

What for the future, from learning the past? Exploring the implications of the compulsory Aotearoa New Zealand histories curriculum

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Important curriculum development work has progressed since the 2019 announcement that Aotearoa New Zealand histories would become compulsory learning across all schools. Much effort has gone into considering how learning 'our' histories can engage, inspire and empower children in schools through years 1 to 10, and recent writing has focused on how to address challenges in building knowledge and capability to meet those aims. However, what will be the effects beyond those years? Will students still be drawn to choose history in their senior school years, or will they be 'over it'? In a quest to gauge the implications of the new curriculum, our research team surveyed secondary school history students on their motivations and areas of interest in learning history, and their views on Aotearoa New Zealand history becoming compulsory for Years 1-10.

Findings from our research confirmed that students' past engagement with history influenced their ongoing interest, motivation and understanding of the subject. However, the positive learning that had drawn them to history was often about everyone else's history rather than their own. Students identified international histories – often involving war or conflict – as favourite topics. So, while most supported the implementation of the new curriculum, they equally expressed concern that the local focus should not be at the expense of wider perspectives. They felt history could become repetitive and boring; elements which could put students off engaging with history in future. We conclude by presenting important considerations for ensuring such negative impacts do not occur.

Keywords: history curriculum, secondary history, Aotearoa New Zealand histories, subject choice, teaching history

Introduction

There is a sea change coming in the learning of history in Aotearoa New Zealand schools. From 2023, it will be compulsory for Year 1 to 10 students to learn this country's history, on the assumption that widespread learning of Aotearoa New Zealand histories will build stronger identity, understanding and connectedness across all New Zealanders (Ardern & Hipkins, 2019). The change is likely to have dramatic effects on a subject that, until now, has tended to take a back seat in the New Zealand Curriculum. In recent years social studies has come to be seen as "an increasingly fragmented learning area" (Sheehan, 2017, p. 106) while engagement with Aotearoa New Zealand history has been ad hoc and often avoided (Sheehan, 2012; Sheehan, 2017). Bringing this country's history to the fore

has the potential, therefore, to create a significant shift in how history is perceived and engaged with, not only in schools but also across families and wider communities.

Over the past two years much work has gone into writing the curriculum, developing resources, considering how teachers may adapt to new requirements and identifying strategies important for engaging students with Aotearoa New Zealand's histories. But what do students think of these potential changes, and how might compulsory learning affect their perception of Aotearoa New Zealand history? We realise very little has been studied of students' views, and this research has sought to address that gap. Although we acknowledge that there will be significant differences between the broad citizenship-based aims of the compulsory junior curriculum and the tight assessment-based focus of history as an NCEA subject at senior level, we have approached the senior history students in this study as those who, through social studies classes or other media, have had enjoyable and stimulating encounters with learning about the past which have motivated them to continue history at senior level.

The context for this research

The development of the Aotearoa New Zealand history curriculum, and the campaign for greater recognition of Aotearoa New Zealand history which preceded it, has initiated more collaboration and discussion between New Zealand historians and educationalists than has been apparent for some time (Hunter & Farthing, 2004). This research has been our own attempt to build stronger understanding and working relationships between school and university history teachers. Grounding ideas have come from a wide range of literature based on both international research into history teaching concepts and issues and that which explores the unique Aotearoa New Zealand context. We have sought to understand factors that influence students' choice of history as a subject, those that encourage their engagement with history, and the status of history as a subject choice in Aotearoa New Zealand secondary schools today.

Research seeking to understand why students choose specific subjects in secondary schools has identified multiple factors, including personality, student background, and practical or rational considerations. Intrinsic versus extrinsic factors may be at play (Palmer, 2020); students may choose independently based on preference, familiarity and confidence, or external influences from family, friends or community may take precedence (Hipkins & Vaughan, 2019). Pragmatic thinking may drive priorities, such as how useful a subject might be for future study or careers. Perceptions of subject hierarchy may also be influential, if history and other arts or humanities subjects are considered of lower status than the more abstract mathematics and physical sciences (Bleazby, 2015). Students may, however, ultimately have little choice when mundane issues such as availability of subjects and timetabling preside (Smyth, 2016).

Students' valuing of history as a subject choice may be explained through 'historical consciousness' whereby the relevance and importance of history are interpreted through the intersecting notions of public memory, citizenship, and history education (Seixas, 2012). Historical consciousness, fundamentally understood as "interpreting the past for the sake of the present and anticipating the future" (Rusen, 2012, cited in Clark & Peck, 2020, p.2), justifies a commitment to learning history especially where citizenship considerations are at play. Seixas (2012) argues that history education plays a central role in building the ability of students to answer questions of historical consciousness "to help them make sense of who they are, where they stand, and what they can do" as citizens with responsibilities in a rapidly changing world (p. 21). Popa (2022), however, also

emphasises the more personal elements of historical consciousness, defining it as “a disposition to engage with history so as to make meaning of past human experience for oneself, or in other words, to make the historical past one’s own” (p. 174).

