

## The Assessment of School History in England, Wales and Northern Ireland

It is only in the last twenty years or so that serious thought has been given to the issue of the assessment of school history. Up till then, assessment was seen very much in terms of the recall of historical knowledge and the writing of essays. For younger children, factual recall tests ('What was the month and year of the Norman invasion of Britain?'; 'Who was prime minister at the time of the passing of the first Reform Act of Parliament?') or short paragraph answers ('Write a paragraph on Florence Nightingale'; 'list three causes of the English Civil War, writing two lines on each cause') were the stock-in-trade of assessment; for older children, it was the essay question based usually on either the concepts of cause and consequence or on those of similarity and difference ('Why was the Parliamentary Reform Act of 1832 passed and what were its effects?'; 'Compare and contrast the Chartist movement with the Anti-Corn Law League. Why did the first fail and the second succeed?'). The difference between the approaches was one of degree, not kind. They were both premised on the expectation that the child had learned by heart the historical information given in class by the teacher and that he or she would be able to regurgitate this in the assessment situation. The notion that history was about debate, controversy, uncertainty and the use of limited and debatable sources was almost entirely lacking in most history classrooms.

Why should this have been so? There was after all a formidable body of Western European historical writing which admirably demonstrated the unique nature of historical knowledge and understanding; the philosophy of history was a well developed study; undergraduate history courses in British universities all demanded that students should at least in their final year undertake a detailed enquiry into a small period of history in which the study of a range of documentary sources would play an important part. There can have been few graduate history teachers in the fifties and sixties who believed that history was a once-and-for-all story of the past, incapable of modification or reinterpretation. Yet the view that children must receive a far more limited and controlled diet of history was partly a product of teaching methods in secondary schools

which were usually didactic and premised on the idea that children were empty vessels to be filled with the teacher's superior knowledge and wisdom. Perhaps at the heart of it, however, was the belief that children were incapable of doing 'proper' history, with its demanding conceptual concerns. Research which emerged in the fifties, sixties and early seventies seemed to reinforce this view. Researchers such as A.R. Lodwick and R.N. Hallam took Piaget's developmental framework of cognition and showed that the development of children's logical, explanatory historical thinking was slow and that many children did not reach fully operational thought as far as history was concerned until they reached the age of sixteen. What use therefore was there in expecting young children to hypothesise or speculate in history? Teach them the basic facts and be content with that.

The undermining of this position came in the sixties and seventies. Benjamin Bloom and his associates published the first volume of their influential taxonomy of educational objectives in 1956; teachers were confronted with a hierarchical framework of thinking skills ranging from simple recall of knowledge, through to comprehension, application of knowledge, analysis, synthesis and finally to evaluation. Such a framework, the authors declared, should underwrite all subjects in the curriculum, the higher levels as well as lower. Far too much of our teaching was targeted at low level cognitive skills. Four years later, in 1960, Jerome Bruner published his seminal work *The Process of Education*. In this persuasive and tightly reasoned book, Bruner argued that any subject could be taught in some intellectually honest form to any child provided that the structure of the subject formed the basis for the teaching and not simply its content. Thus with history, teachers would have to introduce their pupils to the nature of historical knowledge and the ways in which statements about the past are arrived at; only by doing this could children claim to 'know' anything about the past.

Perhaps the greatest pressure to move from the old didactic approach to history came from a nationally funded history curriculum development project which was launched in 1972. The Schools Council History 13 - 16 Project, as it was then called, took as its starting point the ideas of Bruner and Bloom. The Project would be based on the issue of 'What is history?';

it would demand the extensive use of a wide range of sources within a clearly defined programme of study to enable the children to develop their own understanding of the nature of the past; it would encourage pupil-centred learning and the development of high level thinking skills.

At the same time as the Curriculum Project was developing its ideas and materials, new research was emerging which suggested that our view of the development of children's historical thinking was too limited. Work that I did for a master's degree in 1965 - 67 and for a doctoral thesis from 1975 onwards showed that the earlier research workers had been using an inappropriate framework for measuring children's historical thinking and that many children were able to think in quite a sophisticated way in history by the ages of fourteen or fifteen. The Schools Council History project's evaluation of its project triumphantly supported these conclusions. Denis Shemilt's important study which was published in 1980 showed that the Project research group of pupils who had been taught according to the Project philosophy had achieved far greater understanding of key historical concepts such as causation, far greater skills in the use of historical sources, than did a control group of similar pupils who had been taught in a conventional manner.

