**Chronology and the new National Curriculum for History- is it time to refocus the debate?**

Dr. Alan Hodkinsona & Christine Smithb

aDepartment of Disability and Education, Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, England, UK

bDepartment of Teacher Education, Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, England, UK

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**Abstract**

Coming some two years after the introduction of the new National Curriculum (2014) this article considers the media storm and debate around the concept of chronology and how it should be taught in schools. Drawing on empirical evidence the article strongly suggests that young children are capable of grasping complex temporal concepts, specifically chronology, if teachers carefully plan for their development through targeted activities. Within the article suggestions for such activities, including whole school approaches, are outlined. In conclusion the article calls for further research into how history can be taught in a way which develops chronology and engenders a love for and enjoyment of the subject by all pupils in our primary schools.

**Introduction**

With the election of the Coalition government in 2010, Michael Gove, the then Minister for Education began ‘a frenzied programme of educational reform’ (Burn 2015, 48). Notably he proclaimed that he ‘was on a mission to end the trashing of our past’ (Burn 2015, 48). Gove declared that pupils had lost a sense of chronology (Paton 2013) and argued that they needed to be taught a narrative arc of chronology (Paton, 2013) which provided a ‘proper spine’ to the history learnt in our schools (Education Select Committee 2013). Gove, therefore, by conferring such importance to chronology, and by arguing that there was support for placing it at the heart of the curriculum (Education Select Committee 2013), clearly defined the parameters of the forthcoming curriculum reform. Indeed, he was unequivocal in what he required this new curriculum to do, stating ‘he absolutely wanted a chronological approach to the teaching of history’ (Education Select Committee 2013). Interestingly, he also stated he did not want to revive past curricula of ‘1066 and all that’ (Paton 2013). This comment, in hindsight, was prophetic and one that appeared to become lost in the media storm that surrounded the publication of the draft curriculum for history.

We will return to discuss this ‘media storm’ but for now let us rewind history just a little. Between 2010 and 2013, a series of meetings between Gove and panels of ‘experts’ commenced. One of the authors - Hodkinson - was involved in this process and found himself working with some ‘big names’ in history. Having been a primary school teacher for many years he had witnessed the difficulty children had with chronology. His aim therefore during this period of ‘consultation’ was to quietly but clearly detail the evidence of the importance of chronology to the teaching and learning of history in our schools. It is important to state from the outset of this article that he had been influenced by evidence that we could teach this element of the curriculum more effectively.

On 6th February 2013 the draft of the new curriculum was released for general consultation. For the first time in decades the chronological teaching of history became mandatory. And so the media storm began. Although supported by numerous academics (see BBC 2013) the draft curriculum was condemned and was subjected to a ‘torrent of opposition’ (Burn 2015). Once again, and like so many times before, old wounds re-opened and the age old debates about the nature and purpose of school history and how history should be taught were re-ignited (Harris & Reynolds 2014). Throughout the 20th Century there has not been a decade that has gone by where the ‘constant complaints’ about how history should be taught have not been fiercely debated (Cannadine 2013). We do not intend to re-hash such well-worn debates (for analysis of such debates see Arthur & Phillips 2000). It was clear though that like previous curricular reform that a ‘host of malignant spirits’; (Partington 1986, 69) haunted the discussion. What was of interest to ourselves was how the draft curriculum brought out the ‘great and the good’ and their media headlines. The decades old ‘skills/ knowledge’ debate had surfaced once again. Many professors offered support for this curriculum whilst others roundly condemned it. There were the ubiquitous ‘letters to the Times’, one of which, signed by 15 professors, declared the teaching of chronological order had long been needed (Sellgren 2013). Others academics roundly criticised this chronological teaching. For example, Professor Chris Husbands stated that there was ‘no evidence that teaching chronologically produces an understanding of chronology … [and] it is more likely to muddle chronological understanding’ (Sellgren 2013; BBC 2013). Another dominant argument was how teachers in mixed aged classes would deliver this form of teaching. Indeed, questions on this specific issue were put directly to Michael Gove in the Houses of Parliament (Education Select Committee 2013).

