2021 cohort

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Teaching Historical Empathy

Introduction

If history is 'one damned thing after another' (a quote attributed to the historian Arnold Toynbee), a key job of the history teacher is to help students understand why each 'damned thing' happened in the first place. Traditional history teaching has relied on the concept of 'causation' to teach students how previous events or thematic influences like economics or politics contributed to major historical events occurring.

However, while causation is vital for mastering history, it does not necessarily help students understand the mindset or attitudes of people from the past. Teaching pupils to understand the perspectives of past people and societies has been suggested as a more holistic and ambitious strategy to promote greater understanding of the past. Since the introduction of the Schools Council History 13–16 Project in 1972, numerous educational theorists and practitioners have argued that pupils may be able to generate more sophisticated and in-depth explanations of the actions of historic individuals or societies if they are taught the overarching political, socio-economic, and religious ideas of past societies. This may be particularly valuable when studying topics which expose young people today to historical actors whose lives are very different to their own. Beyond the history classroom, some scholars have suggested that helping students generate 'empathetic connections' to the lives of others could promote more democratic and community-driven citizens of tomorrow.

While the theoretical benefits of an empathy-centred pedagogy are meaningful, the concept has been criticised for a lack of clarity and/or intellectual rigour. The difficulty in assessing or measuring skills like 'perspective-taking' or 'empathy' led to the concept falling out of favour in UK education. While the last 10 years has seen a renewed interest in empathy-based pedagogies, the evidence basis behind such pedagogies remains limited.

My project aimed to replicated the methods of one recent study into empathy by applying it in my specific school setting: a Year 7 mixed-ability class in a school in South Birmingham. My aim was to test whether the proposed pedagogy of this study could improve this class' ability to take the perspective of Medieval people who lived through the Black Death pandemic in the 14th century. By doing so, I hoped to uncover whether the pedagogy of the original study (which was taught to 15-16-year-old students in the Netherlands) could be applied to students in different contexts and to different historical topics. I also wanted to evaluate whether lessons which focussed on perspective-taking added value to an already saturated Key Stage Three National History Curriculum.

Literature Review

The National Curriculum for history contains 6 broad aims which pupils should achieve by the end of Key Stage Three. One of these aims is that pupils will 'gain historical perspective' and be able to understand the context of a range of different cultures and time periods across history. However, numerous researchers have highlighted that pupils routinely struggle to contextualise the past because they view people's actions and beliefs in history through a 'presentist' lens (for a summary of this research see Huijigen et al., 2018: 410-411). This tendency presents an ethical and an intellectual problem: when confronted with actions or beliefs which they do not understand, pupils may adopt condescending attitudes towards people in the past (e.g. "they were stupid") because they cannot understand their actions; moreover, pupils may lack the ability to produce complex explanations for why people in the past acted the way they did. As Huijigen et al. (2018) summarise, while this problem means teachers should endeavour to explicitly teach students how to perform historical contextualization, there are few proven pedagogic strategies for achieving this.

One established but controversial strategy for helping pupils gain historical perspective is encouraging pupils to establish an empathetic connection with people in the past. In the 1960s-1970s, the Schools Council History Project in the UK proposed a history curriculum which encouraged pupils to make explicit identification with people in the past in order to develop their ability to analyse the past as well as create more 'humanely educated' citizens (Endacott and Brooks, 2018). A wide range of social educational theorists have debated the merits of this approach. According to Yeager et al. (1998), Riley (1998), and Foster (1999), teaching empathy does not mean encouraging pupils towards sentimentality or producing 'imaginative' fiction, but to use evidence from primary and secondary evidence to reconstruct the worldviews of people from history. Emphasising empathy as a historical skill or competency does negate the criticism from affect theorists that sentimental readings of literature reproduce unequal power structures (for a summary of these criticisms see Jurecic, 2011). Nevertheless, many educational theorists still view empathy remains a problematic concept because it requires pupils to understand the context of a historical period as well as self-awareness of their own presentist perspective (see VanSledright, 2011). Others also cite the difficulty in measuring and assessing a pupil's ability to empathise (for a summary see Harris & Foreman-Peck, 2004).

