

# **Introduction of History in the Ghana Basic School Curriculum: The Missing Link**

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## **Abstract**

This paper addresses the missing link in history education in the Basic School curriculum of Ghana. It examines post-colonial history education in Ghana and acknowledges the frantic efforts made by several authors to help introduce history into the Basic School curriculum. The paper maintains that while introducing history as a core subject at the Primary School level is widely accepted, the neglect of the same at the Junior High School (JHS.) level presents a missing link in history education in Ghana. Many history educators and academics have firmly debated this missing link, particularly historians in the media. The paper discusses the missing link and argues for the introduction of history at the Junior High School (JHS.) level within the context of the episodic memory theory. The paper insists that teaching history at the JHS level provides a crucial link between Primary School history and Senior High School history, which is a leveraging platform for studying history at the tertiary level. It also suggests that teaching history at the JHS level allows students to internalise values such as patriotism, moral values, solidarity, tolerance, national consciousness, etc., which are required social elements for nation-building. It concludes that incorporating history into the JHS curriculum would ensure continuity in the study of history from the Primary School level to the tertiary level and give more meaning to the rationale behind the introduction of history at the Basic School level.

**Keywords:** History, Education, Curriculum, Basic School, Ghana

## **Introduction**

It has been argued in several research papers that history should be made a required course of study in Ghanaian Basic schools (e.g. Cobbold & Oppong, 2010; Oppong, 2012; Oppong, 2014; Oppong, 2019; Ansong, 2011; Ogah, 2017; Adjepong, 2013b). In all these papers, explicit arguments were made in support of the need to study history as a mandatory subject. All these requests were followed by the proposal submitted by Adjepong, Boadi-Siaw and Kissiedu (2017) to the Government of Ghana when suggestions for national curriculum

reforms were mooted. The proposal requested for the restoration of history as a core curriculum subject without hesitation in Basic schools in Ghana (Adjepong, Boadi-Siaw & Kissiedu, 2017). The reason is that history is an academic discipline with essential values relevant to the development of Ghana, a diverse society in need of a subject that promotes an understanding of the importance of active citizenship, social inclusion and diversity in our society (Cobbold & Oppong, 2010). Indeed, this forms the core of school history.

Research shows the role of history in developing a sound knowledge of the history of one's country for nation-building (Adjepong, Boadi-Siaw & Kissiedu, 2017; Bam & Visser, 2002; Cobbold & Oppong, 2010). In post-colonial Ghana, with its numerous changeovers from republics to military regimes, the need for teaching history in schools became an essential part of the education system. In particular, history education became a tool for tackling deep-seated ethnocentric problems of diverse nature, providing a sense of inclusion and respect for diversity and building a new shared understanding of the Ghanaian past.

The 2021 national census showed the diverse and heterogeneous nature of the Ghanaian population and society (Ghana Statistical Service, 2022). Despite its heterogeneity, Ghana could strive for unity in spirit and purpose for the common good through the study of history. Certainly, teaching history in schools can strengthen awareness of our common destiny as a people within this diversity. It is important to note that the discipline of history does not only focus on the past, but can also give us an insight into the present and show us how to deal with the numerous circumstances of our present as well as place us on the appropriate path to the future. In this way, students can appreciate Ghana's unique path of social, economic and political development. This knowledge and understanding are essential for active participation in Ghana's developmental drive.

In many ways, the reintroduction of history as a mandatory subject at the Basic School level in Ghana's education system is a feat after many years of requests for the study of history at that level. Fortunately, in 2019, after deliberations on proposals and research papers, the Government of Ghana published the new Standards-Based Curriculum for Basic Schools in Ghana. In the new curriculum, history was made a core subject, alongside English language, mathematics, and science, among others, from primary one to primary six (grade 1 to

grade 6) (Ghana: Ministry of Education, 2019). The problem, however, is the missing link in history education in Ghana at the Junior High School level. In Ghana, Basic School refers to Primary (B1 to B6), Junior High (B7 to B9), and Senior High (B10 to B12) schools (Adjepong, Boadi-Siaw and Kissiedu (2017).