Historical consciousness may draw students to history, but how can learning history hold student attention and commitment? Most historians believe its core appeal lies in the thrill of historical investigation and exercise of historical thinking skills; skills that bring together all stages of historical cognition through engagement with and evaluation of historical sources (Wineburg, 2001). Historical thinking draws on inquiry-based, ‘hands-on’ learning to build critical engagement with historical sources and has been a core element of the history curriculum in Aotearoa New Zealand since 2007 (Harcourt, 2016). The more interesting the historical exploration, the more the historical imagination is engaged, and the greater likelihood of continued enthusiasm for history (Doull, Russell & Hales, 2020). An “orientation to the past” therefore becomes embedded (Chapman, 2020, p. 35).

While historical consciousness and historical thinking help to explain why and how students engage with history learning, the ‘what’ extends history education research into subject matter and the challenges of teaching and learning of Aotearoa New Zealand’s ‘difficult histories’ (Harcourt, 2020). Because the senior history curriculum has not prescribed any specific topics, Aotearoa New Zealand histories, particularly those that deal with the challenges of this country’s colonisation and its consequences for Māori, have until now suffered low priority as learning choices (Sheehan, 2012; Sheehan, 2017; Sheehan & Ball, 2020), encouraging “pedagogies of forgetting” (Kidman, 2017). Campaigns for the teaching of the New Zealand Wars and their role in Aotearoa New Zealand history have been a first step in addressing this deficit. The new curriculum now seeks to broaden that objective (Bell, 2020a; Belgrave, 2020) while the greater emphasis on mātauranga Māori in the refreshed Year 11-13 curriculum means that dealing with and responding to Aotearoa New Zealand’s difficult histories will become a central and essential consideration – and likely continual challenge – for teachers, students across all school years, and their communities.

Recognising these likely challenges in embedding Aotearoa New Zealand history learning in schools, ensuring the meaningfulness of the learning for students will be important. MacDonald (2020) has highlighted the role teachers play in supporting students to think through difficult histories as they learn them. Developing historical empathy (Davison, Enright & Sheehan, 2014) and a sense of “personal reckoning” (Bell, 2020) in such histories is argued to be crucial. Students’ senses of identity and culture are likely to deeply affect the necessary personal connection such learning entails (Reymer, 2012).

Given the many questions about the implications of the new curriculum, it is valuable to ascertain how history currently fares as a subject choice in Aotearoa New Zealand secondary schools. Enrolment numbers indicate that history has been quite successful in holding its own amongst competing subject options over the past two decades. Since the late 1990s, history has steadily attracted around 18-19 percent of students across all Aotearoa New Zealand schools, while Economics and Geography have both declined in popularity.¹ The participating schools in this research showed similar

¹ From 1996 to 2016, Geography enrolments declined from 26.2 to 19.7 percent, and Economics more dramatically from 22.9 to 10.6 percent. History by comparison increased slightly over that period from 18.2 to 19.2 percent. Calculated from *Enrolment Counts*
<https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics/schooling/student-numbers/subject-enrolment>

numbers; in 2020/2021 between nine and 29 percent of Year 12 and 13 students had enrolled in history in these schools.²

Research approach

This research has sought to better understand senior students' engagement with history in relation to those ideas presented above. We wanted to know what has drawn senior students to learn history, what their interests in and understanding of history as an academic subject are, and how they view Aotearoa New Zealand history in particular. Our research team engaged with 150 Year 12 and 13 secondary school students and their history teachers in five schools across Aotearoa New Zealand.³ The school's details are presented Table 1.

Table 1

Details of schools in study

School	Region	Decile	No. of Y12 students	No. of Y13 students
1	Auckland	10	20	24
2	Lower North Island	5	0	13
3	Lower North Island	8	7	10
4	Upper South Island	6	13	18
5	Upper South Island	7	32	13

The schools were all urban based, but four also catered to wider rural catchments.⁴ Despite geographical, social and cultural differences between the schools, we found common themes among student and teacher views which we believe provide important starting points for discussion in preparation for the roll out of Aotearoa New Zealand histories.

A first step in our research was to hold a discussion with all the teachers involved, to explain our research aims and how we proposed to achieve them. From the ideas raised in that discussion, a questionnaire was developed for the students to complete as a prelude to in-class discussions. The questionnaire asked students about: their interests and motivations in studying history; the ways they learn about history; their knowledge of and interest in various aspects of Aotearoa New Zealand history; and the importance they place on a compulsory Aotearoa New Zealand history curriculum. A follow-up in-class session was held in each school 1-2 weeks later,⁵ where we showed the students key themes that had been evident in their responses and discussed issues that arose from them. We also asked them what they considered to be the most important aspects of Aotearoa New Zealand's past, and the ways they would like to learn that history. Finally, we held open-discussion interviews or focus groups with history teachers at their respective schools to discuss the findings more broadly and their own ideas or concerns

² Calculated from *Enrolment Counts*, <https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics/subject-enrolment>

³ Originally, we planned to engage with more schools, however, a range of circumstances including Covid-19 limited the number available.

