

NUFFIELD PRIMARY HISTORY



VICTORIAN BRITAIN: DOWN THE MINE

TEACHERS' NOTES

In these sessions we see the power of story to give children a key into the past, to engage them imaginatively and to provide them with a mental picture of an historical situation. The contextual knowledge and insight gained through the story enable them to understand the historical sources we turn to next. The subject is child labour in Victorian mines; the class are able to identify with these children, of a similar age to themselves, who tell their own stories.

The children's speaking and listening skills are extended through both sessions, where questioning, hypothesising and discussion play a central role.

Year group/class

Year 3, mixed gender and ability; 32 in the class.

Teaching time

Two morning sessions, lasting approximately one hour each.

Learning objectives

For the children to:

- be introduced to a past situation through a fictional story, then to test the story's credibility by examining relevant evidence;
- use authentic historical sources to ask and answer questions about the past;
- build up knowledge and understanding of an historical situation through a range of sources and methods: story, pictures, text, experiment, simulation;

- avoid sentimental stereotyping by investigating different interpretations of the work of children in the mines;
- develop their oracy skills and confidence through questioning, speculating, public speaking and open discussion.

Key question

- What were conditions for Victorian child labourers in the mines really like?

Resources

The story of Lotte

Pictures from the 1842 Parliamentary Commission's Report on conditions in the mines (also an OHT of each picture)

Written evidence of children working in the mines, to the above Commission

OHT of mine steward's evidence to the Commission

newspaper picture depicting child labour today [not supplied here]

Cardboard tunnel, 26 inches high

Trolley, filled with 174 kg of weights, books, children, etc.

Role cards for Members of Parliament

The teaching [lesson 1]

Episode 1

Focus: Storytelling as a medium for giving information, for providing a context and for engaging the children's imagination.

We told the fictional, but possible, story of the orphaned Lotte going to work down the mines. (You could play it on audio tape, but a story is more powerful if you tell it yourself.)

Bring in a lump of coal to show the children. We didn't, but should have, as many children today have never seen it.

The two connections with the children's own lives were:

- Lotte was about their age
- fear of the dark.

These factors acted as keys opening a door into the lives of people in the past.

Episode 2

Focus: Hotseating to explore the story's characters and their behaviour in more depth.

We told the children that they could now interview any of the characters in the story.

We gave the children a few minutes to discuss, in pairs, who they wanted to question, and what they would ask.

The next twenty minutes saw John in the hot seat, becoming in turn the mine owner Mr Akenshaw; his housekeeper; the mines inspector; and Lotte herself.

The children asked thoughtful, moral questions and returned to their seats with new insights into the characters' attitudes and behaviour.

Episode 3

Focus: Considering possibilities; developing speaking skills.

Afterwards, we asked the children: What do you think happened to Lotte next?

They discussed their ideas in pairs, then volunteers came to the front to give their versions of what might have happened.

Many of these children come from broken or disturbed homes, and their wish-fulfilment endings were heartbreaking. They had Mr Akenshaw adopting Lotte; the housekeeper adopting Lotte; a grandmother appearing to take her away; even her parents appearing, miraculously not dead after all. Only two pairs thought she would probably be sent back down the mine the next day.

The teaching [Lesson 2]

Episode 1

Focus: Reading pictures as text, using pictures as evidence.

We reminded the class about Lotte, then asked: Could Lotte's story be true? How can we find out? Well, real commissioners (rather like the inspector of the story) did go round the kingdom's coal mines, interviewing people who worked in them. They recorded, in words and pictures, what they found.

We have copies of the report they wrote for parliament, but first we'll look at some of their pictures of people working in the mines. We gave out the pictures, one per pair of children (we had only 10 pictures, so some pairs had the same one as each other).

We set the children two tasks: examine your picture closely, and write down three things it tells you about working in the mines. Also write down three questions you would like answered. Work quickly – only a few minutes allowed.

After five minutes we pulled the class together to discuss the pictures as a whole group. We put each picture up on the overhead projector in turn, and asked the pair/s whose picture it was to come up to the front and point out on the OHT what they had observed. We encouraged the rest of the class to contribute too.

This detailed investigation of each picture worked well, with all the children participating and adding their interpretations of the pictures. They immediately identified the trappers who kept the doors as being like Lotte. After initial sniggering, we had a good discussion about why the miner hewing coal was working naked, with excellent ideas from the children.

Episode 2

Focus: Answering questions from the evidence; making connections; understanding the complexity of situations.

Now for the questions the children had written down: we collected one question from each pair, and recorded them on the board.

- What sort of things did they eat?/What was the food like?
- Did they like it?
- Why did they have a lamp? (Reference to Lotte – she didn't have one)
- Did they work for money?
- Was it gassy down there?
- What was it like in the mine?
- Was it very hard work?
- Did they miss their friends?
- Is it very dirty in the coal mine?
- Did they cry sometimes because they missed their families?
- Was it scary?
- Did they want to go home?
- How long did they work?

