CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVES ON THE PAST: POSSIBILITIES AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

The six historical thinking concepts are a valuable framework for engaging students in doing history, and clear definitions of the concepts can guide instruction in powerful ways that will help students think historically. But the historical thinking framework can only provide a progression for increasing sophistication in historical thinking if we have a sense of what students' thinking at various age and grade levels looks like. For elementary school students, the path to understanding historical perspectives seems to begin with a sense of personal connection to the experiences of people in the past. Their care about and for the people of the past is an important motivation for historical inquiry and for persistence in engaging in sophisticated historical thinking.

History and Social Studies programs in schools across Canada have been transformed in recent years. While provincial and territorial school curricula still require that students graduate high school with an understanding of key events, people and issues in Canadian history, the programs also expect students to be able to think historically, to analyze, assess and construct historical accounts. This means that teachers spend less time transmitting historical information and more time cultivating students' ways of thinking in the discipline

Many of the new programs draw on a model of historical thinking developed by Dr. Peter Seixas and The Historical Thinking Project.[1] The model identifies six concepts that shape the questions historians ask and the methods they use to gather, analyze and assess evidence in order to answer those questions in the accounts they create. These historical thinking concepts are: historical significance; evidence; continuity and change; cause and consequence; historical perspectives; and, the ethical dimension. Seixas and Morton assert that "this framework allows for progression: students can use the concepts to move from depending on easily available, commonsense notions of the past to using the culture's most powerful intellectual tools for understanding history."[2] The Historical Thinking model is based on research begun in the United Kingdom in the late 1970s and taken up by history education scholars in the United States, Australia and Canada in the years since. Dozens of studies have examined students'

understandings of historical significance, assessed the extent to which children can analyze primary source evidence and how they understand the nature of historical change. Most researchers conclude that even elementary school children can demonstrate relatively sophisticated historical reasoning, particularly when supported by appropriate teaching.[3]

One element of historical thinking of particular interest to researchers and to teachers is historical perspective, largely because of the challenges that this poses for many children. Seixas and Morton explain that "taking an historical perspective means attempting to see through the eyes of people who lived in times and circumstances sometimes far removed from our present-day lives… In short, what was it like to be them?"[4] Not surprisingly, this is very difficult for elementary school children who tend to imagine themselves having to endure the difficulties of explorers or early settlers, and who therefore, judge the past as a place best avoided. Students' tendencies to project their own values and attitudes on the past – demonstrating presentism – are sometimes exacerbated by well-intentioned history textbooks that try to encourage a sense of connection with the people of the past and instead undermine a sense of historical perspective. For example, one history text includes the following passage about early European settlement in Canada:

> *Can you imagine what it would be like to leave your home and travel across the ocean to a new land? Imagine that you had to spend weeks at sea, crowded onto a cold, damp ship. Imagine being hungry and sick throughout the journey. Then you finally reach land, only to find out that you have to travel for many more months on foot through the wilderness. Many thoughts go through your mind. Where will you sleep? What will you eat? How will you survive? Finally, you reach your destination and find – nothing! No towns, no farms, no homes – only forests and fields and streams. Now, after an exhausting journey, you have to clear the land to build your new home. How would you feel?*[5]

A teacher encouraging students' understanding of historical perspective would not ask them how *they* would feel but would challenge them to seek evidence of what the *settlers* might have felt and thought. Moreover, the teacher would also challenge the students to consider whether, in fact, the land was "empty" because there were no towns or farms. Students' natural tendency to project their own beliefs and values onto the past is contrary to taking an historical perspective and one example of the reason historical thinking is so challenging for children. As British researcher Peter Lee explains, "ideas that work well in the everyday world are not always applicable to the study of history."[6] Indeed historical thinking – including taking historical perspectives – is, as Sam Wineburg famously said, "an unnatural act."[7]

In order to clarify and better express the complexity of this important historical thinking concept, Seixas and Morton identify five "guideposts" that characterize a sophisticated understanding of historical perspectives.[8] First, students with a powerful understanding of historical perspective recognize the differences between contemporary worldviews and those of people in the past. Second, though we can always acknowledge some human experiences as common throughout time, sophisticated historical thinkers are cautious about assuming that people in the past experienced those events – parenting or schooling for example – in the same ways as we do. Third, taking an historical perspective means considering the social, political, economic, and intellectual context of people's ideas, beliefs and values. Moreover, it acknowledges that our own worldviews are a product of our own historical context. Fourth, conclusions about historical perspectives are grounded in evidence and also accept the limitations of the evidence that may be available to us. And finally, historical perspectives are always diverse perspectives: there were, for example, many "British" perspectives on the fur trade. Students who demonstrate sophisticated understandings can explore and articulate a variety of perspectives on historical events.