⁴ Limited demographic data was gathered: 49 percent identified as female, 51 percent male; 66 percent of students were born in Aotearoa New Zealand.

⁵ Two to three class sessions were originally planned so that issues arising from the questionnaire could be fully discussed, however, Covid-19 restrictions meant that only one in-class session per school was possible.

about the implications of the new curriculum. Our findings from all of these interactions are presented in the following sections.

Findings

Why do students choose history?

The initial question posed to students was why they chose history as a subject. The findings are presented in Table 2, which shows that students' subjective interest in history was far more prevalent than pragmatic considerations. Enjoyment of the subject was the clearly most chosen reason with 70 percent of the students indicating that they had 'always liked history.' Next, interest in history seemed to be shared almost equally between perceptions of enjoyment and importance. Nearly half (47 percent) of students indicated history's importance to them as a way of understanding the present, and 44 percent indicated that past enjoyment in studying a history topic had made them want to learn more. More pragmatic reasons had middling responses by comparison, just 21 percent considered that learning history would be useful for university and 17 percent felt that it would be useful to a future career.

Table 2

Students' reasons for choosing history as a subject

Responses to: Why did you choose to take history this year?	Percentage who agreed
I always liked history	70%
I think it's important to understand the past to understand the present	47%
I enjoyed a particular history topic I studied before, which make me want to learn more history	44%
It is taught well	24%
Learning history will be useful for me when I leave school for university	21%
Learning history will be useful for me in a future career	17%
It suited my timetable	10%
My family is interested in history	9%
My friends chose it	9%
Substitute for taking English/gain better English skills	4%
Another reason	8%

How is history learning enjoyed, and preferred?

Subsequent questions asked where and how students developed their liking of history. It is interesting to note that school was clearly the most important source of knowledge about history. On a scale of 'not at all from here' through to 'a lot from here,' school was indicated highest, at 84 percent, of the sources of historical learning (Table 3). Online sources were the second most popular, being indicated by two thirds of students, and

scoring significantly higher than the next most popular sources of books or articles (37 percent) and TV and films (28 percent). The responses also suggest that, outside of school, student engagement in history is an individual undertaking, with low scores given to learning history in more social ways such as through family, church, marae or through the news.

Family background, indeed, seemed to only moderately influence students' interest and enjoyment of history. While about three-quarters of students indicated that they gained 'some' historical knowledge from their families, a follow up question asking how much their family or whānau discussed history indicated that this was not to any great extent. Less than eight percent indicated that history was much discussed in their families, but where this did occur history 'other than from New Zealand' was indicated as being discussed more than 'whānau family history or whakapapa' or 'New Zealand history.'⁶

Table 3

Students' sources of history learning

Responses to: Where do you get your knowledge about history from?	Percentage who indicated 'a lot from here'
School	84%
Internet	66%
Books or articles	37%
TV and films	28%
Family	17%
The news	14%
Games	11%
Church	3%
Marae	2%

Table 4 shows how students indicated they preferred to learn history. It is significant that Internet or digital sources were not only a high source of history learning, but also popular, with 79 percent preferring to learn history this way. The next three moderately popular choices highlighted that the students preferred more active learning situations than reading books or primary historical sources. Around half the students indicated that they placed high value on listening to other people knowledgeable in history, looking at photographs or films, or visiting historical sites.

⁶ This may be explained by the low number of Māori students who participated in this research; while the students were not specifically asked to identify their ethnicity, most were known to be non-Māori. In one South Island school the low Māori student numbers in History were explained by a timetable clash that meant Māori studies and History could not both be taken.

Table 4

Student preferences in learning history

Responses to: How do you like to learn history?	Percentage who chose this as top 3
Looking a documentaries or miniseries on TV or internet	79%
Listening to people you know talk about history	53%
Looking at photographs, old films, etc	47%
Visiting places where history has been made	47%
Reading the words of people living in different time as primary sources	30%
Through historical novels & dramatisations, including historical fantasies	26%
Reading what historians wrote about the past	24%
Listening to podcasts	13%

What's important about history?

To better understand how students viewed the importance of learning history, students were given a range of statements to rank according to their agreement with them. While the answers were quite mixed, three statements consistently ranked higher than others. Table 5 shows each statement's ranking in the top three positions, highlighting that the highest ranked statement was 'it helps to make better decisions in the present and future.' This suggests a high level of historical consciousness amongst the students and connects with the strong belief in the importance of history expressed in the reasons students chose history.

