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How do pupils understand historical time?

Some evidence from England and the Netherlands

Marjan De Groot-Reuvekamp and Penelope Harnett

One of the key aims of the English history National Curriculum is to ensure that pupils 'know and understand the history of these islands as a coherent, chronological narrative'. Teaching chronology is also important in the Netherlands. In this article we cover some aspects of teaching and recent research from the Netherlands that can help inform our teaching about the understanding of time.

Chronology and the understanding of historical time

The understanding of historical time combines what is often referred to as 'chronology' (objectively measurable) and historically experienced time, sometimes referred to as 'a sense of time'. Understanding time is not an isolated element. It is about the understanding of events, people and changes in the past and includes understanding concepts like causes and effects, changes, similarities and differences within and between periods, and how they affected people's lives. In Dutch primary schools history is hardly taught to young children. Teachers often cite the fact that young children do not have an understanding of historical time, because: 'they first have to learn the vocabulary of clock and calendar time, like today, yesterday and the names of the days in the week.' Yet this needs squaring with the fact that young children are often fascinated by historical stories, for example on knights

and castles, and ask questions about historical themes that they encounter through television programmes or museum visits.

Chronology in English and Dutch schools

In the Netherlands primary education is aimed at children aged 4 to 12. There is no 'state curriculum'; attainment aims are fixed through *Core objectives* (Table 1), that should be reached by the end of primary school. These leave a considerable amount of freedom. Having said that, for history the vast majority of teachers follow textbooks, starting from ages 8/9.

Evidence in both the Netherlands and England indicates that the

teaching and learning of historical time are not always very well implemented in schools. Although chronology features in both the English National Curriculum and the Dutch Core Objectives, many aspects are not well covered. In the research for this article, only a quarter of the English teachers pay attention to the chronological order of historical periods consistently and the majority of teachers in both countries do not use time-lines (Table 2).

In England primary pupils are expected to 'develop a chronologically secure knowledge and understanding of British, local and world history' from the historical periods which they study. Similarly in the Netherlands, since 2006 the Dutch curriculum has

Table 1: Core objectives for history in the Dutch primary curriculum.

Students should learn:

1. to use simple historical sources and **the vocabulary of time and periods of time**;
2. about the characteristic aspects of one of the following **eras**: hunters and farmers; Greeks and Romans; monks and knights; cities and states; discoverers and reformers; regents and princes; wigs and revolutions; citizens and steam engines; the world wars and the Holocaust; television and computer, with the **canon** as basis for illustration;
3. about the important historical persons and events from Dutch history and connect these with examples from world history.

contained a framework of ten eras that are mostly taught chronologically. These ten eras have broad historical labels such as the Era of Citizens and Steam Engines. In 2007 the 'Canon of Dutch History and Culture' was added: an overview of 'what everyone ought to know, at the very least, about the history and culture of the Netherlands'. The canon is a chart with a series of 50 'windows', arranged chronologically on a time-line (e.g. the Roman Times, William of Orange, Rembrandt, Anne Frank and slavery).

Progression in understanding historical time

Teaching periods in chronological order, however, does not guarantee that pupils will develop their understanding of historical time. It is important to gain as many insights as possible into how pupils acquire understanding of historical time.

What we have come up with based on our research is three stages of understanding – *emergent*, *initial* and *continued*. Table 3 on p. 9 has developed this by defining pupils' skills and knowledge for each stage, based on five objectives on the understanding of historical time. The model is not age-related. Pupils' development in chronology seems a continuous process: there is no particular moment when pupils leave one stage and enter the next. Important elements in the model include the development from concrete to abstract knowledge and the use of the vocabulary of time, from broad descriptions to specific dating.

Linked to this we also devised two paper-and-pencil tests for younger and older pupils with, for each stage, multiple-choice items that corresponded with the five objectives. We conducted the tests in seven Dutch primary schools with 1,457 pupils. The results showed that in all three stages pupils in higher-grade classes significantly outperformed pupils in lower-grade classes. Furthermore, in all grades there seems to be room for improvement, especially for ages 6-9 where pupils have hardly had any teaching on the understanding of historical time. Pupils ages 9-12 could improve on level C.

