and learning about Britain's empire involves emotional and pastoral work which is unevenly distributed among students and staff

Teachers identify a range of emotional, pedagogical, and practical challenges when teaching about empire. These include:

- **navigating student misconceptions** including offensive stereotypes
- **managing sensitivity** around language and content
- **responding to unpredictable or emotionally charged student reactions**

Racially minoritised staff often bear a disproportionate emotional and representational burden when teaching about empire while some white colleagues express concern over their own positionality.

As a white British woman I am conscious that I have a privileged position and worry that I will not have the empathy and understanding I need to cover these topics with enough understanding of the non-white experience and family histories of the students I teach.

(English teacher, London, survey response)

Support for appropriately sensitive teaching and learning about the British Empire **needs to extend beyond individual subject teachers and their lessons**. Our comparative case study school research emphasised the importance of recognising the **wider, whole-school level implications** of teaching about this history and its legacies

Key Finding 7

Many teachers strive to diversify and deepen their teaching about Britain's empire, but curriculum content often remains constrained in important ways

Teachers face difficulty determining **what to include and how to organise content** when teaching about the British Empire.

Because it's so big and nebulous and you could have so many different threads and there's no consensus on what are we trying to achieve by teaching this.

(Extract from interview, Comparative Case Study School 6)

Overwhelming, historians emphasised the importance of recentring the voices and perspectives of the colonised when teaching the history of empire. This also had very strong support among teachers.

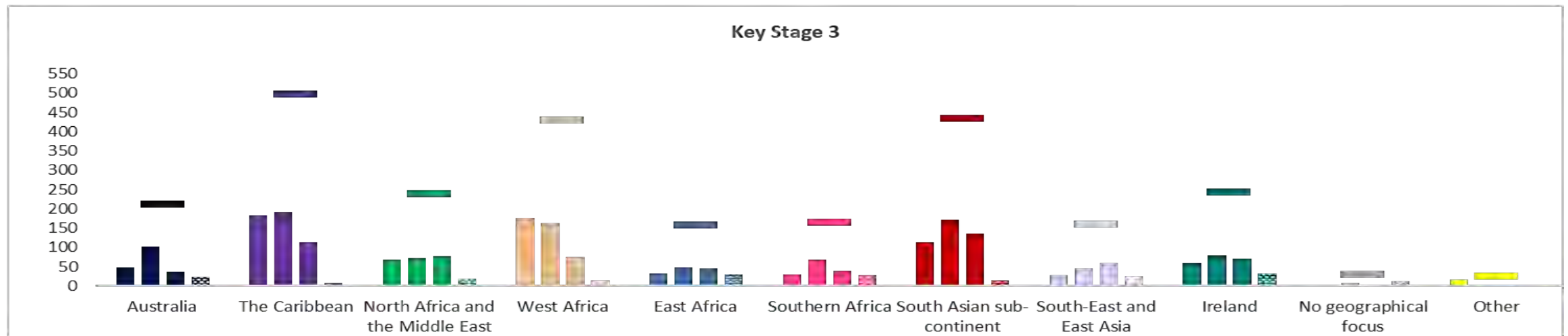
90% identified '**encouraging students to reconnected and remember the full humanity of individuals and communities involved**' as a '**high**' or '**essential**' pedagogical priority, second only to 'awareness of key facts'

However, many classroom textbooks currently in use continue to reproduce what some teachers described as an 'outdated', 'Eurocentric' framework and include limited representation of colonised peoples' experiences.

In turn, students who took part in our survey were much **more likely to be able to name and/or describe an individual involved in this history as a coloniser** than they were the colonised.

Key Finding 8 Teaching about the British Empire very often focuses on a small number of key regions, potentially limiting students' awareness of its wider global geography

Students' knowledge of the geography of the British Empire typically appears concentrated rather than comprehensive. **Only a minority** of all surveyed students were **aware of the full global reach** of empire: just **35.5%** of those who had formally studied this history at school (and 17% who had not) recognised that it had once extended across all major continental regions of the globe.



