I WAS MEANT TO HAVE BEEN BORN ON MY BIRTHDAY, BUT I ARRIVED A DAY LATE:
YOUNG CHILDREN AND CHRONOLOGY

— Penelope Harnett

How did you stop yourself from getting the plague?
The quotation above from a child signal some of the challenges of teaching children about chronology in the primary school. Learning about chronology involves:

- Knowing the conventions of recording the passage of time
- Providing experiences to develop children’s sense of duration
- Opportunities to develop sequencing skills
- Being able to move about with confidence between different periods of time

They are all features of successful learning in history.

Knowing about the conventions of recording the passage of time and key vocabulary
Children’s acquisition of vocabulary develops from their experiences of learning new words in different contexts and attaching meaning to them. Early understandings are associated with terms such as before/after; now/then. (I did this before I started school, I learned to read after I came to school; now children’s toys are made of plastic; then children’s toys were made of wood.) Such vocabulary is important for learning history, but is also important in many other contexts (e.g. classroom routines – we will do this before play; we went to the library after lunch; science – we watered the seeds after we had planted them etc.). Classroom displays often include names of the days of the week, months of the year and the seasons which all provide important support for children.

As children progress they move from an undifferentiated sense of the past where they know that once upon a time a particular event occurred at any time which is not the present, to a greater awareness of different periods – the Tudors, the Vikings. Increasing mathematical understanding also permits children to play around with larger numbers and to appreciate the terms decade, century and conventional dating systems.

Providing experiences to develop children’s sense of duration
Young children look forward to their birthdays and other celebrations which seemingly never come and then pass by so quickly. As one grows older however, these events appear to arrive with increasing frequency! Consequently our grasp of duration develops as we grow older, although the duration of some events such as the millions of years when dinosaurs roamed the earth always remains hard to grasp.

Teachers may help children acquire a sense of duration in different ways.
- A birthday frieze around the classroom may provide some reference points for children to develop their understanding as they compare the length of time to their birth date with other children in the class.
- Planning summative activities at the end of a topic which engage children in thinking about how their recent learning relates to other topics they have studied; e.g. what are the similarities and differences between Victorian toys, those of my grandparents and my own?
- Reflecting on classroom activities throughout the school year and placing photographs of them on a timeline provides opportunities for children to talk about the passage of a year.
- Allan and Janet Ahlberg’s book, Starting School is a useful resource for reception aged children to begin such a time line from their first term at school.
- At the end of the year, children might decide which photographs from the timeline are significant and which they would like to take up to their year 1 class. And so the process could continue throughout Key Stage 1.

Young children’s understanding of smaller units of duration – minutes, hours, seconds may be developed in a number of other curriculum areas, and also through teachers making explicit reference to the passage of time in different classroom routines.

Sequencing skills
The ability to order events and to explain their sequence is fundamental for the study of history. However this ability is important for all subjects; early readers need to appreciate that a story follows a sequence which needs to make sense and similar skills are utilised in encouraging children to write stories with a beginning, middle and an end; scientific investigations follow a sequence through raising questions, trying out and testing ideas and drawing conclusions; dance routines follow particular sequences and children become familiar with the order of events in their daily lives.

There are thus many opportunities on which teachers may capitalise to support children’s abilities to sequence.

Moving with confidence between different periods of time
The recent HMI report on teaching history identifies this as a key challenge and recommends that schools see this as an important priority. Pupils do not make links between different periods of history which they have studied and consequently have a fragmented view of the past (Ofsted, 2011).

A number of strategies may support children in developing their confidence which include:
- Making explicit reference to the development of children’s chronological understanding on school curriculum plans
- Beginning each history lesson reminding children of their prior learning with a particular reference to chronology. In the core subjects, teachers are very adept at reminding children of their prior learning in maths or literacy, this pedagogic strategy could be employed effectively in other subject areas to help children make connections.
- Planning summative activities at the end of a topic which engage children in thinking about how their recent learning relates to other topics they have studied; e.g. what are the similarities and differences between Victorian toys, those of my grandparents and my own?
How do houses differ/ remain similar in Tudor and Victorian times? Who kept law and maintained order in Ancient Greece and Anglo Saxon England?

