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Teaching history at elementary school: how to develop historical understanding

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Introduction

This research is part of a larger study developed in the United Kingdom and in the United States of America gathering evidence on the possibility of starting history teaching with young children, in contrast to the ideas put forward by studies based on Piagetian theories. In the 1980s Martin Booth began questioning studies initiated by Jahoda (1963) which were developed and disseminated by Hallam (e.g. 1967, 1979), sparking off discussion of this topic among teachers, researchers and even other groups in society. These studies had led to a movement to exclude history from the curricula in the first few years of schooling. Hallam (1983) defends removing history from the curriculum of young children arguing that children at these ages cannot develop the historical concept of causality.

The research and arguments of Martin Booth (1980, 1987) challenged this, attempting to show the specific nature of historical thinking and pointing out how dominant Piagetian theories on the teaching of history had inhibited 'the history curriculum and our ideas on the development of children's historical understanding' (1987, p. 39), and showing that more recent research provided a more optimistic perspective. In the United States, the work of Linda Levstik and S. J. Thornton was noteworthy (Levstik and Papas, 1987; Thornton and Vukelich, 1988), and in 1991 Downey and Levstik, in their summary of research into teaching and learning history in the *Handbook* on *Teaching Social Studies,* pointed to the need to develop classroom research to understand the best ways to promote the development of historical understanding in children.

In the 1990s research into children's learning of history, sometimes in association with other areas, suggested that it was possible and desirable to reintroduce history into the elementary school curricula, and even at pre-school level, and to initiate the development of concepts of time associated with historical thinking. Several authors argued that children at these ages already had a concept of causality, observed in the coherent following of a narration; it is not a 'formal' concept of causality, but it is already the narrative that will help them to later 'formalise' the concept of causality in history (Egan, 1994; Cooper, 1995). They also begin to defend the use of interactive methodologies to improve research into children's learning, using stories, images, objects and time lines.

Following these initiatives, this research will analyse the development of time concepts related to children's historical understanding, contributing to the creation of clear epistemological references and promoting didactic changes in the teaching of history in the primary school.

Research questions

1. What idea do children have of change and progress over time?
2. What is the past and history for children?
3. With whom, where and how do children learn history?
4. What is the relevance of family history and other themes of every day life for the teaching-learning of history in the primary school?
5. How did the development of time concepts and historical understanding evolve in the children (1st to 4th year) who followed a history syllabus based on new history teaching strategies?

Methodology

This research falls within the interpretive framework of educational research (Erickson, 1986). Following Yin's (2003) categorisation of case studies, we begin by developing an *exploratory case* study, which in the second phase takes on characteristics of a *descriptive case* study. Our study is predominantly qualitative in nature and may be considered longitudinal, since it describes the learning and understanding process of historical time in children from the 1st to the 4th year of schooling, following two groups of children over two years. According to the typology proposed by Stake (2000), it can also be considered an *instrumental case study*, as we aim to show how children develop concepts of time and difficulties the teaching-learning process, as well as understanding the strategies and procedures to achieve this learning. The aim of the study is not to make generalisations, but rather to provide an in-depth study in classroom contexts, with real classes involved. Thus, to a certain extent, it also has the characteristics of an *intrinsic case study* (Stake, 2000).

This case study has two major parts: Semi-structured interviews with the students at the beginning and end of the school year and interventions in class using strategies for teaching and learning social studies/history. The interviews covered time sequencing (putting images in order) concepts of past, history and the learning of history, with pupils from the 1st to the 4th year.

Different methods of history teaching were used in the classroom interventions. Interventions were carefully planned and timetabled with materials for various methods and strategies prepared by the researcher. In the exploratory case study teachers and researchers systematically reflected on the suitability of the activities and materials, some of which were reformulated, others retained and few replaced.

The participation of the class teachers in this project, including the final case study, had some characteristics of collaborative action research (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2001; Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000), because they were involved in collecting data, implementing activities, reflecting after the sessions and contributing to the validation of the diaries. Though the aim of this study was not to change teachers' practices, it did lead to reflection, rethinking and the reformulation of practice.

