HISTORY

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1 History in the school curriculum

1.1 Introduction

Before beginning to look in detail at approaches to teaching history and the development of children's historical understanding, it is important to consider the purpose and aims of teaching history. The following extracts, taken from an article by David Sylvester, give a background to the development of the subject, since the late 1950s:

In 1959 the Ministry of Education published Primary Education and the chapter on history began with an analysis of the difficulties of teaching history to the young.

It was partly that history was becoming ever wider and more complicated ... And if the matter of history was becoming more difficult to present, teachers were at the same time becoming more sensitive about what and how young children could learn. Whereas in the past the stress had been placed on finding out what was objectively important and teaching it, now much more attention was being given to children's interests ... if children in our primary schools profit only from what they, in some measure, understand, and if younger children have so little sense of time, what place can there be for historical material in their education?

(Ministry of Education, 1959, p. 276)

In 1967 the Plowden Report, Children and their Primary schools, was published. Again it began by rehearsing the difficulties of teaching history:

History for children is a subject on which it is not easy to reach agreement ... History, it is said again and again, is an adult subject. How then can it be studied by children without it being so simplified that it is falsified? There is the further problem that it is not until the later years of the primary school, if then, that some children develop a sense of time. Yet we received oral evidence of an infant school where several of the older children became absorbed in historical subject matter of the most varied kind, and we visited an infant school where one exceptional child had memorised the dates of the kings and queens of England – all except the muddling Anglo-Saxons. There is, it seems, a need for further enquiry into the impact of history on children, in terms of the interest, attitudes, knowledge and concepts which it develops. In particular, more studies are needed of children's understanding of time.


However, the Report then suggested that work of quality in history seemed to occur when history was not taught as a separate subject but in 'topics such as exploration, which link history and geography, or by studies of the environment' (Ibid., p. 226). The Report went on to stress the importance of stories and the need for concrete detail rather than generalisations in historical work, suggesting finally that the use of time charts would enable children to acquire a broad sequence of events and 'in effect a short “alphabet” of history' (Ibid., p. 229).

However, the main impact of the Report in schools was to begin a move away from history as a separate subject to topic work and the growth of various forms of interrelated studies in humanities, social studies or environmental studies.
By 1974 history ranked low in the priority which primary school teachers gave to it. In a survey of teachers of the age groups of 5, 7, 9 and 11 all the teachers said that they made little or no contribution to furthering the aim that, 'the child should have ordered subject knowledge in, for example, history and geography' (Taylor and Holley, 1975, p. 49).

When HM Inspectors of schools conducted a survey between 1975 and 1977 they reported that in 90 per cent of the 9-year-old classes and in almost all 11-year-old classes, taken as a whole ... the work was superficial' (DES, 1978, pp. 72–3).

The effect of this and other HM Inspectorate surveys was to reinforce a growing view among politicians that all was not well, and a movement began for a more central policy in education.

(Sylvester in Bourdillon, 1994)

References for the above extract

CENTRAL ADVISORY COUNCIL FOR EDUCATION (1967) Children and their Primary Schools: a report (Plowden Report), HMSO.

DES (1978) Primary Education in England, HMSO.

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION (1959) Primary Education, HMSO.

TAYLOR, P. H. AND HOLLEY, B. J. (1975) A Study of the Emphasis given by Teachers of Different Age Groups to Aims in Primary Education, NFER.

The purpose and nature of school history is a controversial subject. The debate precipitated by the development of national curriculum history in 1989 produced more controversy and print in the pages of the newspapers and journals than any other subject, with the possible exception of English. At issue was the place of 'British' history in the school curriculum, and the links between history and a knowledge and understanding of 'heritage'. The guidance given to the Working Group by the Secretary of State for Education stated:

the programmes of study should have at the core the history of Britain, the record of its past and, in particular, its political, constitutional, and cultural heritage.