Curricular principles

PRINCIPLES



1. **A spiral curriculum:** Schools should teach the histories and legacies of the British Empire across the 11-18 age range, revisiting themes and extending the scope of students' studies by key stage
2. **'Legacies' of the British Empire:** Teachers should teach about 'legacies' to connect the histories of the British Empire to our contemporary world but be aware they are complex and controversial
3. **Spatial scope and coverage:** Students should learn about the histories and legacies of the British Empire at all significant levels: global, regional, national, and local
4. **Conceptual themes:** Students should be taught about a range of core aspects of imperial expansion, rule, and decline across the curriculum
5. **Humanising the peoples of empire:** Teachers should ensure that lessons about the British Empire explore lives of peoples involved to embody factors and concepts

Pedagogical principles

6. Enquiry and meaning-making: Teachers should plan their lessons in enquiry sequences that involve students investigating powerful questions to build knowledge and understanding 'Legacies' of the British Empire.

7. Diverse sources and interpretations: Teachers should use sources in enquiries that include a range of voices and types of remains from the past and interrogate interpretations of the histories and legacies from more than one perspective

8. Balance and judgement: Students should be taught to consider a range of different ideas in their enquiries but not asked to produce an equivalent "balance" as a final learning outcome

9. Students' agency and dialogue: Students should be actively involved in the exploration of enquiry questions through dialogue with their peers and teachers

10. Identity and locality: Teachers should incorporate local dimensions in their enquiries and consider how their students' identities might be connected to the histories and legacies of empire

Principles for professional practice

11. Range of programmes and resources: Development opportunities for professionals within both academic and heritage sectors should broaden and deepen their understanding of pedagogical and curricular work in relation to the histories and legacies of the British Empire

12. Local perspectives: Development opportunities for professionals within both academic and heritage sectors should include connections to their locale and region

13. Identities: Development work should pay attention to the personal and social demands, challenges, and opportunities of working in the field of histories and legacies of empire, for both adults and young people

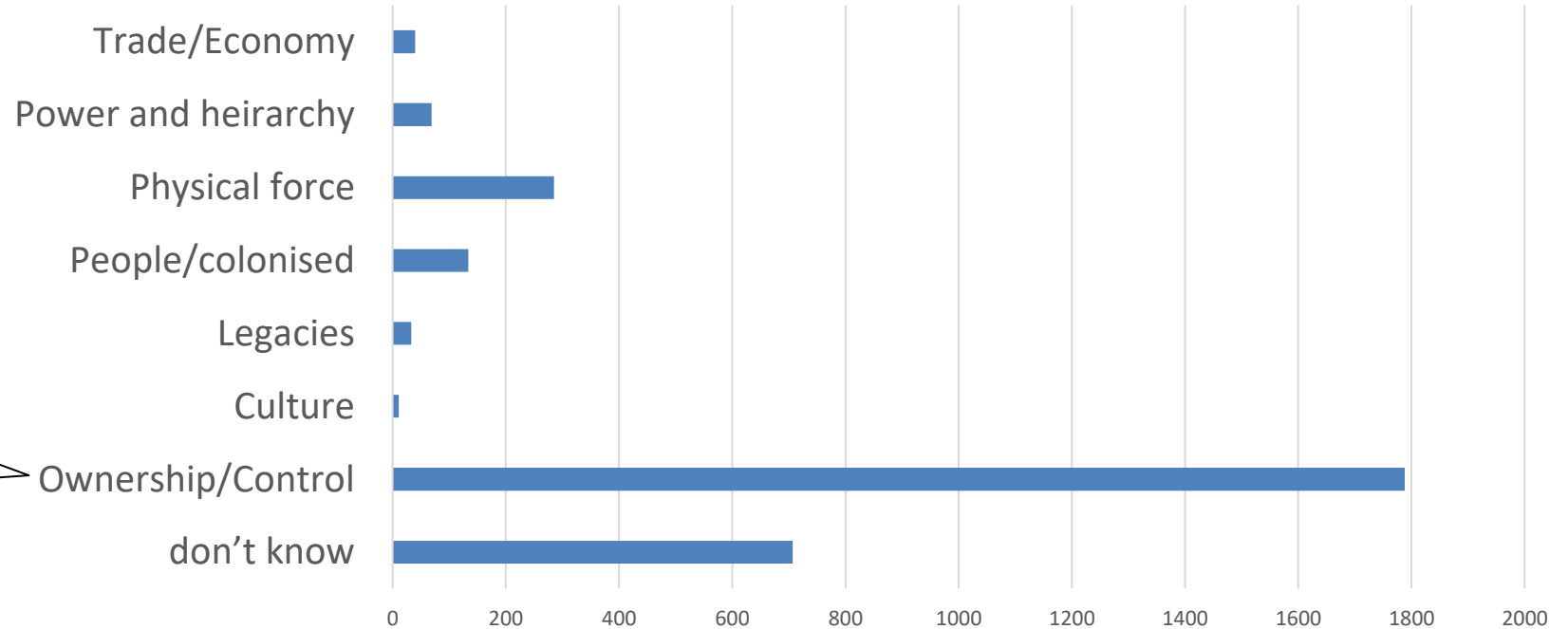
14. Students' agency and dialogue: School leaders should support teachers to work collaboratively in exploring the challenges and opportunities of this field, in both subject groups and cross-curricular settings