While these challenges led many teachers in the UK to abandon using empathy within the classroom, Lee and Shemlit (2011) rightly question whether 'empathy' should be completely discarded or whether the right pedagogic and assessment strategies can help the concept 'come out of the closet'. In the last decade, other researchers have also re-examined empathy or associated concepts like 'perspective-taking'. several qualitative and mixed-methods studies have examined how teachers and pupils understand empathy in order to explore the implications on teaching the concept. Using interviews with teachers and observation of their lessons, Cunningham (2009) explored how teachers' subtly differing notions of the definition and purpose of empathy had implications on how they taught and assessed the concept. Bartelds et al. (2020) also conducted a mixed-methods study, including interviews with teachers and pupils, which explored these groups' understandings of empathy. They concluded that teachers need 'to teach historical empathy more explicitly' (2020: 546). These studies highlight a far more malleable and nuanced definition of empathy compared to the more straightforward definitions provided by either supporters or critics among educational theorists. these studies generate valuable further questions about using empathy in classrooms, although they provide less clarity about the practical implications on classroom practise. Moreover Bartelds et al. recognise that their study was selective in the age of pupils they interviewed (16-17 years old) and the interview questions they used.

Other researchers have examined more purely pedagogic techniques for teaching the concept. Some of these proposed methods, such as Volk (2013) and Benger (2020), appear promising but are better suited to higher education (in the case of Volk) or may not be easily replicated to

many subjects in the curriculum (in the case of Benger). In two separate articles, Huijgen, van de Grift, van Boxtel, and Holthuis (2017; 2018) utilised a mixed methods research project which examined a sequence of lessons taught to 15-16 year old Dutch pupils. The project examined a pedagogic technique for promoting the pupils' ability to perform what the researchers term 'Historical Perspective Taking' (HPT), a historical competency which encompasses awareness of one's own presentist perspective; demonstrating historical empathy; and the ability to reconstruct the historical context in which people lived. The researchers' proposed 'pedagogic technique' encompasses explicitly teaching these competencies to pupils alongside normal subject content across a sequence of 4-8 lessons. In the study, pupils received pre- and post-study assessments to test their HPT abilities, while a control group, who learned the subject content using more traditional pedagogic techniques, took the same assessments. The study found the experimental group outperformed the control group in the post-experiment assessments. As a concept, HPT arguably represents a less controversial concept than a pure focus on empathy, given there is emphasis on cognitive skills alongside 'emotional' skills. More promising is that the sequence of skills-based lessons proposed in these articles could feasibly be replicated across numerous topics across the history curriculum. The researchers highlight that their studies were highly selective in terms of the test pupils' age (15-16) and context (Dutch secondary schools). Nevertheless, these limitations present an opportunity to explore whether a similar 'pedagogic technique' can yield success in UK secondary schools with younger pupils.

Methodology

As outlined in the Literature Review, a project carried out among 15–16 year-old pupils in the Netherlands, Huijgen et al. (2018) developed a pedagogic strategy to improve pupils' ability to perform historical contextualisation and analyse the perspectives of historical agents. My project sought to uncover whether their findings can be successfully replicated when applied to younger pupils in the context of a mixed-secondary school in South Birmingham.

The project spanned a sequence of 3 lessons on the topic of the Black Death and Medieval medicine which involved a Year Seven classes I taught. This class had 25 pupils. My decision to focus on Year Seven pupils was partly due to the curriculum these classes are covering: anecdotal evidence from history teachers in England claims that pupils find it particularly difficult to engage with topics from the medieval period (Dawson, 2018). Secondly, I wanted to explore whether the age of pupils influences their ability to perform historical contextualisation and perspective-taking.

