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## Developing outstanding historical thinking in primary schools: Fox Primary School

**URN:** 100482

**Local authority:** Kensington and Chelsea

**Date published:** 10 January 2012

**Reference:** 120142

### Brief description

By the time they leave Fox Primary School, pupils have outstanding historical knowledge and understanding. Crucial to this success is a determination to develop historical thinking at every opportunity by first-rate teaching, an outstanding curriculum and excellent planning.

### Overview – the school's message

‘We all enjoy teaching history and making those links that make sense and work – it's great’.

Emma Madden,  
Deputy  
Headteacher

‘History at Fox is not only taught discretely but also through literacy (writing and guided reading) and numeracy. This allows not only for historical thinking to be taught in context but also for it to be taught across the curriculum. It is woven throughout everything we do. Teachers have excellent subject knowledge and ensure that lessons are stimulating and engaging. There are substantial materials which teachers can use for planning, but they are always keen to create additional ones and add them to the resource bank. As a result, history is vibrant: teachers love to teach it and pupils love to study it.’

*Paul Cotter, Headteacher*

### The good practice in detail

#### 1. Teaching and learning

Expectations are high. Pupils are routinely challenged to think critically. Staff share an understanding that all pupils, including those in Key Stage 1, are motivated by opportunities

to ask and answer difficult historical questions. Pupils are given time to discuss their ideas with their talk partner, in groups and with the rest of the class. They are encouraged and expected to think critically using the correct historical terminology. As a result, they are animated, highly reflective and thoughtful when they talk about history and they write perceptively and accurately. Pupils enjoy their learning in history, not least because the teaching encourages them to take an active role in their learning. The high levels of engagement and involvement which follow ensure that all groups of pupils make excellent progress. Pupils leave Year 6 not just with well-developed historical knowledge and understanding but also with an ability to investigate, consider, reflect and review the events of the past. In other words, they are able to think historically and their attainment is significantly higher than is usually seen in other schools.

In a discussion, a group of pupils in Years 2 and 3 noted that the diary of Samuel Pepys was very helpful in learning about what was happening at the time he lived in London. When asked how they would deal with another diary which told them something different, their response was unequivocal. 'That's ok', said a Year 3 pupil, 'because we would be able to check what Samuel Pepys had written'. Another pupil added, 'We would have another point of view. You know someone who perhaps lived in another part of London and so lived life differently'.

This exchange epitomises the thinking of pupils in this school. It reflects their interest in engaging with characters from history, in wanting to know more about the topic, and in not being troubled by the prospect of additional evidence which might introduce new and different information. These pupils do not seek safety in a single version of events. Instead, they readily embrace a variety of accounts and are taught to cope with the uncertainty that might bring. In other words, their historical thinking has been carefully nurtured.



Teaching consistently challenges pupils to think for themselves and to draw their own conclusions. By encouraging them to ask and answer well-focused historical questions from an early age, pupils become critical and thoughtful commentators on the topics studied. As Ros Morgan, a teacher in Year 1, makes clear, 'For us it is about asking questions and making the pupils aware of what they are learning and why they are learning it'.

Teachers are highly imaginative in their use of resources and create lessons which pupils find exciting and intriguing.

Pupils in Year 2 were mesmerised at the sight of what was purportedly the dairy of Samuel Pepys and were encouraged to use their imaginary 'historical telescopes' to focus on the content of an extract from Samuel Pepys' diary, to select the key words and phrases, and to infer what historical conclusions they could draw from this.

Pupils in another class enjoyed handling artefacts purportedly from Tudor times as they tried to deduce why Henry VIII divorced Catherine of Aragon and married Anne Boleyn.

Throughout the school there is a consistent focus upon active learning based on enquiries, problem solving and independent learning.

Pupils in Year 5 were perceptive in the way they approached using particular types of evidence when studying Victorian times. They were acutely aware that a contemporary painting had to be treated with care because 'the people who painted this got paid so they might have made it look better than it really was'.

In their exploration of Britain since 1948, pupils in Year 6 had looked at posters of the period and their analysis was sharp and precise. With ease they could discuss the key questions to ask when assessing the value of posters, such as:

- Why was it made/written or taken, and who made it/wrote it/took it?
- What was the intended audience?
- What does it tell you?
- What doesn't it tell you?

## 2. The curriculum

The **curriculum** has been very carefully crafted. Not only is history taught extremely well as a discrete subject, it is prominent right across the curriculum and particularly in literacy and guided reading.

### Discrete history

A two-year rolling programme ensures that the curriculum at Key Stages 1 and 2 covers the key elements of the programmes of study. What is more, the pupils experience a considerable amount of history and it is rare for a term to pass without them exploring a history theme.

In addition, the curriculum is made meaningful to the pupils. This is achieved through a unit for pupils in Years 2 and 3 which focuses on the impact of changes in the local area. Moreover, whenever it is appropriate the local and regional



context is explored, not least through an excellent range of educational visits and visitors which are integrated fully with learning in the classroom.