What do we mean by 'Empire'?

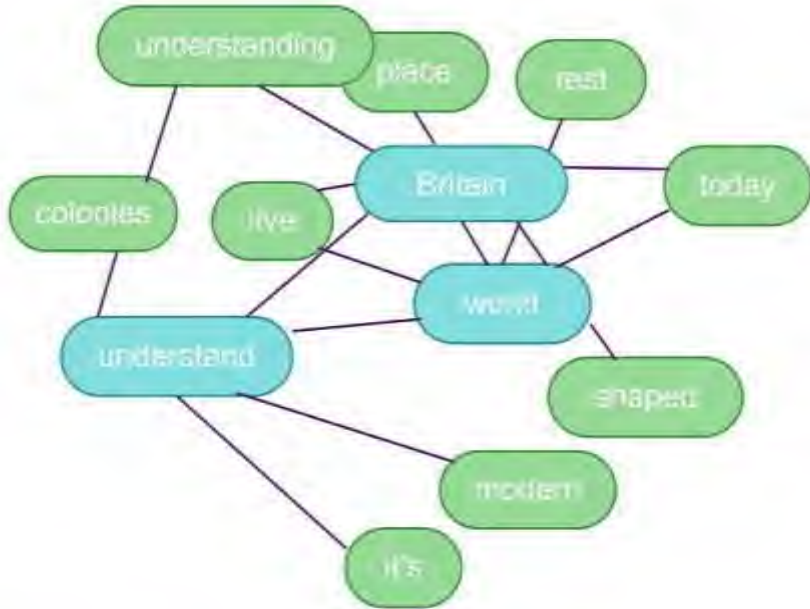
"Where Britain ruled other countries and took charge of their land."
"It means when the British were in control of other countries."
"When Britain had power over many places."

What does the British Empire mean to you



1. Ownership / Control – concepts of rule, power, control, or domination (e.g., “when Britain took over countries”).
2. Physical Force – mentions of violence, invasion, or coercion (e.g., “they fought to take land”).
3. People / Colonised – references to people, populations, or colonised groups (e.g., “people under British rule”).
4. Power and Hierarchy – explicit comparisons of power, rank, or strength (e.g., “less powerful countries,” “most powerful empire”).
5. Trade / Economy – references to resources, goods, money, or economic gain (e.g., “to make profit”).
6. Legacies / Continuing Impact – recognition of ongoing or lasting effects (e.g., “still affects people today”).
7. Culture – references to language, religion, education, or cultural influence (e.g., “spreading culture or religion”).

Why does learning about the British Empire matter?



Insight from 70 historians: Knowledge of the past and present

The British Empire is a central aspect of British history... We don't understand our current governance systems, our society, our education system, our social structures, our understandings of humanitarianism today unless we understand the Empire and its impact on British society.

(Dr Catriona Ellis, University of Strathclyde)

Britain's various imperial projects have shaped nearly every society in the world... to understand world history means to engage with the history of Britain and its empires.

(Dr Mark Reeves, University of the West of England)

Why does learning about the British Empire matter?

Insight from 70 historians

Meaning and purpose

Because it plays a large role in debates about national identity and is mobilised by different interest groups in different ways.

(Professor Henric Altink, University of York)

Had the British Empire been as widely known about as I think it should be, it is inconceivable that the Windrush scandal... could have arisen.