All this of course threw the conventional world of history assessment into turmoil. Essay papers which demanded little more than the recall of historical facts seemed increasingly inappropriate ways of assessing sophisticated concepts and skills. The Schools Council History 13 - 16 Project pioneered new types of papers where the questions were carefully focused on key concepts, key skills. Forty per cent of the assessment would be based, not on terminal examination papers but on work accumulated during the course of the two-year teaching programme - mini investigations in the locality, studies of particular issues based on documents, projects involving the use of camera or drama.

The influence of the Schools Council Project was considerable; and when a new framework for national history examinations at sixteen plus was drawn up, the hallmark of the Project thinking was clearly evident. From 1988 onwards all General Certificate of Secondary Education examinations (taken at sixteen) in history would have to focus on four

clear assessment objectives: the recall, evaluation and selection of relevant knowledge which must be deployed in a clear and coherent fashion; the use of key concepts such as cause and consequence, continuity and change, similarity and difference; the ability to look at events and issues from the perspective of people in the past; the skills of using, interpreting and evaluating a wide range of primary and secondary sources - written, visual, artefactual, oral, landscape and buildings.

Given these demands, examining boards had radically to overhaul their practice and create new examining papers which would focus on these objectives. 'Documents' papers now became standard practice; questions became more probing, more concerned with conceptual understanding and far less with the simple regurgitation of memorised information. The problem, of course, in all this was the assessment. Examinations have to be valid - that is, they must set questions which are really concerned with basic concerns of the subject; but they must also be reliable - that is, capable of being marked in such a way that there is agreement about the results. Increasingly, the feeling grew that there should be clear-cut criteria against which a candidate's performance could be assessed; and examiners developed levels of response marking schemes for the questions they set. For example, a question based on a series of documents dealing with the American settlement in Kansas in the 19th century asked:

'In 1876 a Kansas newspaper reported that the settlers were happy and contented in their dugouts and sod houses. We would not be very happy living in such primitive conditions, so why were they?' (6 marks maximum)

A preliminary levels of response marking scheme was drawn up a follows:

**LEVEL 1:**           General Answers (1 mark)  
Answers at this level do not show any specific contextual knowledge, e.g. claims that some of the houses could be comfortable, that some settlers did well, that it was better

than nothing or better than what they had before.

**LEVEL 2** Concentrates on background of the settlers (2-3 marks)  
 Answers at this level use contextual knowledge and understanding to explain the conditions many of the settlers had left behind, e.g. in Europe, on the East coast, in slavery. Answers might add that many had nothing to go back to.

**LEVEL 3** Empathetic understanding (4 marks)  
 Answers at this level use contextual understanding to explain the sense of achievement the settlers had in overcoming the conditions, in owning their own land for the first time.

**LEVEL 4** Both levels 2 and 3 (5-6 marks)

Once the candidates have answered the question, a sample of answers will be inspected to see how far the levels of response marking scheme accords with what they have actually written. It may well be modified in the light of this scrutiny.

Such criterion-referenced marking is time consuming but it does moves us on considerably from the 'one fact' 'one mark' approach to assessment which was at one time so prevalent. It is of course by no means fool-proof; the criteria used to judge a piece of work are not cast-iron descriptors, incapable of interpretation. But there is a growing body of evidence to suggest that a high degree of reliability can be achieved.

This approach to assessment has been built in to the new national history curriculum for the 5 to 16 age range which teachers will start teaching in schools in England, Wales and Northern Ireland from September 1991. When I reviewed in an earlier issue of *Mitteilungen* (90/2) the recommendations (April 1990) of the working group charged with drawing up the new history curriculum, I was critical of their Report. There was too much history to be covered; their programmes of study

