

# 'A lot of guess work goes on' Children's understanding of historical accounts

The ESRC-funded Project *Chata* has collected evidence of children's ideas about the discipline of history and attempted to see if there is any progression in those ideas. Here, Peter Lee describes how *Chata* has tried to map children's ideas about historical accounts. History teachers (and tutors and managers of history teachers) who are trying to extend and explore the bases of their professional knowledge will find this clear and lively account an invaluable starting point for considering the role of the *Chata* project, its methods and findings.

## Introduction

If you were to ask your students about why historical accounts differ, what would they say? What do you tell them when the issue arises in your teaching (assuming it does)? What do you actually believe yourself? Have you equipped your students with ideas that will help them to make sense of the differences they will encounter in the stories historians tell?

The *Chata* project wanted to map students' ideas about historical accounts, and if possible to construct a model of progression in those ideas. This paper gives a brief description of how we set about the research, and gives a summary of what we found.

## Method

For the first phase of the project, discussed here, the sample of 320 (aged between 7 and 14) was drawn

from rural, suburban and urban schools in Essex. The analysis presented is based on written responses for years 6, 7 and 9, and both written and interview responses for all year 3 children.

We gave students in years 3, 6, 7 and 9 two stories running side-by-side down an A4 page, and asked them questions about the differences, and how it could be possible that there were two different stories about 'the same bit of history'. The same format was used in three different task sets, on three separate occasions. Each task set was based on different content, but the structure and some of the questions were the same for all of them. The two stories on each task set were exactly the same length, each broken into three mini-chapters, and each illustrated by specially drawn cartoons picking out key features of each 'chapter'.

In task set one the pair of stories dealt with the Romans

## Do we really need to know what students think?

Yes. First, if we don't know about students' ideas, we can't hope to be very effective in changing or developing them. This is nothing to do with being 'child-centred': it's more a matter of taking the 'subject' or discipline of history seriously.

Second, 'interpretation' is enshrined in the National Curriculum. Whatever else it means, it includes differences between historical accounts, and we need to know what students make of such differences.

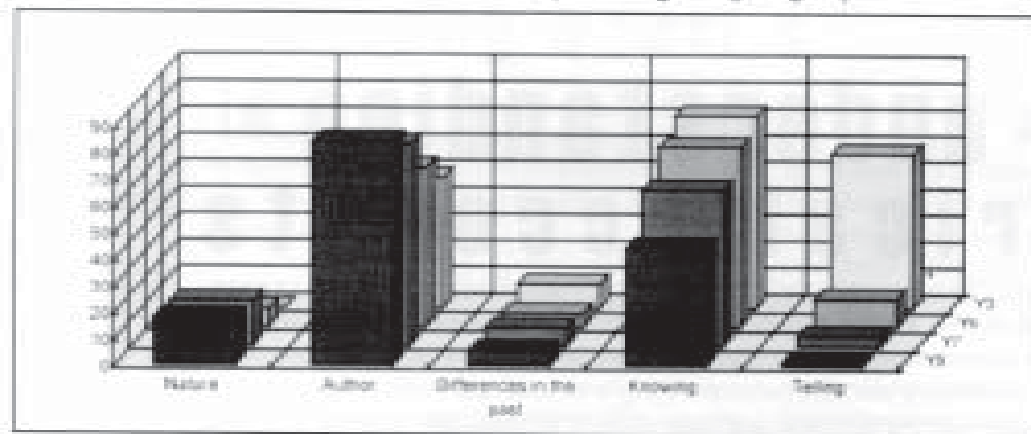
Third, arguments about the nature of historical accounts are in the forefront of debate about history. They are sometimes coupled with assumptions about the implications for teaching. For example, we are often told that we must disabuse students of any 'certaintist' notions they hold about history. But are students 'certaintist' in the first place? We need to know what ideas our students do have.

Finally, history looks set for another round of impositions from educational theorists and politicians, this time hoping to use it as a vehicle for citizenship, democracy and patriotism. It is not that history has no role to play here, but there is a danger that in the attempt to make sure history delivers, emphasis will be placed on giving students particular versions of the past, rather than on understanding the kind of game history is. If we want to empower students by giving them a better intellectual toolkit with which to think about the past and the present, we need to know how they think history works.