### **Post-independence history education in Ghana**

The extent to which history education had been represented in the Ghanaian education system before 2019 is considered here. Viewed as a spasmodic progression, post-independence history education in Ghana had long been considered a significant part of the school curriculum that preceded the 1987 education reform. The central episode in the 1987 education reform narrative of the development of history education is a transformation that occurred in the pre-tertiary education curriculum, which incorporated history into the social studies subject. In the early years of post-independence Ghana (1960–1986), education reforms that spanned the various regimes primarily focused on initiatives to shift from transmissive practices to the use of transformative methods (Boakye, 2019). In this regard, the content of the school curriculum was to be diversified to make education more responsive to the needs of the individual, the society and the nation (Dare, 1995; Antwi, 1992a; McWilliam & Kwamena-Poh, 1975). In all these reforms, history was considered a distinct subject of study. At the pre-tertiary level, history was one of the four subjects written during the Middle School Leaving Certificate Examination (M.S.L.C.E.) – now Junior High school. At the secondary school level, history was one of the subjects offered for the School Certificate and General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (SC/GCE ‘A’ level) examination (Cobbold & Opong, 2010). At the tertiary level, history was a programme of study that enjoyed curriculum space. In these arrangements, history education was duly represented at all levels of the education systems in the various post-independence governments till the 1987 education reform (Opong, Gyimah & Yeboah, 2021).

The 1987 education reform initiative used an approach that centred on the curriculum structure more than the previous reforms. The structure of the reform was to diversify the curriculum by promoting more active learning and reducing the length of pre-university education (Agbemabiese, 2007). There were four major dimensions:

the structure and expected destinations of graduates from basic school, duration, curriculum, and education financing. The key issues of the reform, and for which changes were implemented, included:

1. replacement of the existing Middle Schools, an idea suggested by the Dzobo Educational Committee of 1975
2. a reduction in the duration of pre-tertiary education from 17 years to 12 years
3. readjustment of the curriculum and reduction of core subjects from 7 to 4 for S.S.S.1 (S.H.S. 1) and S.S.S. 2 (S.H.S. 2)
4. introduction of new core subjects, including Integrated Science and Social Studies for S.S.S. 1 (S.H.S. 1)
5. initiation of the 1987 Education Reform Programme (ERP) with the objectives of improving education and re-orientating the academically oriented education system to prepare the youth for the world of work
6. change from the 6-4-5-3/4 organisational structure to 6-3-3-3/4 (Ghana: Ministry of Education, 1996a).

An important note in the reform was the introduction of new core subjects, particularly social studies. The introduction of social studies at the pre-tertiary level was a concern in the history education narrative in the post-independence era. As mentioned earlier, history lost its place in the pre-tertiary school curriculum due to the introduction of social studies as a compulsory subject of study. History became part of the many subjects whose contents were merged into the social studies subject. This ended the status of history as a discrete required subject of study in the pre-tertiary education curriculum. The only space created in the reform for history was the opportunity to be studied as an elective subject in the General Arts programme at the Senior Secondary School (now Senior High School) level (Cobbold & Opong, 2010). It also continued as a programme of study at the university. This marked a turning point in history education in the education system. The representation of history at the pre-tertiary level was negligible from 1987. This meant that the values of teaching history at that level of schooling were regrettably denied. The idea that the new social studies subject would serve the same purpose as school history was misplaced. Notwithstanding the displeasure expressed by

professional historians, history educators, and sympathisers of history, history remained expunged from the pre-tertiary curriculum until 2019. Adjepong, Boadi-Siaw and Kissiedu (2017) note that the health condition of history was poor, if not worse, in that era.