However, the importance ascribed to learning history did not seem to equate to students believing that they would gain personal learning themselves. When asked explicitly in our class discussions about the personal relevance of learning history, the majority of students across all our participant schools expressed the view that history was about understanding people *different from* themselves, rather than learning *about* themselves. The reasons given for this reflected students' interest in learning perspectives different from their own that could serve to "bridge the gap between people" (S2)⁷ and "gain a range of different viewpoints on a historical event" (S2) which some believed could build social tolerance and avoid conflict. Students also reflected that changes in social attitudes over time have made people from the past seem very distant; one student, for example, expressed that their ancestors seemed like "completely different people" (S3).

⁷ Quotations are referenced from here on denoting whether quotation is from a student 'S' or teacher 'T'; i.e., (S1) denotes quotation is from a student from school 1.

Table 5

Student views on the importance of learning history

Responses to: Please rank the following sentences in order of what you agree with most, to least	Percentage who gave this a top 3 ranking
It helps us to make better decisions in the present and future	59%
It helps us understand ourselves and the communities we come from	48%
It explains how important people have influenced what happened	48%
It shows us how people responded to different problems in different times	43%
It shows us how people lived in the past	36%
It explains how our nation was formed	26%
It helps us to understand our ancestors	24%
It shows how much things have got better	14%

What history do students like to learn?

The sense that students were drawn to history to learn about people different to themselves was consolidated by the topics they identified as being the most enjoyable to learn. The topics identified as favourites, through open answers, showed that students overwhelmingly preferred to learn about events that were not Aotearoa New Zealand-specific, and were usually about war or conflict. Favourite topics named by students across all schools are listed in Table 6, all but one of which focused on war. The American Civil Rights movement, however, also fitted within the theme of conflict.

Table 6

Topics that were identified as most interesting to learn

Open responses to: Name three topics you have studied in history which have interested you the most		
Top topic mentions (from 450 possible mentions)		Popularity across schools
1. World War Two	58	Mentions across all schools
2. Hitler/Rise of Nazi Germany	52	No mentions in school 3
3. Civil Rights Movement	46	Mentions across all schools
4. World War One	34	Mentions across all schools
5. Vietnam War	30	No mentions in school 2
6. Holocaust	28	Mentions across all schools
7. Rwandan Genocide	25	No mentions in school 2

As shown here, Aotearoa New Zealand history topics were not highly rated although they were identified, albeit in small numbers, by some students. The most mentioned Aotearoa New Zealand topics were the 1981 Springbok Tour (17 mentions across two schools), the New Zealand Wars or Musket Wars (13 mentions across four schools) and the Treaty of Waitangi (12 mentions across two schools).

Despite the low popularity of Aotearoa New Zealand history topics, class discussions indicated that world and national history were seen as continuations of each other rather than separate. Students expressed that understanding international events gave them frameworks through which to contextualise Aotearoa New Zealand history. Some students articulated that they liked to learn the ‘big things’ first then narrow down the focus to Aotearoa New Zealand.

Views on Aotearoa New Zealand history

Building on general views about history learning, a second part of our questionnaire asked students explicitly about Aotearoa New Zealand history. They were first asked to rate what they thought of Aotearoa New Zealand history in terms of interest, importance, relevance, and connection to themselves. Table 7 presents the average results. While indications showed that they rated this history as quite important and relevant, they were more neutral or negative about its interest and connection to themselves.

Table 7

Students’ perceptions of Aotearoa New Zealand history

Responses to: I think Aotearoa New Zealand history is ... (indicate on scale 0-100)	
Criteria	Average score
Unimportant (0) – Very important (100)	75 = quite important
Irrelevant (0) – Very relevant (100)	74 = quite relevant
Boring (0) – Exciting (100)	49 = neutral
Not about me at all (0) – Totally about me (100)	43 = only a bit about me/neutral

From these answers it is difficult to ascertain how students differentiated between the terms ‘important’ and ‘relevant,’ especially when they received similar scores. However, it seems that importance and relevance were connected to society-wide considerations because learning about themselves was given much less consideration, receiving the lowest average score of all.

To help us better understand the score given on the boring-exciting scale of Aotearoa New Zealand history, we looked to answers students gave indicating their levels of knowledge and interest in learning a range of specific topics.⁸ Students were first asked to indicate their level of knowledge about each topic in terms of ‘nothing,’ ‘a little,’ ‘quite a lot,’ and ‘a whole lot.’ The results are presented in Table 8.

⁸ The questionnaire was written and completed before the draft curriculum was published, so topics were chosen across as broad a range as possible.