The space for reasoned and reasonable discussion was lost as the media became dominated by headlines such as ‘Historians split over Gove’s curriculum plans’ (BBC 2013). It is not the place here to assess this or that professor’s knowledge or classroom experience in relation to the teaching and learning of history in our schools. On both sides of the argument some of the ‘great and good’ had substantial experience and expertise and others had little, or no, practical knowledge of what it is really like in the real and difficult world of modern day key stage one and two classrooms. However, whatever may be said about these ‘experts’ and the ‘media storm’ the result of the consultation was that the mandatory teaching of historical knowledge in a chronological sequence was dropped.

This article’s aim is to refocus debates away from grand media statements back squarely to what we actually know about chronology and chronological teaching. For, despite what has been said there is a significant research base, dating back to 1922 which, specifically relates to teaching history in a chronological order. Perhaps, if more people had been cognisant of this research a more nuanced discussion about school history teaching might have taken place. What was accepted by politicians and academics alike was everyone wanted the very best history teaching. We argue that this teaching should be based on sound evidence rather than media rhetoric and hype. This article therefore provides an evidenced argument to the benefits of teaching for chronology in the learning of history in our primary schools.

**On the importance of chronology**

At the outset of this article it would seem necessary to try to answer two key questions. First, what is chronology and second was Gove correct in his initial statements that ‘children had lost a sense of chronology’. This second question is important as it was this that framed Gove’s arguments in relation to curriculum reform. However, at this juncture it is important to make the distinction between chronological teaching (i.e. teaching knowledge in chronological sequence) and teaching for chronological understanding.

**Question 1: What is chronology and why should it be observed to be important?**

For ourselves, chronology is the “air that history breathes” and without it children’s historical understanding will remain limited. It should be noted that the development of chronology is not a party political issue. Indeed, parties of varying persuasions have deemed it important. Many history curricular have observed chronology to be central to the underpinning of historical understanding. This is because a sense of chronology enables children to place events and periods within time (DfEE 1999; Forrest and Harnett 1996) and facilitates recognition of the relationship of different events and periods to each other (Forrest and Harnett 1996; Wood 1995). Chronological understanding, therefore, depends upon being able to ‘…place items correctly in a time sequence, being able to describe the time distinctions between the items and an ability to relate items to their appropriate context by providing a clear contextual justification’ (Wood 1995,11).

The ability to sequence objects in a chronological order is also observed, by practitioners, to have importance (Forrest and Harnett 1996; Stow and Haydn 2000; Wood 1995, Hodkinson 2001; 2003a). This importance lies in the belief that a sense of chronology provides children with a ‘…mental framework to make sense of the past’ (Stow and Haydn 2000, 87). Wood (1995, 11) contends that chronology is fundamental to historical understanding because ‘…the past is chaos until sequenced’. Whilst chronological understanding is seen as essential to the study of history in its own right, Wood (1995) argues that its importance is also based in it being a precursor to understanding causation. Furthermore, Wood suggests that a sense of chronology enables children to consider the short and long term consequences of an event. Wood contends that this type of understanding is the basis for making judgements in relation to progression within history. Indeed, researchers have suggested that focussing attention on chronology seems to develop schemes of time periods that may enhance children’s cognition (Vikainen 1961; Hodkinson, 2003a). As Stow and Haydn (2002) account, chronology is the distinctive marker of history which sets it apart from other disciplines.

The evidence base, then, appears clear-cut; chronology is vital to the study of history. Without a comprehensive grasp of such, children will fail to understand how to sequence events, periods and people chronologically. Additionally, they will not fully understand duration, causation and will lack an appreciation of how time is measured. Put simply, they would be unable to understand or employ dating conventions. Problematically, whilst chronology has been enshrined, to varying extents, within extant and current governmental curricula the development of teaching method and assessment of chronological understanding has not been grounded in the findings of research (see Hodkinson 2004).

**Question 2: Was Gove correct to state that children are losing their sense of chronology?**

The concept of chronology and wider ones of historical time are complex and undoubtedly difficult to understand. For example, in our teaching of history we have been amazed by the number of seemingly asinine questions that children ask about the subject matter. For example, a child once asked, ‘Sir, if Queen Cleopatra hadn’t been bitten by the asp would she still be alive today?’. Another enquired if one of the authors had been alive during the Roman invasion of Britain. Whilst these questions might cause simple merriment they suggest that despite sometimes comprehensive teaching these children lacked a fundamental concept that is needed to appreciate history; they lacked an understanding of chronology. Although we have both ‘aged beyond our years’- because of the stressful employment that is teaching -one would have thought these children should have realised that the passage of time between the Ancient Egyptians, Romans and the present would have made it impossible for either Cleopatra to be still alive, or any living adult to have been engaged in hand to hand combat with Caesar’s legionaries!

