**Historical Thinking in the Early Years**

By
Amy von Heyking, PhD
Department of Elementary Education
University of Alberta

We have been teaching history in Alberta schools for a very long time. In the early years of the 20th century, the purpose of that teaching was clearly stated. Elementary school children should learn about the distinguished men of Canadian and British history: "Discussion of the chief excellences and defects in their character [will] teach moral discrimination and ultimately … derive principles of conduct" (Alberta Department of Education, p. 78). In other words, we told the stories of important men to train children's moral judgment, to help them learn important moral lessons from the heroic and not so heroic conduct of great men of the past. We also taught history in order to nurture children's patriotism, in this case appreciating Canada's place in the British Empire. History was also understood to cultivate certain important mental faculties: it exercised memory, developed the imagination and taught critical judgment by having students weigh evidence. So traditionally, there are have been three reasons for teaching history to children: to shape their character; to transmit a particular understanding of national identity; and, to nurture specific intellectual skills. While our understanding of these three purposes may have changed over the years, and despite the fact that history instruction has been integrated into the social studies since the mid-1930s, these three goals have essentially remained.

In our current (1990) program of studies, we still expect children to meet important attitude objectives. Our moral purpose in history teaching is not as didactic as it once was. Our program calls, for example, on our students to have an "appreciation of

and tolerance toward the decisions made by people [Albertans] in different times and different circumstances" rather than simply judging them as morally virtuous or morally corrupt (Alberta Education, 1990, p. C. 32). Our understanding of the Canadian identity and role of history in shaping that identity has also evolved. Our current program requires that children have pride in our country, but that also means that they should appreciate "the accomplishments of many different racial, ethnic, and linguistic groups" and appreciate Canada's bilingual and multicultural identity (Ibid, p. C. 41). History instruction, therefore, is still seen as essential in creating a kind of collective memory among Canadians. The intellectual skills associated with historical understanding are somewhat more difficult to identify in the current program, given their integration with the social sciences. There are general critical thinking skills identified that could potentially be developed within the context of historical study: identifying cause-effect relationships, seeing events from several different perspectives, drawing conclusions based on evidence. The majority of skills that are identified as unique to historical study, however, are those generally associated with making sense of time and chronology. Given that young children are just learning sequencing and do not understand the mathematical concepts associated with time (decades, centuries), it's not surprising that very little in the way of historical study is included in the primary grades in this program.

Moreover, history's integration into the social studies meant that it was generally treated as a source of data for solving current problems. Rather than being recognized as a unique form of inquiry, this approach meant that history was used in the service of a social science decision-making or problem-solving approach. There are at least two assumptions about the nature of history as a discipline embodied in this approach that

have considerable pedagogical implications. First, it implies that history is about important public issues, current political, economic and social trends, rather than about everyday life or a family's past. These issues or problems usually require an understanding of very abstract concepts such as government and trade, concepts beyond the cognitive capabilities of young children and certainly outside their experience. This was sufficient reason for delaying formal history instruction until after elementary school. The second implication of this approach is that the study of history can actually reveal facts that may be used to solve current problems. It assumes that we in essence "mine" the past to discover indisputable facts that offer clear and obvious lessons. That the "facts" might be disputable; that the events of long ago might be seen by different people in different ways; that there may indeed be any number of contradictory yet plausible accounts of the past; that history could be used to prove or justify any number of moral or policy positions simply was not acknowledged in this approach to history teaching within social studies.

Two important developments occurred in the field of history education that challenged these assumptions. First, our understanding of history as a discipline has been enriched and essentially reshaped which means that new history programs reflect a very different understanding about the nature and purpose of history teaching. Second, we have a better understanding of the cognitive capacities of elementary school children, which means that new programs require even very young children in our schools to engage in historical thinking tasks. Alberta's new program of studies in social studies acknowledges historical thinking as unique. It is not simply defined as a kind of critical thinking, but instead is described as:

> a process whereby students are challenged to rethink assumptions about the past and reimagine both the present and the future. It helps students become well-informed citizens who approach issues with an inquiring mind and exercise sound judgment when presented with new information or a perspective different from their own. Historical thinking skills involve the sequencing of events, the analysis of patterns and the placement of events in context to assist in the construction of meaning and understanding, and can be applied to a variety of media, such as oral traditions, print, electronic text, art and music (Alberta Learning, 2003, 9).