Data collection was through interviews (semi-structured interviews, informal interviews), observation (active participant observation, observation focalised), field

notes, classroom diaries and work done by the students in the sessions. The researcher in the project was the main observer (Lessard-Hébert, et al. 1994, Erickson, 1986, Everstson and Green, 1985). The data, recorded in the field notes, taken mainly by the class teachers and sometimes by the researcher in observing task performance, follow Lessard-Hébert, et al (1994) in the narrative descriptive style, while the classroom diaries, made by the researcher, were of the comprehension type. The classroom diaries were the main method used for recording data.

Description of the Study

The study ran between 2003 and 2006. The exploratory study was carried out in the school years 2003-2004 and 2004-2005, and the final study in the school years 2004-2005 and 2005-2006. In the exploratory study we worked with two classes from the 1st and 3rd year at two schools - an urban school and a suburban school in the city of Braga in 2003-2004. In 2004-05 we decided to follow only the students at the Braga city school.

The final study in 2004-2005 followed two classes, 1st year and 3rd year, of 24 and 25 students respectively, and these are being followed again in the current year, 2005-2006, as 2nd and 4th year classes. The exploratory study was a preparation for the final data collection, enabling better definition of the final design of the case study. Of greater importance was the contact with the reality of primary teaching with the pupils and teachers. We applied and tested several strategies and activities for the study, which were somewhat diverse in nature: using narratives; timelines; genealogies; using images; and using objects. The size of the study required some adjustments to the original design. In the exploratory study, interviews were held at the beginning of the school year 2003/2004, in which the protocol of the interview was tested, following an adapted model from other authors (Levstik and Barton, 1996 and Barton and Levstik, 1996). The interview revolved around ordering a series of images and justifying this, find out what conception the pupils had of this and their learning. The researcher asked questions such as: 'which is the oldest and which is the most recent? Why did you put this one before that one? What led you to think that this one is older than this one?' For the students of the 1st and 2nd year, we used six historical images of family life from different contexts and historical eras. For the students of the 3rd and 4th year, we added another image to the six (picture C), making a total of seven pictures for them to sequence. Images were chosen that we thought any adult could put into the correct order. They represent family scenes from pre-history to the present day;

A.   A drawing of pre-historic family, in a cave, around a fire;
B.   An illumination from the 16th century of a family at table, served by a slave;
C.   A portrait of the family of the 1st Viscount of Santarém in a rooms in his residence, with his wife and five children (1816);
D.   A painting of a middle-class family by the fireplace, with a maid (1886);
E.   A propaganda poster of the New State with a rural family (1933-49);
F.   The family of the present dukes of Bragança at their home (1999);
G.   The family of the present dukes of Bragança at their home (2003).

In selecting the images, which are all restricted to the same theme of the family through history, our aim was to cover a large time scale so that pupils would be able to sequence the images regardless of their knowledge and ability to identify different historical periods. Our choice of images did not aim to integrate the most significant historical periods sequentially, since this approach is not part of this level of schooling.

The selection of images was based on various criteria:

- In the first place, it was hoped that the students would first sequence two of the pictures, one from 'a long time ago' representing the pre-historic period, and the other modern, to establish goalposts for the sequencing. Even though the syllabus does not cover the pre-historic period, the children already have a great interest in it and have already acquired some informal knowledge through the media, books, museum visits, electronic games, etc.
- Secondly, we related the images to the official syllabus. Two of the main themes covered in the fourth year are 'national holidays' and 'discoveries'. The second image is from this period.
- Thirdly, we wanted to see the differences between the initial and final interviews, after two years of classroom intervention. The last two centuries are covered in more detail in systematic teaching and in informal approaches, so this period was given more focus, choosing more images from this era. As various studies suggest (Barton & Levstik, 1996; Levstik & Barton, 1996; Barton, 2002), the last 200 years reveal greater differences at the level of dress, housing, adornments and technology, as well as also showing more clearly social differences within the same era. We therefore selected two images from the 19th century, one from the beginning and another from the end of the century, in which the differences are clear. The three final images correspond to the last 100 years. The picture from the middle of the 20th century, which represents a poor/rural family, was chosen with the aim of seeing to what extent the children could identify certain contexts in time regardless of the economic or social situation portrayed and could recognise the simultaneity of different socio-economic realities. The last two images, closest to us in time and of the same family, were selected so that the children, particularly the younger ones, could observe and point out more details and so that they could explain, by sequencing them, that it is the same family after some years, thus identifying a shorter time interval between them.