(DES, 1990, Appendix 2, pp. 189–90)

The working group accepted that:

An understanding of British history should be the foundation of pupils' historical learning, since it is the main framework of their immediate experience, in political, economic, social and cultural terms.

(Ibid., p. 16)

However, the report went on to state:

We believe that to study the history of Britain solely in political terms is but one part of the story. The political history of the British Isles, and of their inner-relationships, is complex ...
Also at the heart of the controversy was the debate around whether history should concentrate on ‘facts’ or methodologies. The 1970s had seen the development of a new rationale for teaching history, strongly influenced by the Schools’ Council History Project set up in 1972. This ‘new’ history emphasised historical methodology and a syllabus which was ‘relevant’ to the lives of young people. Modern world history and local history (partly with an eye to leisure interests) were introduced, together with an emphasis on enquiry-based learning and the evaluation of historical sources. This approach advocated moving away from the idea of the study of history being a process of remembering facts, as it was felt that this reduced history to a memory exercise. Although aimed primarily at secondary school pupils, this approach to teaching history was also adopted in primary schools. Critics of ‘new’ history feared that the subject was being reduced to an endless stream of source evaluation and empathy exercises which paid no attention to historical facts, that is names, dates and events.

This dichotomy between historical skills and ‘facts’ is, in fact, a false one. Facts provide information about the past which is an essential part of history, but they do not in themselves constitute history or provide an understanding of the past. Any study of history needs to combine a thorough knowledge of past events with an understanding of historical method. That is, after all, the way in which historians carry out their work.

The first national curriculum Orders for history, introduced in 1991, successfully avoided the false polarities between history being about skills or about content by emphasising that:

All the attainment targets require that pupils demonstrate their knowledge of the content and terminology outlined in the programmes of study. Pupils need to select, use, and, as necessary, recall detailed and relevant information from the appropriate study units to sustain an argument or to support an answer. This assumes increasing importance, with each succeeding level in the statements of attainment.

(SEAC, 1993)

1.2 Criticisms of the first national curriculum

Under the 1988 Education Reform Act (England and Wales), history was established as a core foundation subject and as such was to form a compulsory element in the school curriculum for all pupils aged 5–16. This development was welcomed by history teachers as a move which recognised the value of history’s contribution to a ‘broad and balanced education’ and preparation for adult life. Its status under the 1988 Act was the same as the other core foundation subjects (Geography, Technology, Art, Music and PE).

However, planning, teaching and assessing the first national curriculum history Orders presented primary school teachers with a great challenge. How was this subject to fit into the topic planning? How were primary teachers to cope with the demands of the subject content knowledge and of the demands of teaching historical concepts and skills to pupils? The
debates about the place of history in the primary curriculum which followed the introduction of the history Orders in the 1990s did raise teachers' understanding of the nature of history and moved the focus of much history from being about 'historical content' to a coverage of the concepts and skills, such as chronology and historical enquiry, etc.

Other criticisms were levelled at the first national curriculum for history, in particular:

- the amount of content to be covered. This presented problems particularly at key stage 2;
- the introduction of a ten-level scale of attainment targets for assessment purposes. Teachers found that they did not necessarily reflect the way in which pupils make progress in history. Whilst such a scale may be appropriate for maths or science, it did not fit what was known about the development of children's historical thinking, or, indeed, the complexities within the subject itself. The history statements of attainment did not represent tasks which can be done once to demonstrate competence and many of the statements were open to interpretation. Many of the ideas and skills embraced by the statements of attainment applied across many if not all levels. For example, Attainment Target 1, strand c, required pupils to 'describe different features of a historical period'. This could be interpreted with varying degrees of sophistication. As the Interim Dearing Report pointed out:

  The most difficult problem to resolve is that of the same level meaning different things in different key stages ... There is, nevertheless, a significant problem in that it is impossible in a subject such as history to divorce the development of historical skills from the acquisition of knowledge about an increasing range of historical periods. It is not clear whether these problems are solvable.