**The Nature and Purpose of History in Elementary School**

History is not the story of the past. It is not a record of events that happened long ago. It is a form of inquiry that helps us construct an understanding of our own lives (individually and collectively) in time. As Cooper (1995) explains, it encourages children "to ask questions, to discuss and to speculate about the reasons for people's behaviour, attitudes and values in other times and other places" (p. 3). It requires that children constantly ask the questions: "What is it like to be someone else?" and "How do I know it is true?" (Ibid). The constant quest to answer these questions helps children not only become critical and independent thinkers, it helps them make sense of their own lives in time. History is an interpretive discipline, requiring that students determine the

validity and credibility of evidence in order to analyze and to construct and reconstruct narratives about people, events and ideas of the past (Foster and Yeager, 1999). History of this kind is powerful and exciting. It requires that children move beyond memorizing a story and instead engage in the creation of stories about the past. But can young children do this?

**Children's Historical Understanding**

The earliest examinations of children's cognitive development within the context of history seemed to indicate that the subject was largely meaningless to students until the age of fourteen. Using Piaget's stages of cognitive development, researchers such as Hallam (1970) concluded that when faced with tasks requiring historical thinking, students under the age of sixteen were generally at the concrete operational stage and therefore could not reasonably be expected to cope with abstract concepts or tasks, such as hypothesizing beyond what is readily apparent in source material or synthesizing material drawn from many different sources. Clearly history as investigation, analysis and interpretation would be beyond the ability of young children if this assessment of children's abilities were accepted.

Researchers now have largely rejected universal cognitive development theories. Instead, they define learning as a reordering of prior knowledge according to "scripts" which are domain specific (Levstik, 1993). In other words, learners use their prior mental structures of a discipline when they are confronted with something new in the field. This means that teachers need to acknowledge that elementary children do indeed bring considerable prior knowledge to the learning of history. Seixas (1996) stresses that

children from a very young age encounter traces of the past in the natural and manmade landscape, in the relics of the past, in the language they use and in the cultural institutions of which they are a part. Moreover, children experience many accounts of the past on television and film, in books, in family stories and in commemorations. Cooper (1995) likewise argues:

> the past is a dimension of children's social and physical environment and they interact with it from birth. They hear and use the vocabulary of time and change: old, new, yesterday, tomorrow, last year, before you were born, when mummy was little, a long time ago, once upon a time. They ask questions about the sequence and causes of events: when did we move here? Why? What happened in the story next? Children encounter different interpretations of past times in nursery rhymes and fairy stories, family anecdotes, theme parks, films and pantomime. They encounter historical sources: old photographs, a baby book, an ornament, a statue, a church, maybe a closed-down factory or a derelict cinema being replaced by new roads and flats … before children start school there are many contexts in which they are implicitly aware of the past (pp. 1-2).

Research designed to determine children's prior understandings of time and history supports the contention that students have some conception of history as the study

of significant events in the past and may even possess specific understandings of particular historical events as early as the second grade (Levstik & Pappas, 1987). Opportunities to share these prior understandings should therefore be incorporated into every elementary teacher's history teaching units.

Many studies support the claim that elementary children can develop quite sophisticated historical thinking skills within an appropriate context of active engagement with source material, alternative accounts and teaching that scaffolds children's emerging understandings and skills (Barton 1997b; Foster & Yeager 1999; Levstik & Smith 1996; VanSledright 2002). As Levstik reminds us, this "implies that educators may have considerably more influence over children's cognitive development than global-stage theory assumes … if prior knowledge and extensive experience in a particular domain are major influences on knowledge restructuring and theory building in younger children, then educators need to think carefully about how to facilitate that engagement" (1993, p. 3). It is helpful, therefore, to examine more thoroughly the specific elements of historical thinking that define this domain and suggest ways in which teachers could engage young children in activities that would build children's understandings in history.

