

TRR 16: How do primary school teachers challenge more able pupils in History?

STACEY JENKINS

Background/Context

Learning is regarded as an active and constructive process and children display different speeds of development from an early age (Eysenck & Keane, 2005; Mackintosh, 1998). Within a mixed ability classroom, the most generic strategy for day to day work is differentiation. However, it has been argued that many teachers do not specifically cater for, nor push, the needs of those who display advanced developmental characteristics (Fisher, 2000); also referred to as 'More Able (MA)' pupils.

The Department for Education (2013) identified that schools were not prioritising the needs of MA pupils; they defined MA pupils as those who achieve the highest National Curriculum level at the end of Key Stage Two. This demonstrates the necessity of intervention from as early as Key Stage One (KS1). When challenging these children, Fisher (2000) stated that teachers simply provide more work which generates the same answer and therefore demotivates the child. This highlights the importance of the emphasis on promoting thinking and reasoning in the National Curriculum for those children within KS1 and KS2 (Fisher, 2000). It is imperative that children do not just simply learn facts; they should be able to apply their knowledge in different contexts by analysing and evaluating their own work (Bloom, 1956); also known as 'Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS)'. From this, children should become aware of their own cognitive thoughts and processes, known as 'metacognition', and should therefore be stimulated and challenged when engaged in independent learning (Eysenck & Keane, 2005). There are three aspects to metacognition: self-awareness; metacognition knowledge and metacognition control (Porter, 2002). These aspects involve different thinking skills such as the ability to ask questions; finding out more information, reasoning (Who? What? Why?); and thinking of new ideas (Fisher, 2000).



Figure 1: How to challenge more able

When challenging MA pupils, there are different methods and strategies to use within the classroom (Doran & Cameron, 1995). The chart below shows the variety of approaches used within planning; classroom practice; and marking and feedback.



Research Questions:

Based on the literature review conducted, three key questions will be explored:

1. How are more able pupils challenged through the use of planning?
2. How are more able pupils challenged through the use of activities?
3. How are more able pupils challenged through the use of marking and feedback?

Existing evidence / Literature

As shown above, historical skills can be broken down into three different elements; historical knowledge; historical understanding and enquiry skills.