- Developing a class time which is developed and extended as children progress through the school. This time line would include not only topics which children had studied in history, but also children’s other experiences of past ways of life and events. e.g. postcards bought on visits made by families to historic places; stories set in the past; TV programmes and films; paintings; news items from both local and national media; photographs of local landmarks etc. could all be included.

The point would be to have as wide a selection as possible for children to appreciate the many different experiences they have of the past. As items are added to the classroom timeline, children begin to develop certain reference points with the past – at its simplest level this may be explained as; ‘the castle comes before the railway station because it is only half way down the classroom wall and the railway station is above the doorway’ but it might also encourage children to reflect on how people travelled in medieval times and also whether defensive buildings were necessary in the Victorian era.

Timelines such as these enable children to employ their visual memory as a powerful tool in making sense of past events. Older children may make suggestions concerning the scale of the timeline and how events should be represented; all children may be encouraged to make decisions about historical significance and whether particular events should be included on the time line or not.

Some of the above activities may support teachers in their interpretations of the current National Curriculum for history. Chronological understanding embraces vocabulary acquisition, duration and sequencing, but the real heart of chronological understanding is to be found in knowledge and understanding of events/ people and changes in the past. It is worth reminding ourselves of the importance of:

- Identifying differences between ways of life at different times (Key Stage 1) and
- Describing and making links between the main events, situations and changes within and across different periods and societies studied (Key Stage 2)

since these understandings are at the heart of a good education in history.

Conclusion
Young children may still make curious remarks such as those at the beginning of this article – the point is to use such comments for assessing children’s chronological understanding and to base future historical learning on developing their understanding.

References

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WHAT MIGHT WE EXPECT PUPILS TO ‘KNOW AND CAN DO’ AT THE END OF KEY STAGE 2?

— Alf Wilkinson

**Chronological Understanding is a real issue at present** – and is vital if pupils are to make sense of any history they know. But what do we mean by it and what might we expect pupils to be able to do when starting secondary school?

At the very least, we would hope that pupils can sequence their learning – that they know the Vikings come after the Saxons, but before the Tudors. The Victorians come before the Romans, and the very next day the Anglo-Saxons turned up!

**Sequence on its own is not enough.** World War Two, for instance, lasted 6 years, and the 1960s a decade. The Viking era is a couple of hundred years, depending on how you measure it. How well do pupils understand these relatives? And how do you ensure a sense of time lapse, between periods studied? For instance, the Tudors are 600 years from us, but so were the Vikings from the Tudors. It is common for pupils to think that the Romans left one day around 400 AD and the very next day the Anglo-Saxons turned up!

**Period** But for me the biggest aspect of chronology that pupils struggle with is a sense of period. What was so special about the 1960s? What made it so different from the 1970s? Or today? The ‘Swinging Sixties’ does mark a significant change in British life, for example, especially but not exclusively for young people. What was it that changed so much? Can we isolate that and get a real feel for the period? The same is true for the Vikings – were they really all violent thieves in horned helmets that terrorised the country? Interpretations of the Vikings have changed a lot since the Vikings came after the Saxons, but before the Tudors. The Victorians come before the Romans, and the very next day the Anglo-Saxons turned up!

Equally significant are the similarities over time. People still had to work, live, sleep, eat. They still faced major decisions over whether to move, marry, build. Life may have often been ‘brutish and short’, but it still involved many of the dilemmas we face today. Let’s not forget it is the story of people that fascinates pupils, of everyday life, and that is as much a feature of chronological understanding as who came first.

**The development of chronological understanding** should be a continuous, conscious element in the curriculum. The three attached powerpoints on kitchens, postboxes and toys illustrate the kind of pedagogy required.

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