## Historical Thinking

Although there are different explanations of historical thinking, Seixas's (1996) six elements provide a coherent framework for analyzing historical thinking. They also provide teachers with an entry point for deepening students' historical thinking. It should be acknowledged that the six elements are not typically addressed in isolation in separate history learning activities, but without these concepts students lack the tools needed both

to make sense of historical accounts and to construct their own historical interpretations. Young children will not emerge out of grade three having mastered all of these elements; young children are simply being introduced to the kind of thinking that they will apply to more abstract and remote historical questions later.

### *1) Significance*

History is not a chronicle of everything that happened in the past. Historians make decisions about what is important enough to record. In some cases historical significance is determined by an event's or idea's or person's long-term impact. For example, we study Champlain because he was responsible for the founding of New France. We don't study, Hélène Boullé, the twelve-year-old girl he married in 1610, because she didn't make any particular or direct contribution to the building of the colony. But of course the criteria of "long-term impact" is not sufficient to determine historical significance. Historical significance is also determined by our current interests and values: the priorities of the present determine the questions we ask about the past and nature of the evidence we use. Historians used to ask questions that were largely political or economic in nature. Why do we have this form of government? How did these particular patterns of trade develop? That the everyday lives of people – particularly women, children, people of the working class, people of ethnic minorities – might be significant simply was not considered. Now of course historians have broadened their questions to include precisely these things. Increasingly there is adequate content in which to ground children's historical studies of schooling in the past

or the games their grandparents played long ago. Students can engage in investigations of the history of their local communities or of everyday life in the past.

*Learning activities:*

Young children learning about their local community could address the element of historical significance by considering for whom their school or other places in the community are named. Why are these people important? Have they learned about other people in their community for whom something should be named? Teachers need to be more deliberate about raising these questions so that students will better appreciate that historic preservation and commemoration is a selective process.

Children could consider what will be significant about their own lives by creating time capsules that illustrate what life is like in the beginning of the 21st century. They should explain why they have included certain artifacts and omitted others. They might compare the choices they made with the choices of students in a more senior grade or with the choices their parents might make. Exercises like these prepare children well for later studies that further illustrate that historical significance depends partly on your point of view.

***2) Epistemology and Evidence***

Another important element of historical thinking involves understanding how we come to know about the past. What evidence do we have? How reliable is this evidence? How can we explain historical accounts that offer different, even contradictory, interpretations of events in the past? Children should not be left with the impression that there is one true story of the past. Nor should they think that historians make things up.

Children need to understand that historians draw inferences based on evidence; some inferences are better than others; some evidence is more credible. Researchers suggest that this element of historical thinking – determining the credibility of evidence, weighing different kinds of evidence, understanding how historians use evidence to weave a narrative – is difficult for children.

Lee (1998) found an age-related progression of ideas about the nature of historical accounts when children aged 7 to 14 were presented with differing accounts of the same historical event. The youngest children were more likely to believe the accounts at face value: they argued that the accounts were not so much different in content than in the vocabulary they used. When obvious contradictions were pointed out to them, they assumed that one narrator had more information or the other mistaken. This would seem to support Piaget's assertion that young children cannot hold more than one perspective at one time (and therefore Hallam's conclusion that critical analysis of historical evidence is of little use with elementary school children). But researchers reach a different conclusion.

First it is clear that while young children may have difficulty with the nuanced and varied interpretations of historical evidence, they are quite comfortable recognizing and accepting multiple perspectives in literature for example. Cooper (1995) states that young children are capable of comparing and contrasting versions of fairy tales and nursery rhymes from different cultures. They can appreciate the differing perspectives offered by alternative versions of familiar fairy tales. They can debate varying interpretations of stories they listen to or read. She insists that these exercises in a familiar context prepare the ground for historical thinking skills. She goes on to suggest

that young children can begin to appreciate the interpretative nature of history: "Young children can begin to understand why there may be more than one version of a story about the past. In order to do so they need opportunities to create their own interpretations, based on what they know, and to see how and why they may differ" (p. 17). In other words, children need to engage in historical inquiries within the context of their family history or other familiar surroundings in order to gain first-hand experience with the interpretation of evidence.