When Year 2 pupils study the Great Fire of London, their learning is enhanced by a visit to the London Fire Brigade Museum. Pupils in Years 4 and 5 visit the Royal Palaces at Hampton Court and Kensington when studying the Tudors and the Victorians respectively.

Before going to Chelsea Football Club Museum, pupils in Year 6 are prepared extremely well by activities designed to strengthen their understanding that museums are historical representations that should be questioned and challenged.

The visits are used for much more than discovering new information and for exploring the background to their work.

In this way visits are exploited to help develop pupils' historical thinking.

### The cross-curricular framework

A key reason to explain the success of the school in encouraging pupils to think critically in history is the way in which opportunities are routinely taken through extensive cross-curricular links to enhance this work. To Ellie Hardisty, a Year 2 teacher, 'Making links is all about making learning exciting and enjoyable, and about creating confident and articulate young people.' Teachers like the flexibility and the opportunities this approach brings.



While links between history and other subjects are found in many schools, particularly with art, design and technology, and information and communication technology (ICT), these links have a particularly marked impact at Fox Primary School. This is because nothing is left to chance. Links are formal, written into the documentation, and extend into all areas of the curriculum so that all staff know precisely what is expected. When studying the Great Fire of London, for example, all pupils undertake a bakery unit in numeracy. They also deepen their understanding of ancient civilisations through work in numeracy by studying the use of symmetry in Greek art and the biographies and work of Ancient Greek mathematicians. When studying the Romans they explore Roman numerals.



Perhaps the most important links which strengthen the work in history, though, are those with literacy and guided reading. Every opportunity is taken to enhance the work in one part of the curriculum with what is going on in another, so that literacy and guided reading support history, and vice-versa. As a result, historical texts and fiction feature heavily in the school's guided reading programme and pupils regularly explore *Assessment Focus 7*, which relates texts to their social, cultural and historical contexts and literary traditions.

In Key Stage 2, pupils' knowledge and understanding of the Victorian era are deepened through their work in literacy, where they study extracts from Sherlock Holmes and Charles Dickens before devising their own Victorian detective stories.

As part of their work in history on Britain since 1948, pupils in Year 6 study Afro-Caribbean migration to Britain and the impact of the arrival of the boat the Empire Windrush from the West Indies. In their guided reading and literacy lessons, the themes of migration and settlement are explored through the lyrics of the songs 'London is the place for me' and 'Sweet Jamaica'. They read extracts from the book Notes from a Small Island and investigate the experiences of Floella Benjamin, through her autobiography Coming to England, and Paul Canoville, the first black player to play football for Chelsea.

Such an explicit cross-curricular approach to developing pupils' historical knowledge and understanding also makes a considerable contribution to their historical thinking not just because the curriculum enables this to happen but also because it is explicitly planned, assessed and taught.

### 3. Planning



Planning for developing pupils' historical thinking is comprehensive both in relation to discrete history and to cross-curricular studies. Schemes of work articulate clearly how the curriculum will develop pupils' subject-specific knowledge, understanding and thinking in lessons and over time. For Emma Madden this is really crucial. 'The importance of our schemes are that we set out clearly what teachers have to teach and we back this up with unit resources and subject-specific professional development led by the subject

leader at staff meetings. Developing subject knowledge and expertise is vital if we are going to be successful'.

Plans include specific references to the historical processes and concepts which will be focused upon in each lesson and to the activities which will be used to develop these attributes.

In a Year 6 topic on The Victorians, the overall plan identified the work to be covered in relation to 'chronological understanding', 'historical enquiry', 'historical interpretations', 'knowledge and understanding', and 'presenting information and answering questions about the past'.

Such references are also to be found in the planning for younger pupils in Key Stage 2 and even for those in Key Stage 1. In each class, the details are tailored to meet the needs of the respective age group.

Alongside this planning is a thorough subject-specific assessment structure which sets down the expectations for pupils as they move through the school and these



expectations are written to ensure that historical thinking is an explicit focus. This planning and assessment structure means that teachers are continuously focused on much more than historical knowledge and understanding. Such planning helps to enrich the development of pupils' historical thinking. As a result, all staff recognise well what pupils are expected to know, do and understand, what pupils should achieve, and what pupils need to do to raise their attainment further. This helps to explain why lessons are so purposeful and why they secure consistently good and outstanding progress.

Teachers are passionate about the subject, have high expectations and work closely as a team, sharing their ideas as a matter of course and seeking always to improve their practice. This supportive and collaborative approach makes a significant contribution to the subject's popularity in the school and to pupils' outstanding achievement. For Eileen Martin, a Year 6 teacher, 'What is so important is that it is a shared curriculum – we share our planning and we share our resources. Overall, we always want to improve what we teach and how we teach it, and staff are given time to do this'.

## The school's background

**Fox Primary School** is a large school that has twice the national average of pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds and those for whom English is not the home language. The proportion of pupils who have a statement for their special educational needs and/or disabilities is well above average, although the overall proportion of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities is below average. The proportion of pupils who join or leave the school at times other than in Reception or Year 6 is higher than the national average. The school has several awards for its curriculum including Activemark, Artsmark, Healthy Schools, and the Quality Mark.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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