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Primary school children, history, citizenship, social inclusion and civilising values

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There are enough buzzwords in the title to grace a minister for education's rousing call to action! I am not going to waste words defining citizenship, inclusion, civilising values etc. Let us just assume we have some commonality of understanding and that my presentation will exemplify both my understanding of the issues and my experience of working with the younger age range of compulsory schooling, between five and eleven.

There are two questions for me:

- Can - or should - history be about inclusion, civilising values and citizenship?
- Can children in primary school start to understand these concepts through their work in history?

I think the answer to both questions is yes.

People used to think that history was too hard for primary children or that it ended up as a travesty because of assumptions about needing to grab kids' attention with lots of exciting but basically dumbed-down stories, rather than work with primary sources, get children to consider interpretations and generally 'do history' in a way more mature people might recognise. Fortunately, I do not have to make the case for young children doing valid history - it is recognised in the national curriculum and the 'key elements' or concepts are the same as those for pupils at the other end of compulsory schooling - and actually for academic historians too. Citizenship education in primary schools replicates the agenda of secondary schools: as well as a focus on political literacy, there is also a strong emphasis on social and moral development, community involvement and active engagement.

So should or might primary history be the vehicle for citizenship and civilising values?

I do not think that history should be propagandistic and used for political purposes. However, I do think that it is quite possible, without adulterating or diluting history beyond recognition, to address some of the concepts of citizenship, particularly the processes relating to understanding perspectives and developing rational interpretations based on evidence. There are also of course the obvious and well established connections through political literacy, for example suffrage, varieties of political organisation including the contrast between dictatorships and democracy, or learning about how poverty has been managed.

However, this session looks at social inclusion and civilising values, and this is where other aspects of the citizenship education agenda are relevant. On the one hand, this agenda focuses on equality and diversity, human rights, social justice, challenges to stereotyping and racism. Secondly, through the development of social and moral responsibility, children engage actively with a variety of local and global community projects, and think through their attitudes to value-laden issues.

Rather than give you a theoretical - or a polemical - talk, I thought I would let examples from my own practice with primary children speak for themselves, and allow you to judge how far it is possible to meet the agenda of this particular session. Over the past few years, either through my students in primary teacher training, or through the classroom work I have been able to plan and teach myself, I have had my original experience as a class teacher confirmed: young children can handle quite abstract and difficult materials. Unfortunately, many secondary teachers do not recognise these capabilities, and may patronise the children entering secondary schools.

My first examples come from some qualitative research I conducted in the mid 90s in two inner London schools. Basically, I asked the children how they would respond to a variety of dilemmas that came from the real world of history. These included whether or not to help an escaped slave in the 1840s, whether they would have helped the Frank family hide from the Nazis in 1942, whether they would have risked parental opposition to further the aims of a Trade Union in the 1890s and whether, if they had been one of Nelson Mandela's children, they would have supported his actions in the early 1960s. Here are some examples to give you a flavour:

Farzana and Toyin (both aged 9) talking about Mandela:

Farzana: People should fight if it's for a good cause.

Toyin: You shouldn't fight just because you don't like someone. But he [Mandela] was trying to save his country. Trying to do the right thing [so that] ... they don't have to do what the government says, and they can live where they want, and have jobs and live with their children.

Harriet (aged 9) talking about helping the Frank family:

You should always try to make things right, because it might work out alright. You never know. And if it sounds really stupid like trying to help them, and it won't work, at least you try.

Cherise (aged 10) talking about helping the escaped slave:

When Allen Jay was talking to the black man he was putting himself at risk, and he could be killed by his own people. Even though he was a Quaker and a Christian, and you're not supposed to ... colour is not what matters, it's what's on the inside. He should have left it and said, 'I can't help you, because I would be putting my life at risk, if it's to help you. I can't do nothing. I don't want to be killed'. (1)

My next examples come from classroom work I have been able to develop in a London primary school, in collaboration with class teachers. (2) The unit on significant people in KS1 History allows teachers to choose, plan and teach their subject matter themselves. Three years ago, working with two class teachers, I planned and taught Year 2 children (aged 6-7) about three significant black people, all of whose lives were restricted by racism - and in one case by sexism too.