Concerns relating to chronology are not new, indeed, they may be traced back to fears expressed by Her Majesty’s Inspectors (HMI), in 1978. HMI stated that children were ‘…acquiring a very confused, superficial understanding of the past’ (see Hoodless 2002, 173). For a number of years now, Ofsted as well as the defunct Qualification and Curriculum Authority (QCA) made government, and educationalists aware of the difficulties children have in understanding history if chronology is not taught effectively. For example, in 2005, QCA stated that ‘many pupils are failing to gain a good overview of history’. Again, in 2007 Ofsted remarked that pupils ‘are not good at establishing a chronology, do not make connections between the areas they have studied and so do not gain an overview, and are not able to answer the “big questions”’ (Ofsted 2007, 4). More recently Michael Maddison (HMI), and the then, lead for History at Ofsted commented:

‘Too many pupils’ chronological understanding is not good. This is because their historical knowledge is episodic and their ability to make links across that knowledge is weak… The resulting weakness in pupils’ understanding of chronology and developments over time is not helped by the absence of accurate time-lines from classroom walls in many schools visited’ (Maddison 2014, 7).

It would appear then that Michael Gove was cognisant of the evidence base and therefore legitimate in his statements relating to children’s understanding of chronology. Although, perhaps rather than ‘losing their sense of chronology’ some children had never developed such as they had not experienced effective teaching (See Hodkinson 2003a). To summarise, the evidence base details that the importance of understanding chronology to the development of historical thinking cannot be overstated. However, in the media storm and grandiose rhetoric that swirled around in 2013, especially about our ‘Island Story’, it seemed that such evidence was overlooked.

**The new National Curriculum**

So we now have a new National Curriculum. In relation to chronology it states that children should:

* know and understand the history of these islands as a coherent, chronological narrative, from the earliest times to the present day…. (DfE 2013)
* understand historical concepts such as continuity and change, cause and consequence, similarity, difference and significance, and use them to make connections, draw contrasts, analyse trends, ….

In relation to key Stage 1 children the new curriculum denotes that they should develop:

‘an awareness of the past, using common words and phrases relating to the passing of time. They should [also] know where the people and events they study fit within a chronological framework and identify similarities and differences between ways of life in different periods. They should use a wide vocabulary of everyday historical terms’ (DfE 2013).

At key stage 2 pupils:

‘should continue to develop a chronologically secure knowledge and understanding of British, local and world history, establishing clear narratives within and across the periods they study. They should note connections, contrasts and trends over time and develop the appropriate use of historical terms’ (DfE 2013).

This curriculum though is not to be a ‘chronological route march through two thousand years of English history’ but there is still a ‘clear emphasis on the importance of narrative to the study of history and that children should, ‘know and understand the history of these islands as a coherent, chronological narrative’ (Taylor, 2013). The new curriculum, the government argues, ‘contains the essential knowledge that all children should learn, but will not dictate how teachers should teach’ (DfE 2014). Maddison (2014, 7) believes that there is now a ‘clear and inescapable requirement that children develop a strong chronological understanding… [and that teachers] must ensure that pupils leave primary school with a more sophisticated grasp of chronology’. But here is the problem, for whilst some might be pleased with this new curriculum others have concerns. For example, the Historical Association state that most teachers in primary schools are not history experts and ‘are being expected to teach complex areas of history . . . without any training or resources and possibly little historical knowledge of their own’ (Historical Association 2013 in Sellgren 2013). Our concern though is that many of these teachers specifically will not have the requisite knowledge or understanding to effectively teach chronology.