Before the 2019 education reform, two education programmes were initiated – the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (F.C.U.B.E.) in 1995 and the 2007 education reform. The major phase was the 2007 reform. The Rawlings/National Democratic Congress (NDC) government, which introduced the F.C.U.B.E., argued that the 1987 education reform and the subsequent implementation of the F.C.U.B.E. programme in 1995 had not yielded the desired outcome for the state (Boakye, 2019). This justified the 2007 education reform. Similarly, the 2007 reform, which was introduced by the Kufour/New Patriotic Party (NPP) administration, focused on structure, content, duration and finance (Boakye, 2019). In particular, the reform only introduced trifling changes to the content at the Basic level, which included the introduction of physical education and creative arts, comprising art and craft, music and dance. Significantly, at all levels of Ghana's education, the 2007 reform introduced information and communications technology (I.C.T.). Again, this arrangement did not consider history education as part of the new subjects introduced at the pre-tertiary level. History continued to remain at the periphery at the Basic level. In this circumstance, several proposals were submitted to the government to consider introducing history as a separate subject of study at that level. However, as noted above, these efforts proved futile. Therefore, history education during that era had no appropriate space for representation. This is why in 2013, the Department of History at the University of Cape Coast complained about the marginalisation of history as a subject at pre-tertiary levels (Faculty of Arts, University of Cape Coast, 2013).

As highlighted in the introductory section, history became a mandatory subject in the Basic School curriculum at the Primary school level in 2019. The proposals submitted when the 2019 reform was mooted made inroads at this time, particularly with a strong basis on Bruner's spiral curriculum theory. History has been reintroduced into the pre-tertiary curriculum, an accomplishment worth commending. This new arrangement made history part of the curriculum from Basic One to Basic Six (B1–B6). The representation of history education

changed under this reform. History, either as a core subject or an elective subject, is a subject of study at all levels of the education system, except at the Junior High School level. This means that the Junior High School level remains the missing link in Ghana's history education scheme.

### **School History and Bruner's Theory**

Globally, teaching history in schools, particularly at the primary school level, received an impetus following Bruner's spiral curriculum theory of 1970. Before Bruner's theory, several scholars believed that history was an abstract subject reserved for mature students (Hallam, 2006). This contention was based on Piaget's theory of human development which classified human cognitive development into four stages: Sensorimotor stage – from birth to 2 years; Pre-operational stage – from 2 years to 7 years; Concrete operational stage – from 7 years to 11 years; and Formal operational stage – from 12 years and above. Piaget argued that the first three stages of cognitive development do not support children with abstract and hypothetical concepts. The ability to think about abstract ideas and situations is the key hallmark of the formal operational stage of cognitive development. This idea led many people to believe that children at the primary school level are not mature enough to study history (Hallam, 2006; Opong, 2021).

However, Bruner's spiral curriculum theory came to expose the limitations of Piaget's interpretation of what children can do in the early stages of their lives. Bruner (1970) argued that any school subject could be taught in a simple form to any school child of any age. He suggested that those who select content could provide appropriate pedagogical support to reflect the child's developmental stage. Instruction must be relevant to the child's level; being aware of the child's cognitive development allows the teacher to make appropriate pedagogical decisions (Aktin, 2010). After Bruner's seminal work, a myriad of books and articles appeared that supported Bruner's argument. In teaching history, Sheldon (2010) indicates that school children could understand and use the basic ideas in history at any age, as long as learning is structured to enable them to move from the simplest understanding of these ideas to more complex concepts, but without losing the integrity of the concepts. In his seminal work, Rogers (1979) showed how all aspects of a lesson

could be designed to promote understanding of a historical concept. He affirmed that history concepts can be spiralled during instruction by drawing upon contextualised evidence and according to the child's level in the school. The child can appreciate history by using historical sources, questioning these sources, and making assumptions according to the historical materials available (Rogers, 1978). Drawing on Roger's idea, Guyver (2013) added that sources could support the teaching of primary school history as evidence, narratives or stories as interpretations, and chronological and contextual frames with timelines. These ideas offered the discipline of history attention in the primary school curriculum across the globe.

In many ways, Burner's theory provided legitimacy for teaching history in early grades. In Ghana, the request to reintroduce history into the Basic school curriculum had a basis on this theory. Not surprisingly, the response to the reintroduction of history into the school curriculum from most professional historians, curriculum experts, researchers and history educators has been encouraging – notwithstanding the public political debate on a possibly overloaded curriculum.