The project consisted of a baseline assessment to test pupils' ability to perform historical perspective-taking. This was followed by a sequence of 3 to 4 lessons which replicated the structure and sequence of Huijgen's study. A final assessment then tested the impact of these lessons on the pupils' skills. An improvement in pupils' scores in the post-assessment compared to the baseline would indicate the success of the pedagogy.

This project utilised a mixed-methods approach to data gathering and analysis. As mentioned, the measurement tools for this project consisted of a baseline and final assessment. The use of a baseline and final assessment replicates the approach used in the original study (Huijgen et al., 2018). Both tests included 5 short primary source extracts. These were followed by multiple-choice questions, with space for pupils to explain their decision-making for each question. This sought to uncover how well pupils were able to explain the decisions or actions taken by people in the past. By using multiple choice questions, the test ensured that a pupil's writing ability would not impact their score. Nevertheless, encouraging pupils to explain their reasoning has two benefits: it provides some mitigation against pupils trying to 'guess the right answer' by randomly selecting a multiple-choice answer; it also provided opportunities to qualitatively analyse pupils' thinking and decision-making for each question.

Pupils scores in both assessments were analysed to compare individual- and whole-class progression. In addition, longer-form answers produced by pupils in the tests and during learning activities during lessons were qualitatively analysed to provide a more nuanced exploration of pupils' thinking before, during, and after the sequence of lessons. According to Huijgen et al., a limitation of their original study was the lack of qualitative data and analysis compared to quantitative data. In this way, I hoped to address this limitation in the original study by including more qualitative data.

Ethics and Data Protection

I carried out my research project within my Y7 class's normal timetable and curriculum topics. This ensured that pupils did not miss topics which other Y7 pupils in this school were learning.

All pupils in the classes completed the pre- and post-assessments and the learning activities in the sequence of lessons. Nevertheless, while all pupils in the classes completed the same learning activities, I recruited pupils who were willing to share their data from their pre- and post-assessments in addition to any classwork they completed during the project. Pupils who did not consent still participated in lessons (and hopefully benefited from the research project) but were not included in the study.

To ensure transparency, I introduced my project to the class before the study began, explaining its aims and purposes and how they could help me. I gave pupils a participant information sheet and permission form to take home for their parents/carers to sign. To increase the chance of buy-in, I emailed pupils' parents/carers to inform them of the project, the value of including their child in the study, and allowed them to ask me any questions about the project.

The baseline and final assessments for the project were completed by pupils as hard copies on test papers. These were collected and stored in a locked staff office on the school premises. When transcribed into Excel, pupils' names were replaced with a randomised number (e.g. Pupils A, Pupil B etc.) which did not correlate with the alphabetic order of surnames in the class, age, gender, or any other characteristic. By assigning a randomised letter to all pupils, I could measure each individual's progress across the sequence of lesson by comparing the differences between their pre- and post-assessment. At the same time, I ensured that this data could not be used to identify a specific pupil.

Where pupils gave consent for their answers to be used for qualitative analysis, their work was pseudonymised in this final report.

All data that was digitally recorded during this project was stored on a password protected school laptop. When I transcribed this data, I did not transcribe pupils' names – only their test scores. Additionally, all hard copies of pre- and post-assessments were securely disposed of at the conclusion of the project.

All classwork completed during the sequence of lessons was recorded by pupils in their own exercise books. The data in these books is protected in accordance with the data protection policies of my current school. At the end of the school year pupils are encouraged to take their exercise books home for revision purposes. Any books which pupils do not take home are shredded.

Results

My results indicate mixed outcomes about whether my series of lessons have improved year 7 pupils' ability to perform the skill of historical perspective-taking. The qualitative data from lesson activities indicated that pupils were able to understand the perspective of medieval people living through the Black Death by applying contextual knowledge of medieval medicine and culture. However, the statistical results from my pre- and post-tests indicate that the lessons had no significant improvement on pupils' ability to apply this skill to other historical contexts and case studies.

