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History in primary schools

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I am sorry to tell you that things are not what they used to be. Whatever anybody else might say to the contrary, and whatever the validity of their evidence, you can now train to teach in a primary school without having to have done any history at school or on your course. It is very difficult to find placements for student teachers where they can teach history in schools at an early stage, and the history that I do see being taught could not be described as exciting or inspiring. This is the case really because it has become marginalised by the literacy and the numeracy hours.

I would like to start by talking a little about the topics identified for discussion here –identity, progression and dialogue –before giving you a bit of the flavour of primary history as I see it, and then concluding on what I hope will be a more optimistic note. Turning first to identity, the African historian Ayi Kwei Armah has said that ‘the present is where we get lost if we forget our own past and have no vision of the future’. (1) I think most people would agree with that. In the European context, Maitland Stobart said a few years ago that ‘identity is a complex concept which covers language, religion, shared memories, sense of identity, sometimes historical grievance and injustice ... battles lost and won, national anthems, songs and poetry’. (2) There are clearly lots of exciting things there with which primary teachers can engage. But there is the problem of whose identity we are talking about and, as Jerome Bruner said quite recently, it is not easy, however multicultural your intentions, to help a 10 year old create a story that includes him in a world beyond his family and neighbourhood, having been transplanted from wherever. (3) So there are questions in looking at history in terms of identity.

I would like to suggest that the way around this is to take a constructivist approach to history, to ensure that the children are involved in the process of historical enquiry from the very beginning. When I said this in Paris recently, somebody in the audience said, ‘Madame, c’est impossible’ –but I assure you it is possible, because I have lots of experience of doing it. I am not saying that the children create their own histories in their entirety –they should clearly work within a framework of what is known, a planned framework –but that from the beginning they should be involved in the process of enquiry, even if their conclusions are not always correct because of their limited knowledge base. It is the process that is important from the outset –there is no one story. If you involve children from the beginning in the process of enquiry, they can see the results of that enquiry in relation to the past, whatever their own backgrounds and histories.

I would follow Collingwood's definition of the process of enquiry, making inferences and deductions about sources. (4) And this process does not necessarily require documents –when you are three years old it might mean your birthday cards or your hospital baby tag. There might be written sources, there might be stories, and there might be pictures. Children at Key Stage 2 can be introduced to the idea that sources are often incomplete and of differing status. Because these children construct their accounts of the past by selecting and combining sources, they gain an understanding from the beginning that differing accounts may be equally valid.

In terms of progression, I think that we need to go back to the key constructivist thinkers and to the people who have carried on their work subsequently. Progression in history is almost impossible to define because there are so many variables, but I would turn particularly to Jean Piaget as the first person to look at development in probability and causality. (5) There is also Lev Vygotsky's work on the importance of discussion and trial and error, evidence that you can develop abstract concepts with quite young children if you start with concrete ones and involve them in talking about them in concrete examples. (6) And finally, I would look at Bruner's ‘spiral curriculum’, advocating the use of different kinds of sources when teaching young children –visual, iconic and physical well as symbolic and written. (7) All of these, within their own theories, have patterns of progression.

I am not just talking about starting with interpretation of sources –clearly you cannot just do that. You can start from the other end of the process, comparing accounts. Young children can look at accounts of folk tales with different illustrations, for example, or with different details added, and ask why there is this variety. They are, of course, all oral history, so the children might start with comparing existing accounts rather than with constructing their own.

Of key significance here is the role of dialogue. If you are talking about interpreting sources, and recognising that very often, especially with ancient sources, there is no right answer, this involves listening to others, sharing ideas, and possibly changing your own as a result. I would argue that this is at the centre of history; and it is possible to do it from the age of three. This sort of dialogue is important to psychological and social development as well as to an understanding of history: you defend your ideas, you listen to others and often accept that different opinions may be equally valid. Children may find it difficult to engage in this sort of dialogue because of their immaturity and limited knowledge but their opinions are, in this context, valid, as long as they can defend and explain them. It is learning the process that is important.

It is very interesting to see young children bringing to bear their own experience and their own reasoning on historical questions. To take a few examples from the classroom, one group of four year olds was talking about changes in uses of electricity, changes in shops and so on. One of them comments that ‘I don't wear clothes like that because I am not in the olden days, but I've seen an old-fashioned car racing up the hill and I've seen it not in the olden days’. Continuity and change; there is some very complicated thinking going on here.

Another child, James, and his friends were talking about old artefacts, flat irons, typewriters and so on. James said that he would like to go back in time to see what it was like, but his friend said that he felt sorry for the people who had to use them. ‘People who used them would have felt very lucky because they wouldn't know anything different’, said another child, Tom. ‘My children will have new toys to play with and they'll look at my toys like they were things from the past’. There is a real understanding there of changing attitudes over time, of changing perspectives.

A reception teacher gave her class of four and five year olds a series of stories of different degrees of known truth and asked them whether they thought that they were true or not. They were talking about Grace Darling, for example, and one child said –and this is her reasoning based on her experience:

I don't think it could have happened because the fishermen wouldn't have gone out and it was dangerous and anyway her daddy would have gone on his own because my daddy would never take me out in a storm.

It was not actually right, but it was thought through in terms of her own experience. Let me give you three further examples of this type of reasoning, displayed by very young children. The first came up in discussion of St George and the dragon:

I've seen pictures in books of dragons ... dragons might have existed since dinosaurs did and they've died out now. It might be the Loch Ness Monster, that lives in Scotland and Robert's going on holiday and he's going to look for it.