Table 8

Students' levels of knowledge about Aotearoa New Zealand history topics

Responses to: How much do you feel you know about the following New Zealand history topics?				
Topic ⁹	Proportion indicating each level of knowledge			
	'A whole lot'	'Quite a lot'	'A little'	'Nothing'
World War One & World War Two	41%	45%	12%	1%
The Treaty of Waitangi	15%	50%	32%	3%
The Impact of Colonisation on Māori	9%	39%	33%	19%
The New Zealand Wars	7%	34%	44%	15%
Where New Zealand's Colonists Came From	6%	32%	53%	9%
Protest History	6%	26%	42%	26%
European Māori Contact Before 1840	3%	21%	57%	19%
New Zealand's Political History	1%	23%	44%	31%
Women's Suffrage	10%	13%	42%	35%
National Identity	3%	18%	79%	21%
Industrial Conflict and Strikes	1%	18%	38%	59%
Māori Migration to New Zealand	1%	15%	65%	19%
The Use of New Technology and Industrial Development	2%	13%	36%	49%
Crime History	5%	9%	49%	38%
Agricultural Development and Trade	1%	11%	39%	48%
Rural to Urban Migration, Including Māori Urbanisation	1%	9%	38%	52%
Pacific Island Migration to New Zealand	3%	5%	35%	57%
The Development of the Welfare State	0%	7%	32%	61%

These findings show that knowledge of Aotearoa New Zealand history topics is relatively low. The students indicated that they knew very little about most of these topics and there were only a few that students felt they knew well. 'World War One & World War Two' were clearly indicated as the most well-known, and the only topic that any significant proportion said they knew 'a whole lot' about. Second most known was 'The Treaty of Waitangi,' although just 15 percent said they knew this 'a whole lot'; many more (two percent) knew it 'quite a lot' or 'a little.' Next, although markedly less known than

⁹ The topics are listed from high to low in terms of the high knowledge answers; that is, total proportions of the responses that indicated students knew 'a whole lot' or 'quite a lot' about them.

those first two topics, were ‘The Impact of Colonisation on Māori’ and ‘The New Zealand Wars.’ For all of the remaining topics, over 60 percent indicated that little or nothing was known, with the lowest ranked being ‘Pacific Island Migration to New Zealand,’ and ‘The Development of the Welfare State,’ which over 90 percent indicated they knew little or nothing about. Overall, students indicated relatively low knowledge of any variety of Aotearoa New Zealand history topics.

Table 9

Indicated levels of interest in learning Aotearoa New Zealand history topics

Responses to: How interested are you in learning about the following New Zealand history topics?				
Topic ¹⁰	Percentage indicating each level of knowledge			
	‘Very interested’	‘A bit interested’	‘Don’t care either way’	‘Not interested’
World War One & World War Two	61%	30%	6%	3%
Crime History	54%	22%	18%	6%
The New Zealand Wars	25%	43%	24%	8%
Women’s Suffrage	33%	33%	16%	19%
Protest History	32%	27%	30%	11%
The Treaty of Waitangi	13%	45%	25%	17%
The impact of Colonisation on Māori	20%	34%	29%	16%
European Māori Contact Before 1840	13%	41%	33%	14%
New Zealand’s Political History	24%	28%	28%	20%
National Identity	14%	38%	32%	16%
Māori Migration to New Zealand	12%	37%	31%	19%
Pacific Island Migration to New Zealand	15%	23%	36%	25%
Where New Zealand’s Colonists Came From	11%	35%	41%	12%
The Use of New Technology and Industrial Development	13%	24%	32%	31%
Rural to Urban Migration, Including Māori Urbanisation	9%	28%	38%	26%
Industrial Conflict and Strikes	9%	27%	37%	28%
Agricultural Development and Trade	8%	25%	31%	36%
The Development of the Welfare State	5%	24%	41%	30%

Students were next asked to indicate their interest in learning the same Aotearoa New Zealand history topics (see Table 9 previous page). The suggested indifference to Aotearoa New Zealand history shown in the earlier boring-exciting scale was further

¹⁰ The topics are listed from high to low indications of the high interest answers; that is, total proportions of the responses that indicated students were ‘very interested’ or ‘a bit interested’ in learning about them.

supported here by their indications of interest in specific topics. Only two topics – ‘World War One & World War Two’ and ‘Crime History’ – provoked high levels of interest, with over half of students indicating they were ‘very interested.’ High interest was also indicated by nearly one third of students in learning ‘Women’s Suffrage’ and ‘Protest History.’¹¹ On the whole, however, students were more likely to indicate they were only ‘a bit interested’ or didn’t ‘care either way’ about studying the topics. The topics attracting the least interest were ‘Agricultural Development and Trade’ and ‘The Development of the Welfare State.’

These results confirmed earlier indications of the attraction World War One and World War Two hold as learning topics, where past enjoyment seems to provoke interest in engaging in the future. Low exposure also could mean low interest, with some of the least known topics also receiving low interest. However, this was not always so. For example, students indicated fairly low knowledge of Aotearoa New Zealand’s crime history, but a relatively strong interest in learning the topic. Likewise, reasonably high levels of knowledge were claimed about the Treaty of Waitangi, but relatively low overall interest was shown in learning more about it.