Over the course of 3 lessons, pupils in a Year 7 class examined the history of medieval medicine and the Black Death pandemic through an enquiry question focussed on why medieval people used preventions and treatments for disease which seem alien to a modern perspective (e.g. whipping themselves to prevent God 'punishing' them with disease). These lessons replicated a lesson structure from an existing research intervention (Huijgen et. al., 2018). It taught learners the socio-economic and cultural context of the time period in order to encourage them to understand the actions and perspectives of people from this period. Samples from pupils' written work in these lessons demonstrated that most pupils were able to understand and apply learning about the key medical theories and socio-cultural context which influenced medieval healthcare. A minority of pupils were able to progress to more sophisticated understanding of the topic which showed a clear ability to empathise with medieval people living through the Black Death. To take two examples of pupils' written work.

- 'I don't think people were "just stupid". The only logical explanations at that time were based on religion and they didn't have much education because of the church'
- 'The NHS was not invented in medieval times as it was only made in 1947…. The government did not care if the people were sick and also you had to pay lots to have a chance of surviving. Mony [sic] was one of the most important things as you needed it for health, education, and tax. Most people could not afford it.'

When asked about the importance of having empathy with people from the past, one pupil answered:

- 'Because it gives us a connection and understanding and we can compare it to the present or future.'

While the qualitative evidence suggested that the lesson intervention improved pupils' historical perspective-taking in the specific subject they studied, the quantitative data from the pre- and post-tests did not indicate any significant improvement in their ability to apply this skill to other historical contexts. The pre- and post-tests (which replicated the assessments of the Huijgen et. al., study) were a set of 5 multiple choice questions, with each question related to a short historical case study about something which may appear unusual or immoral to a modern perspective. Crucially, these case studies were unrelated to the Black Death or medieval medicine, as the assessments aimed to measure pupils ability to apply the skill of historical perspective-taking to other historical contexts.

Student	**Baseline Test (max. 5 marks)**	**Final Test (max. 5 marks)**
A	1	2
B	3	4
C	3	1

D	4	4
E	0	0
F	1	1
G	3	4
H	4	5
I	1	2
J	3	3
K	3	2
L	1	2
M	0	3
N	3	3
O	3	1
P	2	5
Q	0	2
Average	2.058824	2.588235
T-Test	0.143627	

The results from the two tests indicate that the class average increased by 0.5 'marks' between the two tests. This may indicate a slight improvement in the class' ability to perform historical perspective-taking. However, as the T-Test score indicates, the improvement was not sufficient to disprove the null hypothesis. Moreover, reflecting on individual pupils shows some pupils' scores declined between the two tests, while 5 pupils scores remained the same. The limitations on both assessments (both being only 5 questions) have to be taken into account for the small increase, which reflected the limited time in lessons to conduct the tests. Longer assessments may have yielded a greater range of results from the students. Nevertheless, the data does not indicate that learners' general skills in historical perspective-taking improved.

Conclusions

Although the results from this intervention indicate the limited impact of the intervention, they do raise tentative conclusions and questions which warrant further investigation. The disparity between the qualitative and quantitative data may indicate that in order for Year 7 pupils to perform historical perspective-taking effectively, they require a curriculum which explicitly teaches the full socio-economic and cultural context of a historical period. The pupils in my project were able to engage empathetically with the society and people they had been studying. However, when presented with other case studies which they were unfamiliar with, as was the case in the two assessments, they resorted to analysing these examples using their own modern-day perspective.

This suggests that pupils of this age may have the cognitive and emotional capacity to engage in historical perspective-taking, but may be limited by their breadth of their knowledge (particularly the context of different societies across history) compared to older students. An implication of this would be that teachers should avoid asking younger learners from performing any 'empathetic' learning activities (e.g. 'write a letter from the perspective of a medieval peasant') without first teaching the full historical context of the society they are studying. As this lesson design shows, this may require several lessons in a given topic. Teachers, therefore, must carefully consider how and when they integrate these activities into a scheme of work if they want to improve their pupils' ability to take the perspective and engage empathetically with people from the past (and indeed the present) whose lives are different to their own.