

## Seize the Day: time to make history transformative

*Dr. Hilary Cooper, Emeritus Professor of History and Pedagogy, University of Cumbria.*

### A confession

After graduating in history I thought that repeating my own experience of history in secondary schools would be boring. I was more attracted by the refreshing ideas in the Plowden Report (1968) with its focus on 'child-centredness' and recognition that children actively construct their knowledge of the world through their physical action upon it. However the Plowden Report saw teaching history to young children as problematic. '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?' (p. 226). I decided to teach in primary schools but for a number of years my only genuflection to teaching history was a collage of a cavalier, made solely because we could make his hair from paper curls.



When I was seconded to take an Advanced Diploma in Child Development I read about the pioneering work of Fines and Coltham (1971) and of Rogers (1978), which had a huge impact

on history education in Britain and internationally. They drew on the work of Elton, Bruner and Bloom to make claims about progression, that material can be presented in different ways, the concept of differing

## On one hand it is argued that it is the purpose of history education to unite children in a shared understanding of a single national story, to provide identity, cohesion and social purpose.

viewpoints and that, at appropriate levels, school history can be linked to academic history. They began the task of analysing what is involved in learning history. Fines translated his and Rogers' theories into passionate and deeply informed case-studies, through the Nuffield Primary History Project (1991-2009). However the case studies were not based on research. When I returned to being a class teacher I was inspired to begin my doctoral research using data from my teaching, to link the processes of historical enquiry to constructivist theories (Cooper 1991).

### Tensions

A constructivist approach to history for 5-11 year-olds in the 1999 National Curriculum was a welcome statutory requirement but soon became marginalized by emphasis on Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs) in mathematics and English (1998) and on the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies (DfEE 1998, 1999). There were also few opportunities for professional development in teaching history or time available on Initial Teacher Training courses. History in the Balance (OFSTED 2007) found that history at Key Stage 2 lacked progression and rigour. History for All (OFSTED 2010) reported many improvements but regretted the lack of professional development in primary history.

### Dilemmas

It can be argued that much of this malaise had political causes. History is recognized in every country as a politically powerful subject, which



How would this lady dress at the feast?

governments seek to control. On one hand it is argued that it is the purpose of history education to unite children in a shared understanding of a single national story, to provide identity, cohesion and social purpose. This is open to political manipulation. On the other it is to understand how history is constructed: making deductions and inferences about sources, which are incomplete and change as new discoveries are made, understanding that often there is no single right answer, using sources to construct accounts of the past which may vary, depending on their perspective and discussing ideas about the causes and effects of changes. This approach promotes social, emotional and cognitive development but requires teaching skills to ask and answer historical questions at appropriate levels. The Historical Association (2017) found



A professional Development weekend: using sources: what was this house like in the seventeenth century ?

that time, resources and training remain a problem.

### The History Wars

The History Wars in the UK date back to History in Peril: may parents preserve it (Beattie 1987) when a right-wing think tank claimed that the educational establishment sought to 'talk Britain down', which influenced successive conservative Secretaries of State for Education. Our Island Story, first published in 1905 was republished in 2007, allegedly a childhood favourite of David Cameron, 'with the generous support of readers of the Daily Telegraph', for distribution to primary schools. The front page quotes Tennyson.

**'Not once or twice in our fair island story the path of duty was the way to glory.'**



## Selecting and integrating specified concepts central to history into successive units of study will enable pupils to continually build on and develop their understanding of these concepts in new contexts.

Against such a background, Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education from 2010-14, sparred with academics and professionals, in his self-styled role as an expert. He was determined to impose a history curriculum based on linear chronology of the achievements of British national heroes, to instill pride in a shared national past. Gove decided that children would sit in rows and recite the names and dates of kings and queens. The resulting furore led to a more satisfactory outcome in the current National Curriculum.

### A chance to make history education transformative

The Ofsted Framework (2019) is based on principles, which reassert teachers' professionalism. They must teach a broad and balanced curriculum, which is challenging and of interest to all the children they teach. This must be based on firstly, sequenced blocks of learning building on what is already known and secondly, on activities planned to achieve learning aims involving, rich and significant learning experiences, which will remain in long-term memory and can be built upon throughout life. Teachers must make their own decisions about how to plan an ambitious curriculum, which challenges pupils to engage in critical reflection, integrating new meaning within existing schemes and leads to autonomous thinking. Teachers must be able to explain, and justify the curriculum they design and evidence of progression is how well pupils achieve the curriculum aims.