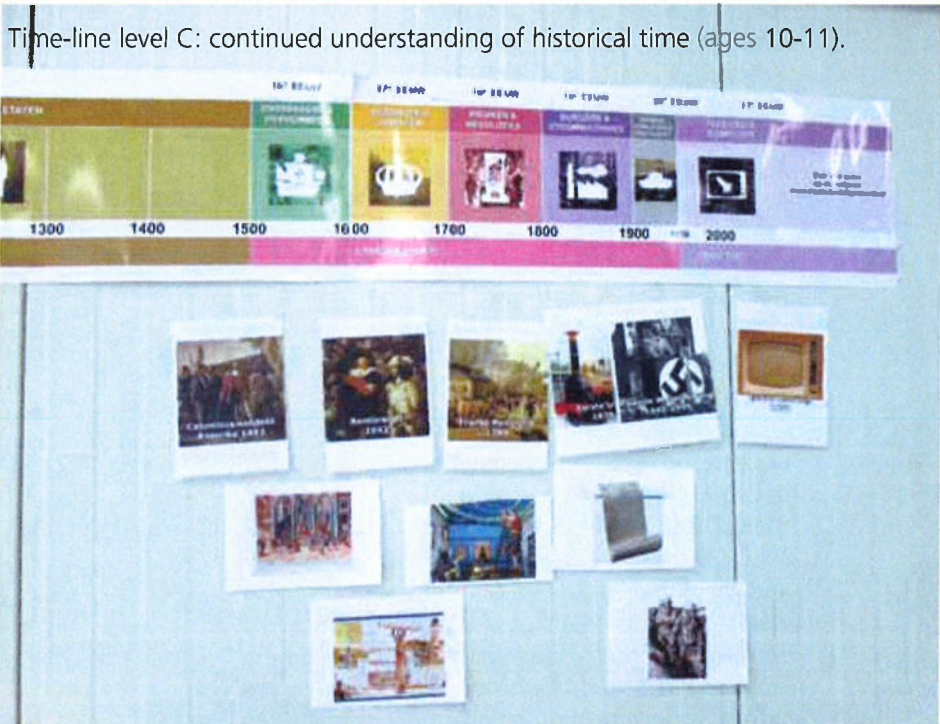
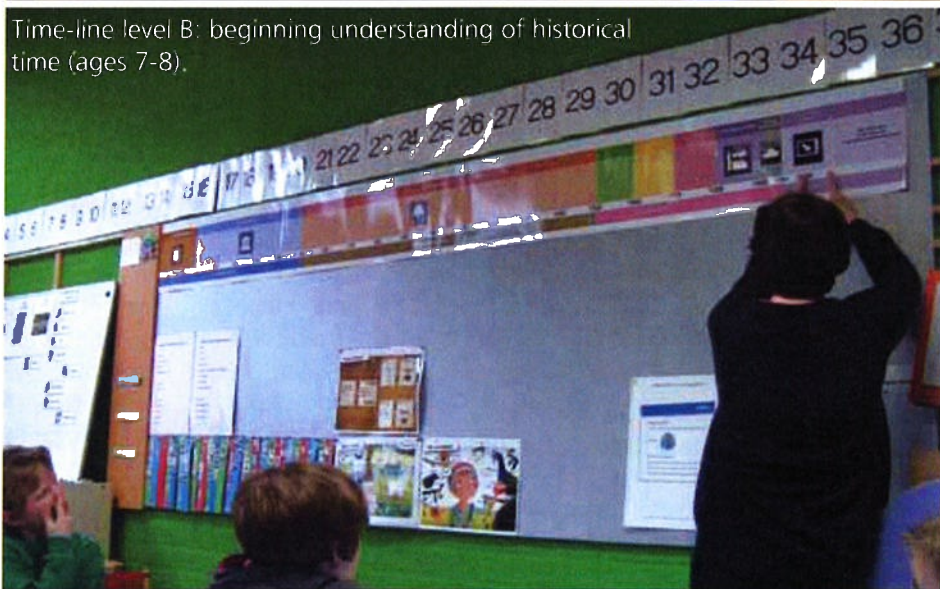


Table 2: Percentages of respondents who responded 'regularly' and 'always' in a survey of practices on the teaching of historical time. (De Groot-Reuvekamp, Van Boxtel, Ros & Harnett, 2014)

Practices of teaching historical time	England		The Netherlands	
	Teachers n=27	Trainers n=20	Teachers n=48	Trainers n=33
During the history lessons the chronological order of historical periods is consistently paid attention to.	37%	25%	74%	53%
In each classroom there is a large class time-line on which events, people and changes are placed in the correct historical period.	45%	25%	49%	47%
For lessons about the understanding of historical time we only follow textbooks.	7%	0%	66%	61%
For the development of the understanding of historical time we develop lessons and/or materials ourselves.	77%	55%	32%	19%
From the start of Key Stage 1, grade 3, students are taught about events, people and changes in different historical periods.	93%	65%	30%	19%
The development of students' understanding of historical time is monitored and recorded systematically.	37%	0%	36%	3%

What does this mean for teaching about time in primary schools?