*Learning activities:*

To help children appreciate the interpretive nature of history, read and discuss stories that illustrate characters' differing perspectives and provide opportunities for debating various interpretations. *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs* (1989) by Jon Scieszka is a terrific example of a familiar story from a different perspective. Phoebe Gilman's *Something From Nothing* (1992) illustrates how one boy's favourite object changes over time, but also contains a second story. Running at the bottom of every page are illustrations that show what a family of mice does with the bits of cloth they find every time Joseph's grandfather turns the object into something new. Children could write "The Mouse Tale" that sees the changing objects from a different – but perfectly legitimate – perspective. Familiar stories such as Pat Hutchins' *Rosie's Walk* (1968) offer wonderful opportunities to debate varying interpretations: Does Rosie the hen know the fox is following her? Or is she unaware of the chaos behind her?

Help students understand that "doing history" is not reading the text and answering the questions. History is created by people who do research. They read

letters, look at photos, uncover physical artifacts, they interview people. They use the evidence they find to create accounts about the past. Children can do the same.

The tools children use every day are historical evidence. Share with the class a school backpack full of objects and ask them to tell you about the child to whom this backpack belongs. What do you think this child is like? What does s/he like to do for fun? What is her/his favourite food? An exercise like this will help them begin to understand that historians can only make limited or tentative assumptions about people based on the evidence they have. After trying one with contemporary objects (perhaps your own), ask children to analyze a variety of historical artifacts. Knight (1995) says that even very young children can improve their historical reasoning by responding to three questions when presented with any traditional primary source, such as archival photographs or historical artifacts: "What do you know for certain about it? What can you guess? What would you like to know?" (p. 95).

Children could create a classroom museum (complete with proper labels) with objects special to them or to their families. Many excellent picture books provide some motivation for an exercise like this one, such as A.L. MacDonald's *The Memory Stone* (1998), C.L. Schaefer's *The Copper Tin Cup* (2000) and G. Shannon's *This is the Bird* (1997). Children could be encouraged to tell the stories of these objects and explain their significance to their families' past.

More intensive use of physical artifacts might include inviting children to examine objects and consider the following questions (Heritage Community Foundation, 2002):

- What is the object made out of? Is it hand-made or machine-made?

- Describe or sketch any unique marks, writing or other clues that might help determine how the object was used.
- Describe how it might have been used.
- How do you think this object might have been made? Why do you think so?
- What does the object say about the life, times, and technology of the people who used it?
- Is there anything that has replaced this object today? How and why is it different?
- Imagine the object in use. Who would be using it? What other objects would be there? Draw or describe its environment.

Ask students to use evidence collected from their families to create stories about their families' past. Help them understand that evidence and people's memories turn into history by helping them write their own stories. Picture books like D. Blumenthal's *Aunt Claire's Yellow Beehive Hair* (2001), P. Brisson's *Star Blanket* (2003), and K.O. Galbraith's *Laura Charlotte* (1997), might all be useful in sparking stories about members of the extended family and about parents' childhood memories. Helpful prompts that children might use to encourage parents' story-telling include:

- Tell me about something I did when I was little.
- Tell me about your favourite relative when you were a child.
- Tell me about the best trip you ever took.
- Tell me about someone who used to come and visit at your house when you were growing up.
- Tell me about an heirloom or special object in our house.
- Tell me the story behind a favourite photograph.

R. Scrimger's *Bun Bun's Birthday* (2001) is useful because the main character is a child who is given the responsibility of writing or remembering the story of her youngest sibling's first birthday. It affirms that children themselves can be makers or keepers of family memories. After asking children to write about their own family memories, it would be interesting if a parent or sibling had to write about the same episode, and it would be particularly effective if they remembered it a different way!