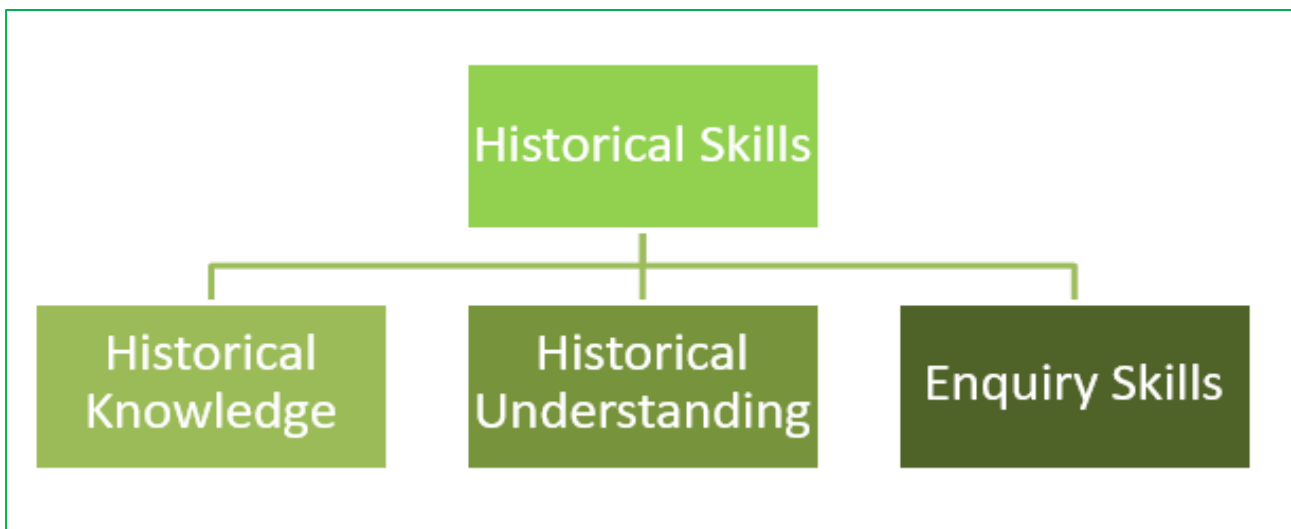


Figure 2: Historical Skills

The table shows the difference between children who are working at a higher level within history, often labelled as ‘higher ability’, compared to those labelled as ‘more able’ (Lancashire County Council, 2017).

The tool was created in order to help teachers to cross reference their pupils and therefore identify the pupils who they believe are more able within history. The document provided by Lancashire County Council breaks down the elements within history, as shown above, by explaining the different traits shown by the more able pupils within the subject.

HIGHER ABILITY LEARNER	MORE ABLE LEARNER
Knows the answers	Asks the questions
Is interested	Is highly curious
Has good ideas	Enjoys ‘silly’ ideas
Is top in the group	Is beyond the group
Accepts mistakes and learns from them	Avoids uncertainty and fearful of errors
Copies accurately	Creates a new design
Enjoys peers	Prefers adults, frustrated with other pupils

How are more able pupils challenged through the use of planning?

KEY STAGE ONE:

An analysis of planning within key stage one has shown that teachers clearly differentiate history lessons based on the ability of the pupils. One example demonstrated the use of a historical skill for a learning objective and, for the more able pupils, a more challenging task was set; this was focused on chronology. They were required to choose the most important five images linked to explorers and then explain the reasons for their choices; this therefore shows that the higher order thinking skills of the more able have been taken into account planning more challenging content.

KEY STAGE TWO:

Similar to planning within key stage two, an analysis has shown that differentiation is the key focus when challenging the more able pupils. One plan, in particular, shows how children are required to answer questions but then also further explain and justify their answers. The further explanation therefore allows the child to draw upon their pre-existing knowledge of the topic.

WHOLE SCHOOL

Overall, the planning of history shows teachers are considering the needs of the more able by differentiating the activities within the lessons. However, the planning documents fail to highlight the key questioning for the more able which therefore allows them to access higher order thinking. Additionally, it was also established that there was a clear inconsistency between the planning formats used across both key stages. Therefore, it would be necessary to create a planning document which clearly separates the different abilities of the children and allows space for the teacher to prepare challenging questions for the more able.

The findings from the planning analysis link to the interview conducted with the key stage two teacher; they highlighted a potential barrier to challenging the more able is their lack of understanding of a topic and understanding which questions to ask the children.

How are more able pupils challenged through the use of activities?

ENQUIRY MAT

At the start of a new topic within a year four class, children were presented with an 'enquiry mat' to complete.