Heather Fearn, the lead inspector for curriculum and professional



development at OFSTED said, at the Historical Association Conference (2019), that selecting and integrating specified concepts central to history into successive units of study will enable pupils to continually build on and develop their understanding of these concepts in new contexts. The framework does not require designing a new curriculum, but evaluating and developing the existing one. However, the question remains, have teachers been given sufficient support to enable them to do this?

### Three key suggestions for developing the curriculum to respond to the new Inspection Framework

#### Embed key concepts in successive units of study

I had found in my PhD research (Cooper 1991) that eight-year-old children, who had encountered and discussed examples of concepts such as power, agriculture,

transport or symbol in units on the Stone Ages, Iron Age, Romans, and Saxons would use them spontaneously, in subsequent units. History 5-11 (Cooper 2018; 3rd edition ) shows how selected concepts can be related to the content of the first four units of the National Curriculum (tables 8.4 – 8.8) and to the unit on Ancient Societies (table 8.3 pp. 124-13).

#### Make knowledge interconnected through links between history and other subjects

History may be taught as a single subject or with links to other areas of the curriculum. Concepts can be embedded in teaching history linked to other subjects, creating a framework of networks of concepts. Concepts such as trade, transport, settlement, can also be embedded in geography, beliefs and symbols in history and religious education. Art and music can be discussed as historical sources as well as in their own right.



## Plan activities in which the processes of historical enquiry are central

For example an enquiry about an historical site

Activity	Aim: Process of historical enquiry
Class discussion	Frame questions to investigate
Site visit	Record findings in response to questions (notes, photos, audio-records, drawings)
Use secondary sources (books. Internet, images etc)	Find out more; record
Create an account or role play	Differentiate between what is known, what can be 'guessed' (hypotheses), what we cannot know.

## Conclusion

I can not resist concluding with a promo. Visit the History Association website. It is rich with stimulating ideas and professional advice!

[www.history.org.uk](http://www.history.org.uk)

## References

Beattie, A. (1987) *History in Peril: may parents preserve it*, London: Centre for Policy Studies.

Cooper, H. (1991) *Young Children's Thinking in History*, unpub. PhD thesis, London University Institute of Education.

Cooper, H. (2018) *History 5-11: a guide for teachers 3/e* London: Routledge.

Coltham, J. B and Fines, J. (1971) *Educational Objectives for the Study of History: a suggested framework*, London: The Historical Association.

Historical Association (2017) *Survey of History in English Primary Schools*, H.A: London:

*Survey of History in English Primary Schools* (2017), London: The Historical Association.

Marshal, H.E. (1905) (reprinted 2005) *Our Island Story*, Cranbrooke: Galore Park Publishing.

Nuffield Primary History Project (1991-2009)

Case studies: [https://www.history.org.uk/site/search\\_results?st=nuffield](https://www.history.org.uk/site/search_results?st=nuffield)

Plowden Report (1967) *Children and Their Primary Schools: a report of the Central Advisory Council for Education (England) Vol. 1*, London: HMSO

Rogers, P.J. (1978) *The New History: theory into practice*, London: The Historical Association.

## Pen Portrait

Dr. Hilary Cooper is Emeritus Professor of History and Pedagogy at the University of Cumbria. After graduating in History at London University she taught across the age-range in London Primary Schools before completing her doctorate on Young Children's Thinking in History as a practicing teacher. She became a lecturer at Goldsmiths' College, London, then Director of Professional Studies at Lancaster University Department of Education and finally a professor at the University of Cumbria. Since 2004 she has co-chaired the History International Research Network and the History Education Research Journal. She has published widely in several languages.

## The next Bulletin in this series will be published in April 2020

How does talking help a child learn?

Dr James Shea is Course Director for all the PGCE secondary teacher education programmes at the University of Bedfordshire's School of Teacher Education.

## What does ASPE do for those in Primary Education?

We...

- promote informed and reflective study on practice that affects children's learning;
- encourage collaboration between colleagues in schools and universities;
- hold events which promote the best in researched practice;
- provide informed commentary on education policy issues;
- commission publications, including the international journal *Education 3-13*, written by leading researchers and practitioners.

## Feedback

- Tell us what you think about our Bulletins.

Email us on [ASPEinfo@aol.com](mailto:ASPEinfo@aol.com)

[www.aspe-uk.eu](http://www.aspe-uk.eu)

