

The global dimension and History in the primary school

Hilary Claire discusses how the processes and values of history might impact on global perspectives in education and then reverses the focus to look at how global concepts and values might affect teachers' approaches to History.

I like photography, am fascinated by how artists get you seeing things in new ways; how zoom and wide-angle lenses focus on different perspectives. As with photography, in History where you stand and how you focus make all the difference to what you notice and include. Close up, you examine the evidence with devotion to detail, whilst the wide-angle lens ensures a broader picture, including political, economic, social, cultural and religious dimensions. Global dimensions¹ in education ask us to look at our world and our communities through the lenses of social justice, racism, interdependence and sustainability. Each of these in some way relates to the central perspectives or themes of History, though there isn't a perfect fit because global perspectives are concerned more with the future and present than the past.

What is History?

Few primary teachers have studied History to an advanced level. For those who relied on their own schooling, the National Curriculum effected a sea-change in perceptions of what History is about and how it should be learned and taught. Teachers discovered that the content could be broader and less elitist: that ordinary people's History is interesting and valid. Here is the first link with global dimensions: focussing on ordinary people's lives opens up a variety of issues which are part of the global agenda, which were either left out or interpreted from a totally different viewpoint in the old elitist History. Nevertheless, there is still a lot of work to do about History that is truly inclusive of race and gender as well as class perspectives.

Secondly, few teachers now believe that History is a 'true account of the past' which you learn off by heart. The NC emphasis on *processes* means that most colleagues appreciate that interrogation and interpretation of evidence, evaluating perspectives or bias, and attempting to *construct an explanation of change over time* are at the heart of doing History. These shifts in understanding the nature of History have – potentially – the power to reflect the concepts and agenda of the global dimension (citizenship, social justice, interdependence etc.). For this to happen, primary teachers of History need both to know what the particular concepts and values of the global dimension are, and how they might relate to their History curriculum. (It goes without saying that this requires considerable subject knowledge, which might not always be in place.) This is not a one way process, however. History influences understanding of global themes; global themes and concepts influence the History we choose to teach, and how we teach it.

The processes of History

History is a discipline: we 'do History' using its specific key elements: chronology, change and continuity, cause and consequence, interrogation and interpretation of the available evidence. We use empathy to try to understand past lives and, finally, we construct and communicate a convincing explanation of issues and life in the past.

Because the notion of change – which implies comparison – is so central to History, we have a tool to compare aspects of the past with the present. In order to do this we don't just put the spotlight on the past, but set up equivalent categories of study in contemporary times e.g. transport, welfare, women's or children's work. The discipline of considering change obliges us to consider criteria – do we mean political, economic or social change? We always ask 'whose perspective are we considering?' This is because the multiplicity of perspectives of those affected is central to investigating change and consequence. For example: WW2 affected many women's experience in the workplace; Caribbean ex-soldiers' knowledge and judgements about 'the Motherland'; the health and social services offered by the new UK welfare state; India's (eventual) successful campaign for independence... we could go on. In other words, History builds skills and habits of mind which directly link to the concerns within global perspectives to reflect different experiences and viewpoints of people caught up in a network of interconnection.

Historical significance

This important historical concept affects choices of themes and perspectives and relates closely to global dimensions. When teachers decide to concentrate on, say, the blitz and evacuation in the 'Britain since the 30s' unit, and not on the contribution of Commonwealth soldiers, this may be because they haven't thought about the latter, don't know much about it, or because they have genuinely decided that the first topic is more significant (for whom?). Perspectives from the contemporary world should influence choice of issues, since significance refers to the longer term. Asking colleagues to consider contemporary significance could be one of the most powerful ways to incorporate global perspectives and dimensions into History curricula.

Objectivity, subjectivity and values in History

As well as exploring the causes and contingencies of change, historians evaluate change in terms of progress or regression. Though some (not all) aspire to neutrality, few achieve it. The criteria they use to make their judgements may be implicit, but

since they are eager to expose the values of their allies or opponents, they soon become public. As children move through school we expect them to evaluate the perspectives of historians and the texts they produce, not just the primary evidence. What could be more relevant to a global perspective than keeping a beady eye on what people *mean* or imply by something ‘improving’ or ‘getting worse’ and the reasons and consequences they propose? What could be more useful than the constant reminder to consider how the change was experienced by x, y and z as well as p and q, and that the consequences of some measures are not always intended?