  (NCC/SEAC, 1993)

- the removal of teachers' initiative in curriculum development. As the Order laid down the content and the attainment targets, many teachers felt they had little scope to develop the curriculum, and hence develop their own knowledge and understanding of curriculum development and design;
- the pace of change in schools. The curriculum teachers were being asked to follow was continually being modified and amended. Head teachers felt they were unable to put into effect any long-term curriculum planning.

Some of these criticisms did not apply solely to the history Orders, but to the whole national curriculum. In August 1993, Sir Ron Dearing was appointed to review the whole curriculum. At the same time, it was stated that there would be a five-year moratorium on curriculum change.
1.3 The history national curriculum and the Dearing Review (1994)

The main changes which took place in reviewing the national curriculum for history were to reduce the content and rationalise, in the light of experience, the attainment targets and statements of attainment. The content at key stage 2 was greatly reduced. There was also some restructuring to take into account the different approaches to the study of history – and allow for overview and in-depth studies across the key stages. Overall the use of terms and language was standardised. The three attainment targets were reduced to one called 'History'. This is divided into 'level descriptions', which are to be used for summative assessment purposes at the end of the year or the key stage. The level descriptions provide an overview of the key features of a pupil's understanding of history at that particular level, and are used to provide the basis for judgements about pupils' attainment. Teachers need to decide together which description most accurately fits each of their pupils. For example, the level description for pupils at level 2 is:

Pupils show their developing sense of chronology by using terms concerned with the passing of time, by ordering events and objects and by making distinctions between aspects of their own lives and past times. They demonstrate factual knowledge and understanding of the past beyond living memory, and of some of the main events and people they have studied. They are beginning to recognise that there are reasons why people in the past acted as they did. They are beginning to identify some of the different ways in which the past is represented. They answer questions about the past, from sources of information, on the basis of simple observation.

(DFE, 1995)

Key elements for each of the key stages were identified. The key elements identify areas of progression in pupils' historical knowledge, understanding and skills. As such they provide a basis for planning, teaching and learning of the content in each of the units. They also provide, with the historical content, the basis for the day-to-day assessment and will help teachers devise tasks and gather evidence of pupils' attainment for making judgements on pupils' progress. These have been developed from the general requirements of the first national curriculum history and also incorporate the skills and concepts of history.

Terminology and national curriculum history

In the various stages of developing national curriculum history, the terminology to describe the concepts and skills taught in history has undergone change, but the underlying concepts and skills demonstrate continuities with the approaches to teaching and the definition of the subject which were developed through the 1960s and 1970s. However, the discourse of the subject – the way it is described and referenced – has been altered. The language and terminology of Schools History Project history, no longer politically acceptable to the government in the late 1980s, was changed. Likewise, in reviewing national curriculum history, the terminology was further modified to remove any reference to the Schools History Project and the terminology which fuelled the 'content' versus 'skills' debate. The chart overleaf summarises the changes in the terminology used to describe the skills and content of history.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>National Curriculum History 1991</th>
<th>Dearing Review – Key Stage 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge and understanding of history (AT1a) Change and Continuity.</td>
<td>Key element 1 - Chronology: to develop overviews of the main events and changes both within and across periods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge and understanding of history (AT1b) Cause and Consequence.</td>
<td>Key element 2 - Range and depth of historical knowledge and understanding: to describe, analyse and explain reasons for and results of the historical events, situations and changes in the period studied.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge and understanding of history (AT1c) Knowing about and understanding the key features of past situations.</td>
<td>Key element 2 - Range and depth of historical knowledge and understanding: to analyse the characteristic features of particular periods and societies, including the range of ideas, beliefs and attitudes of people, and the experiences of men and women; and to analyse the social, cultural, religious and ethnic diversity of the societies studied.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretations of history (AT2)</td>
<td>Key element 3 - Interpretations of history: how and why some historical events, people, situations and changes have been interpreted differently; to analyse and evaluate interpretations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The use of historical sources (AT3)</td>
<td>Key element 4 - Historical enquiry: to investigate independently aspects of the periods studied, using a range of sources of information, including documents and printed sources, artefacts, pictures, photographs and films, music and oral accounts, buildings and sites; to ask and answer significant questions, to evaluate sources in their historical context, collect and record information relevant to a topic and to reach conclusions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General requirements.</td>
<td>Programme of study: Across the key stage, pupils should be given opportunities to study history from a variety of perspectives - political, economic, technological and scientific; social; religious; cultural and aesthetic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General requirements - Historical enquiry and communication</td>
<td>Key element 5 Organisation and communication: to recall, select and organise historical information, including dates and terms; to organise their knowledge and understanding of history through the accurate selection and deployment of terms necessary to describe and explain the periods and topics studied, including government, parliament, Church, state, empire, monarchy, republic, treaty, revolution, reform, class, nobility, peasantry, law, trade, industrialisation, communism, fascism, democracy, dictatorship; to communicate their knowledge and understanding of history, using a range of techniques, including extended narratives and descriptions, and substantiated explanations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Assessment requirements

