

# Comparing Then and Now

This modelling the tools is incorporated into critical challenges at grade 4, however, it can be adapted for use at all grade levels.

## Overview

The detailed activities that follow help students decide whether or not earlier times were as good as people say they were. Students interview two or more adults who were the students' age 50 or more years ago and then use this information to compare quality of life in earlier times and the present. After sharing their findings and discussing the implications, students decide whether or not, for young people, things were better in the old days than they are today. The strategies and support materials can be used as is, or adapted for other purposes such as conducting a general interview with an adult, community Elder or leader; or comparing specific aspects of a historical period or event, culture, economic policy, or land use, then and now.

## Session One

Discuss earlier times.

- During the study of a particular historical period or event, ask students if they would have wanted to live during this earlier time. Ask students about the advantages and disadvantages of living during this time. Mention that often adults talk about the good old days. Discuss what they might mean by this comment and explore reasons why they might think this; e.g., old days were simpler, safer, quieter, had more wholesome food. Using a transparency of [Good Old Days](#), present the following statement:

Compared to today, the quality of life for young people my age was:

<input type="checkbox"/>				
much better back then	a bit better back then	about the same as today	a bit worse back then	much worse back then

Ask students informally (or, more formally, in writing) to complete the statement. (At the end of the lesson, students will be asked to provide a more formal answer.)

Develop criteria.

- Discuss, as a class, the reasons for deciding whether or not the past was better than the present. Based on these reasons, generate a list of criteria for determining quality of life. The criteria might include happiness, personal safety, health, diet, shelter, education, individual freedom, wealth, leisure time and rights accorded. With younger students, you may want to reduce the number of areas of comparison and narrow the focus of each;

e.g., limit education to consider whether school was easier or harder, reduce leisure time to whether or not toys were more fun.

Prepare for interviews.

- Explain to students that it is important to find out more about the past before deciding whether or not life was better. Suggest that each student interview one or two adults who were school-aged 50 or more years ago; e.g., grandparents.

Generate questions.

- Help students generate, for themselves, all the questions they will ask in their interview. Alternatively, distribute [Interview Questions](#), which provides questions about various aspects of life, along with space for students to add their own questions. Encourage students to develop questions that focus on the aspect of the quality of life they find most interesting; e.g., amount of personal freedom. If necessary, suggest that students narrow the focus of their interview to one or more aspects. (See Extensions.)

Edit questions.

- Guide students to peer-edit each other's questions. Ask students to review the questions of one other student, using the following criteria or others identified by the class:
  - *clear*, i.e., the question is easy to understand
  - *provides useful information*, i.e., the question deals with one of the criteria for deciding about quality of life
  - *polite*; i.e., the question will not offend or embarrass anyone.

Conduct interviews.

- Instruct students to make careful notes on the answers to each question. For students who may have difficulty doing this, suggest that the interviews be done with a helper, such as another student or a parent, or that students tape-record the interview and transcribe the answers afterwards. Remind students to listen carefully, refrain from interrupting and thank the person for the interview.

Compare information.

- Invite students to compare the information they gathered in their interviews. The data chart, [Thinking Better or Worse?](#), asks students to use this information to consider the ways in which the past may have been better than, similar to, or worse than the present. This activity may best be done in pairs, especially if each student interviewed one adult.

Reconsider the past.

- The tendency for most students will be to prefer their present conditions. Introduce two ideas to help students think more deeply when judging the past: look for less obvious side

effects and try to see the past from the perspective of the people who lived in the time period.

- Encourage students to consider not only the obvious advantages and disadvantages but also the less obvious consequences or side effects of the differences between then and now. For example, although greater access to cars has obvious advantages, it also has negative side effects, such as more pollution, greater danger of accidents and more expensive than public transportation. As a class, discuss the obvious consequences and less obvious side effects of one or two differences that students have found between then and now.
- Encourage students to appreciate the experiences that people at the time might have had. This is sometimes referred to as historical empathy—to appreciate the contexts for those living at the time. For example, from a modern perspective, it seems hard to imagine life without television; however, before television existed, people did not miss it and used their leisure time in other ways. Identify other leisure activities people might have done by asking students what they do when there is no electricity, e.g., when camping or during an electrical storm. Suggest that people talked together, told stories, played music, made crafts, played games, such as cards, checkers and board games, and played outside. Encourage students, while adopting historical empathy, to infer possible side effects. For example, discuss some of the less obvious advantages of doing without television—people are likely to be more physically active, do things that are more satisfying, avoid conflict in the family about what to watch and know each other better. Throughout the activity, encourage students to put aside their initial reactions and try to reflect on life as it might have been in earlier times by looking for similar or parallel situations in their own lives.