In an attempt to bring an evidenced view to the discussion of how the new curriculum should be delivered we turn to describe a major research that was conducted by one of the authors into the effective teaching of historical time in primary schools. This research’s importance lies in the fact that there has been little work that has investigated direct teaching, teaching methods and cognitive assimilation together in relation to chronology. (Hodkinson 2003a)

**The research study -***Experimental Research Design (figure 1)*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Term 1** | **Term 2** | **Term 3** |
| Group A1 | **T1 STM T2** | **STM T3** | **STM T4** |
| Group A2 | **T1 STM T2** | **TTM T3** | **TTM T4** |
| Group A3  Group A4  Group A5 | **T1 TTM T2**  Taught by own teacher  **T1** Taught by own teacher | **TTM T3** | **TTM T4**  **T4**  **T4** |

STM: Special Teaching Method

TTM: Traditional Teaching Method

T: Data collection phase.

The research collected data in relation to primary school children’s academic performance in history. The data were obtained, over the course of one academic year .For the purposes of this research, a sample of four parallel classes for children aged eight to nine years (Year 4- A1 to A4) were chosen. Additionally, one class of nine- to ten year- olds (Year 5- A5) was selected to act as an age control. In total, 150 children were distributed into five age-related classes. The research was a quasi-experimental multi-method design based upon a pre, post and repeated measure with control. The researcher taught two classes of eight- to nine-year old children with a special teaching method. One group of similarly aged children, also taught by the researcher, followed what might be called a traditional teaching approach to primary history. After one term of the special teaching method one research group reverted back to the traditional method of teaching. These three classes were assessed for temporal cognition at the start of the academic year and then again at the end of each term. Two other classes (one year four and one year five), taught by their own class teachers, were also assessed for levels of temporal cognition and historical knowledge at post-test (see figure 1). The research sought to provide empirical evidence of the patterns of temporal cognition in young children and to establish whether temporal concepts are capable of acceleration by the use of a specialised curriculum and specific teaching strategies.

**Special Teaching Method**

In the years preceding the study the participants of the research experienced a method of history teaching that was substantially based upon the QCA schemes of work. During the research itself, this teaching method was continued and this ‘traditional curriculum’ was taught over three terms to the research participants. Firstly, in the autumn term the children experienced teaching which enabled children to develop their knowledge and understanding of the locality in which they lived and how this had changed over time. During the second term, historical content related to the Victorian era and during the summer term work was based upon exploring the reasoning behind peoples’ invasions and settlement of Britain. The research’s special curriculum and teaching methods employed the same historical content. However, the special teaching method was designed to involve children as active agents in their own learning. Pupils were encouraged to work cooperatively within learning activities that enabled open ended discussion of temporal vocabulary such as decade, century and millennium. Careful planning and organisation of flexible, multi-sensory teaching tasks sought to promote the teaching of challenging temporal concepts at increasingly complex levels. The overriding feature of the special teaching method was that historical material, within the curriculum, was always presented chronologically from time present to time past and time lines were used consistently in every lesson (see Hodkinson 2001). During each lesson, every opportunity was taken to discuss and heighten children’s temporal vocabulary. In addition, specific activities that centred upon developing children’s chronological understanding were developed through the introductory and plenary phases of the lesson. One significant feature of this special teaching method though was that the time for the development of historical knowledge was reduced by around 50 per cent because effort was placed into developing children’s temporal skills.

**Selected findings from the research**

There is not the space here to detail the complete findings and discussion from this research (For more detailed account see Hodkinson 2003a; 2004). Throughout the research study, though, a number of consistent findings were denoted which would appear to have far reaching implications for the teaching and learning of history in our primary schools. In terms of the debates about chronology, detailed earlier, it is perhaps of interest to note those findings which relate to:

* Teaching methods and planning
* The use of specific temporal vocabulary
* Dating conventions
* The employment of timelines
* Chronological order