How can we find the answers? We can't actually talk to the children working in the mines, but we can read what they told the commissioners. So, let's look at what the children themselves say about their work, children like Lotte .

We gave each pair one Victorian child's evidence, differentiating by handing good readers the longer, more difficult accounts. We warned that these children's language was different from ours, and we may not understand all the words, but we'll look hard to try to find the answers to our questions.

The children beavered away for five minutes, while we circulated, helping the strugglers.

Before discussing the children's questions, we asked the children to tell us the hard words in their accounts. We pooled them on the board and talked through their meaning. Some words they could infer, through having met them in context in Lotte's story. Most were jobs – trappers, hurriers, riddlers, hewers, or getters. How many different kinds of work were there in the mines?

Now we returned to the children's questions. Were any answers to be found in the Victorian children's accounts? We went through the questions one by one, asking each pair if their child's evidence could provide any answers. So, for example, whose Victorian child mentioned whether s/he was scared? We collected and discussed the range of answers that emerged.

When it came to how long the children worked underground, we drew up a timetable of our children's typical day and compared it with that of the mining children. They were horrified at the long hours worked.

Many answers surprised the class, for instance that not all the children disliked their work. The picture was more complicated than they'd thought.

Episode 3

Focus: Shared reading, non-fiction text. Testing the evidence experimentally.

This led nicely into our next question: Just how hard was children's work underground? We have the evidence of a mine steward; he tells the commissioners what the children did each day.

We put up the OHT of the steward's evidence and read and discussed it together with the children. What does he tell us about the working conditions of mine children that they don't tell us themselves? What questions does his evidence raise about Victorian attitudes to children?

Usefully, he gives us exact weights, distances and tunnel heights, so we can try out for ourselves how far the children had to push the corves (trucks) of coal, how heavy the corves were and how small were the spaces in which the children worked.

We brought out the cardboard tunnel, and all the children had a go at crawling through it. Much hilarity, but also sober faces when we asked if they'd like to sit in there all day.

Next we wheeled in the loaded trolley. We'd not been able to reach the 174 kg with available maths weights and books, so lifted two children on top to make up the weight. The children tried pushing the trolley/corf, and could not move it alone, despite the smooth floor.

Next we measured the distance the Victorian children had to push each corf, and a team of children pushed the loaded trolley the 250 yards.

So, did we agree with the steward that the children's work was not hard? Could they push a heavy corf that distance 16 to 20 times a day, as the Victorian children did? 'No way, miss!'

Episode 4

Focus: Comparing now and then. Seeing the global picture.

Such exploitation of children couldn't happen today, could it? The children felt safely removed from the world of 1842.

In answer, we showed them a picture of a labouring Pakistani toddler carrying concrete blocks – reproduced in a recent newspaper. A sobering thought to end with, but a valuable insight that British law does not apply globally; and that we do not live in the best of all possible worlds compared with people in the past.

Episode 5

Focus: Simulation – a parliamentary debate on the issue of child labour. Citizenship skills – formulating arguments, taking turns, introduction to civic processes.

Finally, we moved into role as Members of Parliament debating the commissioners' report on conditions in the mines.

We gave each child a role card saying: 'MP FOR [name of constituency]'. Each card had additional information on the back, e.g. the MP for Wakefield had: 'You own two coal mines'.

I controlled the debate in role as the Speaker, and appointed Ellie, the most confident girl in the class, as Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel.

We gave the MPs a few minutes to discuss their roles and what attitudes they would bring to the debate. (This was too short a time – they needed longer to think about their roles and attitudes. Next time we'll give the parliamentary debate a session all to itself).

The Speaker formally opened the debate on the commissioners' report. The session was soon in full swing, with much waving of papers in a

bid to catch the Speaker's eye. When they were called on to speak, the children stood and solemnly gave their opinions.

The 'House' finally voted to ban all children under the age of twelve from working underground.

Afterwards we talked about what the Parliament of 1843 had decided. The 1843 Act was similar to the children's proposals. Smug satisfaction all round.

Learning outcomes

The children:

- used authentic historical sources to ask and answer questions about the past.
- built up knowledge and understanding of an historical situation through a range of sources and methods: story, pictures, text, experiment, simulation.
- investigated and discussed different interpretations of the work of children in the mines.
- developed their oracy skills and confidence through questioning, speculating, public speaking and open discussion.
- considered the credibility of events in a story, and investigated the characters' feelings, behaviour and relationships (NLS, 3:3, T 4 & 5).
- extended their vocabulary (NLS, 3:1, W 13: to collect new words from reading and work in other subjects; W 14: to infer the meaning of unknown words from context).

Nuffield Primary History project

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