In order to further explore family stories, children could interview grandparents or elders about life in the past. Not only will they get a glimpse of memory at work, they will see how things have changed. There are many terrific picture books that provide a natural introduction to an activity like this, such as V. Cross, *Great-Grandma Tells of Threshing Day* (1992), T. Igus, *When I Was Little* (1992) and P. MacLachlan, *Three Names* (1991).

### *3) Continuity and Change*

Understanding change over time is central to historical thinking. Obviously age can be an important factor in gaining this understanding: an older person has simply had more direct experience with historical change – in technology, in values – and therefore has a better sense of what and how things change than a very young person. But outside direct experience, there are also critical concepts that must be addressed with children in order for them to come to a rich understanding of the nature of continuity and change in time.

First, children must have a grasp of time concepts. Primary children's understanding of time concepts is generally vague (Seefeldt, 1993). They can read clock

time, recite days, months and seasons in order and can use terms like "tonight" or "tomorrow" to describe a point in time. Units of time that require an understanding of decades and centuries must wait for the upper elementary grades. But researchers stress the importance of helping even very young children with time categories such as "past" and "present" or "then" and "now." They can examine archival and current photographs of familiar scenes – schools or local streetscapes – and categorize them as past and present (Cooper, 1995). Well-illustrated picture books also provide an opportunity to identify elements of the story or illustration that provide clues as to its setting in time. When did this story take place? How do you know? Are there clues in the illustrations?

Sequence is another critical concept in understanding change over time. Researchers working with very young children stress the importance of developing their understanding of a sequence of events by using familiar contexts. Cooper (2003) described the strategies used by the staff of an Infants' school in the United Kingdom to help their students build their understandings over the course of several grades. The reception (kindergarten) class practiced sequencing photographs that showed activities and routines of their school day. Year 1 children moved beyond sequencing the events of their day to sequencing months and special events in the year for a classroom "memory line" and creating a personal timeline. They also examined photographs of the school and its playground dating from ten years previously to compare and contrast their school "then" and "now."

Studies indicate that when faced with pictures and photographs from various historical eras, even young children can place them in the correct chronological sequence (Barton & Levstik 1996). Using clues from the material culture portrayed in the

photographs, young children could identify the sequence even if they lacked the appropriate time vocabulary to label the pictures.

Sequencing exercises, however, do not by themselves aid students' understanding of change and continuity. Seefeldt (1993) stresses the importance of structuring opportunities for young children to observe and record changes in themselves, their school and their community. Following the seasonal changes of a tree in the schoolyard, keeping records of the children's own growth and tracking a construction project in the neighbourhood can all help children understand that "(1) change is continuous and always present; (2) change affects people in different ways; and (3) change can be recorded and become a record of the past" (p. 147). While young children should begin with, they should not be restricted to an understanding of personal change. With appropriate support they can begin to think about changes over time in their families, schools and communities.

*Learning activities:*

Help children understand the time concepts of "past" and "present" by categorizing then and now photographs of familiar scenes. Or read a story obviously set in the past, such as D. Hall's *Ox-Cart Man* (1979). Ask the children to listen and to look at the pictures to determine when the story might have happened. Identify the clues they use to identify that the story is set long ago: transportation, clothes, food, homes, toys, chores, tools. The children can then create a class "flap" book, with illustrations of these objects in the past and present. Other excellent titles to use include *Belle's Journey* (1993), *A Dog for a Friend* (1994), and *The Prairie Fire* (1999) all by Marilynn Reynolds.

Other stories can help children put events in sequence. M. Waddell's *Once There Were Giants* (1989) clearly illustrates how one girl grows from infancy to adulthood. Story boards could be created with the illustrations so that children could put them in the correct sequence. C. Zolotow's *This Quiet Lady* (1992) could also be used for this purpose. Many opportunities for sequencing activities arise naturally throughout the school year: children could create a timeline for a special field trip day; a "memory line" could be created around the classroom with month-by-month highlights of the school year.