 <p>Ruby Bridges, 1954: As a 6 year old she was part of the campaign to desegregate schools in the Southern States of America during the Civil Rights Campaign.</p>	 <p>Bessie Coleman, 1893-1926: The first black woman aviator, she fought racism and sexism to achieve her dream to fly.</p>	 <p>Frederick Douglass, 1818-1895: Born into slavery in the southern States of America, he taught himself to read, escaped to freedom and toured England as part of the abolition campaign. He became one of Lincoln's advisors and an American ambassador.</p>
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We used the wide range of strategies that are available to primary teachers, including cross-curricular approaches through drama, geography, maths and literacy to get the children to think about some of the following:

- How to recognise and resist injustice without resorting to violence
- What white people as well as black people might do in solidarity against racism
- The importance of moral as well as physical courage to keep going in the face of difficult barriers
- The power of words including the written word in advocacy

The teachers in this school have a commitment to focussing on issues of social justice, ethics, moral courage with young children, and recognise how these can be developed through history. The following year, the whole school took on a project about significant women, for Women's History Month, which picked up on these approaches. The year after that, two teachers in that school planned and taught a unit based on 'the Black Moses' of anti-slavery, pre-American Civil War, Harriet Tubman.



Year 2 children role play Ruby Bridges being escorted to school by white marshals through a hostile mob, Alabama, 1960

 <p>Harriet Tubman, another significant figure, whom Year 3 children studied as part of Women's History Month</p>	 <p>HARRIET TUBMAN (c. 1820-1913) Harriet Tubman was the best-known "conductor" on the Underground Railroad, a network of abolitionists who spirited blacks to freedom. A fugitive slave herself, Tubman made some nineteen return trips to rescue as many as three hundred slaves from bondage. Her courage and shrewdness were widely known and all the more remarkable given the blackouts she suffered throughout her life as a result of being struck on the head with a two-pound weight by an overseer. During the Civil War she served as a nurse, spy, and scout for groups of raiders penetrating Confederate lines. In her later years Tubman worked for black education and social betterment, woman suffrage, and other causes. <small>Photograph by H. B. Luskley Prints and Photographs Division - Library of Congress "KNOWLEDGE CAREERS" Published by Postgraduate Publications Box 6099, Redwood Park, California 95077</small></p>
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My own students are increasingly designing this kind of work themselves and taking it into schools when they get jobs. Teachers and young children have the capacity to work in this way given encouragement and permission! In other schools I have seen really excellent work based on such people as Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks and Nelson Mandela which raise the same issues.

Returning to work I have designed and taught myself, in another class, with the class teachers of Year 6 children, I planned and taught a unit based on the Kindertransport, as part of the KS2 History unit 'Britain since the 30s'. Here the issues were:

- How a fascist government terrorises and scapegoats a community
- The British government and private individuals' responses to fascism in Europe in the late 30s
- The feelings and experience of children and their parents forced apart and of child refugees on the Kindertransport

Again we used drama, poetry, video, hot seating and oral history as well as conventional interpretations of primary text and pictures to develop the children's understanding of issues.

 <p>Year 6 boys (aged 10 and 11) interpret the Kindertransport, after studying a variety of primary sources</p>	 <p>Year 6 children interview Otto Plashke, a survivor of the Kindertransport in 1939.</p>
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(3)

With this group of 10 and 11 year olds we took the issues into the present, and considered contemporary analogies and our responses to them. When we did this,

we did not moralise with the children, but tried to give them space to explore their own feelings about situations, some of which were directly familiar in their own families.

