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Shared Heritages? Investigating Ways of Life in the Past to Promote European Consciousness with Children in Primary Schools

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Introduction

This paper and workshop investigates the contribution which an exploration of shared heritages might make to teaching about European citizenship. Learning about our heritages is inextricably linked with history education and the paper addresses some of the challenges which this might involve and discusses whether certain approaches to learning history might be more appropriate than others. The value of grand historical narratives and national histories is discussed and analysed for its contribution in fostering a shared consciousness. Using approaches developed from Bruner's MACOS curriculum project, key questions are explored which might be used to underpin historical investigations with particular reference to people's everyday lives in the past. It is argued that such questions might promote greater understanding of shared heritages.

Focusing on everyday lives provides opportunities for comparing and contrasting different experiences; it permits children to explore ways in which humans respond to similar challenges in their daily lives and the universality of some of the approaches which they adopt. In this way, the threads which link humankind together may be explored and may contribute towards some sense of shared experience and heritage. This workshop provides opportunities for considering how children may be encouraged to explore everyday lives and to communicate their research to a wider audience.

Shared or divided heritages?

Cultures and societies have always looked to the past for explanations about themselves and their identities: for objects and beliefs to value and for reasons for their different behaviours and customs. Aboriginal societies looked to their Dream Time; the Ancient Greeks and Romans to their myths and legends to provide explanations about the world and their place within it. Viking sagas recount stories of valour and bravery and emphasise the qualities to be admired within communities at the time. As oral accounts were replaced with more systematic research and writing about the past, historians still selected aspects of the past which provided insights into contemporary concerns and interests. The story of the past was linked with the development of the community whether at local, national or global levels. This was a key criterion for teaching history in schools particularly since the development of mass education and continues to be important today.

The grand narrative – the development of nationhood and a sense of collective identity finds itself embedded within schools' history curricula across Europe. It is a narrative which provides a distinct national past and which sets countries' different pasts apart from each other. In early twentieth century England, history stories were taught to

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provide examples of good citizenship and patriotic duty. Suggestions from the Board of Education to school teachers advised them to select stories which would encourage children to learn about heroic deeds and the contribution of individuals to the common good. History was used to explain the present and in terms of the British Empire, it was the story of the march of civilization and democracy across the world. Historians of the grand narrative selectively grasped their facts to explain the greatness of their state; a one sided view of the past was presented to coincide with contemporary views of the present.

The manipulation of the past to serve present national needs and ideologies continues across Europe. Abens' (2006) analysis of the effect of Soviet educational policies on curriculum and teaching in schools includes the identification of ways in which Soviet ideology permeated through history teaching and textbooks to denigrate Latvian achievement and to interpret the past in terms of Marxist-Leninist dogma. Teaching history in Latvian schools continues to be a sensitive issue with a range of different views held of events in Latvia during the last century.

Challenging the grand narrative of national histories

The examples above indicate some of the challenges which national histories may create for developing a sense of shared European consciousness. For a large part of the past two millennia, tribes, regions and nations in Europe have been in conflict with each other. The creation of modern Europe has been violent and painful and studying the political histories of different nations inevitably involves studying their relationships with other nation states. Studying the politics which divide and have divided nations might not be the best way to foster European consciousness.

For children, an undue focus on national history fosters a sense of distinctive nationhood – a sense of ourselves juxtaposed against 'the other'. Since 'the other' is viewed as outside our experience, the uniqueness of ourselves and our experiences is emphasized. This view of history prioritizes a single national history above the collective experiences of people across Europe and the world in facing similar challenges. For example, English children learning about industrialization and developments in science and technology in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries learn of the achievements of British engineers and industrialists; they are not aware of similar developments occurring for example, in France and Germany at the same time. If children are not supported in contextualizing their knowledge within a wider field, achievements are viewed as unique to specific nations rather than as the collective endeavours of people across a range of different regions and communities.

More recent historiography encourages a broader conception of the historical past, drawing on a wide range of sources of information and encompassing a breadth of historical experiences. As well as political perspectives, historical studies now draw on varied disciplines deriving from amongst others, cultural, social, economic, ethnic, and religious interpretations. These different interpretations provide some opportunities for European children to develop a more shared consciousness from learning about the past.