Views on Aotearoa New Zealand history becoming compulsory

Finally, the students were asked how important they thought it was for Aotearoa New Zealand history to be made compulsory learning for all Year 1 to 10 students, to rate this on a scale of 0 to 100, and to write open answers to explain their score. Despite what we had seen as clear preferences for learning international histories and a relatively low interest in learning Aotearoa New Zealand history topics themselves, more students were positive than negative about the importance of learning Aotearoa New Zealand history, with an average rating of 67/100. Themes that were identified in those answers are presented below.

Students that gave a score of ‘100 percent/very important’ commonly expressed that it is important for people to learn about their country’s history so that they know where they come from, can build identity, understanding of one another and tolerance; and to learn so as not to repeat mistakes of the past. Many of their comments reflected the politically stated goals of the curriculum, including expressions towards the importance of:

- educating for tolerance, avoidance of ignorance;
- correcting misconceptions;
- developing national and cultural pride; citizenship qualities; and
- gaining knowledge to inform understanding of current social challenges.

The open remarks particularly showed how students perceived historical understanding to be important for living in Aotearoa New Zealand today:

“I believe it is important for all students to have an understanding of New Zealand’s history and how this relates to problems in our community.” (S1)

“You should know the history of your own country.” (S3)

¹¹ However, for Protest History, 30 percent also indicated they didn’t care.

“It’s important people are educated so we can avoid ignorance and so the younger generations can make an impact.” (S2)

“Because understanding our own history is extremely important to understand[ing] our current situation. One must first know where they came from, to know where they belong.” (S5)

“Because so many of my peers have no knowledge of New Zealand history yet still form uneducated opinions on modern historical debates.” (S5)

While many students agreed that learning Aotearoa New Zealand history was important, concerns were also expressed that it shouldn’t come at the cost of learning wider world histories. It could make history learning feel repetitive and boring, which would put students off:

“It is important to understand exactly how our country was formed, however, it shouldn’t be the only history taught exclusively.” (S1)

“Because some people are not originally from New Zealand and so may not be as interested in New Zealand history. People may want to learn more about European/American history because that is where they originate from.” (S4)

“If the question was about general [international] history I would have moved my mark [to agree more] as I believe that people need to have at least a small historical knowledge in order to form a comprehensive world view. However, New Zealand history is only a part of that, nonetheless we are living in New Zealand so it is still relevant to us.” (S1)

“New Zealand is relatively unimportant in the grand scheme of the world, and there are much more interesting histories available almost anywhere else.” (S3)

“I think it is important to know a little bit [the basics] of New Zealand history, but there are other topics such as world wars that should also be taught.” (S3)

“Part of what makes New Zealand history boring is that we don’t understand the wider context.” (S2)

Several students also mentioned that Aotearoa New Zealand history was not so interesting to learn. Five students stated that they found Aotearoa New Zealand history boring, while another three stated it was “not that interesting,” they “didn’t find it interesting” and that they thought young students “might not find it interesting.” Other students stated:

“Because [in] New Zealand history nothing really happens, it’s boring. So many other topics in history across the world are more interesting and relevant.” (S1)

“Personally I didn’t find it that interesting. I feel that if it was over taught it would lead to kids hating it.” (S2)

Only one student used the word “interesting” in a positive way to describe Aotearoa New Zealand history, and no one used the word “exciting.”

Students also raised concerns that the element of compulsion presents a considerable risk, especially if forced upon students at a young age. Examples include:

“I think people should know the very influential moments in history for New Zealand, but I don’t believe any further history learning should be compulsory – if they are interested, they can take the class again.” (S4)

“From years 1 to 10 seems a bit early for them to learn all of Aotearoa history as they’re still deciding what they want to do in future.” (S1)

“While I think it is important for New Zealand history to be taught from a young age, I only think it is necessary to have a base knowledge. Once you have a general understanding of Aotearoa New Zealand history then I think it should be your choice whether you further your studies or not.” (S4)

Themes from teacher discussions

After our class engagement with students, we opened discussions with their teachers to reflect on the students’ responses and gain their views on the curriculum.¹² It was clear that teachers work with passion for history and employ multiple approaches to engage students in the best ways possible with subject matter. They indicated that attracting senior students to history as a subject option is important to them; some went as far as to say it was needed to ‘keep their jobs’ and maintain the size of the history department in their schools. Attracting students, they explained, requires multiple strategies. These include offering topics they know will excite student interest in Year 10 social studies; in one school, having students study the Holocaust in Year 10 was believed to have increased the attractiveness of history as a subject choice.