*Teaching methods and planning*

The findings of this research demonstrate that children, given the right teaching and learning environment can develop and understand chronology and wider temporal concepts. However, it is clear that to enable such development to take place the teacher must design, plan and deliver effective teaching programmes. Specifically, for any programme to be effective it must provide children with situations that enable them to become ‘active constructive processors of information rather than passive receivers of knowledge’ (Asham and Conway 1993, 35). This conception of learning places significance on the development of highly focussed short-term lesson plans that enable teachers to become both pro, and reactive to learning needs. These short-term lesson plans must endeavour to employ a wide range of teaching strategies that enable conceptual understanding to be developed. Furthermore, individual lessons should facilitate the application of newly acquired skills and concepts through discussion and problem solving activities. The aim of this teaching should be twofold; first, it should reduce cognitive load, in terms of conceptual knowledge and understanding in order to make it possible for children to develop automatic cognitive sub-routines (see Hodkinson 2004). Second, it should encourage children to become independent learners. Throughout this process the teacher should be observed to be a facilitator, stretching children’s learning and re-introducing concepts that have been poorly understood through different teaching methods and activities. The research demonstrated that this teaching of fundamental aspects of temporal cognition at increasingly more complex levels is beneficial to cognitive assimilation. The research then strongly suggests that chronological understanding does not develop magically (Egan 1982 in Simchowitz 1995), but rather develops by being taught, re-enforced and extended (see Model 1). We agree here with Simchowitz (1995, 17) assertions that ‘the onus is on the teacher, then, to actively promote learning of such concepts’. We believe, therefore, that teachers have an important function in developing temporal cognition. This function is to formulate curriculum models which are lively, flexible and where oral work is used as a powerful teaching and learning method.

**Model of Learning for Temporal Cognition**

**REFINEMENT OF TEACHING METHOD AND ACTIVITIES**

Poor conceptual understanding

Teacher constructs curriculum and learning activities which emphasise temporal concepts

Teacher prescriptively models skills or concepts.

Active involvement, of pupils, in problem solving and discussion relating to temporal concepts.

Teaching activities which allow pupils to apply new knowledge and skills independently

Concepts applied in differing contextual setting with the teacher and pupils developing a range of interaction skills.

**INCREASING INDEPENDENCE OF LEARNER**

**(*Model 1*)**

*On the importance of planning*

The findings from this research enables us to argue that for teaching to become more effective long term and medium plans should endeavour to order the teaching of the study units chronologically. Furthermore, it is contended that short-term planning has a vital role to play in enabling a teacher to carefully tailor their teaching method, activities and resources to the individual learning community they are responsible for. We contend that the usage of a fast paced introductory, as well as a plenary session, which are specifically designed to develop historical skills are advantageous to the development of temporal cognition. As well as developing historical skills these sessions should also try to teach the multi-faceted nature of temporal concepts as well as their application to differing contextual settings. This might mean that lesson elements become more based on mathematics than history, if one is say trying to develop the concept of duration. We suggest, then, that unless the multifaceted nature of concepts are specifically taught, in this fashion, it would appear that children’s conceptual understanding will remain shallow. This lack of in-depth learning will result in children experiencing very real difficulties in transferring their knowledge and understanding of chronology to different and differing learning situations.

*The usage of specific temporal vocabulary*

An analysis of children’s understanding of commonly used conventional temporal vocabulary within this research suggests that development of comprehension is a most important issue. This research, like others, suggests that the ‘restrictive nature of language’ (Peel 1967, 171) has significantly influenced children’s conceptual understanding of history. Whilst this research’s findings strongly suggest that many children have some understanding of the verbal symbols relating to common time words, it is demonstrable that children cannot fully apply the concepts involved with those of decades and century. The research demonstrates that the special teaching method careful use of language, especially the time taken to discuss new concepts and the specific teaching of specialised vocabulary, within a structured teaching method and curriculum, enabled children to progress in their assimilation of temporal cognition. If teachers carefully consider the impact of language upon teaching and learning activities and take steps to diminish its effects, particularly with those children who display weak language skills, if they also create a learning ‘environment, which encourages a wide range of language use’ (Bullock 1975, 185 in Levin 1977) it is apparent that all children can be enabled to achieve their full potential. This contention would appear to have significant implications for teachers in their delivery of the new national curriculum for history.

*Dating conventions*

The literature base denotes that assimilation of dating conventions is an area dogged by controversy. Researchers appear to be diametrically opposed as to whether primary aged children can assimilate dating conventions and whether dates are relevant to historical understanding. The wide-ranging analysis contained within this research facilitates a clarification of children’s capabilities in this respect. The study provides evidence to suggest that dating conventions do not have to be abstract in nature (Bullock and Gelman 1979 *in* Thornton and Vukelich 1988) and that multi-sensory teaching methods can enable both AD and BC dates to be taught in a ‘concrete’ manner. The data produced as a result of the special teaching method demonstrate that participants of the taught groups were able to employ dating conventions competently. This research, then, clarified the existing research base by concluding that the onset of development of dating concepts is much earlier than previously thought and it is manifest that teaching can make it possible for children to master dating conventions very much earlier than extant research postulates.