(Dr Poppy Cullen, Loughborough University)

At present we have a teaching of world history that is lacking in evidential probity... This history does not survive scrutiny and is not only academically void, but lacking in rigour. We need to be responsible in changing this.

(Professor Onyeka Nubia, University of Nottingham)

Q2 What would you like teachers and students to know about the British Empire?

Key Themes

2. Power Dynamics and Resistance

3. Legacies of the Empire

4. Economic and Social Impact

5. Cultural Exchanges and Contributions

6. Historiographical Debates and Perspectives

1. Complexity and Diversity of the Empire

“It’s critical to examine how colonized peoples actively resisted imperial control, from anti-colonial uprisings to cultural preservation.”

“Power in the Empire was deeply racialized, relying on exploitation and the construction of hierarchies.”

“Resistance movements show the Empire’s fragility and the resilience of those subjected to it.”

Q2 What would you like teachers and students to know about the British Empire?

Key Themes

2. Power Dynamics and Resistance

3. Legacies of the Empire

4. Economic and Social Impact

5. Cultural Exchanges and Contributions

6. Historiographical Debates and Perspectives

1. Complexity and Diversity of the Empire

“Contemporary conflicts and migration patterns are rooted in the governance structures and policies of the Empire.”

“The legacies of the British Empire are embedded in global systems, from legal frameworks to trade networks.”

“Understanding the Empire’s legacies is crucial for unpacking issues of race and identity today.”

Q2 What would you like teachers and students to know about the British Empire?

Key Themes

2. Power Dynamics and Resistance

3. Legacies of the Empire

4. Economic and Social Impact

5. Cultural Exchanges and Contributions

6. Historiographical Debates and Perspectives

1. Complexity and Diversity of the Empire

“The wealth of the Industrial Revolution was built on the exploitation of colonial resources and labor.”

“Economic ties between Britain and its colonies reshaped global trade and local economies.”

“Colonial rule brought profound changes to social hierarchies, both in Britain and abroad.”

Q2 What would you like teachers and students to know about the British Empire?

Key Themes

2. Power Dynamics and Resistance

3. Legacies of the Empire

4. Economic and Social Impact

5. Cultural Exchanges and Contributions

6. Historiographical Debates and Perspectives

1. Complexity and Diversity of the Empire

“The Empire’s cultural exchanges were not one-way; colonized peoples profoundly influenced British art, cuisine, and thought.”

“Understanding how cultural imposition erased indigenous traditions is critical to grasping the Empire’s impact.”

“Teaching about the Empire’s cultural exchanges enriches students’ understanding of Britain’s diverse heritage.”

Q2 What would you like teachers and students to know about the British Empire?

Key Themes

2. Power Dynamics and Resistance

3. Legacies of the Empire

4. Economic and Social Impact

5. Cultural Exchanges and Contributions

6. Historiographical Debates and Perspectives

1. Complexity and Diversity of the Empire

“Teaching the Empire should include an examination of historiographical debates to foster critical engagement.”

“The Empire’s history has been weaponized in public discourse; it’s vital to explore how narratives are constructed.”

“Students should see that historians disagree on the Empire’s nature, which reflects broader societal debates.”

1)At the start of the First World War where was the first shot fired by a British soldier?

A)France

B) Ghana

C) Kent



It was on the Gold Coast that the first shot was fired by a British soldier in the last War. It came from a rifle carried by a dusky warrior whose name was Sergeant Alhaji Grunshi, and whose face bore the tribal scars of a people familiar only to the traveller who has penetrated into the hot savannah land north of the Colony of Ashanti [...]

Sergeant Grunshi was a member of the Gold Coast Regiment, West African Frontier Force, and was one of the contingent of troops which marched into the then German dependency of Togoland shortly after the war was declared.

There was little show of resistance to this invasion, but at Lome, some miles from the capital, a few Germans, ensconced in a factory, opened fire on a British patrol.

This fire was promptly returned by Sergeant Grunshi and the first bullet to leave his rifle (although neither Alhaji nor any of his companions realized it at the time) signalized the opening of four years of bitter hostilities in the course of which Empire was to lose more than 1,000,000 dead. During that war hundreds of Gold Coast men followed Sergeant Grunshi on active service in West and East Africa

The Times, The Gold Coast Mobilised, 25th March 1940.