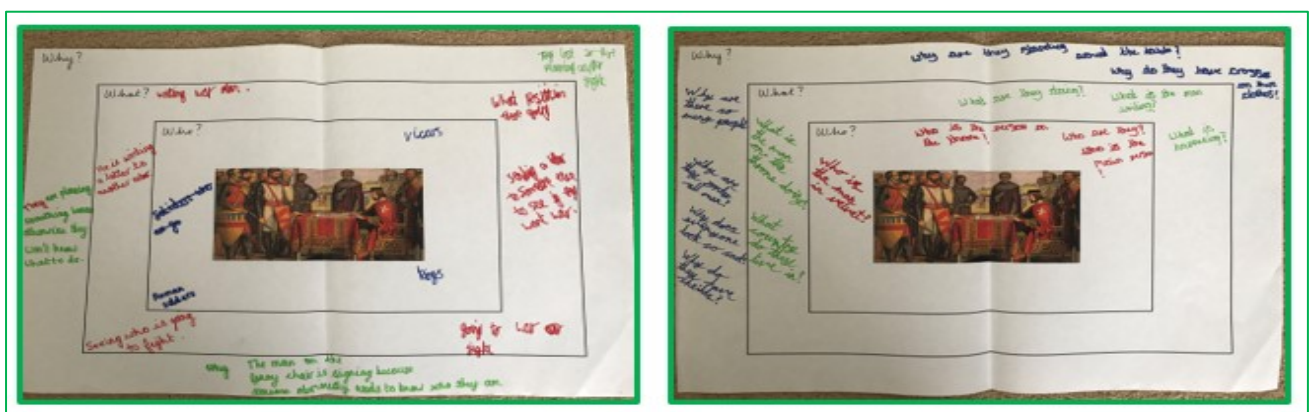


Figure 4: Enquiry Mats

ENQUIRY MATS CONTINUED

The image within the middle of mat was a historical image showing men from a period in British history sat around a table. The children worked in pairs and were asked to write responses within the different boxes in order to find out more about the image. The instructions given were intentionally vague to enable the children the freedom to interpret the task in their own way. There were no time restrictions. The completed work of the six more able children within the year four class was then analysed.

The responses within the different boxes of the enquiry mat showed that the children interpreted the instructions of the task differently. One pair responded to the task by **writing questions about the picture** which they would want to further find out or investigate; the other **pair wrote their own responses based on what they thought was happening on the picture**.

The different responses show the different thinking skills used by the more able pupils; for example, some pupils chose to write questions as they wanted to know more about the picture and have therefore demonstrated thinking skills linked to historical enquiry. However, other children have answered the questions using their own pre-existing knowledge and understanding of a topic.

From this, when focusing on historical enquiry, more able children may need to be given the choice of both questioning and answering. The development of a new enquiry mat could show a divide between the two, questioning on one side and answering on the other. This would allow children to access higher level thinking skills through both reasoning and enquiry.

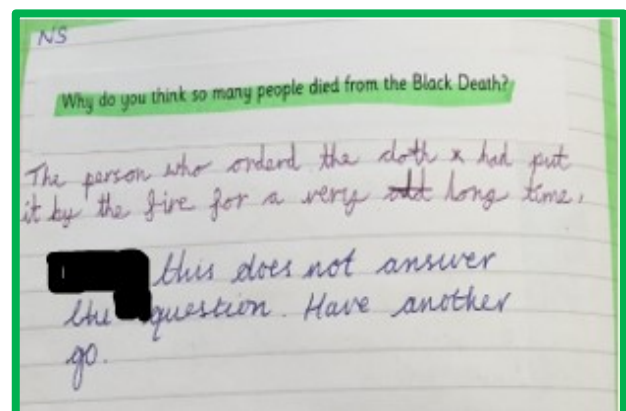
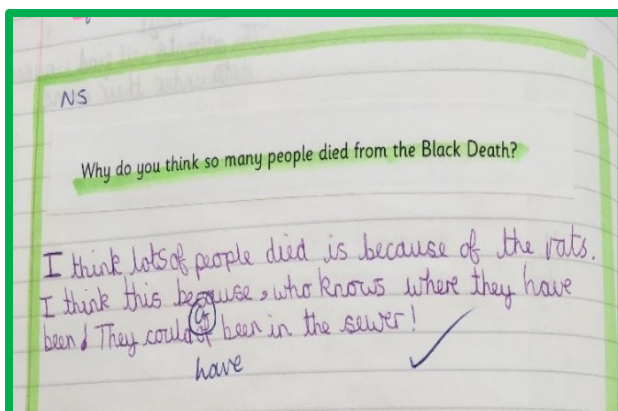
How are more able pupils challenged through the use of marking and feedback?

Across the school, marking and feedback demonstrated a variety of techniques used in order to challenge MA pupils. For example, some teachers used 'next steps' to gain a deeper insight into the children's thought processes.

In one example, the feedback given shows that the teacher had praised the child for achieving the learning objective but then also included a 'why' question in order to give the child an opportunity to explore their own ideas and reasons for their answers.

