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Piecing together the past

Now is the time for teachers to experiment with assessment in history, says the IOE's **Caroline Heal**...

Has a tick box approach to assessment in primary schools become endemic, and if it has, how did it happen? My guess is that most teachers would point to the National Curriculum with its statements of attainment, the concept of levels, and the twin pressures of accountability and the need for manageable systems of recording. However, it is not clear that assessment in the foundation subjects has fallen victim to this approach. The criticism levelled by inspectors is not that a tick box approach predominates in history but that there is too little assessment of any kind.

The valuable shift to assessment for learning is empowering teachers to embed assessment into their teaching so that it is an essential and inseparable part of it. This is entirely positive. If this is not also being used in the foundation subjects then the implications for children's learning in those areas are serious.

One of the issues affecting progress towards meaningful assessment for learning in history may be a lack of shared understanding about the kind of subject history is, especially at primary level.

Many children think that history is just everything that happened in the past. If this is true of your pupils, then you might introduce them to questions about 'How we know?' and the notion of evidence, which may in turn lead to an understanding that some things can't be known because of the lack of evidence. The metaphor of the jigsaw is appealing, with 'evidence' as the pieces of the picture. However, Ros Ashby has recently suggested that Lego is a better analogy, drawing attention to the way in which quite different constructions can be made with the pieces. History is an interpretive subject with enquiry at its heart.

Potential problems

There are a number of obstacles to effective assessment in history. One is the risk that assessment for learning in history blurs into aspects of assessment for literacy. Since history is a subject that is language rich and depends a great deal on the acquisition of specialised concepts and vocabulary, it is all too possible for fluency (or lack of it) in language, especially in writing, to disguise the qualities of historical thinking.

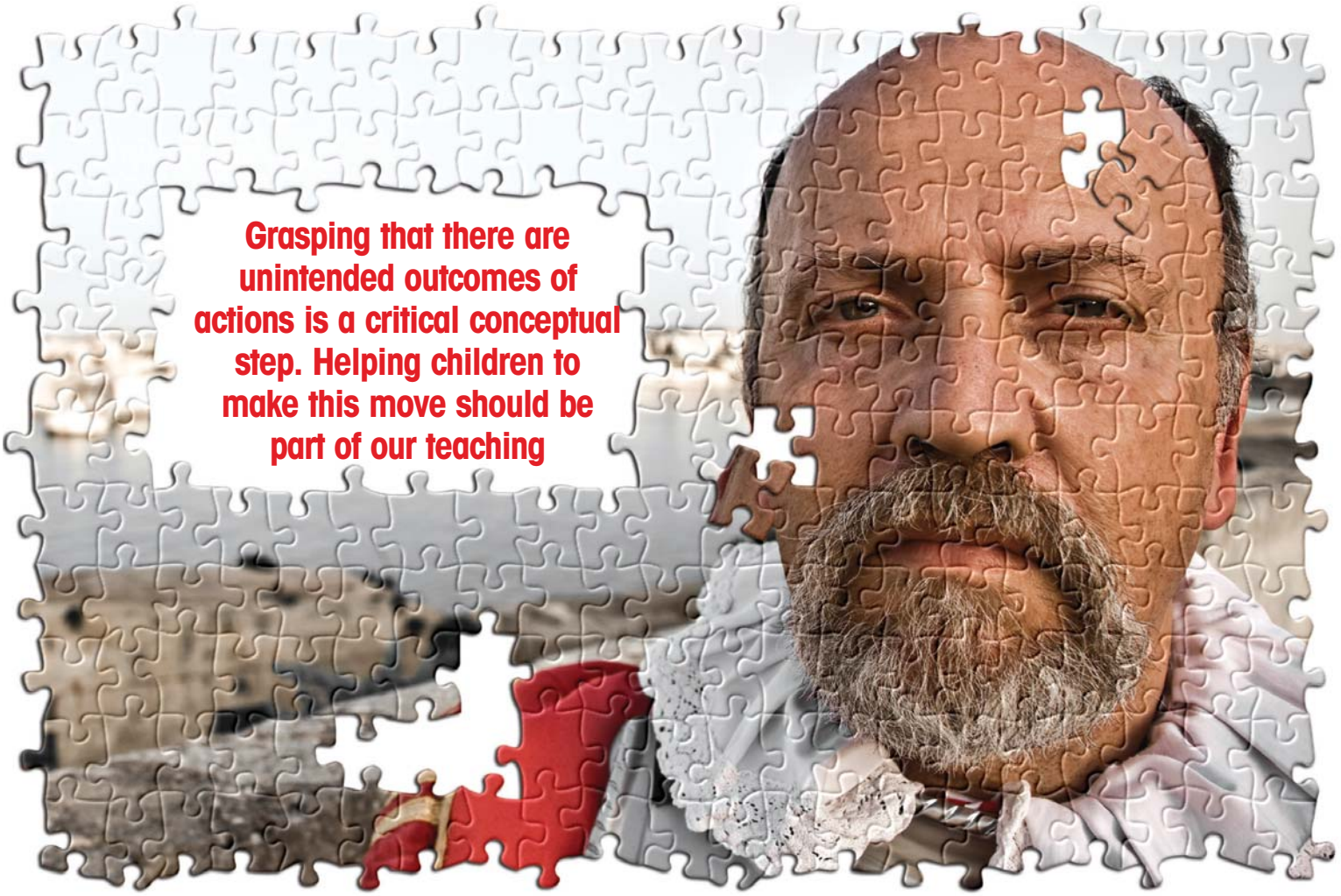
Secondly, it is not helpful to work with crude notions of 'levels' as if learning in history could be described as if it followed a ladder-like path, expressed in bunches of descriptors identifying performance with greater and greater mastery.

These models of progression are flawed in conception, and are certainly not based on empirical evidence about how children actually learn. The research that is casting light on the ways in which children learn in history is developing slowly, but so far has concentrated mainly on older primary and secondary pupils.

With the change in government, the future shape of the curriculum and assessment is under renewed discussion. It is a good moment for interested teachers to experiment with assessment in history - and this is not about developing 'good assessment activities' as if they stood alone.

Making improvements

So how could we develop our experience in assessment in primary history? There are many possibilities.



1 Teachers could monitor how their pupils use the word 'because' in the context of historical explanation to see how it develops over time.

When young children start to use the word 'because' they often do not use it for explanation at all but just as an all-purpose connective. As they begin to develop the idea of explanation they apply it to giving reasons why they do things or why things happen, not necessarily in a historical context. An important development is being able to explain why they think things, and begin to speculate about other people's thinking and motives for action.

2 Later, children have to unravel the difference between human motivation and the idea of causation in a historical context. Research suggests that children often think things happen because people want them to. Grasping that there are unintended outcomes of actions is a critical conceptual step. Helping children to make this move should be part of our teaching.

3 Challenge can be introduced by giving children a range of possible explanatory factors (and some red herrings) and asking them to rank or link them. As a collaborative exercise this should generate discussion in the struggle to come to agreement. It is good to place emphasis on creating a climate for debate in the classroom, to try to turn questions into problems to solve.

4 History co-ordinators could take the curriculum map of topics across the year groups and see how they could map on to it the opportunities that children have for developing ideas about 'evidence' or 'change'. Or perhaps teachers could set themselves the task of gathering evidence of children's understanding of 'interpretation' to develop ideas about what progression might look like.

These suggestions are in the spirit of small-scale action research but this kind of undertaking would be an opportunity for professional development.

To answer my own opening question - tick box approaches have not come to dominate in primary history. Let's make sure they don't by working on approaches that have the potential to yield some insight about learning.

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