Peter Lee (History Education Unit, Curriculum Studies Group, University of London Institute of Education) is a member of the *Chata* project team. Project *Chata* (Concepts of History and Teaching Approaches at Key Stages 2 and 3) was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. The project team also included Rosalyn Ashby, Manling Chau and Alaric Dickinson.

Peter Lee

Figure 1. Ideas about differences in accounts: percentages of year groups



(Note that Figures 1 to 4 only register an idea if it appeared on any given child's response on at least two of the three task sets. For 3.75% of the sample, a total of 12 cases, no ideas appeared more than once, so single occurrences were used at the risk of a slight reduction in reliability)

in Britain: they differed in three main ways. First there was a difference in theme. One story focused on material life, the other on culture and ideas. Second, the tone of the two stories differed. One stressed improvements in material life for the Britons, and contrasted strife among the Britons before the Romans came with peace afterwards. The other emphasized the cultural achievements of the Britons before the conquest, and told how the Romans imposed their way of life on the Britons. Third, the stories differed in timescale. The first story ended with the Roman withdrawal and its short-term impact on material civilization. The second carried the story forward to end with the survival of Roman ideas in the present. (See Appendix 1.) The same pattern of difference (tone, theme and timescale) was repeated in the pairs of stories from task sets two and three.

The second task set gave students two stories on the end of the Roman Empire. The first of the pair mainly dealt with barbarian invasions, and ended in 476. The second story focused on the organizational problems of running the Empire, and ended in 1453. In task set three the two stories were about Saxon settlement in Britain. One gave a relatively detailed account of the coming of the Saxons, and the other located the settlement in a longer period ending with the establishment of a unified English kingdom.

We asked a range of questions, some of which were repeated across the three task sets. One key issue we wanted to explore was how students and younger children would explain the fact that there could be 'two different stories about the same bit of history', and it is the responses to this that are discussed here.

## Analysis

### 1. The big picture

The ideas students used to explain why stories about 'the same bit of history' could differ fell into five broad categories.

1. The accounts are the same, and any differences are only in how the stories are told;
2. Differences are a result of problems in obtaining knowledge of the past;
3. The stories are about different things, places or times;
4. Differences are a consequence of the accounts being written by different authors;
5. It is in the nature of accounts to be different from one another.

Figure 1 shows how these ideas were distributed between year groups.

Figure 1 suggests that it is possible to think in terms of a progression of ideas in students' understanding of historical accounts.

- Young children tended to say that the stories were 'the same', differing only in the telling. Sometimes such ideas seemed to be linked to the classroom experience of being given a story, and having to retell it 'in your own words'. It was as if the story was fixed, and differences arose because people just used different words to tell it (and perhaps ought to do so, or they'd just be copying). Few older students made reference to this idea.
- Younger students were more likely than older ones to attribute differences in the stories to knowledge problems (see section 2 below for more details).
- Between 5% and 9% of students said differences between stories must mean that the accounts were about differences in the past. The past is complex, and different accounts mirror that complexity. Ideas of this kind were spread fairly evenly across the age range.
- Older students were more likely than younger ones to stress the role of the author in differences between accounts. They treated authors as active agents, in some sense constructing accounts, even if this amounted to no more than compilation. Responses of this kind varied between thinking of the author as imposing an illegitimate and biased view, and seeing selection as a legitimate personal move.
- A small proportion of (mainly) year 7 and year 9 students recognized that accounts could not be complete. In this sense they thought that it was in the nature of historical accounts to differ.

## Are 'levels' getting out of hand?

There is a big difference between taking a finished attainment and slicing it arbitrarily into a series of steps, and trying to establish different *positive* ideas students work with.

In the latter case you can say what the ideas are: they can be characterized in their own right. In the former case grades of response are picked out in terms of failure to meet the final achievement, or by watering down the previous step. So words like 'simple', or 'more fully' stand in for positive description of a self-standing idea.

The ease with which this kind of achievement slicing can be applied (unhelpfully) to almost anything is well illustrated in set of spoof levels devised by a Cambridge History Project cluster group after a hard day with sources on the Ranters from the 17th century.