Another child noted that 'the story was made up in England because St George was brave'. Alternatively, there is the story of King Arthur:

This is definitely true because there were knights and kings and castles a long time ago, because our Queen lives in a castle and she has special guards. I think I've seen it on television. Someone wrote it down, it must have happened.

And finally, there is a fictional story about Bill and Pete who go down the Nile to look at the Pyramids and the Sphinx. One girl responded by saying:

My granny was born a long time ago and she lived in Africa and she was born before the war came and I think the crocodile is old because its crinkly like my gran. And the Sphinx is old but it looks new because it was clean because I saw that on television.

Again, there is some really complicated reasoning going on there.

Moving on to slightly older children, a group of seven year olds were doing a topic on the Second World War. Of course, they had lots of factual knowledge about the Second World War, but they were looking at the wedding photograph of a student's grandparents, dating from 1943, and working out what they could from it: 'They've all got uniforms on.' 'How do you know?' 'You can see the wings on this uniform; they're wearing soldiers' outfits'. 'They didn't have much money in the war. They couldn't have new dresses. She's wearing a normal dress like you'd wear at a party. She's got a small bunch of flowers and no veil and they had short dresses so they could run down the shelters.' And then they go on to something really interesting based on their own experience of life:

They wanted to be happy and make the most of their lives; they wanted to have happy memories in case they died, like in *Home and Away* when Blake wanted to marry Meg before he died. And Ted and Rita in *Coronation Street*, yeah.

They are applying their own understanding of life.

Some nine year olds were studying the [Waterloo Helmet](#), which was dug up near Waterloo Bridge in the 1860s. They have been trained to look at how it was made and what it was used for, and from there to consider what it might have meant to people at the time. So, in a long discussion, with no adult present, they talked about how it was made. They had the right metals, and they spoke about moulds, rivets, tools and smelting. They mentioned other weapons, swords and shields. There were three groups of suggestions when it came to use: as protection in battle or when fighting for food; for ceremonial use, as a symbol, a trophy or an award for bravery; and as an offering or a commodity to trade. They had all sorts of suggestions as to what it might have meant to people: the patterns might mean something like 'long live all our tribe' or 'our tribe is the horse tribe'; or they might indicate a magic helmet to wear in battle; or they might be simply be a rendering of the wearer's name. They did not know –these were only possibilities –but they were getting involved and thinking what it meant, rather than just looking at it as an Iron Age helmet.

So I now reach the happy conclusion that things might actually be getting better. I was at a conference a couple of weeks ago where we were talking about teachers being responsible for curriculum. This is a real possibility, as long as they can justify it. Combining subjects, for example, is a good way to solve concerns about time management. So subjects like maths and English might be applied to history; or history as a discrete subject might be combined thematically with another one or two other subjects. There is a huge range of possibilities with history and maths. Children might look at a Stone Age bow and arrow, for example: how far can you shoot it; does it make a difference if you shoot from a slope or with a wind? The same is true of history and science. I went with one group of children to a Tudor farm in the Weald and we found that it had not developed as well as other farms in the area because of its heavy clay soil. Transport easily became embedded in mud, and it had been difficult to move goods out of the valley. This led to experiments with friction, looking at wheels and the force that it takes to drag them across rubble, grass, sand and a variety of other surfaces. This was part of the children's science course, but it fitted well with the historical enquiry into the farm's failure to grow. We also looked at the Tudor farm building, testing different kinds of roof trusses to see which were stronger and replicating the clay tiles that had been used.

There are similar opportunities to combine history and art. Taking the Stone Age again, a group of children looked at pots in [The British Museum](#) and then made their own, decorating them with ropes, vines and so on. There are numerous other possibilities: geography, music, design and technology.

I would like to conclude by saying, and I am quoting Bruner again, that:

we teach a subject not to produce little living libraries but to consider matters as a historian does, to take part in the process of knowledge. If we respect the ways of thought of the growing child, if one is courteous enough to translate the material into its logical forms and challenging enough to tempt him or her to advance, then it is possible to introduce him/her at an early age to ideas and styles that in later life will make him an educated man. (8)

Notes

1. Quoted in P. Fryer, *Black People in the British Empire: an Introduction* (1989). [Back to \(1\)](#).
2. M. Stobart, 'Tensions between political ideology and history teaching: to what extent may history serve a cause, however well meant', in *The Standing Conference of European History Teachers Association Bulletin*, 6 (1996). [Back to \(2\)](#).
3. J. Bruner, *The Culture of Education* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1996), p. 41. [Back to \(3\)](#).
4. R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (Oxford, 1939) and R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1946). [Back to \(4\)](#).
5. On probability, see J. Piaget and B. Inhelder, *The Origin of the Idea of Chance in the Child* (1951), and on causality see J. Piaget, *The Language and Thought of the Child* (1926, 3rd edn. 1959). [Back to \(5\)](#).
6. L. S. Vygotsky, *Thought and Language* (London and New York, 1962). [Back to \(6\)](#).
7. J. Bruner, *The Process of Education* (New York, 1962) and J. Bruner, *Towards a Theory of Instruction* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966, 7th edn., 1975). [Back to \(7\)](#).
8. J. Bruner, *Towards a Theory of Instruction*, pp. 22, 52. [Back to \(8\)](#).