Share ideas.

- After students complete their comparison charts on the past and present, invite them to share their ideas with others. This may be done either in a whole class setting, by asking individual students to read their conclusions on a particular topic (e.g., shelter, diet), or in small groups where five or six students study each other's charts. Encourage students to add to their lists of the ways in which life was better or worse in earlier time.

Introduce critical question.

- Pose the critical question:
- *How good were the good old days?*
- Display [Good Old Days](#) on an overhead transparency or distribute as an activity sheet to each student. Ask students to indicate their conclusion about the comparative quality of life for young people and to write a paragraph explaining their reasons. Encourage students to study their completed data charts to help them identify the important advantages and disadvantages of life in the past. Prior to completing their paragraphs, share with students the assessment rubric found in [Justifying My Conclusion](#). Emphasize that, in completing their paragraph, students should ensure:

- information about past and present conditions is accurate
- reasons support their conclusion; e.g., if students conclude that the past is wonderful, the reason must convincingly reflect this conclusion
- their explanation is sensitive to the possibility that people in the past may have viewed things differently than they are viewed in the present
- reasons recognize both negative and positive implications, especially those that may not be obvious to students who were not alive at the time.

Express conclusions.

- Invite students to share their conclusion and supporting reasons with the class. As an optional activity, ask students to revisit the assessment of comparative quality of life each made at the outset of the lesson. Invite students whose opinions have changed to indicate the nature and reasons for the change.

## **Assessment**

Assess data chart.

- Assess students' ability to compare gathered information about life in the past, as recorded on their data charts, using the two criteria on the rubric [Comparing Past and Present:](#)
  - anticipates positives and negatives
  - addresses important ideas.

Assess paragraph.

- Assess students' ability to explain their conclusions about the quality of life in the old days, as recorded in their paragraphs, using the four criteria on the rubric [Justifying My Conclusions:](#)
  - accuracy of information
  - support for conclusion
  - historical perspective
  - side effects.

## **Extension**

Compare toys.

- Encourage students to ask their parents or grandparents what their favourite toys were and why. Invite students to present one of these toys (the toy itself, if possible, or a picture of it), along with the reasons why the interviewee loved the toy. Ask students to consider whether or not the toys would be fun to play with today. Are there better toys now? Determine if the reasons for the choices are the same as those of their parents or grandparents. Note the criteria students use—play value, durability, cost, aesthetics, appeal to personal interests, conformity (not being left out because everyone else has the toy) or

attention (having the toy when nobody else does). Suggest additional criteria as students present their views and list them on the chalkboard. Create a chart for students to compare toys then and now for each of the identified criteria. Ask students to write a paragraph explaining their answer to the question. In the case of toys, how good were the good old days?

Compare school experiences.

- Assign students to interview older people about their elementary school experiences. Compare past and current practices in various areas, such as the subjects studied, time spent on each subject per day and on overall school work each day, disciplinary methods, teaching methods, rituals (e.g., assemblies, singing *O Canada*, saying the *Lord's Prayer*), arrangement of the classroom and textbooks. Create a chart for students to record this information. Invite students to imagine what it would be like to attend school in these earlier times. Encourage students to bring photographs of old school scenes and consider using photocopies of the pictures to create a poster display. Assign students to write a diary-like account of a day in the life of an elementary student in this earlier time. Ask students to write a paragraph explaining their answer to the question, In terms of schooling, how good were the good old days?

## **Credits**

This lesson is taken from *Selected Critical Challenges in Social Studies–Intermediate/Middle School*, edited by John Harrison, Neil Smith and Ian Wright (Richmond, BC: The Critical Thinking Consortium, 2004, ISBN 0-86491-247-1). Permission granted from The Critical Thinking Consortium for use by Alberta teachers.

## **Documents**

The following documents are referenced in the above modelling the tools. They can be adapted for your needs and re-saved.

Graphic Organizers

- [Good Old Days](#) 
- [Interview Questions](#) 
- [Thinking Better or Worse?](#) 

Assessment

- [Justifying My Conclusion](#) 
- [Comparing Past and Present](#) 