Fostering a sense of shared heritage; starting points

Over forty years ago, the renowned psychologist, Jerome Bruner launched his social studies programme MACOS – Man: A Course of Study, which was a multi-disciplinary approach to the curriculum based on the behavioural sciences. His curriculum was underpinned by three key questions:

- What is uniquely human about human beings?
- How did they get that way?
- How could they be made more so? (Bruner, 1966, p74).

Whilst this curriculum did not specifically engage with history, it does provide some insights which might guide an approach to historical study. ‘What is uniquely human about human beings’ reminds us about the capacity of humans for individual thought and the ability to reflect on our experiences and emotions. In terms of history education this might be explored through questions such as: Who am I? Where have I come from? What is important to me? ‘How did humans get that way’ raises questions concerning the development of humans’ capabilities for survival and ways in which they have improved their lives. Similar or different solutions to managing their daily living may be explored. Finally, ‘How could they be made more so’ focuses on humans’ capacities for communication and for sharing experiences. The social nature of learning is recognized and humans’ abilities to learn from each other.

These key questions provide an important structure for considering classroom experiences which might promote the development of European and global consciousness through exploring shared heritages. Such experiences will include children investigating their own pasts and those of people close to them. Children might research children’s daily lives in the past and compare and contrast these experiences with their own and with children living elsewhere. Communicating ideas, exchanging information and also considering alternative futures will also provide opportunities for the development of greater understanding of humanity and the relationship of individuals to the wider world.

History’s contribution to understanding our shared heritages

A key concern of both history and citizenship education is the development of identity – both at an individual level – ‘who am I?’ - and also collectively – ‘where do I belong?’ Personal and family histories can be explored to develop a sense of who we are and where we have come from. Young children are fascinated to hear stories about, ‘when I was little’, ‘when I was a baby’. Recounting family stories, sharing family photograph albums, remembering family celebrations are some of the earliest encounters which we have with our history and are important in establishing our roots and identity within the family (Kimber et al., 1995).

Beginning with ourselves we may develop awareness of a sense of belonging to local communities: our street, our school and our town. The past of our different communities may be researched through different sources of information including buildings, maps and old pictures and photographs. Older members of the community may provide

information into what life was like in the community in the past. Further understanding of ourselves and our communities may be developed as experiences are contextualized within national events and global connections are made which enable us to see ourselves in a wider context.

Studying history encourages the understanding of people's different experiences – how they lived their daily lives and how they managed their daily routines. It provides opportunities for learners to reflect on their own experiences by contrasting their lives with those of people in the past: how were they similar? How were they different? Learning about what past societies valued and how they were organized provides additional insights into contemporary citizenship debates (Harnett, 1999).

Investigating and constructing stories of the past requires skills in critical analysis; selecting and evaluating different sources of evidence; hypothesizing and developing interpretations and finally summarizing and drawing conclusions about likely events and ways of life. These are all skills to be valued within active citizens who are able to make informed judgments on their rights and responsibilities as members of society. Historical research provides a real purpose for analysis and also for consideration of ways to communicate ideas and make knowledge public.

Re-constructing lives in the past: the daily life of a Victorian Child

The workshop is based on a story written for five year old children about a day in the life of a child living in nineteenth century England (Harnett, 1997). It is a fictional account which provides an imaginative re-construction of a child's life. This genre of writing is not uncommon; many authors have used a similar format to engage young children and to provide opportunities for children to make connections between their own lives and those of children in past. The text is very brief and describes the routine of a child's day; getting up, having breakfast, going to school, playing, shopping and going to bed. These routines would be familiar to the reader.

The book is well illustrated with artist's reconstructions of different rooms in the house, street, school and shop. The reconstructions contain a great deal of information about ways of life; domestic artifacts, clothes, food, toys, people are all illustrated. In addition there are photographs of artifacts which can be found in the illustrations. For example, the breakfast scene has photographs of the saucepan and cooking range which are illustrated on the opposite page. Similarly, photographs of a slate and slate pencil are placed opposite an illustration of children using them in a nineteenth century schoolroom. Illustrations which demonstrate how artifacts were used are important, since children who handle artifacts may find difficulty in imagining how they were used in the past. Photographs of artifacts also do not always provide an indication of their size, and the illustrations are able to show this.