Think

1) Locate in time and place

2) Questions, themes, implications



16th Cen

17th Cen

18th Cen

19th Cen

20th Cen

21st Cen

Statutes of
Kilkenny 1366

Pequot War
1636-38

Boston
Tea party

Napoleonic
Wars

1st shot
FWW

Q2 What would you like teachers and students to know about the British Empire?

Key Themes

2. Power Dynamics and Resistance

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6. Historiographical Debates and Perspectives

1. Complexity and Diversity of the Empire

“The British Empire was not a coherent or fixed entity—it was always changing, containing a patchworked hierarchy of governance and experiences.”

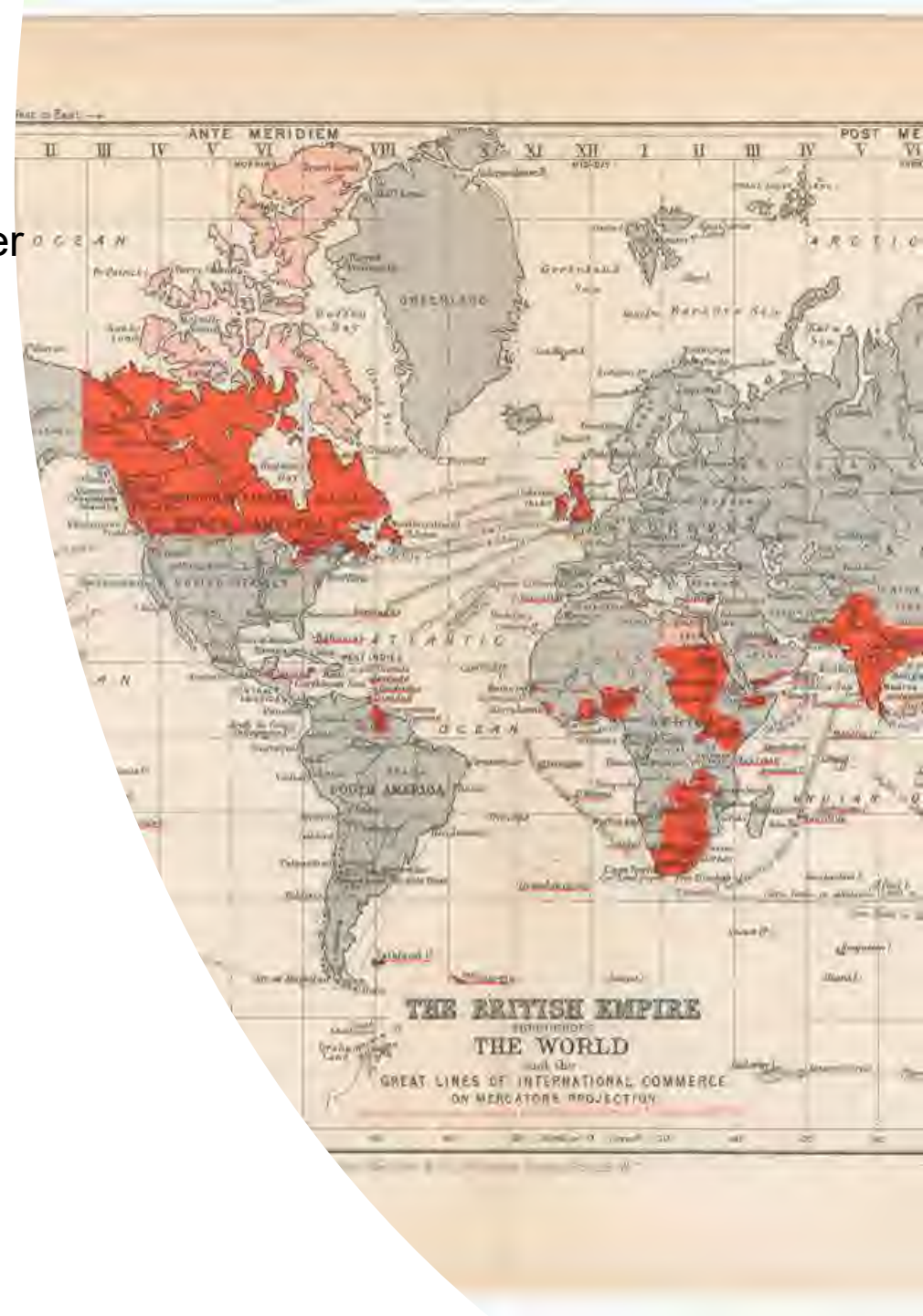
“Colonial experiences varied widely, from settler colonies like Australia to extractive economies in India and Africa.”