Teachers are required to teach the revised history Orders to years 1 to 6, but there are no statutory requirements to assess pupils at the end of key stage 1 or 2. In deciding the most effective methods of gathering evidence of pupils' attainment, and in deciding on the most effective ways of reporting on pupils' progress in history, teachers use their professional judgements. Some teachers are choosing to use the level descriptions for the summative reporting on pupils' progress in history.

The case for extending the scope of statutory teacher assessment for 7 and 11 year olds in 1998 and beyond is under review. A useful guide to the structure of the history national curriculum can be found in Moon, B. *A Guide to the National Curriculum* (Oxford University Press, 1996) which is one of the PGCE's set books.

1.4 The aims of school history

Denis Shemilt in his introduction to 'Aims of School History' (Shemilt, 1992) argues that the aims of national curriculum history should be made explicit, as they are for other subjects such as religious education. They should relate to the individual potentialities as well as to the needs of society and be broadly civilising, rather than narrowly instrumental (Shemilt, 1992). However, this position, Shemilt argues, leaves many important questions about the aims of school history unanswered. He identified the four most important questions as being:

1 How should the aims and purposes of history teaching relate to the aims and purposes of education for 5–16 year olds?
2 Is it possible to formulate aims for teaching history to 5–16 year olds?
3 To what extent should history teaching aim to develop pupils' understanding of the methodological basis of the discipline?
4 In what ways should the study of the past aim to be relevant to pupils' present and future lives?

The History Working Group (England) also offers a rationale for teaching history and its place in the school curriculum.
We can identify two broad aims in the above list. The first is extrinsic: history should fulfil certain personal and social aims, through providing pupils with a sense of identity and a framework of reference for understanding their present world. This contributes to children's education as citizens and equips them for adult life. The second aim is intrinsic: to foster an appreciation of history for its own sake by arousing an interest in the past and in the methodologies that can be used to interpret the past.

Important for both these aims is that pupils, through studying the historical process, learn to take a critical approach. The 'search for the truth' should be accompanied not only by disciplined enquiry but also by an awareness that events and processes can be interpreted in many different ways. John Slater (former Staff Inspector HMI History) considers that one of the roles of history in the curriculum is to establish the status of doubt:

[History] is part of a balanced curriculum better defined, not by what subjects are called, but by what they do and are for. Historical thinking provides procedural conditions for making statements about other human beings. Its enemies are stereotypes and dogma. Doubt is our weapon – at least I think so.

(Slater in Shemilt, 1992, p. 53)

1.5 Essential concepts and skills

National curriculum history for key stages 1 and 2 requires that pupils should gain an understanding of the following historical skills and concepts. They are listed as key elements in the programmes of study.
1 Change, continuity and chronology

This involves recognising, describing and analysing change. Pupils can explore the causes and effects of change, how technological, economic, political, social and aesthetic changes interact, and how change varies in pace, complexity and significance. This requires an increasingly sophisticated knowledge of chronology and of features and events of different historical periods.