It was also clear that assessment requirements are strong drivers of student choice to study history, and in the teachers’ decisions on what history is taught. Teachers highlighted that although students may have expressed interest in diverse ways of learning, when it comes to class participation and attendance, they are wholly focused on what they need to do to pass units and gain credits. As one teacher expressed, “credits are the currency” (T1). That focus on assessment was also used to boost the attraction of history as a subject choice, highlighting it to prospective students as a way to gain NCEA literacy credits. This was, indeed, stated by three students as a motivation for choosing history in their questionnaire answers.

Very apparent in the teachers’ explanations of their work was how much time and effort they put into developing learning resources for their students. They noted that while students have high interest in engaging with online sources, their capabilities in discerning good sources from bad needed development. Aotearoa New Zealand history websites such as nzhistory.govt.nz and Te Ara were noted as commonly used, but not adequate for senior history learning. While teachers got good support from their school librarians in sourcing other resources, they were limited by their schools not having access or subscriptions to academic journals. Copyright considerations also severely limit their ability to share good quality, peer-reviewed history writing with their students. To address this and with no ‘go-to textbooks,’ some teachers compiled their own sets of sources for students, but there they were also challenged by copyright constraints.

¹² The discussions were held between the visiting researchers and the teacher(s) at their schools.

Teachers expressed that field trips, especially ones where they could take students to historical sites, were very important in making the history tangible for their students. However, they were also extra work to organise. While some field trips could be chartered through organisations, teachers usually arranged field trips themselves. Even during museum trips, for example, it was important for the teachers to guide the students around themselves to make sure they saw the most relevant material for their learning.

Given the working realities of attracting students to history and maintaining their interest, supporting assessments and continually working on resource development, it is not surprising that while all the teachers said they welcomed the compulsory Aotearoa New Zealand histories curriculum, they also admitted concerns about possible impacts on their senior school history programmes. First, they noted that students come from a range of feeder schools which tend to provide different history learning experiences, which result in a wide variety of abilities and interests on entering secondary school. The teachers acknowledged that they knew students were more attracted to international, non-Aotearoa New Zealand history topics and, in fact, they tend to cater to that interest in the topic choices they provide. They further acknowledged that their own capabilities in understanding and teaching Aotearoa New Zealand history varied. Despite all having history degrees or having studied a large amount of history at university level, their training did not necessarily include Aotearoa New Zealand history. Some of the teachers had last studied Aotearoa New Zealand history formally at high school, so either referred to that learning to teach, or 'learnt on the job' as Aotearoa New Zealand history topics came up for them.

Several of the participant teachers discussed 'Treaty fatigue'¹³ in students, whereby Aotearoa New Zealand history was associated with the Treaty of Waitangi only, and teachers "really faced a battle to get [students] to be excited about New Zealand history, and to take our subject if they know we're going to be doing New Zealand history" (T1). Students felt they had learnt about the Treaty year upon year, knew it, and were 'over it.' However, despite student perceptions, teachers felt that they came to them actually knowing very little about the Treaty, especially basic concepts such as: what a treaty is; what the Treaty was about; what Māori society was like before the Treaty; or what Britain or an empire or a colony is. They were often frustrated by students' indifference to the Treaty because once they had been turned off the topic, it was near impossible to interest them in the more complex aspects of the Treaty's history. The teachers were not resistant, however. They wanted to teach about the Treaty, along with other aspects of Aotearoa New Zealand history, but needed students to be ready to learn about its wider context. Some felt that learning about the Treaty of Waitangi should wait until secondary school so that it was not such a 'stale' topic for students, and they could really engage them in it. One of the most important approaches teachers identified for teaching Aotearoa New Zealand history was to make connections with wider world contexts and events. Teachers found that when students could see how Aotearoa New Zealand linked with the wider world, they became more engaged with the topic. This was how teachers explained the strong interest of students in World War One and World War Two, and their own success in teaching Aotearoa New Zealand events like the Springbok tour, the Rainbow Warrior bombing and Nuclear Free policy.

¹³ 'Treaty fatigue' is a term that references commentators such as Hill (2012), and Husband (2021). In these contexts, the term explained a feeling that the teaching of the Treaty was over-done. The Treaty is referred to here in English for simplicity, while recognising that Te Tiriti o Waitangi was often how it was referred to and discussed.

Discussion and conclusion

The Aotearoa New Zealand histories curriculum presents exciting opportunities for schools, their students, and communities, and substantial change for teaching and learning. While recognising that the findings from this research must be taken as preliminary, some important themes are apparent. We believe these present important considerations for ensuring the curriculum's successful roll out, not just in the immediate learning experiences children have, but in the long term as well. The optimal outcome would be that students not only come to learn about Aotearoa New Zealand history but also see the value of history in their senior schooling and beyond – in effect, that they build strong historical consciousness. In this final section we highlight what we consider the implications to be from the main points made by students and teachers in our research.