Ultimately sequencing activities should illustrate change and continuity over time. It is not enough that children put events in sequence; they need to think about what that sequence illustrates. After reading S. French's *Guess the Baby* (2002), children could examine two pictures of themselves: one current, one from their early childhood. They should then consider questions such as: What changes can we see? In ways have you changed that we cannot see in the photos? In what ways have you stayed the same? Children could create personal timelines that illustrate changes in every year from birth to age six, and then complete sentence stems such as:

- The most important way I have changed is …
- I am surprised that I …
- I am proud that I …
- I am happy that …
- I wish that I …
- One thing I will do in the future is …

To assess children's understanding of time concepts and change and continuity, interview them and ask them to tell you about something that happened a long time ago; something that happened last week; and something that will happen when they are older. Analyze their responses for their completeness, their accuracy and the number of details. Even young children enjoy writing their "memoirs." J.L. Curtis' *When I Was Little: a Four-Year Old's Memoir of Her Youth*, is a lovely sample to share with children.

Children should not be restricted to considering concepts of personal change. Community changes over time can be explored through archival photographs, field trips to local museums and historic sites, and through appropriate literature. Helpful titles include: J. Baker's *Window* (1991) and *Home* (2004), both of which are wordless picture books that dramatically illustrate how the view outside a window changes over the course of a generation. Other books such as D. Fleming's *Where Once There Was a Wood* (1996) illustrates how natural places are changed by development and might provide a useful introduction to an activity in which children track the progress of a construction project in their own community.

***4) Progress and Decline***

Seixas (1996) points out that "school textbooks have typically told a whig history, conveying an underlying message of the growth of democracy, knowledge, and enlightenment through time" (p. 773). Many studies suggest that elementary students have clearly gotten this message. Barton (1996) indicates the extent to which children he studied thought that history is the story of constant progress, that life – whether in terms of political participation, technological advantages or amount of leisure time – has always

improved over time. Researchers suggest that challenging these dominant messages, purposefully provoking students with examples that encourage alternative readings, might in fact be the best way to create the cognitive dissonance that leads to growth in understanding that progress and decline are a matter of perspective.

Students when studying the history of their families or their communities could simply be asked to consider in what ways life has improved and in which ways life has gotten worse. If children are interviewing parents or elders about their childhoods, they could be directed to ask these adults whether life had improved or declined and in what ways. Have machines and tools made life easier for us? Is it better to use a remote control rather than turning a knob to change TV channels? Is it better that we can make meals in minutes in a microwave rather than wait for a traditional oven? Are video and electronic games an improvement over the games of the past? Did they have to schedule play time with their friends?

*Learning activities:*

Children could be encouraged to consider one particular element of life in the past in detail. If they are studying the games that children played in the past, children should play games from the past and consider which they enjoyed. This procedure, however, requires that children specifically address the concepts of progress and decline:

1. Discuss with students in your group what games they like to play and why they like to play them.
2. Once you have identified a number of games, identify what makes those games fun. What qualities does a fun game have? For example, is it competitive?

Strategic? Physically active? Do you prefer games you play alone or with others? Do you prefer using electronic games? Why?

3. List the qualities of a fun game and probe for explanations.
4. Now play games of the past. Examples might include charades; duck, duck, goose; ring taw (marbles); three-legged race; egg and spoon race.
5. After you have played the game, review the qualities of a fun game you defined earlier and answer the following questions: Which games from the past were fun? Did they have any of the qualities you listed before? What do these games tell you about what children did for fun? How do these games differ from yours? Why might this be? Are your games better or not? Why?

### *5) Empathy and Moral Judgment*

Historian Gerda Lerner (1997) states that meaningful historical study, "demands imagination and empathy, so that we can fathom worlds unlike our own, contexts far from those we know, ways of thinking and feeling that are alien to us. We must enter past worlds with curiosity and respect" (p. 201). In previous social studies curricula, helping children empathize with people of the past was described as an "affective" outcome. Historians and those who engage in research in history teaching and learning do not describe it this way. Portal (1987) argues that, "empathy is a way of thinking imaginatively which needs to be used in conjunction with other cognitive skills in order to see significant human values in history" (p. 89). It is in fact what defines the discipline of history within the humanities rather than the positivistic sciences: it is the

creative leap that must often be made from the documentary evidence available to historians in order to appreciate what life was like in the past.