“Students need to understand how the Empire's development was driven by a complex interplay of political, economic, and social forces.”

Empire is not a thing!

Britain's empire should be considered as a process, rather than a "thing," and its causes, consequences, and legacies seen as complex and varied across time and place (see Principle 1 and 3).

Spatial
Temporal
Human Relationships
Centre or periphery
Impact/legacies
Ideas & Ideology



Personal	Aims	Practice	External	Change environment
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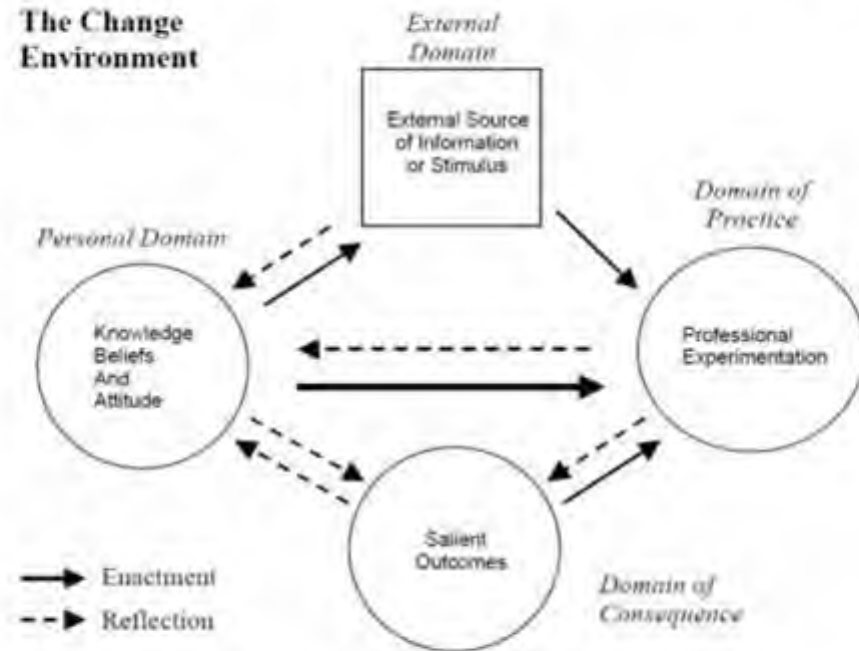


Fig. 3. The interconnected model of professional growth.

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What is my own relationship to empire?	How does this determine my aims?	How well are my aims reflected in my teaching?	What resources do I draw on?	How do I account for student perspectives?
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1. Complexity & Diversity of the Empire	2. Racial Legacies, Hierarchies & Social Ordering	Power, Coercion & Resistance	4. Economic Structures, Extraction & Capitalism
Principle 1 (Spiral curriculum) Principle 3 (Spatial scope) Principle 4 (Conceptual themes):	Principle 2 (Legacies) Principle 5 (Humanising peoples of empire) Principle 7 (Diverse sources & interpretations) Principle 13 (Identities)	Principle 4 (Conceptual themes) Principle 8 (Balance & judgement) Principle 9 (Students’ agency & dialogue)	Principle 4 (Conceptual themes). Principle 3 (Spatial scope) Principle 10 (Identity & locality):

5. Voices, Methods & Reading Against the Grain	6. Interconnection & “Empire at Home”	7. Memory, Commemoration & Ongoing Legacies	Endings, Decolonisation & Continuities
Principle 7 (Diverse sources & interpretations) Principle 6 (Enquiry & meaning-making) Principle 11 (Range of programmes)	Principle 3 (Spatial scope) Principle 10 (Identity & locality) Principle 12 (Local perspectives)	Principle 2 (Legacies) Principle 8 (Balance & judgement) Principle 9 (Students’ agency & dialogue)	Principle 1 (Spiral curriculum) Principle 2 (Legacies): Principle 14 (Solidarity)