4 Planning a history study unit and assessing children's work

In this section, we look at how to plan a unit of study for children through which their work can be monitored and assessed. In order for pupils to produce high-quality work in primary school history a consistent approach to planning and assessment is needed, based on documentation that has clear aims regarding the knowledge, skills and attitudes that pupils should acquire (see DES, 1989). Effective learning is achieved through discussion and questioning, that begin with children's existing knowledge and then introduce new facts and ideas that relate to the pupils' first-hand experiences. Teachers can show children how to investigate primary sources in order to find out about the relationship between past and present and to imagine what it might be like to have lived at another time. These investigations can then be recorded in a variety of artistic, creative and mathematical forms.

At key stage 1, history can be taught through topics with a strong history focus (family or local history, the distant past, or 'story', i.e. fictional narratives), or through 'humanities topics', linking history with other curriculum subjects, such as geography or science, or as a component of traditional themes such as 'The Seaside', 'Home' or 'Toys'. At key stage 2, core history units may be taught as a separate subject, although there are many advantages in planning a history-focused topic within an integrated curriculum. There are also flexible possibilities for overlap between core and supplementary units. For example, there is a variety of possible links between life in Tudor times, a local study, and Benin. The local history study and the study of a non-European society often link well with topics that have a science and technology focus or a geography focus.

Planning a history study unit involves planning activities which will allow children to acquire historical knowledge through the processes of genuine historical enquiry. Figure 4 provides a useful list of historical questions.

It is important to remember that the specified content does not have to be covered in equal depth; the weakness of much history teaching in the past was that it was spread superficially across too much content without involving children in an investigative way, or relating the content to their interests (DES, 1978; HMI (Wales), 1989). Consequently, history was often seen as irrelevant and boring, rather than as central to the curriculum and to children's cognitive, emotional and social development.

In planning the programmes of study it is important to identify which topics are studied *in outline* and which *in depth*, together with which of the key elements of the programme of study are being focused on in each topic.
FIGURE 4
Asking Historical Questions
Source: CCW, 1991, p. 28
4.1 Breaking your planning up into stages

Planning involves a sequence of stages:
- an overview of resources;
- selection of focuses for investigation;
- selection of key vocabulary and concepts (key elements);
- possible activities related to resources and focuses;
- long-term plans showing how activities relate to key elements and how they can be assessed;
- more detailed short-term plans for each activity.

Each of these stages will be discussed in turn.

4.2 Overview of resources

An overview of possible resources, particularly in the locality, will stimulate ideas for activities, link the topic to the children's own area, and provide opportunities for first-hand experiences. It may create valuable interaction and shared understandings between the school and the community. It is important also to explore opportunities for support available through education services in libraries, museums and galleries.

Primary sources

Sites
Museums, galleries, churches, great houses, municipal buildings, theatres and cinemas are just some examples of possible sites to investigate. English Heritage, The National Trust and The Historical Association produce publications for teachers that give up-to-date information on events, conferences, reconstructions, organisations and teaching materials, related to sites of historical interest.

The local community
Local history departments in libraries and local history societies can provide a wealth of materials, including maps, censuses, town plans, newspapers and photographs, and may have various projects running, such as a living archive project or a reconstruction of a famous local person's life. Community centres, workplaces, parents and friends can also be important sources for materials as well as offering opportunities for pupils to learn how to interview someone, perhaps through creating and using a questionnaire.

Artefacts
These can be items collected by pupils or teachers or perhaps loaned from museums, libraries and independent organisations.

Contemporary literature
Extracts can be selected from adult literary books, such as Beowulf, Julius Caesar, Pepys.
Contemporary records
Information and statistics on subjects such as trade, health, entertainment and education can be found in, for example, censuses and council or parliamentary minutes.

Archive footage
Video-tapes of archive footage, for example about the Second World War, can be invaluable in creating pupils' conceptions of a period or event, and old films can also convey the cultural values of a particular period.

Music
Pupils can listen to music from a particular historical period and learn about its role and significance in the society to which it belonged.

Secondary sources

Information technology reconstructions
For example, BBC Landmarks series: Egypt, The Victorians, The Second World War, Columbus, The Aztecs, The Civil War, Elizabeth 1. BBC Educational Publishing, PO Box 234, Wetherby, West Yorkshire, LS23 7EU, or Longman Logotron, 124 Cambridge Science Park, Milton Road, Cambridge CB4 4ZS.