Although HOTS questioning in marking and feedback is not consistent across the school, it is worth outlining the difficulties involved with next step marking. As highlighted within an interview, teachers find it difficult to next step mark every piece of work within every subject taught. Therefore, it could be considered, across the school, that only assessment pieces require this level of in-depth marking.

CASE STUDY



After learning about the Black Death, all children received a 'next step' and were required to answer this question independently. All questions were differentiated based on ability. Linking to Bloom's taxonomy, the children who were labelled as more able were given a question which required an explanation and therefore access to higher order level thinking skills.

When analysing teacher feedback, it was evident that other forms of recording information were required. For example, a next step asked the question: **'Why do you think the Black Death killed so many people?'** Whilst a higher ability pupil answered that question using pre-existing knowledge Alex, a more able pupil, answered the question at a greater depth.

However, this was not communicated upon first inspection. They wrote: 'The person who ordered the cloth put it by the fire for a long time.' As a teacher, the initial reaction would be to assume that the child has misunderstood the question. A further discussion revealed that the child had a very secure understanding of the question but was faced with the constraint of time; this further relates to the different methods involved with challenging more able pupils. If Alex had been given more time, they would have had the ability to further explain their answer. In their words, they believed that so many people died because germs were spreading quickly within households; this was a direct result of germs manifesting on cloths and spreading throughout the building when the cloth was heated by the fire. This therefore highlights the importance of allowing more time for more able pupils in order for them to access higher order level thinking and therefore communicate their ideas. To overcome this, the use of an iPad was then used to film the child explaining their answer in their own words rather than writing them for a next step; this method of recording was then used as a tool for assessment.

For this method of communicating to be used effectively, teachers would need to factor the four aspects of challenging MA pupils, highlighted within the case study, into their planning.

Issues

When analysing the questionnaires it was clear that a small number of participants did not understand the format used. For example, they confused the Likert scale and answered backwards; this therefore skewed the data. Additionally, one participant scribbled further information onto the hard copy of a questionnaire in order to expand on their response. At this point, it would have been beneficial to edit the questionnaires and include both closed and open-ended questions; however, time constraints did not allow for this to happen and could therefore be considered for future research.

A further issue identified was the difficulty of conducting semi-structured interviews. Many teachers were busy, out of school or simply did not have much time to partake in the interviews; the quality and representativeness of the interviews was therefore impacted as only a short amount of time was spent per interview. In the future, it would be essential to interview more teaching staff without time constraints.

Conclusion

CHALLENGING THE MORE ABLE: Research has shown that it is evident that teachers within the school possess an understanding as to how to identify more able pupils within history. However, semi-structured interviews and questionnaires have highlighted many factors which are contributing to the lack of challenging provision for more able pupils. Firstly, many teachers lack confidence within the subject area and therefore feel as though they are not challenging the more able sufficiently. To overcome this, it could be suggested that teachers receive further CPD in order to build confidence across the school.

I think challenging more able pupils in history could be made easier and more manageable if the teachers had all the subject knowledge ready to, and at their fingertips, to know how to do this.

At the moment I would use questioning strategies to challenge them based on their responses. And obviously within a task I try and differentiate but it is something I would feel like I need more input to do more

PLANNING: A strong focus on differentiation was established in planning throughout the school. Although this highlights a focus on ensuring more able pupils are accessing more challenging content compared to other children within the class, more variation would be required to ensure these children are reaching their potential within history lessons. The analysis of planning has shown potential for a new planning format to be created in order to help teachers differentiate activities in history lessons to ensure more able pupils are accessing HOTS; this will allow teachers to think about the most efficient and productive method to use when challenging the pupils. For example, as stated by Doran and Cameron (1995), the teachers need to decide whether they are challenging the children through the activity set, questioning as a next step or by completely removing any time restrictions to ensure in-depth higher order thinking is achieved. It is also worth noting that, as a result of a planning analysis, teachers need to ensure learning objectives focus on a specific historical skill (knowledge, understanding or enquiry). This will ensure children are accessing the skills required to meet the requirements of the national curriculum.