### **The missing link, Episodic memory, and the arguments**

It has been noted that the missing link in the school curriculum at the Basic School level is at the Junior High School level. That is, history is part of the primary school subjects as a required subject and also as part of the Senior High School programme as an elective subject for students pursuing General Arts. At the Senior High school level, the opportunity is provided for Junior High school graduates who may want to study history as a career subject. It is worth noting that the many calls and proposals submitted to successive governments in the Fourth Republic of Ghana requesting for the reintroduction of history as a distinct and required course of study in the education system had as its objective the study of history from Primary school to Junior High school. Therefore, introducing history as a core subject at only the Primary school level serves as a modified acceptance of the request made by historians, history educators, and non-experts. The disregard for the reintroduction of history at the Junior High School level justifies this paper's 'missing link' argument.

The missing link firmly indicates that throughout the programme structure of the Ghanaian education system, it is at the Junior High School level that history is not studied as a distinct subject, neither as a core nor as an elective subject. In the programme structure of Senior High schools and tertiary institutions, history is made a choice subject for those interested in pursuing it further in their schooling. Apart from the relevance of history to the development of nations, the explicit intention of the various calls was to make history a core subject to be studied up to the Junior High School level. This would allow students to engage with the subject for a more extended period. And that long-term engagement would serve as a leveraging platform for students to make appropriate decisions regarding the study of history at higher levels. Therefore, JHS history could be used to consolidate primary school history and prepare pupils for ongoing study at SHS. Again, given the unpopularity of history at SHS (Dwarko, 2007; Cobbold & Oppong, 2010; Ogah, 2017), the reintroduction of history at JHS could help salvage the situation because students would have had an encounter with history from primary to JHS and gained interest in studying history. More importantly, it was hoped that studying history would help students appreciate the subject and its values for nation-building. This objective was the main point of reference in academic papers and media reportage for reintroducing history as a core subject of study in the early years of schooling.

The call to study history at the JHS level also finds support in the episodic memory theory. Wu and Wang (2017) define episodic memory as the memory of previous events (especially concerning their times, places, associated emotions, and other significant contextual questions about knowledge, including who, what, when, where, and why) that can be explicitly stated. Episodic memory is one of the significant neurocognitive memory systems (Schacter & Tulving, 1994) in terms of its unique functions and properties. Tulving (2002) explains episodic memory as “the collection of past personal experiences that occurred at particular times and places. It makes possible mental time travel through subjective time, from the present to the past, thus, allowing one to re-experience, through autoegetic awareness, one’s own previous experiences” (p. 5). Accordingly, this memory enables learners to retrieve and apply what they have studied in school for present and future use. Teaching history in schools for the benefit of inculcating in learners some essential values of tolerance,



patriotism, good morals and ethics, solidarity, and national consciousness, among others, for nation-building become critical in any education system. This is because the level or stage that children could internalise these values for future application is essential in the programme structure of any education system.

As is well known, every subject is unique, with distinctive features which require different methodological approaches. Some subjects have higher graphical representation than others. For instance, the exact or natural science subjects have higher graphical representation with a unique systematic mode of inquiry than those subjects that belong to the humanities, whose features are dispersed and multifarious, of which history is part. Besides, history has much irregular humanistic knowledge with a distinctive mode of inquiry (Wu & Wang, 2017). This suggests that remembering issues from history lessons is complicated, as compared to other subjects with high graphical representations. It also means that primary school learners who fall within Piaget's Concrete Operational (7–11 years) stage are not likely to remember historical content as those in Junior High school who fall within the ages of 12 and above would do. In any case, this does not imply that children in the Concrete Operational group cannot study history.

The query is about how they would remember and apply things they studied in their early years. Amos (2017) admitted that it is true that most people do not remember much of the things they learn in their early years when they become adults. He further posed the question: "So, at what point do children start making long-term memories?" He submitted that "some evidence suggests that young children lose their early years memories as they grow. He further noted that children at age six, for instance, can remember events from their first birthday celebrations, but by adolescence, they would probably forget those celebrations" (p. 73). Wu and Wang (2017) also stressed that young children have long-term-like memories, but these memories typically fade after a certain age or stage of brain development. Rather, Tulving (2002) had established that episodic memories made at adolescence and beyond are more likely to stick because the young brain undergoes essential developmental changes that improve one's ability to store and recall events. Children in this category are more found at the Junior High school level. As a result, their ability to internalise, share and

practise what they study at the JHS level during later years as adults is high. This further strengthens the argument that students in Junior High School are more likely to recollect what they studied at high school levels than in primary school.