were too detailed; their assessment objectives were far from clear. The Statutory Orders, enshrining the final version of the history curriculum, were published in March 1991. The result of wide public discussion and comment, they provide teachers with an infinitely more acceptable and flexible framework for school history. Like the 13 - 16 History Project and the framework for national examinations at sixteen plus, the new history curriculum is based on clear cut assessment objectives, or attainment targets as they are called. The first of these is entitled 'Knowledge and understanding of history' and is concerned with the conceptual understandings of time, change, continuity, cause and consequence and of the need to view events, issues and people within the context of the period studied. The second is 'interpretations of history' - the way in which our understanding of the past is constantly being reshaped in the light of new or reinterpreted evidence and that the historian's own perspective can have a profound effect on the historical statements he or she makes. The third attainment target is concerned with the use of sources in history - 'the use of historical sources'. The programmes of study which follow sketch in broad terms the historical topics which will give substance to the three attainment targets. Nearly fifty per cent of these deal with British history from the earliest times to the present; the rest look at Europe and the non-European world. Within this framework of content, there is plenty of opportunity for teachers to pick and choose and to emphasise the themes and events they consider to be important. The new history national curriculum, however, goes much further in specifying the requirements for assessment than the History 13 - 16 Project or the framework of criteria for the G.C.S.E. sixteen plus examination. For each of the three attainment targets, statements of attainment at ten levels have been laid down - a progressive hierarchy which purports to chart the nature and development of children's historical thinking from the age of 5 to the age of 16. Thus for example in attainment target 1, the level one (lowest) statements of attainment are: 'pupils should be able to a) place in sequence events in a story about the past; b) give reasons for their own actions'. A level 5 response (an average 13 to 14-year-old) for the same target reads: '...a) distinguish between different kinds of historical change; b) identify different types of cause and consequence; c) show how different features in an historical situation relate to each other. At level 10, the top level, the statement

reads '.....show an understanding of the issues involved in describing, analysing and explaining complex historical situations. The two tables below present the statements at the same three levels for attainment targets 2 and 3:

Attainment Target 2 (Interpretations of History)

Level Statement: demonstrating their knowledge of historical content...pupils should be able to:-

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1. understand that stories may be about real people or fictional characters
5. recognise that interpretations of the past, including popular accounts, may differ from what is known to have happened
10. show an understanding of the issues involved in trying to make history as objective as possible

Attainment Target 3 (The Use of Historical Sources)

Level Statement: demonstrating their knowledge of historical content.....pupils should be able to:-

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1. communicate information acquired from an historical source
5. comment on the usefulness of an historical source by reference to its content, as evidence for a particular enquiry
10. explain the problematic nature of historical evidence, showing an awareness that judgments based on historical sources may well be provisional

Many of us have found these statements accessible and helpful in that direct our thinking to the essential nature of history and suggest teaching strategies. Where we have difficulties is in using the statements of attainment as a matrix for assessment purposes. The reasons for this are twofold. First, the levels of response are premised on the notion of the linear, continuous progression and development of children's historical thinking in the three dimensions of the attainment targets. All common sense and experience tells us that this is not so. Children may show great insight and maturity in one instance; in another their thinking may have regressed to the most infantile level. They may demonstrate considerable gifts of handling one type of historical source and using it as evidence, great clumsiness with another. Crucial to this of course are motivation and context; if children are fired with enthusiasm, it is amazing what they can achieve. But of key importance too are the teaching methods used and the background and experience the children bring to the topic. It may well be that children involved in a study of their school and community during the second world war may create a real sense of time and place because they are working on a topic of immediate interest to which they bring a range of knowledge and understanding acquired outside the school. This leads me to the other difficulty. As they stand, the statements cannot serve as simple criteria against which children's historical thinking, however presented, can be measured. Their significance as descriptors of the level of thinking exhibited will depend essentially on the materials used in the assessment process, the format and type of the questions asked and the extent and nature of the knowledge the children are expected to bring to the task. Thus the hierarchy of ten statements for each attainment target, are not, and cannot be truly progressive. An example may make this clear. It would be perfectly possible to devise a demanding exercise based on a difficult piece of source material which focused on the lowest level of attainment target 3; for example, comprehending and communicating the information contained in the American Declaration of Independence or the American Constitution can tax even quite able sixteen-year-olds. Equally, a task focusing on level 5 of the same AT 3 could be devised for seven-year-olds with the children examining a Victorian mangle (for wringing out washed clothes) as a source of evidence for 19th. century



laundry methods.

