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WHY DID YOU WRITE IT LIKE A STORY RATHER THAN JUST SAYING THE INFORMATION?

— Penelope Harnett

Introduction

Six-year-old Rebecca asked me this question when I visited her classroom to share a book which I had written with her and her classmates. It seemed to me at the time that Rebecca was identifying a problem which has preoccupied historians for generations; how to understand and communicate 'the past' to a wider audience who were not present when the events took place. Interestingly, Rebecca makes the distinction between a 'story' and 'saying the information'.

Some historians may argue that history is always a story, dependent on the version of the past that they want to tell. The historian E.H. Carr talks about facts sitting on the fishmonger's slab waiting to be picked up and used by historians to make them into historical facts and a historical narrative about the past (Carr, 1964). Different historians select different facts and therefore interpretations of the past may differ. More recent historians such as White argue that history is indeed fiction; a re-telling of the past which is never fully knowable, since historians live in the present and are removed from the past (White, 1987).

Pupil perceptions of the past: interpretations

Representing the past

This question posed by Rebecca (who was probably drawing on her knowledge of different writing genres discussed in the literacy hour) could be seen as the beginning of an awareness of the different ways in which the past may be represented; the notion of historical interpretation which is part of the key knowledge, skills and understanding within the history National Curriculum. This requirement has presented challenges for many teachers since the introduction of the National Curriculum and indeed in their report, *History in the Balance* HMI note that in many schools interpretation is 'barely developed at all' (Ofsted, 2007: 9). It may be that some teachers hold a notion of a fixed and knowable past which is hard to dislodge and therefore they provide few opportunities for children to explore a range of interpretations.

Understanding historical interpretations in the classroom

Other teachers who embrace the notion of interpretations have found imaginative ways to introduce interpretations to young children; maybe children have planned their own classroom museum and discussed how to organise their artefacts; perhaps children have had the opportunity to talk about different versions of the same story? The Historical Association's TEACH project has a unit on Pocahontas,

providing more information about Princess Pocahontas and encouraging children to discuss the version presented in Disney's film (Harnett, 2010). Children might, too, have been asked to share their recollections of something they had all participated in, a school trip for example, and through listening to each other, become aware that all the children had different memories about what they could recall.

Such activities introduce children to the idea that the past may be interpreted in different ways; that different sources of information may influence how we see the past and that those recounting the past have different views about what they consider important and worth remembering. It is the beginning of an awareness of the provisional nature of the past; we haven't lived in the past and our views are inevitably coloured by the present, but we can make some attempt at trying to find out what happened using available sources.

As we do this, however, we always need to remember the power of a good narrative. Egan reminds us how stories have been used as important tools for learning in different cultures, and his views are particularly pertinent for learning history (Egan, 1997). Above all, in teaching history we need to engage young audiences in good stories which captivate children's imaginations and enthuse them to want to find out more. Consequently, we need to balance demands for the acquisition of historical skills with the interests and needs of young children; the academic history discourse alongside a pedagogical discourse appropriate for young children.

A day in the life of a Victorian child

I wrote the story, *A Day in the Life of a Victorian Child* (Harnett, 1997) and have enjoyed sharing some of the decisions which I made when I wrote it with young children to help them engage with ways in which the past is constructed by people living today, and to address some of the issues discussed above.

When talking with children I usually begin with talking about the publisher's brief for the book. I was asked to write a story about the life of a Victorian child which would introduce children to different ways of life at that time. Several decisions had to be made in determining what to write. Between 1837 and 1901, the population in Victorian England and Wales increased by 116% from 15 million to 32.5 million (Evans, 2009). There were therefore an awful lot of children living at that time! How could a selection of just one child be made? Would the child live in early Victorian Britain or at the end of the nineteenth century?

Whichever period was chosen would lead to very different stories of this child's life.

Questions and questioning

I share this predicament with children and raise other questions about whom the story should be about.

- Should it be about a boy or a girl?
- How old should the child be?
- Would it be a story about a rich or a poor child?
- Where would the child live – in the country or the city?

Such questions provide opportunities for children to think about the diversity of society in the past. Children may be reminded that in choosing one story, there are many other stories which will consequently remain untold. We may see parallels here with the decisions which historians make as they select the stories which they intend to tell about the past.

Identifying the child

Having discussed the number of possibilities I tell the children that the final decision about the child within the story is that he is a boy, about nine years old, living in a town and from a middle income family.

Defining the story

Having identified the child, we are then confronted with other questions:

- What story should we tell? The story is about a day. Children are asked what sort of day is it going to be.
- Is it an ordinary school day? A special day – a birthday? A holiday?
Having determined the sort of day, how can we find out what might have happened?
Rebecca's friend, Alisha, asked:
• 'How did you know what to put in the story?'

I explained to Alisha that I wanted the story to be interesting and I tried to think about different events which occurred during the day which they might enjoy knowing more about, such as getting up; having breakfast; going to school; classroom life; life in the playground; shopping; and bedtime. Recounting these different experiences would enable children to draw comparisons between their lives and the life of Victorian children living over a hundred years

Figure 3 Victorian hot water bottle



ago. Children would be able to note similarities as well as differences in their lives and maybe also offer explanations for their observations.

The story text

The text within the book is quite brief and as Rebecca pointed out, reads as 'a story... not just saying the information'. Illustrations, however, have been planned so that children can gain a lot of information about what life was like from them. Photographs of artefacts are also included and in the illustrations the illustrator shows how they are used. For example, the child is drawn carrying an earthenware hot water bottle to bed, with a photograph of the bottle on the opposite page. Whilst the text may not 'say the information' the illustrations certainly do and I like to draw children's attention to what they can see in the picture and what they think is happening. Children are able to make many observations, including comments which note omissions, such as Daniel's question:

'Why haven't you drawn any rats in the picture, because in those days they had rats?'

Conclusion: using stories to develop a sense of the past

The suggestions above may help young children to understand how the story has been constructed; that the story is indeed fiction, but has been created by using past sources of information, in particular artefacts which provide some authenticity. This is an important point; for many children the past is a fiction anyway. Maybe one of the most important aspects of what we should be trying to achieve with young children is to help them to realise that past is peopled by **real** men, women and children who had emotions, likes and dislikes and who carried on similar routines, with some differences, to those carried out today. The suggestions here relate to one story, but they may also act as a stimulus for teachers sharing other such stories with young children.

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