Accepting these positions provides grounds for studying history in Junior High school. Indeed, the reintroduction of history as a core subject in the school curriculum is to provide some internal values that would be relevant for students in their working lives as professionals who have the nation at heart and would, therefore, be guided by their nation's past. In that case, having history as a core subject at the Junior High school level is apt. Again, part of the rationale of the primary school syllabus suggests that:

As Ghanaians, there is less understanding among us about important historical developments and events, such as the evolution of the different ethnic groups in the country and their social and economic institutions; the development of state systems; their contact with the outside world and economic, social and political consequences of that association, such as the loss of political independence, the recovery of sovereignty and the emergence of the modern state of Ghana. Furthermore, there is a need to appreciate the value of our own culture. As learners study Ghana's history, they will appreciate the lives and sacrifices of our forebears, learn about the interconnectedness among the various ethnic groups to promote national integration and develop national pride and identity (Ministry of Education, 2019, p. IV).

In the estimation of the authors, this rationale should be reserved for the Junior High school syllabus and not for the Primary school history syllabus. The reason is that children at the primary school level should be exposed to things in their immediate environment. In the case of history, community historical events may be more appropriate for children as a starter. Several historians and researchers agree that the focus of any primary school history syllabus should be local history (Demers, Lefrançois & Ethier, 2015). Opong, Gyimah and Yeboah (2021) recommended that at the primary school level, it may not be absurd if the entire syllabus is devoted to the history of local people. In this manner, the syllabus would allow all learners to appropriately appreciate the diversity of their own and one another's backgrounds in their respective societies. Wattanatorn and Thongthew (2007) indicated that local history enables curriculum developers to construct curriculum

that provide sociocultural, historical and community contexts for learners to appreciate local issues in the classroom. Collins (2001) had suggested that the gains of local context history include the appreciation of the connection between families and societal needs and interests. Similarly, Kraipeerapun and Thongthew (2007) intimated the local context knowledge and skills that children derive from local history. The authors argue that local history provides an opportunity for children to develop knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are relevant to local community contexts. This makes learning real and reduces the abstractness of the history subject to learners at that level of schooling.

At the Junior High school level, the wider national history of socioeconomic and political developments and ethnic diversity would be more appropriate. These past developments enable students to appreciate the life and sacrifices of the early people. As mentioned above, learning about this historical past inculcates in learners such socio-political fundamentals as: patriotism, tolerance, national consciousness, solidarity, etc. These elements are genuinely essential for nation-building, especially for heterogeneous societies. Therefore, teaching history for learners to acquire these fundamentals should be at a stage where they are most likely to be internalised appropriately. Hence, the current rationale for teaching history at the Primary School level would become more relevant, and the desired results would be better achieved if the syllabus was reserved for teaching at the Junior High School level.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

The paper has examined the study of history in the context of the Ghanaian school curriculum and the missing link therein. Specifically, the paper has provided a historical overview of post-independence history education in Ghana, school history and Bruner's theory, the missing link, episodic memory theory and the arguments of the paper. It has been noted that the study of history that truncates at the Primary school level is not appropriate within the context of the episodic memory theory and other justifiable arguments advanced in this paper. As such, the authors call on the Government of Ghana again to review the Basic school curriculum and provide an opportunity to study history at the Junior High school level. They make this call in the belief that such an arrangement would go a long way to ensure

continuity in the study of history from the Primary school level to the tertiary level. It also would help to train and produce citizens who have appropriate knowledge about the history of Ghana from the remote past to the present. The acquisition of this knowledge would enable them to make meaningful contributions to the present and future development of the country. More importantly, the incorporation of the study of history into the JHS curriculum would complete the government's intention for reintroducing history into the Basic School curriculum and give that intention a deeper meaning.

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