

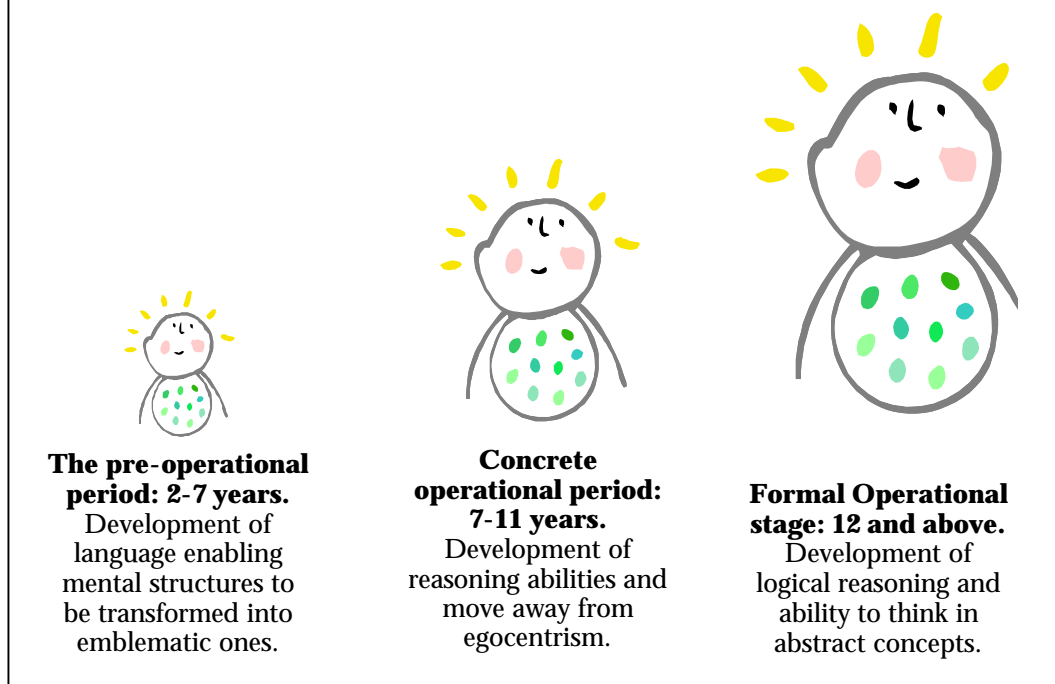
Children's thinking in history: developing concepts in relation to Citizenship

No adult can quite determine what is going on inside a child's mind. However, to have some insight would prove exceptionally valuable in the learning process. If the teacher could understand how a child assimilates knowledge then effort could thus be concentrated on effective techniques that have maximum impact on the child's learning. This question has been the subject of much psychological investigation and interpretation by educationalists.

One of the most influential theories in education has been Jean Piaget's constructivist theory of cognitive development based upon a framework of stages that a child passes through to reach adulthood. Jeanette Coltham has suggested that in Piagetian theory there are three principle stages. The first, the pre-operational; second, the stage of concrete operations and third, the stage of formal operations.¹ (See fig.1).

The application of Piagetist theory therefore suggests that teaching should be similarly partitioned into increasingly sophisticated annualised segments that consecutively followed the maturation of children. In the 1970s, Coltham interpreting Piaget's work suggested that history was a particularly difficult subject for children. It was the 'doings of adults' and children had yet to reach the stage when they could interpret adult activity and the conceptualisation of

Fig. 1: Coltham's interpretation of Piaget's main stages of development



abstract thought.² The emphasis on teaching of historical facts was thus based upon the reasoning that youngsters had to gain a sound knowledge base before they can reason about them. This interpretation of Piaget, according to one critic, would lead to the abandonment of the study of history until children reached the sixth form.³

¹ Coltham, Jeanette B. The Development of Thinking and The Learning of History, TH34, London: Historical Association, (1971), p.4.

² Coltham, Jeanette B. The Development of Thinking and The Learning of History, TH34, London: Historical Association, (1971), p.30.

This was endorsed by contemporary research conducted with 11 to 16 year olds at the time, see; Hallam, Roy. 'Thinking and Learning in History,' Teaching, Vol.8, No.2, (1972), pp.337-346.

³ Booth, Martin. 'Inductive thinking in history: the 14-16 age group,' in John Fines (ed.), Teaching History, Edinburgh: Holmes, McDougall, (1983), p.157.

Further research into children's thinking has raised serious doubts about the work of Piaget and the interpretation placed upon them.⁴ Margaret Donaldson questioned some important aspects of his research that led to a reappraisal of the understanding of children's cognition.⁵ Martin Booth suggested that from his study of 14 to 16 year olds that historical enquiry could lead to the development of deductive thinking and in particular if pictorial materials were used a high level of causation could be established.⁶

In the 1960s, Jerome Bruner developed a theory of cognitive growth that looked to social and environmental factors and was based upon the rediscovery of the work of Lev Vygotsky.⁷ Bruner suggested that children's thinking developed in stages through step-by-step changes in how the brain is used.⁸ His work has had a significant impact on theories of children's thinking, evoking one retort that 'the Piagetian view of pupils' capacities appears to be no longer tenable.'⁹ However, a recent work has suggested

⁴ Scott-Baumann, Alison et.al. Becoming a Secondary School Teacher, London: Hodder & Stoughton, (1997), p.47.

