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English version of article for vn.express (April 2014). History teaching in the UK.

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I was a history teacher in the UK for twenty years, teaching children aged eleven to eighteen although in the last six years I have specialized in teaching children aged sixteen to eighteen, in what in the UK are called sixth form colleges. I now work as a lecturer in 'teacher continuous professional development at The University of Northampton'. This is a large and prestigious university especially as regards teacher training and research into education, in England.

Context:

The schooling of children aged eleven to eighteen is known as secondary schooling in the UK and this is what I will be writing about in this article. To understand the nature of history teaching in the UK it is first worth understanding a little about how the education system in Britain is structured. Children go to primary schools from age five to eleven, they then change school and go to a secondary school from eleven to eighteen. From five to fourteen every child must study history. However, at age fourteen they get to choose eight or sometimes nine subjects that they will continue to study. They must all study maths, English, science religious education and physical education. However, they can choose whether to study history or not, although a majority do choose history.

At age sixteen children take exams called the 'General Certificate in Secondary Education' (GCSE). After they have done this they can choose a variety of different paths including work with training, and various academic and vocational courses. The most popular option for those who stay in school is to continue to study towards their GCSE 'Advanced Level' (A Level) exams. If they choose this they will study three or four subjects for two more years until they are eighteen. At this point and based on how well they have done in these exams they may well choose to go to university. Throughout this time most children in the UK, over 90%, attend 'state schools'. These are run by the government and are entirely free. Most state schools are comprehensive meaning that they don't select on ability or have any entrance tests at all. However, to move on to do A levels children need to have successfully passed their GCSE exams. Despite the stereotype of ancient buildings, traditional uniforms and dormitories, very few children in the UK actually go to schools such as this. Schools are largely modern, near one's house and as stated above free. As for the lessons themselves, up to age fourteen children usually have two hours of history per week, aged fourteen to sixteen have three hours of history per week, and aged sixteen to eighteen five to six hours per week, if they chose this subject.

Teaching history

In terms of what is taught in UK schools one of the strengths of the UK system is there is a lot of flexibility. Although from aged fourteen to eighteen, students are studying towards exams up to the age of fourteen they are not. There is a national curriculum but it is more loosely worded than in many other countries. It has phrases such as 'children should study significant people and events from the twentieth century' but it doesn't tell you exactly who or how many. This means that if a teacher has a deep interest in someone specific or the school has a strong local connection, this person can be studied in some depth. It also doesn't specify exact approaches. So this meant, for example, that when I was teaching children aged eleven and twelve we spent several weeks looking

at the people who had lived in a local castle near our town, analysing and understanding their lives. We also, in another class, studied soldiers from World War One and the life story of individual men who had gone to fight. Because there was space on the curriculum we were able to analyse diaries, poems and love letters. It is very important that the history curriculum is not too full with content as one thing we are developing in our young historians is a set of skills. To really analyse a source such as a letter can take time, perhaps a whole lesson to put it in context, discuss it, understand it.

It is important in lessons to also encourage high level analytical discussion. In depth analysis of a source can be one way to do this, so can group tasks especially those which involve thinking about significance and cause and effect. I use what we call diamond ranking tasks to build competing viewpoints and analyse possible arguments. This involves constructing a list of possible causes of an event in history, writing these on pieces of paper, then moving these bits of paper around to seek patterns and build an argument. For instance if we took the causes of the American or English Civil War, we might find twenty or thirty roots. Some would be long term, whilst some may be more obvious short term causes but in fact have deeper significance. Children with this simple prompt and after having worked together to think, analyse and arrange their thoughts can often discuss very complex and nuanced arguments at a very high level. This kind of visualisation activity, which involves placing the analytical thought process that usually occurs internally in front of ourselves brings forward a level of conceptual thinking that we are all capable of but sometimes needs prompting to turn into a reality.

Other activities I have used are based on the formal debating that is used at 'The Cambridge University, Union Society'. This is a highly structured form of debating that has been taught at Cambridge University for almost 200 years. The fact that I use this illustrates how old practices can also inform modern teaching techniques. Without dwelling too long on the exact rules, its highly structured nature enables more inhibited children to speak confidently. Importantly though within this form of debating one does not know what side of an argument one will take before the debate begins. A student can find themselves arguing against the viewpoint that they actually believe. This is a very important psychological process. Only by arguing from another side can we both understand that viewpoint and also really understand our own. It also teaches the important social skills of being able to debate assertively then return to being friends and colleagues afterwards. It was recently revealed on the news that two important British politicians from rival parties Ed Balls (Labour) and George Osbourne (Conservative) on occasion looked after each other's children, whilst the other was being interviewed. British academic and political life is structured in an adversarial way. It is important that children understand how to construct a strong, assertive argument but also like these politicians put it aside once the formal process of debate has been concluded.

Equally though it is important that children also have space to think and to conduct proper research, school is a preparation for adult life and yet in the past in the UK we sometimes taught skills that were only relevant in schools. Exams exist at age sixteen and eighteen in history. However, real academic work is slow, considered and involves research and creativity. Therefore it is important that teachers see themselves as facilitators of learning. In some lessons children will work from books or computers seeking out information for themselves. They need guidance in this so the teacher still has a very active role talking and helping each individual child. However, if focussed work is taking place there is no need for the teacher to be presenting from the front the whole time. Research can be particularly powerful when studying local history.

It is important too that after all the discussion, research and analysis a lengthy piece of writing is produced. I don't set many essays, perhaps just one 1,500 word essay a month. However, it is much better to produce fewer exceptional essays rather than many mediocre ones. The journey to writing a genuinely intelligent and thoughtful essay is a long, challenging and hopefully fascinating one. I think if children are engaged and carefully supported by their teachers most can take great pride in an essay that really reflects their ideas and understanding.

History to me is a very important subject it teaches skills of thinking and of writing in a way that no other subject can. The best teachers are also lifelong learners. This is why after twenty years teaching I made the transition to working with teachers to help them develop into thoughtful and reflective practitioners themselves. I now find I love my job at The University of Northampton developing teachers, as much as I loved teaching.