This said, there is an important caveat about the relationship between History and global perspectives. Proponents of global perspectives are quite openly on the side of (their own definitions of) progress. No one seriously suggests one should study racism, exploitation, or depletion of resources and not promote a programme of improvement. As a discipline, however, History should not be partisan or in the service of any political programme. This can be confusing: on one hand we say History helps understand the present, implying that we will ‘use it’, but we object strenuously to indoctrination where History is used to serve the interests of a particular agenda or cause. History (understanding the past, and through it the present) can and should be about opening our eyes and our understanding to multiple perspectives and experiences.

Our job is to teach children to *expect to look for* multiple perspectives. This will include moving from stereotyped and prejudiced accounts which marginalise, justify, or ‘explain away’ social injustice, exploitation or racism. However, not all historical perspectives and interpretations are that easily classified into ‘goodies’ and ‘baddies’. Such classifications may be highly simplistic, leading to yet another distortion of the past.

It is hard to appreciate how our values impact on interpretations when we study past events involving our personal belief systems, e.g. that Tudor ‘witches’ suffered abuse. This is particularly the case with teaching primary children who are susceptible to emotional appeals, and seldom have a strong knowledge base to counteract any bias in the version we might offer them. It’s important to remember that History which is manipulated to fit some specific agenda is likely to be partisan and suspect, even if we personally agree with that agenda. We are obliged, through the values of History itself, to remain even-handed about the evidence.

So, have we argued ourselves into a corner, where in order to be ‘fair’, values of social justice do not apply? I don’t think so.

Controversy, global perspectives and History

History and controversy are like heads and tails on a coin. You can’t do History without dealing with controversies. The main organising themes of History are power and resistance; conflict; trade; religious movements and their impact; the negotiations that people, cultures and societies make to survive or coexist. This is what life in communities is about,

and thus is the stuff of History. Potentially, each theme exposes contentious differences in values and attitudes.

Like History, global perspectives address controversial power and economic relationships. Unlike History, there is consensus about certain values, denoted by statements about sustainability, peace and social justice; though the statements themselves do not guarantee that addressing them will be uncontroversial (take the Palestine/Israel ‘Roadmap’). Moreover, some precepts which seem benign, like ‘empathy and respect’, are also problematic in practice. Presumably they don’t mean one should respect the ‘culture’ of racists who terrorise asylum seekers, or patriarchal Bangladeshi men who throw acid in the faces of reluctant wives. Presumably, most who support global key concepts would argue that anti racism and women’s rights take precedence over ‘respect for cultural diversity’. This kind of conflict in values and behaviour is precisely what History finds fascinating, even though, when studying the past, only re-evaluation of the options and choices in the light of consequences is possible. Historians will not do special pleading, or moralise, but represent the beliefs and actions of both groups honestly, without suppressing or sensationalising evidence, possibly leaving readers to draw their own conclusions. In contrast, workers in contemporary circumstances would want to intervene and, in a teaching context, draw ethical lessons.

These arguments suggest that global perspectives which come from an openly politicised agenda may offer a challenge, in that taking sides is not part of a History teacher’s role. We need to face up to this if global perspectives are to contribute to History teaching. While I thoroughly endorse Jerome’s advice (2004) about moving the History agenda on to make connections with contemporary issues, I would like to problematise these ideas: where we move into political activism we stop doing good History, when we invite a clear political agenda of advocacy, we stop acting like historians; and when we are being historians we may have to put aside some of our powerfully felt commitments.

There are two points here: firstly, in school, ‘doing History’ – that is exploring the evidence and putting together the explanatory story is not the end. Coming out of role as ‘historians’, and moving into role as ‘judges’, ‘reporters’ etc., children/adults can be encouraged to thrash out values and controversies. History thus provides a context for developing values and learning to appreciate perspectives. Secondly, such distancing in time and place may be more manageable for the classroom teacher/CPD facilitator than debating contemporary events (it is worth noting that the more relevant the issues, the less detached people are likely to be).

