

NUFFIELD PRIMARY HISTORY



THE MYSTERY OF THE MISSING CAKE

This Key Stage 2 lesson was taught to a small class of Year 6 children in a school in Birmingham. It centred round a mystery, the theft of a cake in an imaginary land where characters from children's nursery rhymes lived – Nursery Rhyme Land. The focus was on stimulating and developing the children's skills of enquiry, particularly the raising of relevant questions and the evaluation of evidence.

The lesson formed part of an enrichment programme of 'intelligence-in-action', based on Shayer and Adey's Cognitive Acceleration in Science Education [CASE] project, which had a profound impact on the quality of pupils' thinking. See www.primaryhistory.org 'Cognitive Acceleration in History Education [CACHE]' in the Leading History section.

During the lesson I planned to use several factors involved in cognitive acceleration to challenge the class:

- concrete preparation, by giving the children information and procedures for solving the problem
- cognitive conflict, by providing the class with contradictory clues
- social learning, in the form of collaborative group work
- metacognition, by asking the children to rationalise and to think explicitly about their questioning
- guided performance, with me directing the children and working closely with them at every stage of the investigation.

To introduce the mystery I used the 'Magic History' child detectives, Jane and Sam, who travel back in time to solve history mysteries. (See *The Magic History of Roman Britain* on www.primaryhistory.org.) In this lesson, they are sent to Nursery Rhyme Land. Without this device, the Year 6 class were bound to sneer at being asked to engage with the characters from nursery rhymes.

Year group and timing

Year 6, mixed gender and ability, 21 in the class.
Time: approximately 1 hour and 10 minutes.

Key question

Who stole the cake?

Learning objectives

For the children to:

- Have their thinking stimulated and developed through engaging in a challenging enquiry (accelerated cognition)
- Exercise the historical skills of questioning, reasoning, hypothesising and evaluating evidence
- Work collaboratively to solve a mystery, engaging in social learning
- Realise that we do not always have sufficient information (clues to the past) to reach a conclusion.

Resources

Several traditional nursery rhyme books, containing the characters the class were to meet in Nursery Rhyme Land.

Sets of clue cards, one per group of 4 or 5 children.

Several sheets of A1 size coloured paper

NOTE: Copyright restrictions prevent us from identifying the actual books and characters used in the lesson, so we have substituted characters from nursery rhymes instead. What matters is the thinking involved, not the characters as such.

The teaching

Episode 1

Focus: Storytelling – introducing the mystery.

I told the story of Sam and Jane and their ghastly history teacher Miss Woodhead: Sam and Jane's Uncle John had to attend a meeting at school owing to his niece and nephew's rudeness to Miss Woodhead. That very evening, Uncle John sent Sam and Jane back in time to Nursery Rhyme Land. When the two children arrived they encountered Little Miss Muffet, who was in tears over the theft of a special birthday cake she had baked for Jack. She had put the cake on a table outside the door to cool. While it was there, several of the other Nursery Rhyme Land characters had walked past the house. When Little Miss Muffet went to collect the cake, she found it gone.

The two curious children agreed to help Little Miss Muffet to fathom the mystery of the missing cake.

Episode 2

Focus: Sharing books – re-acquaintance with the characters.

After this gripping opener, I gave out a pile of nursery rhyme books containing the characters involved in the mystery, one per pair of children. I gave the class five minutes to read the books and re-acquaint themselves with these characters

from their earlier childhoods. The children were delighted, keenly perusing the books and sharing nostalgic memories and forgotten characters with one another.

I now explained that the class was going to help Sam and Jane to solve the mystery of the missing cake.

Episode 3

Focus: Forming groups and explaining the task.

I told the children to get pens and paper ready to take notes. While the children did this, I collected the nursery rhyme books, leaving no distractions, before moving on to the organisation of the groups.

I divided the class into groups of either four or five, one group per table. All the children could face the centre of the room, to ensure they could be fully involved in whole-class discussion, yet also work collaboratively in their groups.

Once all the children were in position, I explained the task. I told them which characters had passed by Little Miss Muffet's house on the day of the theft. This encouraged the children to think about who may have stolen the cake and why.

Episode 4

Focus: Using clue cards to pursue the enquiry.

After giving the verbal clues, I distributed a set of written clue cards to each group. The cards contained information about each of the characters who had passed Miss Muffet's house that day – their personality traits and evidence of their whereabouts on the day. The cards also described events from the story.

The task: Each group had to share the cards among themselves and become familiar with all the characters. Then they had to make a story out of the cards, showing in chronological order what they thought was the sequence of events in the lead-up to the mysterious theft of the cake.

Episode 5

Focus: Assigning group roles and sequencing events.

Before the children started on the task, I asked each group to ensure they had a designated reporter, who would report their reasoning and findings back to the remainder of the class. Each group also had to choose a group leader and an observer. I explained what each role involved and gave the groups just 30 seconds to assign the roles – amazingly they were all successfully allocated within the time limit.