### Some Ranter Levels (with apologies to Lawrence Clarkson)

1. Is sworn at.
2. Can manage simple expletives with assistance.
3. Swears independently on request.
4. Spontaneously generates full-mouthed oaths.

Alternatively, 'levels' are often set out as merely generic descriptions. The SCAA chart supplied to teachers to exemplify 'ascribing significance', and 'interpretations' manages nothing under the first heading except a final goal: 'Assessing the significance of events, people and changes.' There is no indication whatever of any steps towards the goal, and the goal itself is no more than an expansion of the heading. The progression set out under 'Interpretation' is as follows.

Recognizing that there are different interpretations and representations of the past

Describing and giving reasons for different representations and interpretations

Describing and analysing interpretations

Analysing and evaluating interpretations in relation to their period

The progression here is from *recognition*, through *describing and giving reasons for* and *describing and analysing*, to *analysing and evaluating in relation to period*. But these are generic descriptors that leave untouched the ideas students and their teachers might need.

If 'levels' are to be useful, they will have to be robust and relatively simple descriptions of ideas students do seem to use. Indicators as to what counts as operating with each of those ideas can then be written by teachers for any particular task and content.

One way of looking at the pattern in Figure 1 is to represent it as a broad shift in students' views of historians. From seeing historians as more or less passive story tellers, handing on ready-made stories or compiling and collating information, they move to thinking of historians as actively producing their stories, whether by distorting them for their own ends or legitimately selecting in response to a choice of theme. A more detailed breakdown of the 'knowledge' and the 'author' categories shows an interesting pattern. The same sort of shift

from passive to active is apparent inside these categories as is visible between categories in the overall picture.

Figure 2. 'Knowledge' by year group: percentages of year groups

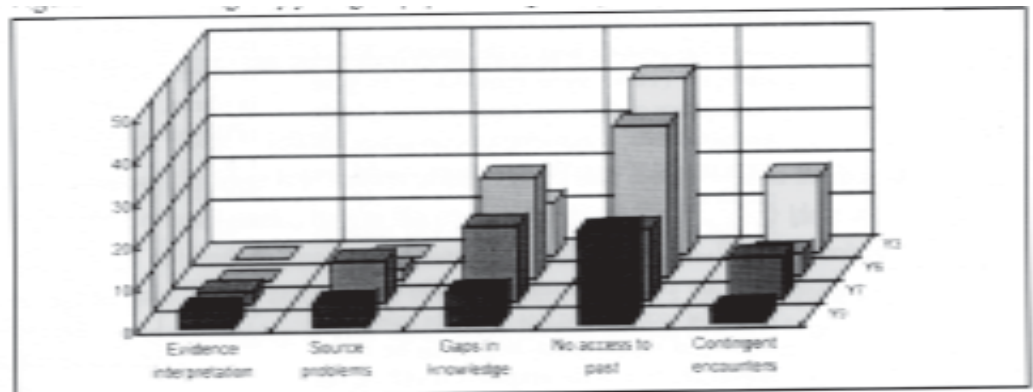
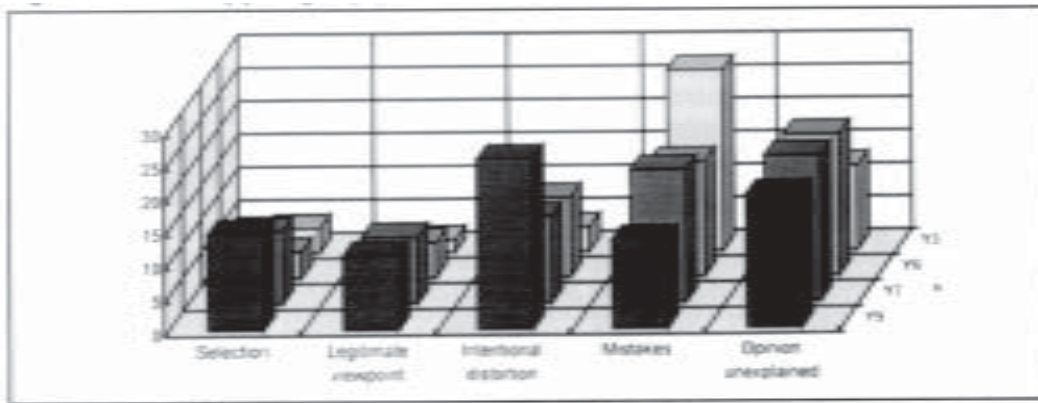


Figure 3. 'Author' by year group: percentages of year groups



## 2. The 'knowledge' category

Figure 2 shows how ideas within the broad 'knowledge' category were distributed.