Recognizing and taking historical perspectives then is a challenging, cognitive task. Despite the requirements of our school curricula, is it reasonable to expect elementary school children to do this? My own research with elementary school children and the work of British and American researchers suggests there are both possibilities and challenges in moving children out of their naïve, presentist assumptions about the past and toward more sophisticated understandings of historical perspectives. Though children typically understand that people in the past thought and lived differently than they do, Barton argues "they can be highly judgmental of historical actions (or representations) that violate current sensibilities."[9] In my research with forty fourth-graders,[10] the students were

most judgmental when they were asked to respond to a photograph of a classroom in their community taken one hundred years ago. While their comments about other photographs of streets and houses were just observations about the differences between then and now, they insisted that the classroom of a hundred years ago was crowded and that the students "don't have as good clothes." This, despite the fact that the photograph showed a classroom that was relatively spacious and twenty-seven well-dressed children. The students had difficulty imagining what the children in the 1912 classroom did for fun, guessing "they probably played baseball with a stick and a rock." While they thought that school today was more intellectually challenging because "our place is more advanced," many students commented on the strict discipline of the earlier classroom and the chores the children would have been expected to do. The students seemed to make negative judgments about schooling and the lives of children in the past because this was a context in which they could easily imagine and uncomfortably themselves.

Yet the Grade Four students also demonstrated an understanding of historical context and occasionally made comments that seemed to reflect an awareness that they too are the product of a particular historical worldview. For example, after Cory had placed five photographs of a street in her community in chronological order, she said that she would most like to visit the 1909 street and ride in the wagons saying, "It wouldn't be really cool for them if you were from that time but for us it would be really cool." Brady chose the 1920s photograph explaining, "there'd be enough modern good stuff like medical care, but enough old stuff that it would be cool to see." Many students commented on the difficulties they had had trying to write with ink pens on a field trip to local historic site, but when Bailey said she would like to ask one of the children in the classroom photograph what it's like to write with ink pens, Evan reminded her that "they'd be used to it." Most impressively, when asked to consider the thoughts or perspectives of people in historical photographs, one quarter of the students drew on their knowledge of the historical context or asked questions to try and determine the context so they could articulate the perspectives more accurately. For example, four boys knew that the photograph of the classroom, taken in 1912, was "around World War One time." Another six students discussed and also asked questions about the technology of the time, trying to determine if the students would have listened to the radio or watched silent movies like the ones they had seen at the local museum. These Grade Four students, whose formal study of local and Canadian history had just begun, were already appreciating the importance of historical context when considering historical perspective.

During the year, the Grade Four students studied local First Nations peoples, the fur trade and completed integrated Language Arts-Social Studies units on the Great Depression and World War Two. In follow-up interviews at the end of the year, the students acknowledged that historical actors had diverse perspectives on events in the past. Cory and Jane, for example, explained the conflicts between the Cree and Peigan, and acknowledged that First Nations peoples' views of the Hudson Bay Company and American fur traders were affected by how fairly they were treated in the trade. All the students were able to articulate how people in urban and rural communities and people of different classes were affected differently by the Great Depression. Like the Grade Four and Five students in American studies, these students were able to distinguish a range of historical perspectives on the events of the past because this had been a focus of the teachers' instructional activities.[11]

Though these Grade Four students were able to *recognize* and explain historical perspectives, when asked to *take* historical perspectives, or write from the perspective of an historical actor, they tended to default to their own feelings. The students completed a novel study of *Storm Child*, the story of a young Metis girl who struggles with her mixed-race identity.[12] At the end of the novel, Isobel (Storm Child) is struggling to decide if she should attend school in Red River. The students were asked to take on the perspective of a character in the novel to advise Isobel whether or not she should go. Nine students said that Isobel's Peigan mother would want her to go to school and offered an explanation like Jamie's: "Because most moms want thier kids to get an edgication" [sic]. Students who wrote letters from the perspective of Isobel projected their own emotions into situations in the novel, perhaps making connections to their own experiences. Mariah wrote as Isobel to the Scottish father who abandons his family at the beginning of the novel: "Father will I ever see you again? Or will this be the end? Is there something more important than your family?" Given the emotional struggle at the centre of the novel's plot it is perhaps not surprising that students were engaged by these universal themes and essentially ignored the evidence and historical context they had studied.