To give the children ownership of the task and a sense of responsibility, I asked the groups how long they felt they would need to sequence the cards. The children set their own time limit of 5 minutes, thus directing themselves quickly into the task with minimal fuss.

Each group functioned differently: some children sat on the floor to order the cards, as they realised that in the short time they had available this was the best way to view all the cards and re-arrange them effectively. This idea was subsequently taken up by the majority of the class. The budding historians, through much group discussion and moving about of cards, speedily completed their brief.

The group leader's role was effective, as throughout the episode each leader kept his or her group members on task, reminding them of the objectives, and often posing questions to make the others re-think or explain their choices.

With the final 30 seconds looming, I warned the children that time was running out. This galvanised the children, who scurried around making final modifications to the sequence of their stories.

Episode 6

Focus: Sharing the groups' versions of events.

For a focused and swift change-over, I instructed the reporter from each group to gather up all the clue cards in order and bring them to the carpet, where I had placed four chairs, facing out to the rest of the class. The four reporters sat down on the chairs and prepared to deliver their groups' versions of the chain of events leading up to the theft of the cake.

Before each reporter's turn, I coached him or her in public speaking. I encouraged them to relax, take deep breaths and try to tell the story rather than read it from the cards. Most of the reporters were quite anxious about speaking and reading in front of the whole class, and it took several attempts before I had them bellowing their stories out to the class with an air of confidence, scarcely looking at the cards for support. I egged them on constantly and congratulated them on their efforts, giving each child a sense of pride and determination.

After this, the groups buoyantly returned to their tables and waited in anticipation for the next task.

Episode 7

Focus: Raising questions to help solve the mystery.

I asked the eager class: 'What is the first thing we have to do to solve a mystery?' Many enthusiastic responses filled the room, from children who had certainly been watching too many Inspector Morse and other detective dramas on television! After a little coaxing, the children eventually concluded that asking questions was fundamental to solving any mystery.

From this enthusiastic discussion the next task evolved effortlessly. I provided large A1 sheets of coloured paper, and directed the children to write down questions that would help solve the mystery.

First, they were to discuss what they would want to know, and why.

Next, these ideas had to be formed into five questions they would ask to gain further information about the mystery.

While the groups worked on their questions, I circulated to ensure that all the children were clear about what they were doing. The class beavered away in their groups, and created sets of very impressive and thought-provoking questions to help solve the crime.

Episode 8

Focus: Sharing questions; provoking thought and debate.

After about 15 minutes I gathered the children on the carpet to share their questions and raise more thoughts and debate among the groups. We scribed each group's questions on a large whiteboard and discussed each one as it was put up.

The children were becoming very animated about the continuing exploration of different possibilities. This created an anticipation and impatience in the children to re-group and make their final judgements.

Episode 9

Focus: The verdicts – providing explanations.

Back in their groups, the class were given 20 minutes for the final thinking activity – reaching a verdict. Within the groups children took on different roles: some led, some watched and interjected where they felt a good point needed to be made, while others stuck closely to the role they had initially been given. Whichever way the groups operated, the dynamics were good and all the children were focused and serious about the task. They arranged cards and made numerous changes right up to the 2-minute warning and then the final whistle.

At this point I asked for all the resources to be collected and delivered back to me. The children darted around, collecting all necessary items and ensuring each reporter was clear about his/her group's final story.

When everyone was in position, I reminded the children of the need to be confident and animated speakers, and how public and private speaking were completely different activities. Each group's reporter now took a turn to re-tell the events leading up to the theft of the cake. The children were confident and clear about their reasoning. The activities throughout the morning had given them the skills to consider the motivation of each character and the grounds for him or her possibly committing the crime.

Their explanations were all very well organised and very detailed, encompassing a range of different rationales for the theft, all of which were equally convincing.

Episode 10

Focus: Debating the evidence.

‘What actual evidence was there in this case?’ I enquired. The children responded, firmly sporting their new history detective hats: ‘NONE!’

We discussed the importance of a process of elimination when solving any crime, and how the problem with history is that there is not always enough evidence, so we cannot always know who was guilty.

Of course, a lack of hard proof to pin the guilt on one of the characters was not good enough for a group of eleven-year-olds, who were already avidly discussing all sorts of new possibilities.

I just looked on and smiled, knowing that the session had been a huge success – the children’s interest and motivation was that of a group of devoted young historians.

Learning outcomes

The children:

- Were motivated and stimulated through engaging in a challenging enquiry that accelerated their thinking (cognition)
- Exercised the historical skills of sequencing, questioning, reasoning, hypothesising and evaluating evidence
- Worked collaboratively on an investigation
- Learnt and practised the techniques of public speaking
- Realised that we do not always have sufficient information (clues to the past) to reach a conclusion.

Nuffield Primary History project

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