Reading the book children are able to make connections with their own lives; there are opportunities for comparing and contrasting different lifestyles. Young children are able to identify differences between times in the past, but may need support in recognizing the similarities in many of the routines. Children may also be encouraged to draw some conclusions about nineteenth century life. For example – how did the lack of electricity

impact on activities which the children could do, and the different jobs and routines within the household?

The book raises interesting questions about the selection of historical content and the representativeness of its account of nineteenth century life. The content of the book has been selected to interest 5-6 year old children. To what extent does concern for the audience influence the writer to manipulate how the past is represented? For example, would similar incidents be included for older children? If not, why not and how does this impact on an attempt to provide an accurate record of the past?

The author is also selective in terms of the key character in the story. Edward is a child from a middle class family living in a city. His 'day' is not representative of the lives of all children living in the nineteenth century which would vary according to their socio-economic circumstances and where they lived in the country. However, this is not explicit within the story. Would readers have the impression that all nineteenth century children led similar lives?

The book provides opportunities to question how do we know about this child's day? Some of the information is provided by the photographs of the artifacts included in the book. However, the writer and illustrator have also drawn on a range of other sources of information. What were these sources? Which were the most useful? Were they all reliable?

The workshop session

The book was shared with participants in the workshop session and participants were asked to compare and contrast children's experiences in their own country with those of the Victorian child. Whilst many similarities were noted, there were also some differences observed and this raised interesting questions about the challenges of interpretation and ways in which the past is constructed.

Participants were then presented with different everyday objects to explore; these included a darning mushroom and needle; pens, inkwells and handwriting books; a pair of gloves and glove stretchers; a milk churn and crocheted cover to prevent flies from going into the milk. Participants were asked to describe them and to consider how they were used. The artifacts promoted much discussion and it was noticeable how participants drew on their own experiences and those of their family members to recount stories about them. Different darning practices were compared; some participants remembered using a wooden egg rather than a mushroom to hold the sock in place and it was also recorded that at times without either of these objects, mothers had just used their hands in the shape of a fist. The ink pens encouraged reminiscences about spilling ink and making blots on the page, and several participants recounted stories of collecting milk in a milk churn from the farm. One participant demonstrated how the crochet hook was used to create the crocheted milk cover.

Handling the objects promoted much exploratory talk. Participants were able to share their views and to identify common experiences. They demonstrated through role play how different objects were used and created little scenarios linked to the object. One

group demonstrated laundry practices and vigorously scrubbed clothes with a scrubbing brush and soap before hanging them out to dry and ironing them. A different social class was represented by another group who wore kid gloves and used sugar tongs to lift the lump sugar from the sugar basin into their teacups. Used in this way, the objects were a stimulus to beginning to tell stories about people and their lives in the past.

Studying children's lives and shared heritages

Stories about daily life provide opportunities for children to reflect on their own lifestyles and to use this as a basis for researching daily lives in the past. Daily routines: clothing, homes, leisure pursuits all provide starting points for investigations. For the more recent past this may involve children interviewing their own parents/grandparents or older members of their communities about their lives which will involve utilizing skills in asking appropriate questions, summarizing and drawing conclusions. For the past beyond living memory, children may create their own historical character and describe features of his/her life. Using a range of different sources of information including artifacts, pictures, photographs and buildings, they may research historical settings and features of daily life appropriate for their selected character. Technology may support children's research. Virtual tours of museums and historic sites provide effective and imaginative windows into the past and children now have a much wider range of information to resource their accounts of children's lives.

Bruner's (1966) three key questions might be useful starting points for developing children's research and provide a common focus for children from different countries. Technology may be used to enable children to share their research relating to everyday lives with children elsewhere in Europe. A network of support to disseminate children's research on everyday lives would encourage children to look beyond their own national boundaries. It would extend children's awareness of the similarities of human experience over time and contribute to developing a collective consciousness of human endeavours.

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