In general younger students were more likely to appeal to knowledge problems than older students, but the 'knowledge' category has its own internal structure.

- Very young children were more likely to say that differences between accounts were the result of people happening to encounter different books, objects, or stories. We cannot argue from silence here, and say these children had no sense of history as a purposive activity, but if they had, it did not show. Stories seemed more like things in the world that you either bumped into or didn't, and they might just be different.
- Year 3 children were also more likely than year 6 students (and much more likely than years 7 or 9) to make repeated mention of problems of access to the past, as if this was all that could be said. (In the words of a year 6 student, 'No-one from them days is alive today'). For year 6 students access problems were still the main issue, but they also stressed gaps in knowledge. Older students sometimes mentioned our lack of direct access to the past, but at the same time tended to mention problems arising from historians' attempts to cope with this problem. (See below.)
- A small proportion of students said differences in accounts were a result of transmission errors, mistakes and inaccuracies, or intentional distortion (bias or lies) in the sources. Year 7 students (10%) were most likely to give explanations of this kind. These students clearly thought of history as having a methodology, but were very aware that sources could be problematic.
- At year 7 and year 9 (3% and 4.4%) students began to insist that evidence needs interpretation, and that this might explain differences in historical accounts. At this point the role of the author of the account begins to be more important, even if the emphasis is still on the

source. (As one year 7 put it, two historians might tell different stories on the basis of the same evidence, 'because they might think that things mean different things e.g. one might think something was a cooking bowl, the other might think it was for carrying water.')

## 3. The 'author' category

Figure 3 shows the age-distribution of ideas about differences attributable to authors.

Older students were more likely than younger ones to see the author as the main source of differences in historical accounts. But, once again, within this broad pattern there was a shift from a more passive to a more active author role.

- Year 3 children tended to explain differences in accounts by saying that authors must have made mistakes.
- Older students were more likely to put differences in accounts down to intentional distortion by authors (dogmatism, lies and especially bias).
- A less frequent explanation of differences, again more common among older students, was that authors hold legitimate viewpoints (without any intentional desire to mislead).
- A small number of students used sophisticated ideas about authors operating selection criteria, having theories, or writing from social (not just personal) standpoints. Although year 7 and particularly year 9 students were most likely to refer to these matters, it is worth noticing that two year 3 students gave responses in this category.

In all year groups some students explained differences in accounts in terms of authors' opinions, and gave no further explanation (slightly more than 20% each in years 6, 7 and 9, and about 13% in year 3). Analysis of the use of 'opinion' by those who did explain what

they meant suggests that 'opinion' covers a range of

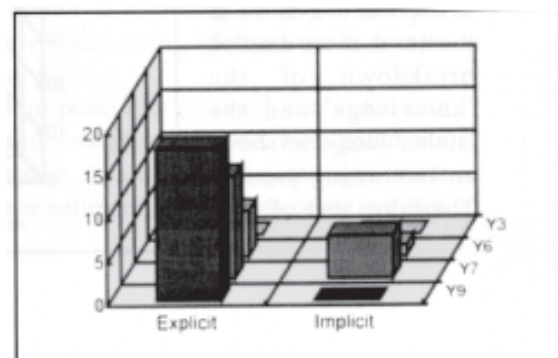


Figure 4. 'Nature' by year group: percentages of year groups



# Chata in a Nutshell



OK, SO IT'S ANOTHER ACRONYM. WHAT'S IT MEAN?



Concepts of History and Teaching Approaches at Key Stages 2 and 3. *Chata* tried to get a picture of 7 to 14 year-old kids' ideas about history (just over 400 of them in all). That's their ideas about the discipline and how it works, not about peasants or kings or revolutions.