The second area of contention surrounding dating conventions is the claim that children do not need to comprehend dates in order to understand history. Therefore, it is the contention of some researchers (Barton and Levstik 1996; Downey and Levstik *in* Knight 1996; Peel 1967) that the usage of dates should be de-emphasised. From an analysis of these research findings it would seem that this de-emphasising of dates is countenanced because these researchers believe that children are unable to assimilate the concepts and conventions involved. The findings of this research do not in any way allow an acceptance of the premise that young children cannot understand the notion of AD and BC dating conventions. Accordingly, claims for the de-emphasising of dates would seem rather asinine. Moreover, if dates were to be de-emphasised what then would these researchers have put in their place? The only method that could be used as a replacement for dating conventions would appear to be those of subjective time phases such as a ‘long time ago’ and a ‘very long time ago’. The research demonstrated that children inadequately understand this form of vague and subjective language and indeed it may be the case that rather than aiding conceptual development it actually hinders it (see Hodkinson 2003b; Hodkinson 2009). Furthermore, one of the major findings of the research is that the groups that were taught to use dating conventions remembered significantly more historical knowledge than those who were not subject to this form of teaching. Dating conventions apparently providing pupils with ‘hooks’ on which to hang the historical knowledge of the curriculum. It appears clear that dates in the new curriculum should not be de-emphasised but should in fact be seen as highly significant in the development of historical understanding and the retention of historical knowledge.

Our conclusion, therefore, based on this evidence concurs with Giles and Neal (1973) who assert that history may not be fully understood without the pre-requisite of temporal cognition. We believe that dating conventions enable children to organise and structure the past. This notion that dates have a vital organisational function is apparently supported by Harris (1976, 19) who asserts that dates are most important because they ‘provide a scaffolding and so prevent gross distortions’. A secure conclusion of the research is that dates would appear vital to historical study and as it is evident that young children can assimilate dating conventions, dates should be taught within the context of the new National Curriculum. Whilst this premise might appear problematic for some teachers it should be emphasised that we are not ‘talking about date hopping’ (Pluckrose 1991, 22), or advocating that historical study should consist only of Kings, Queens and dates. Although, the research has shown that dates have importance, this importance lies in the development of structures for the organisation of the past and so it should not be the case that dates are allowed to dominate teaching sessions.

*The employment of timelines*

The importance, or otherwise, of timelines has seemingly been the subject of much debate and rhetoric. Vigorous support for the employment of timelines and the form they should take dominate the literature base (see Hodkinson 2003b). However, a review of these studies makes it evident that few are based upon empirical research findings. The research produced data that provides evidence of the effect timelines can have on children’s understanding of historical time. A major conclusion of the research is that timelines appear to be a vital tool for the development of cognition. This importance would seem to lie in the belief that timelines assist in making the abstraction of temporal periods concrete.

The research findings though challenge the notion that timelines are useful only as an introductory lesson to a study unit or indeed that non-linear timelines are beneficial in the development of cognition (Collicutt 1990). The findings of the research suggest that the usage of timelines to solely introduce study units is ineffectual and may actually be deleterious to concept assimilation. Furthermore, construction of the timeline also appears to have importance. The research indicates that children have difficulties using and understanding non-linear timelines and that large class time lines which orientate the past on the left and have centuries highlighted, are, if used in a consistent and interactive manner, a more useful teaching resource than are the spiral, zigzag or helix forms of this resource.

This research presents evidence to support the contention that the consistent application of time lines promotes the development of chronology, duration and dating conventions. As stated earlier, it appears that if temporal concepts are to be understood then they will have to be taught, re-taught and reinforced constantly. This is where timelines, as well as discussion, becomes so important. Children must be constantly bombarded with time concepts if they are going to have any chance of understanding them. They should be allowed to make their own personal timelines and these should be added to each year. This type of line can offer a child a constant reference chronology as well as being practically used in solutions to historical time problems. Additionally, large class timelines should be made which have the past orientated on the left and individual centuries highlighted. These lines should be used to display the current area of study and those which have already been considered. Teachers should ensure that these class lines move with a class as it progresses through the school. This will enable a more complex visual display of time to be built up over the course of a child’s education.