First and foremost, our research showed that school is the most important venue for most students in learning history. This suggests that there is responsibility, in the social studies and history curricula particularly, in shaping citizens that appreciate the value of historical knowledge in their wider lives as well as their immediate academic endeavour. We saw that the senior students had elements of this appreciation. Their reasons for choosing history were not so much practical, such as the subject's usefulness for future study or work, as about being drawn to history because they 'have always liked it.' That subjective appeal and interest was predominantly comprised – in almost equal parts – by perceptions of the importance of history, and of the enjoyment that learning history would bring.

Enjoyable past experiences in learning historical topics are clearly important in motivating students to choose history, and the most interesting of these topics have been focused outside of Aotearoa New Zealand and often around conflict. Interestingly, for the students in our research, the importance they placed on learning Aotearoa New Zealand history was not balanced by an interest in learning it themselves, with students perceiving it as dull, lacking excitement and repetitive. However, the low level of students' experience in learning across Aotearoa New Zealand histories may also be a contributing factor. Social, cultural and economic histories were hardly mentioned by students as known topics, contributing to perceptions that Aotearoa New Zealand history comprises only a narrow range of topics such as the Treaty, and participation in war. Regardless of what is behind this, it is important to reflect on student concerns that the compulsory curriculum may lead to the over-exposure of learning topics like the Treaty of Waitangi, and easily 'put off' young students causing them to steer clear of history in future. Ensuring that learning experiences widely traverse social, cultural, environmental and political histories should trigger historical imagination in multiple ways and instigate deeper appreciation of the richness of this country's past.

Citizenship concerns were reflected in the students' perceptions of history's importance and their view that historical knowledge is key to providing deep understandings of current issues. Students expressed historical consciousness in relating the importance and relevance of history to the present day, and its role in informing future decision making and actions. However, their citizenship concerns seemed widely felt; that is, global rather than national or local. The importance they placed on Aotearoa New Zealand history was tempered by concerns that it should not be taught at the expense of wider world histories. This suggests, therefore, that learning must emphasise to students that Aotearoa New Zealand histories are not isolated from the global context. The strong interest shown in learning about the World Wars offers a clear example of this, whereby

teaching strategies that connected local and national histories to global events sparked much greater learning interest.

That students understood Aotearoa New Zealand history to be important in informing their understanding of society but not so much themselves is another important consideration. Building personal connections in history learning encourages interest and the perceptions of importance to grow hand in hand. It may also foster greater caring about what is learnt. This may be done, for example, through student interviews with older relatives, the studying of whakapapa, creating family trees, and/or exploring connections between migrants' nations of origin and this country. Such strategies could centre the students' interests more readily within the Aotearoa New Zealand history curriculum and provide important ground for fostering recognition and respect for the diversity of others across Aotearoa New Zealand society.

Alongside what should be taught is the equal consideration of how. The emphasis given by senior students to learning history in ways other than traditional reading suggests that investigative historical thinking approaches will continue to be important in the new curriculum. We can see that digital learning (online or other) has been a strong, attractive component of historical learning in schools and believe it will continue to be so. However, teachers have highlighted two important issues that will need to be addressed with digital resources. First, student capabilities in critically evaluating digital resources need to be developed. Second, it will be important for digital resources to appropriately match learning goals, so targeted resources such as short video clips that summarize the content of more general documentaries may be useful learning aids.

Engagement with history beyond the classroom will also be very important. The students in this research indicated that they had experienced high enjoyment from learning history in interactive or 'hands-on' ways. Popular modes of learning were cited as listening to people they know talk about history, looking at artefacts like photos and film, and visiting historical sites. This bodes well for historical thinking approaches where engagement with primary sources is emphasised but could put pressure on wider communities for that engagement to occur. Given the importance in the curriculum drafts of iwi history, trips to marae and wāhi tapu, including battle sites, the extent to which these put unfair demands on local iwi and hapū will need to be considered.

If, as this research shows, we are to understand student attraction to learning history as based on being, first, personally interesting to students and, secondly, perceived as both important and relevant, then it is the interest component that will need to be most addressed in the Aotearoa New Zealand histories curriculum. How enjoyment can be maximised through all levels of schooling so that learning history is meaningful for students and maintains their ongoing interest is an important consideration. Care will need to be taken to ensure that Aotearoa New Zealand history is experienced in ways that invoke excitement and curiosity while building a sense of connection – both between Aotearoa New Zealand and global events, and between the student and their own sense of place in those histories. Most importantly, we believe that the ongoing development of and engagement with the new Aotearoa New Zealand history curriculum will require community-wide efforts. There must be strong support available for teachers, schools and their students, which we believe will be to the benefit of the wider community as well. All in all, we hope students will experience history as a rich academic, personal and community endeavour that is meaningful on multiple levels.

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