OH, COME ON NUTSHELL! WHAT DO 7 YEAR-OLD KIDS KNOW ABOUT HOW HISTORY WORKS?



And your ideas about time are as good as Einstein's? Understanding's not all or nothing. Most adults' ideas about the world aren't up to expert standards, but they get you around, and some even improve.

OK, BUT YOU'RE NOT TELLING ME MY KIDS HAVE ANY IDEAS ABOUT HOW HISTORY WORKS - BELIEVE ME, THEY DON'T GIVE IT A THOUGHT!



Right, it's not something most kids ponder. But we're talking about *tacit* ideas, kids' working assumptions. They have to make assumptions about what doing history is, otherwise they can't even begin to do those beautiful worksheets you set them. And some assumptions work better than others.

BIG DEAL! SOME KIDS HAVE BETTER IDEAS THAN OTHERS! YOU MEAN IT'S A RIVAL NATIONAL CURRICULUM ATTAINMENT TARGET?



Yes and no. *Chata* did look to see if there is a progression of ideas. Do some kids have more powerful ideas than others, and do older kids tend to have more powerful ideas than younger ones? But no, *Chata* didn't just cook up an end point and then carve it into eight. It collected evidence of what ideas are around. And it's clear that kids' ideas don't all change at the same speed, so just one AT won't do.

WHAT'S A MORE POWERFUL IDEA?



For a kid who thinks we can only know about the past when someone saw what happened and wrote down the truth, history soon becomes impossible. But for another kid who understands that you can make inferences from stuff that wasn't meant to tell anyone anything, history can go on even in the face of lies and bias.

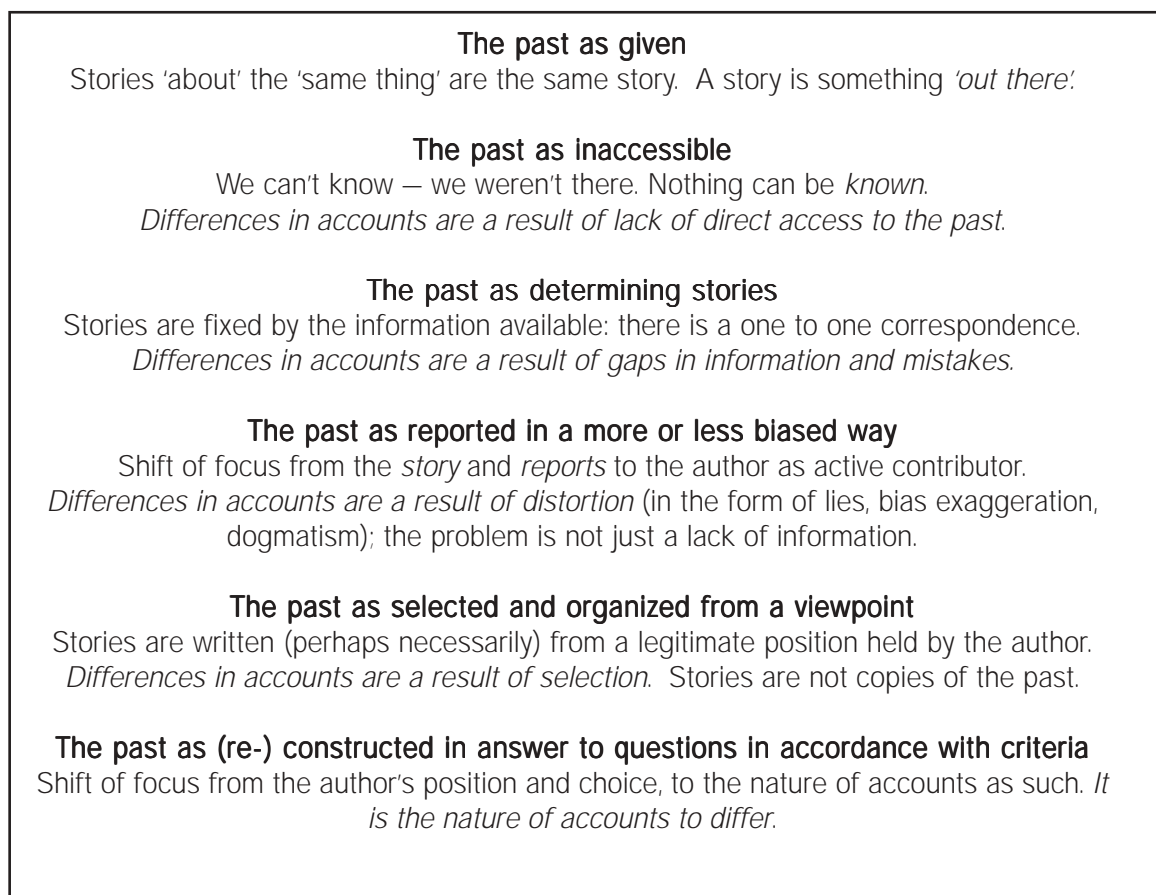
BUT SURELY KIDS' IDEAS AREN'T FIXED?