A large timeline located in the school hall might also be a useful resource, and assemblies could be conducted where classes place their work on the timeline. If the Head Teacher were to discuss children’s work and moreover the relationship of the study units to each other and the present day, this would it seem aid conceptual development. Whilst, it is evident that using timelines in an interactive fashion can offer a way of promoting aspects of chronology it is essential that teachers provide plenty of opportunities to discuss issues raised if work with time lines is to prove advantageous.

*The development of chronological understanding*

The literature base indicates that chronology is a concept that has been firmly linked to developmental cognitive processes. It has been suggested that this is a concept which is reliant upon mental maturation (Thornton and Vukelich 1988) and one where understanding is not developed until at least the age of eleven (Hallam 1975) or until a child has reached the formal operational stage (Diem 1982). West (1981) challenged these findings suggesting that children know very much more about these concepts than they are given credit for. The findings of this research authenticate those of West and concur with those of Vikainen (1961) who asserts that teaching methods and curricular that focus attention on chronology enables acceleration of the assimilation of these concepts to take place. A fundamental element of temporal cognition therefore is that of chronology. The new national curriculum has devolved some of its responsibilities in relation to chronology by making the chronological teaching of the study units discretionary. This would appear to be a mistaken course of action and indeed an opportunity to promote temporal cognition has been seemingly lost. Although, many articles detail that ‘willy-nilly’ teaching of the study units is advantageous to the development of chronological understanding, it is clear that this assertion is based upon sparse, and on many occasions, no evidence empirical evidence. What is apparent that the only two studies, this research and that of Vikainen (1961), which have specifically investigated the relationship between chronological teaching and cognition, offers support for the postulate that this form of direct teaching aids concept development. We contend, therefore that chronology should be rigorously and constantly promoted for it is central to historical thinking and understanding. Furthermore, we would argue that the teaching of history would have a greater potentiality to develop temporal cognition if it started with ‘time present’ before working back into ‘time past’.

Chronology, we argue, then, like key concepts in mathematics, has to be taught, re-taught and reinforced if children are to make any sense of their historical learning. In our view, the development of chronology should therefore be observed to be of the highest important. This is because such understanding allows children to assimilate an organizing structure for their historical knowledge. A useful analogy here is that if history is related to a cloakroom of knowledge and the people, periods and places are seen as the coats, then the coat pegs relate to the organising structure of time. Without an understanding of how to employ this structure the coats will inevitably become a confusing mess on the floor from which attempts to extract and examine individual items becomes very difficult.

**Conclusions**

As we go forward with the new curriculum perhaps it is time to invest in research on schools history to provide a more nuanced and evidence discussion. As Knight usefully summarises ‘If school history learning is to be improved, then it is time to move away from research into what children can understand and when. Research into the effectiveness of various teaching techniques is needed’ (1996, 47).

All too often as educators we are faced with children who simply fail to understand the lessons we present to them. Commonly these perceived failures are attributed to the children themselves and excuses are made such as ‘they come from a poor background’ or ‘they are just not old enough to deal with this’. We believe that such discussion is, like the media storm detailed earlier, most unhelpful as it serves to masks the difficulties that children have in assimilating the sometimes difficult concepts of historical time and provides little, if any, evidenced solutions to such difficulties. Furthermore, the media rhetoric is also unhelpful in that it does not do the children justice and very often, for whatever reason, academics, teachers and ‘the great and the good’ unfortunately sell children short by limiting their learning experiences. This research demonstrates that when children do not achieve our learning objectives then we, as educational practitioners, should look to ourselves and simply ask ‘How can switch the lights on for this child and so enable them to learn?’ The research contends that teachers and teaching methods have the vital role in educational learning. Teachers can, by means of developing specific curriculum, teaching methods and resources, make it possible for children to realise their full potential by enabling them to become active agents in their own learning and enable them to develop the difficult and complex concepts of chronology. We believe that with the introduction of this new national curriculum for history it is now time to refocus the debate and move our time and efforts away from the grand media statement and devote all of our energies to providing research and teaching that enables all of our children to effectively learn and enjoy learning history in our primary schools.

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