2 Causes and consequences

This involves analysing and explaining historical events and actions. Pupils need to be able to identify causes (which should be interpreted broadly to include motive and intention); to distinguish between different types of cause and consequence; to understand how both causes and consequences vary in importance and to appreciate the complexity of the links between them. This requires an increasingly mature ability to select and apply relevant knowledge in support of a convincing argument.

3 Range and depth of historical knowledge and understanding

This involves developing a knowledge and understanding of different historical periods, societies, situations and events, and of the attitudes and values of people in past societies.

4 Interpretations of history

This involves recognising that the past is depicted in many different ways and evaluating these different interpretations. Pupils should be aware that historians select, interpret and combine sources, in order to construct accounts of the past, and are influenced in this by their own interests and perspectives, and those of the society in which they live. To evaluate interpretations requires an understanding of the factors that shape accounts of past developments and events, and the way these accounts may or may not have been used to serve social or political processes. For these reasons, history is dynamic; there is no one correct view of the past.

(The Publication Teaching Interpretations History in the Primary Resource Box provides a useful discussion of one approach to teaching this aspect of history.)

5 Historical enquiry

This involves acquiring evidence and drawing inferences from sources, which are supported by reasoned argument. Sources are the traces of the past which remain. These may be artefacts, buildings, archaeological sites, pictures, oral or written sources. Written sources include birth certificates, advertisements, diaries, literature, laws and statistics. Sources vary in status; we need to consider why they were made, and what they might have meant to the people who made and used them — who may have had values and attitudes different from our own, for example about women, childhood, slavery, religion. We have to try to understand their knowledge systems, and the social and political constraints of the societies in which they lived. A number of equally valid interpretations may be possible,
particularly as sources are often incomplete. An interpretation can be said to be valid if it accepts that human beings behave rationally, if it cannot be disproved, and if it is in keeping with what else is known of the period.

Pupils should be encouraged to find out about the past from different types of historical sources and to analyse these in the light of their existing knowledge of the period. When using sources it is important to be concerned with the provenance of the sources, as well as their content, in order to make a judgement on the reliability and value of the source.

6 The organisation and communication of history

This involves pupils in communicating their knowledge of history in a variety of ways and using historical terms for example, monarch, parliament, etc.

1.6 Local, national and world history

During key stages 1 and 2 pupils should be introduced to the different types of historical study – local, national and world history (non-European). Currently, world history is not a statutory requirement at key stage 1, but a balance across the three is required at key stage 2. It is not always easy to distinguish where local and national history stops and world history starts, and in fact it is possible to cover all three through the same historical content. Here is one example of that approach developed by Sylvia Collicott, Senior Lecturer in the School of Teaching Studies, University of North London:

In teaching Victorian Britain ... we can make links, using a timeline, between the raw materials coming from the colonies and industries in Britain. Here are a few examples: rubber from South America meant the setting up of an Indian rubber factory in Tottenham in the late 1840s, animal skins from India supplied the tanning industry in Otley, guano from Peru gave raw materials for gunpowder, palm oil from Bonny was brought in for the soap-making industry, cacao beans from West Africa supplied the chocolate industry, mahogany wood from the Caribbean was necessary for the British furniture industry. The relationship between Empire and industrialisation is a key issue in this period. Industry needs to be seen in a local-national-world context.

(Collicott, 1993, p. 23)

The National Curriculum Working Group affirmed the value of this approach:

It is important not only to consider Britain's relationships with other parts of the world, and its contribution to world history, but also to study other aspects of world history for their own sake.

(DES, 1990)

1.7 Different perspectives

Teaching history also involves studying the subject from a variety of perspectives. It is important, therefore, that the sources selected include viewpoints from both sexes and from a variety of social, ethnic and
cultural backgrounds. The Benin Project and the Association for the Study of African, Caribbean and Asian Culture and History in Britain are examples of groups recently formed to advise on sources with non-Eurocentric perspectives. The National Curriculum Working Group gives the following advice on the issue of gender:

Teachers should give careful thought to differences in historical roles of men and women and draw attention to them wherever appropriate ... We recommend that whatever weight is given to gender, it should be treated broadly, as one of the many ways in which societies define and divide people. It is helpful to consider the implications of historical events for both men and women and to avoid token lip-service to the history of women.