Children's reference books, history books and historical fiction
These can be a combination of recently published and also old history books, so that the different depictions and interpretations given in both the text and illustrations can be compared.

History 'schemes'
The national curriculum has resulted in a spate of books which purport to relate suggested activities to attainment targets and assessment. Although potentially useful resources, there is a great danger, if they are used uncritically and exclusively, that children's and teachers' work will not be rooted in their own interests and enquiries, and that assessment will be crude and unreflective.

4.3 Selection of focuses for investigation
It is helpful to find focuses for enquiries within a study unit. This will make it possible to relate specified content in a meaningful way. An in-depth investigation, using limited, selected sources can fan out to involve more wide-ranging issues. It is important that children hold in mind particular sources, then extrapolate from the particular to the general. They can then transfer their reasoning to new material. (For more guidance on this see Bruner, 1963; and Cooper, 1991, 1992.)

The study unit may be organised so that different groups of children work on each focus, or the whole class may work on each of the focuses, possibly in different ways.
4.4 Selection of key vocabulary and concepts

In order to use sources effectively and develop their skills of historical analysis, children need to learn new vocabulary and concepts. These may be terms specifically related to the period (black-out, villa, Roundhead, Restoration), words which have a meaning in relation to the period which is different from their meaning today ('democracy' in ancient Greece, 'parliament' in Tudor times; words related to the process of historical enquiry (legend, valid, biased, contradictory); or abstract terms which are not specifically historical (exploration, trade).

4.5 Possible activities related to resources and focuses

Your work in Section 3 on developing activities and relating them to study units and the key elements should have given you some practice in adapting activities to suit the resources that you have and the teaching points that you want to make. You could also extend activities to look at how pupils might communicate their new skills and knowledge to others. For example, pupils could present dramatic reconstructions, slide presentations or exhibitions, with explanatory labels written next to artefacts and perhaps pupils' models and drawings of historical events and artefacts. Perhaps the class could put together an audio-tape or video-tape and describe or demonstrate their findings in an original way. They could also write 'archaeologists' reports' or 'historians' reports'. Possible audiences for their work could be the class, school or parents, or you could try something further afield - perhaps having an exhibition or a dramatic reconstruction at the local library, teachers' centre or at a relevant local organisation.

4.6 Long-term plans

The appendix shows how key elements at key stages 1 and 2 relate to activities and to methods of assessment. The examples used are: for key stage 1, the unit on Castles and, for key stage 2, the study unit on Romans, Anglo-Saxons and Vikings in Britain. (The national curriculum (England) stresses that only one of these three invasions should be studied in depth.)

Assessment can be ongoing throughout the unit of study, and can include various types of work. It could be based on pieces of written work (for example, writing an explanation of a timeline, a display label, an 'archaeologist's report', a story or a poem). It may be made by listening to children's discussion in a group as they use evidence to make a model or a painting, discuss a source, interrogate a database, sort items into sets of 'old' and 'new', 'Ancient Egyptian' and 'more recent', 'reliable' and 'unreliable', 'relevant' and 'not relevant', or while young children play in a house corner 'castle', or older children discuss how to use sources to make up a play.

Alternatively, assessments may be made at the end of a unit of study. They could be based on children's written presentations of their findings or an oral presentation given to an audience. Children's self-assessment of their work, either in writing or orally, can also play a useful part in the
assessment. It is extremely important that the purpose of activities is made explicit to children (and to parents) so that they are involved in deciding to what extent it has been achieved. Many sequences of activities relate to all three attainment targets, but it can simplify assessment if one attainment target in particular is related to each focus.

Issues related to assessment in history

History, together with all other national curriculum subjects, was originally intended to be assessed against a ten-level scale. This approach has been subjected to much criticism as there had been little research into children's thinking in history when constructing the scale. Therefore the levels were not based on empirical evidence of what children may be capable of, nor were they necessarily hierarchical, nor was there always consistency within a level, across the attainment targets. Furthermore, variables in the kinds of questions asked and the complexity of the sources used mean that the statements of attainment are imprecise. Statements such as 'place in sequence events in a story and communicate information acquired from an historical source' can be achieved by a 5 year old; they may also tax a professional historian.