The attainment targets and their associated statements of attainment have been put at the heart of the new national curriculum; they will do much to generate lively, imaginative history teaching, based on the ideas of Bruner (the structure of the subject) and Bloom (the need for a progressive hierarchy of thinking skills). They affirm strongly the capacity of school children at all ages to engage in genuine, enquiry and source-based history. Where I am convinced we have much work to do is in using the statements of attainment as an assessment tool. The descriptors of attainment will only be of use in showing progression and allow comparison between children if they are tied much more firmly into specific contexts and materials. At the moment of writing (early summer 1991), the government's intention is that there should be teacher assessment using the matrix of levels at ages 7, 11 and 14 with nationally conducted assessment at the ages of 14 and 16. It may well be that in the Autumn they will be appointing a consortium to undertake the complex task of developing the tests (or standard assessment tasks, SATs, as they are to be called) for the fourteen- year-olds. Just how such a group could do this in a way that would encourage conceptual thinking and the development of genuine historical knowledge and not become obsessed with factual information is a matter of intense speculation and debate amongst history teachers; for I suspect that the national system of examining established within the history curriculum at 14 plus and later 16 plus will set the pattern for the teacher led assessment for the seven and eleven-year-olds.

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A bibliography for the English and Welsh National Curriculum in History

In two recent editions of *Informations* I have written about the National Curriculum in History which became mandatory in all state schools for children aged 5 to 16 in England and Wales in September 1991. There is now a growing body of literature relating to the new curriculum and I append a list of some of the more important books and articles to have appeared - or shortly to be published.

R. Aldrich (ed.) (1990) *History in the National Curriculum*,  
London: Kogan Page

Attempts to provide a professional review of the place of history in the new National Curriculum which is being imposed on state maintained schools.

M.B. Booth (1992) 'National Curriculum History in a  
Multicultural Society - Issues and  
responses' in ed. A King and M.  
Reiss *The Multicultural Dimension  
of the National Curriculum*, Lewes:  
Falmer Press

Argues that National Curriculum History gives the teacher considerable flexibility to emphasise the multicultural dimension. The chapter gives examples of teaching strategies.

Department of Education and Science (1991) *History in the National Curriculum  
(England)*, London: H.M.S.O.

The 'Statutory Order' which lays down the assessment objectives (attainment targets) and programmes of study for the 5 to 16 age group in English state schools.

T. Lomas (1990) *Teaching and Assessing Historical  
Understanding*, London: Historical  
Association

A thoughtful and practical pamphlet which discusses issues of teaching and assessment relating to children's understanding of five key concepts in history: cause, time and change, evidence, significance and similarity.

R. Medley and C. White (1992) *Planning National Curriculum Assessment in History Teaching for Key Stage 3*, London: Historical Association

A practical, helpful pamphlet which shows how the assessment of the National Curriculum in History for pupils aged 11 to 14 can best be undertaken.

C. Portal (1987) *The History Curriculum for Teachers*, Lewes: the Falmer Press

Predates the National Curriculum but nevertheless carries a series of essays by leading practitioners on a range of relevant theoretical and practical issues in relation to the secondary school history curriculum.

Teaching History Research Group (1991) *How to Plan, Teach and Assess History in the National Curriculum* London: Heinemann Educational

A highly practical book written by a group of leading experts in the field of history education.

Welsh Office (1991) *History in the National Curriculum (Wales)*, London: H.M.S.O.

The 'Statutory Order' for Wales which lays down the assessment objectives (attainment targets) and programmes of study for the 5 to 16 age group in Welsh state schools. In many ways very similar to the English statutory order - the attainment targets and statements of attainment are the same - but emphasising Welsh history in the programmes of study.

Finally, two journals which are deeply concerned with issues of the teaching and learning of history now that the History National Curriculum is in place:

HINDSIGHT is a modern history review aimed at pupils aged 14 to 16. The review comes out three times a year in September, January and March and carries articles and features on 20th century world history designed to be used by pupils in the classroom. Its success is measured by the fact that in the first year it achieved a circulation of nearly thirteen and a half thousand. A year's subscription for an institution is `12.50 - pupils in the institution can then obtain the three issues for `4.95. Full details can be obtained from the publishers, Philip Allen Ltd., Market Place, Deddington, Oxfordshire OX15 0SE, U.K.

TEACHING HISTORY is a journal which appear four times a year in October, January, April and July. It is written for those interested in the teaching, assessing and learning of history to pupils in primary and secondary schools. Each issue carries a wide range of articles, many of which will deal directly or indirectly with the issues raised by the History National Curriculum . It is published by the Historical Association, 59a Kennington Park Road, London SE11 4JH. Membership of the Association, including a subscription at members' rates to *Teaching History*, costs `38.