

Steve McQueen's *Small Axe* films: what they mean for FHE projects

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The pandemic has exposed fundamental problems in education, health care and public service broadcasting as the UK grapples with the virus and an incompetent and uncaring government. But there have been other stories too. The filmmaker Steve McQueen has been largely responsible for the broadcast on BBC TV in prime time of ten films exploring the history of Black people in London during the 1970s and 1980s. In the five fiction narratives of the *Small Axe* series and their five associated documentaries, McQueen and his collaborators have outlined the history of significant events and social issues in those decades and examined how the African-Caribbean diaspora in the UK has developed multiple identities. McQueen has stated that his aim was to present a history that has not been told in sufficient detail and to provide an insight into identity issues for younger members of the Black British community.

There are questions to pose about the programmes, but overall they offer an incredibly rich set of potential teaching and learning materials, especially for post-16 and lifelong education. They ought to be exploited by Film and Media Studies teachers but those subject areas at GCSE and A-level have been seriously restricted by the curriculum reforms instituted by Gove and Gibbs since 2015. Instead I want to use them as examples of the kind of work that education should be doing, not necessarily only on these specific issues but on any aspects of student lives in contemporary society.

The strength of McQueen's work derives from his initial decision to focus on 'personal stories' researched through witness statements and archive material of important events which affected the lives of Black Londoners. For instance, one of the *Small Axe* films is titled 'Alex Wheatle', the name of a young man who grew up in the care of Lambeth Council and at one point found himself in the now notorious Shirley Oaks children's home. In 1981 Alex was living in a hostel in Brixton when he became caught up in the uprisings against policing strategies that targeted young Black men. The 'real' Alex Wheatle, now a well-known writer of young adult literature, was a consultant on the *Small Axe* films and two of the three documentaries in the *Uprising* series deal with the Lewisham fire-bombing

tragedy and the Brixton uprisings of that year.

When the 'witness statements' of individuals who give their own accounts of what actually happened 'on the ground' in these events are presented, alongside archived reportage and police/freelance stills and film footage, in the McQueen-produced documentaries they help to expose how myths are created and 'real' events mediated by the press and broadcasters. The different reports refer to often confusing actions involving direct confrontation between police officers, youths and 'bystanders'. The fictions can then construct individual stories, based on research, which are able to engage audiences through identification with specific characters.

The *Small Axe* film 'Education', the most personal of all the films since it draws on some of Steve McQueen's own memories, is informed by the documentary 'Subnormal' which investigates the policy adopted by education authorities in London in the 1970s (and subsequently) of placing students with 'learning difficulties' in 'Special Schools'. This policy saw disproportionate numbers of Black children sent to such schools, something which was eventually exposed in Bernard Coard's pamphlet 'How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Sub-normal in the British School System: The Scandal of the Black Child in Schools in Britain'. The ensuing campaign had various outcomes, including the establishment of 'Saturday Supplementary Schools' intended to provide African-Caribbean children with access to learning about their own history and culture which was not being made possible in mainstream schooling.

McQueen's aim in making these programmes (on some of the documentaries he was listed only as an executive producer, but all the programmes were associated with his name) was to honour the participants in these personal stories and also to celebrate them in primetime on BBC TV as a means of reaching younger Black people and encouraging their interest in the historical events depicted. There is some evidence that this was achieved. It seems particularly important, at a time when 'fact' and 'fiction' are being confused and Black historical memory is being challenged in 'culture wars' and arguments about a 'cancel culture', that young people, Black and White (and those of other

identities) are given opportunities to explore and investigate these stories.

McQueen's work appeared during a period when the exam system for schools and colleges was forced into crisis by Covid restrictions and when longer term revisions of vocational qualifications were being discussed. In August 2021, Peter Hyman (an ex-Tony Blair adviser and now co-director of 'Big Education', an independent think tank and Free School provider) wrote a piece in the *Observer* suggesting that there are better ways to assess children and young people than through a flawed exam system. Hyman mentions examples of assessment procedures from HE and from other education systems around the world but he doesn't seem to realise that many of these ideas have already been explored in FE. Others have been proposed by reformers but rejected by both Labour and Tory governments because they threaten the 'gold standard' of A-levels, the one qualification that has survived attempted reforms despite being no longer 'fit for purpose'.

Hyman's short piece (1) prompted me to think back to the Blair-Brown government's attempt to introduce the 'Specialised Diploma' qualification structure for 14-19 from 2005/6 onwards. From that proposed structure I just want to pick out one element, the major project in a 'specialised' field. The idea was that students would choose for themselves a project title in their specialism for which they would need to undertake research and analysis and then deliver some form of presentation of findings (an artefact, a report, a presentation to an audience etc). The Diploma structure overall was the government's response to the Tomlinson Report in 2004 which had the temerity to propose replacing GCSEs, A-levels and vocational courses with a single structure. The Specialised Diploma definitely had some good points salvageable from the political meddling and I was reminded of the project by comments about the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) during the 2020 and 2021 exams controversies. The EPQ is in addition to an A-level programme and it has been taken up by some 30,000 to 40,000 students each year since its creation in 2008. The one benefit from the much more academically aligned EPQ (i.e. in comparison with the original Diploma model) is that it has the potential to prepare students for university level work more effectively than A-levels (something that was also discovered to be true of both GNVQ and BTEC National Diploma courses). (EPQs are also available from vocational awarding bodies at different levels (2).

But what has this got to do with Steve McQueen's *Small Axe* films you might ask? The connection is simple. McQueen chose issues about

his own history and his own identity. In order to research the stories he identified he used oral histories and witness statements, film and TV archives and secondary sources. The revolution in social media and digital resources means that there are now extensive archives open to students/trainees in any form of education and training. Some are accessible directly for individuals, others are accessible through libraries and learning centres. The Specialised Diploma was devised in terms of specialised content by 'Sector Skills Councils' and the kinds of project that might be selected matched the interests of vocational students. I don't see any reason why project-based work should not replace exam components in a whole range of qualifications - apart from the ideological opposition of Tory Education Ministers. But we should be preparing for a time when they no longer hold power.

As a retired teacher/examiner I've lost touch with current debates about assessment but ideas about 'extended projects' were fundamental to my conception of General and Communication Studies when I wrote my own units for BTEC National Diplomas and Certificates in the late 1970s. They worked for me and I think for the students as well. Some opted for very personal topics, others targeted issues that were more aligned to their vocational subjects. Finding material then was much more difficult beyond the college library and their own resources. With what is available now I think contemporary students could surprise us with their findings.

It's time to dismiss the idea that 'rigour' in exams is the only criterion for useful assessment and evaluation of education. Observation, continuous assessment and project work are far more useful as well as less stressful and more productive. Steve McQueen has shown the way to engage young people in investigation of their own narratives.

1. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/aug15/lets-not-return-to-flawed-exams-we-have-better-ways-to-assess-our-children>.

2. See: <https://qips.ucas.com/qip/extended-project-qualification-epq>.

(Most of the McQueen films and documentaries are still available on BBC iPlayer, for at least three further months.)