The protocol of the interviews tested in the exploratory study confirmed the suitability of the pictures chosen, and allowed for slight adjustments to be made for the final study interviews.

Results of the analysis of the interviews of the exploratory study

We now present the preliminary results of the exploratory study (2003/4 to 2004/5) in the first aspect of the study, the interviews on change over time and history. At the urban school in Braga, 114 interviews were held. Through these interviews we sought to verify the extent to which changes were noted in the explanations given, and in the understanding of historical time before and after a year of the researcher's intervention.

Table 1- Total of images ordered correctly by the students

No of images correctly ordered	Total 1st year pupils		Total3rd year pupils		Total 4th year pupils
	inter beg	inter end	inter beg	inter en	inter end
1 image	1	0	0	0	0
2 images	3	1	0	0	0
3 images	4	1	0	0	1
4 imaged	12	12	6	6	5
5 images	-	0	13	8	4
6 images	4	9	0	0	0
7 images	-	-	4	8	12
no of pupils interviewed	24	23	23	22	22

Table 2 - Correct placing of the images by the students (absolute nos)

School year	Schedule of interviews	Images							Total students
		1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	
1st year	Inter. Beg.	21	13	9	13	17	20	-	24
	Inter. End	23	21	11	12	20	21	-	23
3rd year	Inter. Beg.	22	21	6	10	12	23	23	23
	Inter. End	22	21	10	8	14	22	22	22
4th year	Inter. End	22	21	13	13	14	22	22	22

The main misordering of the images occurred between the 3rd and the 5th image (table 2). In the time sequencing the 1st year in the first interview varied greatly in the order given, with the correct order and that which switched image C (middle-class family) with image D (New State poster) being the most frequent, with four pupils each. The improvement in performance from the beginning to the end of the year was clear, with nine pupils ordering the sequence correctly and eight pupils just switching image C and D. We highlight the increase in the number of 3rd and 4th year pupils that managed to put the sequence into the correct order. Regardless of the sequencing order of the images, we aimed to analyse in a qualitative way the justifications pupils gave for the ordering of

their images. To do this, we transcribed all the interviews (a total of 18 hours of recording time) and then categorised them, using NVivo 2.0. The interviews include two components: one centred on the sequencing of the images and the other focused directly on the notion of history, past and learning of history.

The first part of the interview was analysed for five main categories: *time vocabulary*; *material culture/daily life*; *social and economic aspects*; *type of explanation/description of the image*; *type of explanation of evolution*. Each of these five was divided into sub-categories. The final category, *type of explanation of evolution*, included two sub-categories: *progress* and *change*. By progress we mean evolution in the sense of linear progress, bearing in mind continuous improvement ('it's better', 'there are more things now') resulting from technological, economic and intellectual evolution over time. By change we mean evolution in terms of the differences found in the style, type of objects, different ways of life, justified by material, economic and technological resources and by social relations. This explanation was constructed from the ideas conveyed in the students' discourse explaining their sequencing of the images.

In the second part of the interview, on the notion of history and past, and why it is important to learn history and how they learn history, the categories arose from the protocol questions, and the sub-categories came from the students' answers.

The explanations given by the 1st year pupils for their ordering of the images lacked content, even for pupils who put them in the correct order. Most justified their ordering around a mere description of what they saw in the image, particularly in the material culture and daily standards of living. Some pupils presented a narrative explanation, creating a story and bringing the characters to life, and some thought that they were of the same characters in the different pictures. Associated with narrative was another category, that of generally considering that images with older people are from longer ago and those with younger people more recent. In some pupils, the idea of poverty as a justificatory element for antiquity can be seen and, sporadically, some pupils associated rurality with poverty and therefore with being older. An example of this are those pupils that considered image D (New State poster) as being older than C (middle-class family), although they do not present any great arguments for this. Other pupils already show awareness that wealth/poverty or rural/urban do not condition temporal order, but co-exist in various eras. Several pupils associated the rural aspect of the image with recent rural life as opposed to the other images that were considered older, such as pointed out by Maria: 'These clothes are normal on farms'. The comparison between the past and the present is frequent in all the years, justifying antiquity by what still did not exist at that time, as in the example given by Julieta in the 1st year: 'Because in the old days, they did not cook in pans, they cooked like this'. The use of time expressions are common: 'ancient', 'more ancient', 'newer', 'old' 'from now'. Only one student from the 1st year identified historical periods in the images, namely pre-history, and two associated the images with the 'time of the kings'.