Further reflecting the ideas of Fisher (2002), the enquiry mat task set for the more able children within a year four class showed that not all children who are identified as more able are accessing higher level thinking; there could be many explanations for this. Firstly, the task was left open for the children to work in pairs to compete on their own accord. The lack of instruction may have impacted the children's action and therefore they did not complete the task to the best of their ability due to conflicting interpretations. Secondly, the children were given a set time to complete the task; this could have been a factor which may have impacted their understanding or ability to complete the questions presented on the enquiry mat. However, it is evident from the responses that the children were demonstrating HOTS as the 'why' sections of the mat generated more responses from the more able children.

With regards to marking and feedback, it is clear that teachers within the school are using next steps to develop the level of understanding of the more able pupils; examples of this show children responding to 'why' questions. The responses generated by the children have shown to include higher order thinking and a strong understanding of the topic being taught at that time. However, the case study highlighted the importance of checking the response and ensuring the child has understood the requirements of the next step through use of verbal feedback.

Further Research

Based on the findings from the study, further research could focus on the higher order thinking skills of the more able children through the use of open-ended tasks such as an enquiry mat. This would further highlight the importance of time limits, questioning and planning for the more able pupils in history. Additionally, a scheme of work could be generated to assist teachers within their planning of history lessons. It would be necessary to include sections to enable clear differentiation; examples of higher level questioning for different topics being taught; and ideas for activities to ensure more able pupils are challenged. Therefore, a variety of approaches, as suggested by Doran and Cameron (1995), would be covered in one planning document.

Lessons Learnt

- During the study, it became evident that many teachers lack confidence in different areas of the curriculum, whilst some felt confident teaching history, others stated that they did not possess strong subject knowledge.
- Lack of time was a large factor which impacted the research being conducted. For example, it was difficult to gather information as teachers were often busy or unavailable at certain times during a school day.
- A further lesson learnt was that future questionnaires would require both open and closed ended questions in order to gather rich and in-depth responses. Although the Likert scale gave an overview of opinions, it did not allow for teachers to elaborate on their responses and explain why they may not have felt confident when challenging more able children.

References

- Bloom, B., (1956) *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*. 1 ed. Harlow: Longman.
- Dept of Education - DfE, (2013) *Schools not doing enough to support more able pupils..* [Online] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/schools-not-doing-enough-to-support-most-able-students> [Accessed 16 December 2017].
- Doran, C. and Cameron R. J., (1995) Learning About Learning: Metacognitive Approaches in the Classroom. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 11(2), pp. 15 - 23.
- Eysenck, M. & Keane, T., (2005) Thinking and Reasoning. In: *Cognitive Psychology: A Student's Handbook*. Hove: Psychology Press Ltd, pp. 429 - 433.
- Fisher, R., (2000) Thinking Skills: Adding to the Curriculum. *Gifted and Talented Education*, 1:1 pp. 5 - 9.
- Lancashire County Council - LCC, (2017) *Meeting the Needs of the Most Able*. [Online] Available at: www.lancashire.gov.uk [Accessed 23 November 2017].
- Mackintosh, N. J., (1998) *IQ and Human Intelligence*. In: Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 62 - 73.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all teaching staff at Edenfield Church of England Primary School for giving up their time to complete questionnaires, participate in semi-structured interviews and allow the use of planning and examples of work. I would also like to thank the other teachers on the ELIP Teaching Research Project and Dr Ann-Marie Houghton and Dr Jo Armstrong for sharing their ideas.



East Lancashire Inclusion Partnership <http://www.elip.org/>

Referencing this article:

Jenkins, S. (2018) *TTR 16: How do primary school teachers challenge more able pupils in History?*

East Lancashire Learning Project

Available from: <http://www.elip.org/research-and-development/research-briefing-papers>