A number of strategies seem to assist understanding of historical time:

- Teachers should consistently pay attention to the objectives of historical time as outlined in Table 3.
- Sequence and the dates of historical periods can be addressed more explicitly
- The use of time-lines can be intensified and improved starting from the creation of pupils' own personal time-lines or family time lines and moving towards larger-scale and more complex historical time-lines.
- The use of pictures, stories and computer technology can act as stimuli for the understanding of historical time.
- Visual clues linked with dates as points of reference can provide useful opportunities for pupils to talk about differences and changes between historical periods which can build up their knowledge of historical time.



Resources

Chapman, T. (1993) 'Teaching chronology through time-lines' in *Teaching History*, 73, pp.25-29.

De Groot-Reuvekamp, M., Van Boxtel, C., Ros, A. and Harnett, P. (2014) 'The Understanding of Historical Time in the Primary History Curriculum in England and the Netherlands' in *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 46, no. 4, pp. 487-514.

De Groot-Reuvekamp, M., Ros, A., Van Boxtel, C. and Oort, F. (2015) 'Primary school pupils' performances in understanding historical time' in *Education 3-13: International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early years education*.
<http://dx.doi.org.10.1080/03004279.2015.1075053>

Harnett, P. (1993) 'Identifying Progression in Children's Understanding: the use of visual materials to assess primary school children's learning in history' in *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 23, no. 2, pp. 137-154.

Hoodless, P. (1996) *Time and Time-lines in the Primary School*, London: Historical Association.

Primary History 59 was devoted to chronology and contains a range of useful articles including those by Barton, Cooper, Hoodless and Pickford.

Stow, W. and Haydn, T. (2000) 'Issues in the teaching of chronology' in J. Arthur and R. Phillips (eds) *Issues in the Teaching of History*, London: Routledge, pp. 83-97.

Conclusion

The development of pupils' understanding of historical time requires thoughtful teaching linked to objectives, with regular assessments, good time-lines and good planning through all years of primary school. We hope that this article will be of use to teachers in their planning, monitoring and assessment of pupils' developing understanding.

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She is currently working on her PhD at the University of Amsterdam on the improvement of the understanding of historical time for pupils aged 6 -12. Marjan would like to thank the English and Dutch teachers who have helped her in her research.

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Table 3: Developmental model for pupils' understanding of historical time. (De Groot-Reuvekamp, Ros, Van Boxtel & Oort, 2015)

Objectives	Stage A – Emergent understanding	Stage B – Initial understanding	Stage C – Continued understanding
<p>1. Vocabulary Apply the vocabulary relating to time and periods of time.</p>	Apply relative terms relating to time, such as: most long ago – a very long time ago – a long time ago – not so long ago – now.	Apply the names of historical eras that are most recent and most long ago and terms such as the eras of: <i>Television and Computer, the World Wars, Steam engines, Roman times and Middle Ages.</i>	Apply the names of the historical eras/periods and terms like Prehistory, Middle Ages and Golden Age. Apply dates AD and BC and the relation between dates and centuries.
<p>2. Sequence Sequence historical periods and objects, situations, events and people of different periods of time in chronological order.</p>	Sequence pictures of objects and situations concerning everyday life, like lifestyle, clothing, architecture and transport.	Sequence some historical periods (objective 1) and pictures of well-known people and tangible events, e.g. inventions.	Sequence, events, people and historical periods
<p>3. Time-line Place objects, situations, events and people on a time-line.</p>	Use a simple time-line that portrays the course of time from (very) long ago until now.	Use a time-line with names of historical era's (objective 1).	Use a time-line with dates AD and BC.
<p>4. Characteristic features Use/identify characteristic features in texts and images to place objects, situations, events and people in the correct periods of time.</p>	Use /identify everyday life characteristic features of past periods (lifestyle, clothing, architecture and transport).	Use /identify social and cultural characteristic features of some historical eras (objective 1).	Identify social, cultural, economic and political characteristic features of the ten historical eras in national, European and World history.
<p>5. Compare and contrast Compare and contrast different historical periods to identify changes, differences and similarities in the way people lived within and across periods.</p>	Identify differences in everyday life of people in the past and the present in tangible examples through history and related to generations of parents and grandparents.	Identify changes, differences and similarities in the way people lived across historical periods.	Identify changes, differences and similarities in the way people lived <i>within</i> and across historical periods.

Note: The abbreviations AD and BC can be substituted by CE and BCE (Common Era and Before Common Era).

Figure 1: The ten eras.