Most recently, I have been teaching Year 3 (7-8 year olds) about the Irish Famine and children at work in Victorian Britain as part of their history curriculum. Again I wrote the schemes myself, and resourced them with as much primary material as I could find and then worked alongside the class teachers. For the 'Victorian children at work' unit we had the children thinking about conditions of work, considering arguments for and against child labour, and preparing their own statements for a 'Royal Commissioner' who would visit their factory. Thus they were learning not just to think about criteria in a civilised society for the treatment of young people, but also skills of advocacy.

<p>Year 3 work on Victorian child labour: Millie's 'testimony' for the Royal Commissioner's visit.</p>	<p>Hasna's work preparing for the visit of the Royal Commissioner.</p>
<p>Conscience Alley: a drama activity encouraging children to consider different points of view, such as 'should I go and work in the factory?'</p>	<p>Amina gives her testimony about conditions in the factory to the 'Royal Commissioner'</p>

After the children had thought about the pros and cons of child labour for a family in the nineteenth century, they made connections with working children's lives in the developing world, which, in fact, were the real experience of some children in the class, who had relatives in the developing world.

The teachers and I wondered if the Irish Famine work would prove too tragic for the children. After all some of the primary pictorial sources are pretty grim.



Bridget O'Donnell and her Children: a primary source that we used to teach the Irish Famine with Year 3 (7-8 year olds)

However these inner city children revelled in the misery! They threw themselves into the role-play and wrote piteous accounts of children caught up in the famine, or thinking about having to emigrate to America with the news of the coffin ships in their hearts.

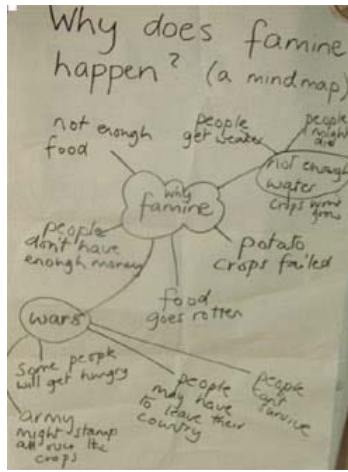
The issues relating to citizenship and 'civilising values' for this session were:

- Discussion about the possible causes and consequences of famine in the contemporary world, including war, flooding and drought
- Responses of government and charity to natural disaster including the Quaker soup kitchens, the government 'make work' schemes, provision of food which people didn't eat like Indian corn
- Moral issues to do with the evictions

Finally as part of teaching the children about the mass emigration from Ireland at the time, we went round the class (including the teachers) talking about our roots and connections to other countries. The children went home and found out their parents' countries of origin. A parent, Zeinab, a refugee from Somalia, came into the class to talk about why she had left her country - due to civil war. So we helped the children to make connections with their own lives and understand some of their own histories.

<p>Interpreting evidence from the Famine years. This work was largely developed through drama techniques, including 'animating' the pictorial</p>	<p></p>

evidence.



A mindmap made by Year 3 showing why famines occur

I hope that the examples I have talked about give some indication of the way one can make citizenship and civilising values, and social inclusion a part of history, not an add-on. I think it enriches the history we teach our young children, as well as meeting some of the objectives of both the History and Citizenship curricula to work in this way. (4)

Notes:

1. The results of this research have been published as H. Claire, 'You did the best you can: history, citizenship and moral dilemmas' in ed. A. Osler, *Teachers, Human Rights and Diversity* (Stoke on Trent, 2005). [Back to \(1\)](#).
2. The author would like to thank the pupils and teachers of the Wilberforce School in north-west London, and in particular the headteacher Angela Piddock and class teachers Kumi, Rachelle, Francesca and Emily who took part in this project. [Back to \(2\)](#).
3. Some of this Year 6 work on the Kindertransport and teaching and learning about significant people can be accessed at the QCA site [Respect for All](#). [Back to \(3\)](#).
4. H. Claire, 'Learning and Teaching about Citizenship through History in the Primary Years', in *Leading Primary History* (Historical Association, 2005). This article reports on a variety of possibilities with primary aged children, many of which have been carried out in practice. [Back to \(4\)](#).

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