( Ibid)

1.8 History and an integrated curriculum

Historical enquiry often overlaps with other areas of the curriculum. Below are examples of this.

- **Art**  Interpreting paintings (see Unwin, 1981, and Morris, 1989), observing and drawing artefacts, copying patterns from fabrics, wallpapers or buildings (see Durbin et al., 1990) can all be a basis for making historical deductions.

- **Technology and science**  History is concerned with the causes and effects of changing technologies and with inventions, structures and materials (see Tasker, 1990). This often requires the understanding and investigation of scientific concepts, for example sources of energy and forces.

- **Music**  History can overlap with music through the study of musical instruments in different periods and cultures, which also involves a scientific investigation into sound.

- **Geography**  History shares many concerns with geography, for example the reasons for settlement, the changing interaction between the made and the natural environment, and aesthetic, cultural and economic communication between settlements.

- **Mathematics**  Historical investigations often involve mathematical enquiry, for example collecting and interpreting data, and measuring and making calculations.

- **Language**  In historical study, the skills of speaking and listening, and reading and writing are developed, as they are central to data collection, the interpretation of sources and to the presentation of findings.

1.9 Cross-curricular themes and dimensions

Health education, economic and industrial understanding, careers education, environmental education, citizenship and personal and social education are intended to permeate the whole curriculum (see NCC Curriculum Guidance 3–8). These dimensions are implicit in history. For example, historical investigations may include exploring attitudes to illness in the past, and changes in diet or in healthcare; the causes and
effects of changes in the way goods are made, transported and traded; and how humans relate to and affect the environment. An understanding of the concept of citizenship can be developed through finding out about the role of organisations and individuals in the local community both in the past and present.

As discussed in section 1.2, the processes of historical enquiry, as well as the content of history, are essential to social and emotional, as well as cognitive, development. Children learn to express an opinion, weigh up evidence, listen to the views of others, and give their own interpretation to support an argument, while accepting that there can be more than one valid interpretation and that, even for apparently straightforward questions, there may be no one ‘right’ answer.

2 The development of children’s historical thinking

Research in cognitive psychology related to each of these strands of historical thinking suggests the kinds of thinking in history we may expect from children at 5 years old and how these may be built upon during primary education. It has sometimes been suggested that history is not appropriate for young children, because their learning should be based on direct and concrete experiences; this view is now very much refuted. Also the past is an intrinsic part of children’s experience, through family history, through myths, legends and folk-tales, and through the buildings and place-names they are familiar with. By focusing on and developing their questions about these experiences, children can be helped to think about the past and their place in it in an embryonic, but genuinely historical, way.

2.1 Understanding the concept of time

Concepts of time emerge slowly. Smith and Tomlinson (1977) found that 8 year olds still had little understanding of duration, of what is meant by a short or a long time. Crowther (1982) found that 7 year olds perceive change simply as the substitution of one thing for another. Piaget (1956) suggested the sequence in which concepts of time develop. Firstly, children learn to place events in order, then to measure intervals of time, and, finally, to understand that events can occur at the same time. Piaget's work on number (Piaget, 1952a) showed how young children are in the process of learning both how to form sequences of numbers and to sort objects into sets with shared attributes. In the context of history, then, they may begin to put artefacts, photographs and familiar events in chronological sequence, and to make sets of, for example, ‘very old’, ‘old’ and ‘new’.

Young children are already familiar with the language of time (for example, ‘yesterday’, ‘before you were born’, ‘long ago’) and, as they get older, they can develop more precise concepts (‘century’, ‘decade’). Stories introduce children to vocabulary which is particularly related to