Among the pupils in the 3rd year, there were changes in the explanations presented at the beginning and end of the year, showing greater power of observation and justification, centred essentially on material culture, on daily life, on material and technological progress. The time terminology used was more precise, with references to historical eras,

including frequent reference to the 'time of the kings and queens' or 'Here there aren't any kings'. With these pupils, the generic knowledge in the explanations given predominates, in contrast to the more or less historical knowledge revealed at the end of the 4th year by some pupils. It is most evident that the 4th year pupils constantly use terms of comparison between the images based on progress, on what already exists or does not exist, on what is better or worse, always comparing two or more periods, revealing greater capacity of comprehension of the changes over time, as we can see in 4th year Liliana's explanation: 'They already have servants and everything here. Then the lamps, the lamps, there are still lamps like that today. Because here there must have been electricity, right? While here I don't think there was'. The reference to concrete eras of historical figures also reveals that most of the pupils associate the images with a certain time, we quote as an example what 4th year Jorge says: 'I saw because of the Salazar lesson I think that it's Eusébio's time, he was a Sporting player, but they put him in Benfica'.
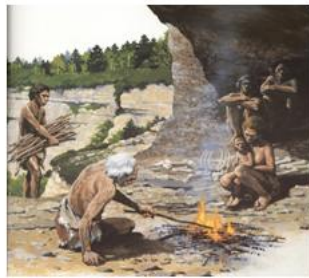
In relation to the conception of history and past, the 1st year pupils mainly associate the past with personal time and history with a story and personal history, while from the 3rd year, there is the notion of past linked to time and events and they associate history with the study of the past. At the end of the 3rd year, the pupils highlight the history of every day life, reinforced in the pupils of 4th year. Of special note in the 4th year discourse is the fact that some explain what history is by giving examples of historical events, which is justified by the fact that the History of Portugal is included in this year. As to the function of history, all the school years analysed point out the importance of understanding, getting to know and learning. From the 3rd year, history has an explanatory function, of preserving the memory and identity of a people. In the 4th year of schooling, the role of history as an element of general culture is strengthened, as well as its explanatory function, as we can see from what Liliana says: 'I think that we must know what the world was like and it also has some reasons. And we used to ask what kings were for'. Among the 4th year pupils, the prevailing notion is that of history associated with progress rather than change, according to the explanations given in ordering the images.

In relation to the learning of history, the school is the main learning arena for 3rd year pupils, with an important place also for museums. It was also interesting that the 1st year pupils referred to catechism, where they say they learn about the past and the 'story of Jesus'. At home, it is the mother that stands out for the younger pupils, while for the older pupils it is the father or grandparents. There is a certain tendency to favour the use of books, photographs, and images rather than using the media for learning history.

Conclusion

This research is still underway and few conclusions can yet be drawn. However, it can already be ascertained that the strategies used proved adequate for the children's age group and capable of promoting the learning of history and the development of notions of time and of historical understanding. The results of this research will be clear when the interviews held with the students to perceive the conception of time evolution in primary school children are put together with the analysis of the classroom interventions. This will enable better understanding of how children think in historical terms, what

historical skills they possess, how to promote them and the historical understanding demonstrated at this age. These elements are essential in the learning of history, and to the understanding of historical time.

A) Pre-historic family,

B) Illuminated Manuscripts from the 16th century

C) Portrait of a noble family (1816)

D) Painting of a bourgeoisie family (1886);

E) Propaganda's poster
with a rural family (1933-49)

F) Family of the dukes
of Bragança (1999)

G) Family of the dukes
of Bragança (2003).

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