Some history education researchers see students' emotional responses to historical fiction and to nonfiction historical accounts as undermining their ability to understand historical perspectives. In the United Kingdom, when researchers first began studying children's historical thinking, they examined their capacity for historical empathy, a goal of history teaching in the curriculum in the 1980s and understood as "the ability to enter into some informed appreciation of the predicaments or points of view of other people in the past."[13] Critics of history instruction that stressed thinking skills targeted historical empathy as a problematic concept, confusing it with its everyday meaning of vicariously experiencing another's thoughts or sharing a feeling. They argued that history teachers were encouraging children to imagine themselves in the past through questionable activities such as role playing, rather than engaging in a critical understanding of past ways of living.[14] Researchers like Peter Lee continue to characterize historical empathy as a purely cognitive act stressing that it "is not a special faculty for getting into other people's minds, but an understanding we achieve if we entertain ideas very different from our own… This is not a matter of having an emotional bond."[15] But American researchers Barton and Levstik argue that historical empathy may involve students' emotions as well as their understandings, and is an appropriate goal for history instruction in schools. They stress that historical empathy involves perspective recognition, but also involves caring: caring about people of the past; caring that events happened; caring for people in history; and, caring to act on what they have learned about the past. In their view, "although we can attempt to study history without caring, we are unsure why anyone would want to."[16]

The Grade Four students in my study seemed to need to make a personal connection with events and people of the past in order to think about change and continuity and about historical perspectives. When they were exploring historical photographs, they commented on objects in the photographs, saying "My grandma has one like that," and "My poppa has a hotrod just like that. It's really, really old-fashioned. You should hear the horn!" Since we were looking at photographs of streets in their town, they examined each photograph carefully asking about the exact locations pictured and listing the buildings and businesses they knew were in those locations now. For all the students, the photographs triggered stories about personal experiences they had had on field trips or family trips to historic sites. These stories were important first steps into questions they would explore regarding change and continuity in their community and the historical perspectives of those who lived through those changes. My findings confirmed Dulberg's conclusion that, "Bringing history alive is more than a matter of teaching rich content alone; students' imaginations must be ignited through some form of appeal to the personal."[17]

For many elementary school students the most powerful connections into historical inquiry come through their family histories. The Grade Four students in my study completed interviews with elders in their families very early in the school year and made reference to those interviews throughout the year as they studied a range of historical events and issues. Some students were so enthusiastic about the project, that they interviewed more than one relative. When they examined the photograph of a 1912 classroom, they told me the stories their grandparents (and in some cases great-grandparents) had told them about their schooling. This perhaps accounts for their negative comments about schools in the past since their elders tended to stress the hardships of their childhoods. When I asked the students why we learn about the past, many made reference to the importance of family history. Wyatt, for example, explained, "So we can tell our kids, so we can pass on those stories."

The students demonstrated their care for and about the people the past in a variety of ways. After their study of the Great Depression, Michael and Nick told me, "it was interesting to see how people lived with not much money… how they survived." Erica explained her reaction to their novel study of *Number the Stars*, a story set in occupied Denmark during World War Two: "I think it's interesting 'cause it's just really sad what they were doing." Some students began to appreciate that their study of history helped them better understand their own time and place. Daniel, for example, said studying history was important, "so we know the place we live in." Cory's excitement and sense of connection came through as she explained the significance of First Nations' history: "They hunted off *this* land. If you find stuff in the ground, like if you're digging in the dirt, and you like find an arrowhead or something, then you they were in *this* spot." Caring about the people of the past and caring that certain events happened triggered important insights for these students about history and about the nature of their own place and time.