Acknowledging one’s values

History values objectivity, truthfulness about evidence, and attempts to explore different perspectives without ignoring some evidence in order to privilege one argument. Impartiality is particularly difficult in societies which are emerging from conflict, where identities are strongly contested. British people, too, can find it very hard to acknowledge their own

past, and meet the challenges of a multi-cultural society (Parekh 2000). The crucial thing is not just to explore the values that underpin other people's actions in the past, but to be willing and able to acknowledge, explore and articulate one's own values and emotions now, and the ways in which one's understanding is filtered through them. Recent research with school children shows that failure to meet this challenge about emotions and values can backfire: children may learn the politically correct thing to say, but revert to the powerful, emotionally laden bigotry of their communities (McCully 2002).

Values and History – a dialogue between the present and the past

It is not the business of History to develop any particular values, other than respect for evidence and the best attempts at truthful explanation. Thus, David Irving (who notoriously denies the Holocaust) is condemned *as an historian* not because of his politics, but because he falsifies evidence. However, it is impossible for anyone, teacher or pupil, to be completely objective, whether about the present or the past. One's personal history, the values of one's family and community and one's sense of self strongly affect one's perspectives about anything of importance. This, in my view, is the way out of the dilemma that I posed earlier.

Historians are not required to be neutral, even if our methodology is dedicated to using all available evidence with integrity. So, Eric Hobsbawm is open about his left wing politics, Sheila Rowbotham honest about being a socialist feminist. This allows anyone reading their work to make their own judgements about interpretations. For myself, when I teach about Victorian History, I foreground (amongst other things) the efforts and successes of women and ordinary people in challenging their allotted roles, and explore the implications for colonised and colonisers of imperial connections and ideologies. Historians coming from a more conservative position will focus on different issues.

Coherence in values across different areas of one's life

What is the connection between transparency about one's political values, one's professional position as a History teacher and the adoption of global perspectives? It would be incoherent for deeply-held belief systems to clash with one's professional life: I advocate and work with global perspectives because they reflect my broad concerns about social justice and the future of our planet. I try to teach History which coheres with my value system and which focuses on significant issues in the contemporary world. This does not contradict my responsibility to respect evidence and not be partisan. It's about keeping a sense of wider significance and given a choice about themes and issues – *which I do have* – looking for ways to explore social justice and equality, the impact and negotiation of diversity and interdependence locally/globally. This is an active choice – we simply don't have time to do everything.

Values, global dimensions and History

So I think we should ask our colleagues to explore their value systems with respect to the contemporary world, and to consider the coherence and significance of their History teaching with relation to global dimensions. Teachers need to go through this reflexive process themselves before they undertake it with children, not least because it will affect their very choice of Historical themes and how they address them. As part of including a global dimension within History, one would consider one's attitudes to interdependence, women's rights, racism, exploitation or conflict in some former period. For example, adults might discuss (through CPD/INSET or ITE) the pros and cons of the Roman settlement of Britain: Was this progress and the introduction of 'civilised' practices? What do we mean by 'civilised' or 'progress'? How much was really sustained? History would say that we need to reflect the perspectives and experiences of both sides, but not rubbish the Roman period to redress any imbalance against the Celts.

What about the invasion of Benin in 1897? A bloody story, with little credit to the British. But dig deeper: the Oba of Benin was betrayed by a powerful faction within his own society which murdered the first British expeditionary force, leading to the second retaliatory British expedition which destroyed Benin city. The close-up lens, the eye for truth and detail so important in History can promote skills and dispositions essential to the search for truth and justice in our contemporary world. Historical methodology obliges you to consider the points of views of each side, so that '*on the other hand*' becomes a mantra. Eventually, when you construct your account, perhaps concluding that 'what x did was bungled, misguided, opportunistic, even evil', you only come to this conclusion after considering the close-up, the wider picture and the different perspectives.

References

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Note

1 In this article, I am using the following definitions from the DFES (*Developing a global dimension in the school curriculum*, 2000) and from David Hicks (*Thirty Years of Global Education*, 2003 (unpublished)) 1) Hicks defines global dimensions as referring to the whole curriculum and the ethos of a school, foci on global interdependence, issues and events. 2) DFID/DFES define *global dimensions* in terms of the following key concepts: citizenship, sustainable development, social justice, values and perceptions, diversity, interdependence, conflict resolutions and human rights. 3) According to Hicks, *Global perspectives* refer to the fact that there are different cultural and political perspectives on global matters.