*Chata* just mapped the ideas kids happen to have now. Think of the changes in ideas as like sheep-paths or snail tracks; they're the way most kids tend to go. Their ideas are probably just the ones our culture and our teaching set them up with. (Humans might be wired up to make certain assumptions about the past, but that's too big a question yet. A *Chata* follow-up looking at kids' ideas about history outside England is on the drawing board.)

SO WHAT DID CHATA FIND? DON'T TELL ME NUTSHELL, YOU HAVEN'T GOT SPACE TO SAY. . .  
You guessed it. But you *could* look at Peter Lee's *Chata* piece starting on page 29

Figure 5. Progression in students' ideas about accounts and their relation to the past



different ideas, and that this range follows a similar pattern to the wider progression under discussion here. For example, some students saw 'opinion' as filling in for lack of knowledge, whereas for others it was what authors have when they take sides.

#### 4. The 'nature of accounts' category

A few older children recognized that historical accounts can never be complete, and that they have to be constructed within sets of parameters. Different accounts answer different questions, and have to meet different criteria. Where responses in the 'author' category treated selection as a matter of historians imposing their preferences on an account, those in the 'nature' category thought of the task of producing a historical account as imposing selection on historians. In that sense it is in the nature of historical accounts to differ. Figure 4 shows how these ideas were distributed across year groups.

- 10% of students explicitly mentioned ideas about accounts answering different questions, fitting different parameters, or as necessarily being incomplete. Some also talked about accounts as not just being conjunctions of facts. (A further 2% made implicit reference to such ideas.)

- Only 5% of year 6, 12% of year 7 and 18% of year 9 mentioned ideas of this kind. While these small proportions may not be surprising, it is perhaps surprising that these ideas appeared at all in responses from students of 14 or younger.

These findings suggest a progression of students' ideas about why historical accounts differ, and in their ideas about the nature of such accounts.

#### Further reading

The most easily available Chata publications include the following.

- Lee, P. J., Ashby R. and Dickinson A.K. (1996a). 'Progression in children's ideas about history.' In M. Hughes (ed.), *Progression in Learning* (pp.50-81). Clevedon, Bristol (PA) and Adelaide: Multilingual Matters. (Written at an early stage of analysis, but gives some idea of the assumptions of the project, and deals with aspects of evidence and explanation.)
- Dickinson, A., Lee, P. J. and Ashby, R. (1997). 'Research methods and some findings on Rational Understanding'. In *Principles and Practice: analytical perspectives on curriculum reform and changing*

pedagogy from history teacher education (pp.113-125). Standing Conference of History Teacher Educators in the UK. (An interim report on rational understanding.)

Lee, P. J., Ashby, R. and Dickinson, A. K. (1997) 'Just Another Emperor: Understanding Action in the Past.' In J. Voss (ed.) *International Journal of Educational Research*, Volume 27, No.3, pp. 233-244. (Discussion of rational understanding on the basis of responses from one task set.)

Lee, P. J., Ashby R. and Dickinson A.K. (1996b). 'Children Making Sense of History', in *Education 3-13 24* (1) 13-19. (Deals with some aspects of explanation.)

Lee, P. J., Ashby R. and Dickinson A.K. (1996c). 'Children's understanding of "because" and the status of explanation in history.' *Teaching History 82* (1) 6-11. (Outlines some of the questions asked by Chata in the area of explanation, and reports one small aspect of the work.)