Cooper (1995) emphasizes that the study of history develops children's moral awareness because it encourages children "to ask questions, to discuss and to speculate about the reasons for people's behaviour, attitudes and values in other times and other places" (p. 3). She suggests that many teaching strategies can help children empathize with people in the past. Imaginative play, stimulated by stories about the past, is a good place to begin with very young children. She acknowledges that the play is largely driven by fantasy rather than any connection to historical evidence, but asserts that, "in play set in an historical context, children are, in an embryonic way, embarking on the process of finding out about and trying to understand and reconstruct past times. This can be the beginning of a continuum in which, with maturity, fantasy will gradually diminish and a search for what is known will become increasingly important" (p. 21).

*Learning activities:*

Role plays, simulations, and field trips to historic sites can all help elementary children develop empathy with people in the past. Turn your classroom into a one-room school from the turn of the 20th century and spend the morning role playing school life in the past. Visit local historic sites and take advantage of the huge range of educational programs available. Young children will benefit most from hands-on opportunities to experience life in the past. Film and literature can also provide wonderful opportunities for children to imagine life in the past. Ultimately we want children to ask, "What was it like to live in this time?" and therefore practice seeing and experiencing the world from a perspective unlike their own.

### *6) Historical Agency*

The final element of historical thinking refers to causation: historical agency refers to understanding how and why things change. Research suggests that elementary children have extremely simplistic notions of the reasons for historical change. They tend to see history as a record of the accomplishments of a few important people (Barton 1996; Barton 1997a; VanSledright and Brophy 1992): Lincoln freed the slaves; the Famous Five ended discrimination against women. This is hardly surprising given the traditional "Great Man" interpretations of history presented in most textbooks for elementary children. Barton (1997a) also asserts that elementary children have difficulty appreciating the social, economic and political factors that lead to change; they do not understand the role of social and political institutions. This indicates that detailed study of political, military and economic history is inappropriate for elementary children. On the other hand, because children so readily appreciate that history is about real people, history teaching at the elementary school level can potentially help them understand that they themselves are historical actors.

Understanding that the actions of people in the past have an impact on us today, and appreciating that our actions will have consequences for future generations is history teaching's essential contribution to citizenship education. History teaching in the elementary schools therefore should offer opportunities for children to make a difference in the future of their communities. Projects such as the preservation of historic sites or the erection of historical monuments, or projects that involve them in environmental

conservation would empower children and help them see the benefits of community service. This is why history is not only appropriate for young children; it is essential.

*Learning activities:*

Because the topics at the primary level emphasize the history of family, school and local community, there are actually plentiful opportunities to help children understand that history is made by ordinary people. They can study the people in their own communities who have made a difference, those for whom local landmarks have been named and those who have not received as much public recognition. Elders or long-time residents could be invited to talk about how the community was built. Children could be encouraged to make their own contributions to ongoing community activities whether it is raising money to preserve an important local historic site or adopting a local park. They should acknowledge the contributions people have made to their communities by writing thank you cards to community members or nominating someone in their school as a "local hero." They could make specific commitments to making a difference by drawing "helping hands" with suggestions for community service, or writing on cutouts of their footprints and then creating a bulletin board that shows "the path to our future." Thinking historically does not just mean thinking about the past; it involves seeing oneself in time, as an inheritor of the legacies of the past and as a maker of the future.

**Conclusion:**

Seefeldt (1993) insists that history can be powerful for young children. Instruction, however, must be meaningful, appropriate, personified and intellectually

stimulating (p. 149). It must involve questions of relevance to the lives of children and involve topics with which they might have first-hand experience. They must be given the opportunity to develop questions of their own and initiate learning activities. Primary social studies topics that examine families, schools and communities in the past offer just such opportunities. Ensuring that children consider the six elements of historical thinking – significance, epistemology and evidence, continuity and change, progress and decline, empathy and moral judgment, and historical agency – requires foresight and planning, but ultimately prepares children well for deeper and richer historical thinking in the years to come.

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