

CHILDREN AND HISTORY

Children's study of history rests on knowledge of facts, names, dates, and places. In addition, real historical understanding requires students to engage in historical thinking: to raise questions and to marshal evidence in support of their answers; to read historical narratives and fiction; to consult historical documents, journals, diaries, artifacts, historic sites, and other records from the past; and to do so imaginatively-taking into account the time and places in which these records were created and comparing the multiple points of view of those on the scene at the time.

Because of the importance of historical fiction in opening the past to children and engaging their interests in the people and events of long ago, it is especially important for children to learn to analyze these stories for their historical accuracy, to compare these stories and their illustrations with primary sources-historical artifacts, photos, diaries, and other records of the past-and to differentiate fact and fiction. Children should also have opportunities to compare different stories about a historical figure or event in order to analyze the facts each author includes or omits, and the interpretations or point-of-view communicated by each-important early steps in the development of students' abilities to compare competing historical interpretations of events.

Students engaged in activities of the kinds just considered will draw upon skills in the following five types of historical thinking:

1. Chronological Thinking
2. Historical Comprehension
3. Historical Analysis and Interpretation
4. Historical Research Capabilities
5. Historical Issues-Analysis and Decision-Making

These skills, while presented in five separate categories, are nonetheless interactive and mutually supportive. In conducting historical research or creating a historical story of their own, for example, students must be able to draw upon skills in all five categories. Beyond the skills of conducting their research, students must, for example, be able to comprehend historical artifacts and records consulted in their search, analyze their purpose and importance, and demonstrate a grasp of the historical time (e.g., long, long ago) and geographic place in which the problem or events developed.

Chronological thinking is at the heart of historical reasoning. Without a clear sense of historical time-time past, present, and future-students are bound to see events as one great tangled mess. Without a strong sense of chronology-of when events occurred and in what temporal order-it is impossible for students to examine relationships among

them or to explain historical causality. Chronology provides the mental scaffolding for organizing historical thought.

In developing students' chronological thinking, an important share of instructional time should be given to the use of well-constructed historical narratives: literary narratives including biographies and historical literature, and well-written narrative histories that have the quality of "stories well told." Well-crafted narratives such as these have the power to grip and hold students' attention. Thus engaged, the reader (or young listener) is able to focus on what the narrator discloses: the temporal structure of events unfolding over time, the actions and intentions of those who were there, the temporal connections between antecedents and their consequences.

Jerome Bruner has observed, the "psychological and cultural reality in which the participants in history actually lived." To read historical stories, biographies, autobiographies, and narratives with comprehension, therefore, students must develop the ability to read imaginatively, to take into account what the narrative reveals of the humanity of the individuals involved-their probable motives and intentions, their hopes, doubts, fears, strengths, and weaknesses. Comprehending historical narratives requires, also, that students develop the ability to describe the past on its own terms, through the eyes and experiences of those who were there, as revealed through their literature, diaries, letters, arts, artifacts, and the like; and to avoid "present-mindedness," not judging the past solely in terms of the norms and values of today, but taking into account the historical context in which the event unfolded-the values, outlook, crises, options, and contingencies of that time and place.

Perhaps no aspect of historical thinking is as exciting to students or as productive of their growth in historical thinking as "doing history." Such inquiries can be generated by encounters with historical documents, eyewitness accounts, letters, diaries, artifacts, photos, a visit to a historic site, a record of oral history, or other evidence of the past.

Worthy inquiries are especially likely to develop if the documents students encounter are rich with the voices of people caught up in the event and sufficiently diverse to bring alive to students the interests, beliefs, and concerns of people with differing backgrounds and opposing viewpoints or perspectives of the events.

Meaningful historical inquiry proceeds with the formulation of a problem or set of questions worth pursuing. In the most direct approach, students might be encouraged to analyze the document, record, or site itself. Who produced it, when, how, and why? What is the evidence of its authenticity, authority, and credibility? What does it tell them of the point of view, background, and interests of its author or creator? What else must they discover in order to construct a story, explanation, or narrative of the event of which this document or artifact is a part?

Issue-centered analysis and problem solving activities place students squarely in the center of historical dilemmas with which people have coped at critical moments in the past and near-present. Providing children in grades K-4 opportunity to examine such issues in historical literature and in the history of their local community, state, and nation fosters their personal involvement in these events. If well chosen, these activities promote the development of skills and attitudes essential to citizenship in a democratic society.

Among those skills appropriate for grades K-4 are the ability to analyze a situation; define the issue, problem, or dilemma confronting people in that situation; suggest alternative choices for addressing the problem; evaluate the possible consequences-costs as well as benefits-of each; propose an action; and judge its consequences.

Bradley Commission on History in Schools. Building a History Curriculum: Guidelines for Teaching History in Schools.1988.