The most up-to-date work has been given as unpublished conference papers or published overseas (a situation we hope to rectify before too long). However one paper is available in English, dealing with accounts in much the same way as the present paper, but discussing examples of students' responses.

Lee, P. J. (1997a). "'None of us was there": Children's ideas about why historical accounts differ.' In S. Ahonen et al. (eds), *Historiedidaktik, Norden 6, Nordisk Konferens om Historiedidaktik, Tampere 1996* (pp. 23-58). Copenhagen: Danmarks Laererhøjskole.

The Chata project grew out of research at the Institute of Education beginning 25 years ago, and pursued on a small scale (with interruptions) ever since. Much of this earlier work used video recording of groups of three students discussing the 'best' answer to historical problems of explanation or enquiry in the absence of adults. (References to this work, and to the work of Booth, Charlton, Hallam, and Shemilt are to be found in Lee et al. 1996a, listed above.) Independently, Denis Shemilt's much bigger Schools History Project Evaluation Study (1980) both confirmed and went beyond the research at the Institute. Later Institute explorations (of 'empathy' and 'evidence') further developed our understanding of children's ideas. More recently Cooper and Knight, adding to the earlier work of West, have researched ideas at primary level. A keen interest in these matters has appeared in the USA in the past decade (influenced to some degree by history education and research in Britain).

## So what?

There's no room for an argued case here, so what follows is a speculative, if dogmatic, starting point.

The Chata evidence suggests that any 'certainty' about historical accounts is more likely among year 3 children than year 9 students. More common at all ages is the belief that history is impossible, either (for younger children) because 'No one was there' or (for older students) because 'Everyone is allowed to hold on to his own opinions'.

Students need ideas that enable them to move beyond helplessness in the face of historical disagreement. This means tackling key ideas that shut down further moves. What are they? Let's take just two.

- ◆ We didn't see past events so we can't say anything valid about them.
- ◆ If the story is not complete, it can't be any good.

First, much of what we say about the past couldn't have been 'eyewitnessed' by anyone. Declining economies, rising birth-rates and the acceptance of new constitutional ideas (for example) are not witnessable events. Not even the things that historians want to say about apparently concrete events like battles were available to witnesses. 'Being there' is not the answer!

Second, as some of the Chata students already understood in year 6, historical accounts cannot be complete: this is not a problem, just part of what an account is. But once you've asked a question, and subscribed to some parameters, not any old story will do.

Third, different accounts don't necessarily conflict, though they may compete. Accounts can do different jobs, and talking about the significance of an event only makes sense within a particular account. The Falklands War had different significance in a story about dictatorship than it did (as the Malvinas crisis) in a story about colonialism. And significance changes with timescale within a single story. The students who said that no account could be complete, and that different accounts answered different questions, understood that historical accounts were not just copies of the past. They were pointing the way for other students to follow.

## Appendix 1: Task Set 1

### FIRST STORY

#### Chapter 1



Before the Romans came the Britons lived in wooden huts. They had no towns. Almost no-one could read. The Britons often fought each other.

#### Chapter 2



The Romans went to Britain and took most of it over. They made Britain peaceful.

The Romans built towns and cities. Some houses had central heating. Many Britons lived more comfortably. Some Britons learned to read.

#### Chapter 3



Much later, invaders attacked the Romans. The Roman armies went off to protect their other lands. The Anglo-Saxons took over England.

Towns and cities fell into ruins. It was as if the Romans had never been in Britain. It was ages before people in Britain lived as comfortably as they did when the Romans were there.

### SECOND STORY

#### Chapter 1



Before the Romans came the Britons had their own way of life. They were good at making jewellery and tools. Almost no-one could read.

#### Chapter 2



The Romans took Britain over. They beat the Britons who tried to stop them.

The Romans made Britain like other countries they lived in. Britons copied the Roman way of life. Some learned to read.

#### Chapter 3



Much later, invaders attacked the Romans. The Roman armies went off to protect their other lands. The Anglo-Saxons took over England.

Once the Romans left, Britain gradually became one country, with a mixture of Britons and Anglo-Saxons. After a time people remembered Roman ideas. Some Roman ideas are still used now.