⁵ Donaldson, Margaret. Children's Minds, London: Fontana Press, (1978). See also Bryant, P.E. Perception and Understanding in Young Children: An Experimental Approach, London: Methuen (1974).

⁶ Booth, Martin. 'Inductive thinking in history: the 14-16 age group,' in John Fines (ed.), Teaching History, Edinburgh: Holmes, McDougall, (1983), p.162.

⁷ Mostly based upon a misinterpretation according to Julia Gillen, see; Gillen, Julia. 'Versions of Vygotsky,' British Journal of Educational Studies, Vol.48, No.2, (2000), pp183-198.

⁸ Smith, Mark K. 'Jerome S.Bruner and the process of education,' <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/bruner.htm>. [Accessed 7 November 2002].

⁹ Husbands, Chris. What is History Teaching? Open University Press, (1996), pp.15-16.

that the work of both Piaget and Vygotsky should not be 'seen as dichotomous' but 'taken together...as representing a holistic approach.'¹⁰

Unlike Piaget, Bruner argued that 'difficult' subjects could be taught 'in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development.'¹¹

Developing the concept of the spiral curriculum, Bruner argued that the key concepts should be revisited by teaching content in different ways and thus the level of children's thinking would be developed. For the teacher, one of the primary messages arising from Bruner's work is the notion that children's thinking is stimulated by the arousal of interest in the subject.¹²

The search for a universal explanation of staged cognitive development has been tempered as new research offers a far more complex view of children's thinking. Studies of children's thinking and historical understanding have established the nature of pupils thought processes and ideas about 'time, evidence, causation, perspective and significance.'¹³ *The Schools' Council's History 13–16 Project* led the new 'thinking' and shifted teaching 'historical facts' to broad themes and understanding through the use of evidence,

¹⁰ Gillen, Julia. 'Versions of Vygotsky,' British Journal of Educational Studies, Vol.48, No.2, (2000), p.196.

¹¹ Bruner, Jerome, The Process of Education, (1960), p.33 *cited in* Smith, Mark K. 'Jerome S.Bruner and the process of education,' <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/bruner.htm>. [Accessed 7 November 2002].

¹² Bruner, Jerome, The Process of Education, (1960), p.80 *cited in* Smith, Mark K. 'Jerome S.Bruner and the process of education,' <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/bruner.htm>. [Accessed 7 November 2002].

¹³ Barton, Keith C. "You'd Be Wanting to Know about the Past': social contexts of children's historical understanding in Northern Ireland and the USA,' in Comparative Education, Vol.37, No.1, (2001), p.90.

sources and interpretation.¹⁴ The recognition that thinking skills should be embedded into historical pedagogy and the linkage to other curricular learning activity was supported in other research.¹⁵ The link was such that the cognitive skills necessary to make sense of the past were 'reflected in the National Curriculum for History's Key Elements.'¹⁶ In other subject areas, educational psychologists have posited that it was not what children learned but how they learned, that was ultimately important. To 'teach thinking' as the Cognitive Acceleration through Science Education (CASE) research revealed was to actually accelerate the learning process based upon a fusion of Piagetian and Vygotskian theory.¹⁷

The changes to the National Curriculum (2000) added 'thinking skills' and the emphasis on the acquisition of skills for learning and for communication. It also stipulated that the curriculum should promote citizenship through history by 'developing pupil's enquiry and communication skills and, in particular, the ability to critically evaluate evidence and analyse interpretations.'¹⁸ The majority of pupils at the end of key stage three are expected to have obtained an attainment of between level five and six of the level descriptions thus

¹⁴ Scottish Council for Research in Education, Can Thinking Skills Be Taught? A paper for discussion, Section 3, <http://www.scre.ac.uk/scot-research/thinking> [Accessed 7 November 2002].

¹⁵ Nichol, Jon. 'Who wants to fight? Who wants to flee? Teaching history from a "thinking skills" perspective,' Teaching History, Issue 95, (1999), pp.6-10, 12-13.

¹⁶ Nichol, Jon. 'Who wants to fight? Who wants to flee? Teaching history from a "thinking skills" perspective,' Teaching History, Issue 95, (1999), p.12.

¹⁷ Shayer, Michael, 'Cognitive acceleration through science education II: its effects and scope,' International Journal of Science Education, Vol.21, No.8, (1999), pp.895-896. See also, Gold, Karen, 'Thinking: the next big idea,' in Times Educational Supplement, 14 June, 2002.

¹⁸ DfEE/QCA, National Curriculum for History, (1999), p.8.

show thinking that begins to evaluate sources of information to critically assess it to support conclusions.¹⁹

The teaching of pupils to read, analyse and interpret sources as historians do are key skills required to instil a powerful form of critical cognition and awareness. To think logically and creatively in a world of mass global communications will equate to those attainments necessary for children to understand and evaluate concepts in relation to citizenship. Children able to conceptualise the meaning of fairness, diversity or democracy will be able to become responsible and informed citizens of tomorrow.

Educational psychologists are unlikely to achieve a full consensus, debate and theory offers other strands of thought not explored in this essay such as that surrounding the use of language. The development of children's thinking skills and the promotion of an enquiring mind is a debate that is now placed firmly within the context of the National Curriculum.

¹⁹ DfEE/QCA, National Curriculum for History, (1999), pp.37-39.

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