In working to the original ten-level scale for assessing national curriculum history, teachers have learnt that some of the responses to a national framework can be negative – for example, the idea that assessment might be separated from teaching and learning. Where this approach has been taken and assessment has been treated as something that is 'bolted on' to teaching and learning it has created a tremendous workload for teachers; assessment in history, as in other subjects, is part of planning and everyday classroom activities.

However, work on the national curriculum has enabled teachers to identify effective assessment in history. Ian Colwill, the Professional Officer for history at the SCAA, identifies effective assessment in history as:

Where there's been effective assessment teachers have looked to plan the assessment into the teaching and learning so that assessment not only reflects what pupils now understand and can do but it also supports and develops that knowledge and understanding as well. Central to that is a clear understanding of why and what they are assessing.

(BBC Interview, March 1994)

Experience of planning tasks against the Orders for the first national curriculum had indicated to teachers the limitations of seeing the attainment in history as a series of hoops pupils had to jump through.

In the revised national curriculum Orders for history, the key elements provide the broad indicators for planning. Each of the key elements has two or three key ideas which are useful for planning. For example, the idea of change is covered in key elements 1 and 2. At key stage 1 when these key elements are used in planning activities, they take pupils through three broad stages:
developing a sense of chronology – put events and objects into order;
•• developing the terminology of chronology, i.e. old, new, before, after, etc.;
•• to identify difference in the way people lived at different times.

At key stage 2, when these key elements are used in planning activities, they take pupils through these broad stages:
•• developing a sense of chronology – to put events, sequences and the people studied within a chronological framework;
•• to use the dates and terms, e.g. AD, BC, Tudor, Vikings, etc.;
•• to describe and make links of the main events, situations and change within and across periods.

Broadly speaking, these stages ensure that pupils are given opportunities to do some sequencing work, to develop narrative accounts of changes (written/pictorial or oral), and to analyse change. Each of these aspects of change can be re-visited throughout the key stage in more complex contexts in which more knowledge is required. Pupils’ responses to historical questions around these key elements build up a picture of progression across the key stage, which teachers can then relate to the level descriptions at the end of the year and the key stage.

4.7 Short-term plans

Detailed plans for each activity using the following format will help to clarify its purpose and how this is to be achieved. They can be written at the beginning of each week, rather than at the beginning of the project.

What do I want the children to learn?

What information do I want them to acquire and what thinking processes are involved? How do these relate to the key elements in history?

What will I do?

Will I be talking to the whole class, or a group?

How will I introduce the activity?

What information will I give them?

What questions might I ask?

What interventions may be necessary during the activity?

Will I be assessing any/all of the children? How?

What will the children do?

For example: following the group discussion, they will draw the artefact and write a ‘museum information label’ describing it and saying what is known about it and what reasonable guesses can be made about it.

Resources

For example, artefacts, drawing paper, pencils, card and glue for label.
Evaluations

Evaluation of teaching
What worked well in terms of developing pupils' understanding of history? What didn't work so well, why, and what would I do differently?

Evaluation of some of the children's responses

Why did they respond differently, in work or attitude? What does this tell me about their understanding of history?

What could I/did I do about it?

This will inform both plans for future activities and pupil assessments.

5 Examples from PGCE trainee teachers' work with children

5.1 Using oral history in a year 1 class topic on the Second World War

Children listened to a pre-recorded tape on which a woman described her experiences as a trainee nurse during the London blitz. In a later session, they talked to a retired dinner lady (referred to as Mrs I. in the transcripts) who told them that, at that time, she had lived in a country town in Scotland. She spoke of the 'war effort' and of her marriage to a soldier, and showed them photographs. They also examined a gas mask, a hooded torch used during the black-out, and two identity cards.

Chronology/similarity/difference

Assessment objectives

- place in sequence events in a story about the past;
- identify differences between past and present times.

In discussing both accounts, children used time vocabulary in order to sequence events and to describe differences between past and present. Here is a transcript of part of a conversation held by three pupils.

J. The war's over now.
A. That's a long time ago ...
Ja. (looking at photographs) That was when you were young.
J. Not old like you are now ...
Ja. Is he [her son] grown up now?
A. He's a man now.
D. It was a very long time ago.
Ja. We don't have bombs because we are not in a war are we?
J. It's peaceful now.
A. We don't have ration books ... gas masks ... tin hats.
D. We don't have to go somewhere else [evacuation].