The six historical thinking concepts are a valuable framework for engaging students in doing history, and clear definitions of the concepts can guide instruction in powerful ways that will help students think historically. The teachers I worked with, for example, taught the concept of historical perspective very explicitly, beginning with examples of visual perspective and then moving students through examples of perspective in a range of familiar situations: playground disagreements, in picture books with multiple narratives. They modeled the guideposts of powerful understandings of historical perspectives for the students and often asked questions that encouraged students to consider the context of historical actors' perspectives and articulate multiple perspectives on past events. By the time they were addressing historical perspectives in their inquiries into the fur trade or the Great Depression, the students could recognize and explain historical perspectives in relatively nuanced ways, reflecting some of the guideposts Seixas and Morton identify.

But the historical thinking framework can only provide a progression for increasing sophistication in historical thinking if we have a sense of what students' thinking at various age and grade levels looks like. Researchers VanSledright, Kelly and Meuwissen stress, "Understanding what novices are doing when researchers give them opportunities to think historically is crucially important to the process of being able to map starting points of academic development in the history domain."[18] For elementary school students, the path to understanding historical perspectives seems to begin with a sense of personal connection to the experiences of people in the past. Their care about and for the people of the past is an important motivation for historical inquiry and for persistence in engaging in sophisticated historical thinking.

NOTES

1 See The Historical Thinking Project at http://historicalthinking.ca/.

2 Peter Seixas and Tom Morton, *The Big Six: Historical Thinking Concepts* (Toronto: Nelson Education, 2013): 3.

3 For thorough reviews of this research see Keith C. Barton, "Research on Students' Ideas About History" in *Handbook of Research in Social Studies Education*, *eds.* Linda S. Levstik and Cynthia A. Tyson (New York: Routledge, 2008): 239-258; and, Amy J. von Heyking, "Historical Thinking in Elementary Education: A Review of Research," in *New Possibilities for the Past: Shaping History Education in Canada*, ed. Penney Clark (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011): 175-194.

4 Seixas and Morton, *The Big Six*: 138.

5 Tom Smith, *Settling Canada* (Markham, ON: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2005): 2.

6 Peter J. Lee, "Putting Principles Into Practice: Understanding History," in *How Students Learn: History in the Classroom*, *eds.* M. Suzanne Donovan and John D. Bransford (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2005): 31.

7 Samuel S. Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

8 Seixas and Morton, *The Big Six*: 148.

9 Barton, "Research on Students' Ideas About History": 244.

10 The students' comments quoted here are verbatim quotes from interviews or their writing assignments, but all the students' names are pseudonyms. Other information about this study can be found in von Heyking, "Historical Thinking in Elementary Education," and in "Historical Understanding in the Elementary Years," paper presented to the annual meeting of the Association of Canadian Studies, Vancouver, BC, October 2006.

11 See Keith C. Barton, "History is More Than Story: Expanding the Boundaries of Elementary Learning," paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Council for the Social Studies, Nashville, TN, November 1993; Keith C. Barton, "Did the Devil Just Run Out of Juice? Historical Perspective-Taking Among Elementary Students," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Education Research Association, New York, NY, April 1996; Jill Jensen, "Developing Historical Empathy Through Debate: An Action Research Study," *Social Studies Research and Practice* 3(1) (2008): 55-66.

12 Brenda Bellingham, *Storm Child* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 1985).

13 Department for Education and Skills, History in the Primary and Secondary Years: An HMI View (London: HMSO, 1985): 3, quoted in Richard Harris and Lorraine Foreman-Peck, " 'Stepping Into Other People's Shoes': Teaching and Assessing Empathy in the Secondary History Curriculum," *International Journal of History Learning, Teaching and Research* 4(2) (1997): 4.

14 *Ibid.*: 1.

15 Lee, "Putting Principles Into Practice": 47.

16 Keith C. Barton and Linda S. Levstik, Teaching History for the Common Good (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004): 242.

17 Nancy Dulberg, "Engaging in History: Empathy and Perspective-taking in Children's Historical Thinking," paper presented to the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA, April 2002. See also Barton and Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good*: 231.

18 Bruce VanSledright, Timothy Kelly and Kevin Meuwissen, "Oh, the Trouble We've Seen: Researching Historical Thinking and Understanding," in *Research Methods in Social Studies Education*, ed. Keith C. Barton (Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing, 2006): 212.