

Taking historical perspectives

We don't have a time machine, so it can be difficult for children to understand what the past meant to those people who lived in it. It's almost like a different country which they haven't visited. Our understanding of history is often obscured by the concerns, beliefs and values we have in modern society. We look at history with modern glasses, and because of this, we don't see important things.

Because of this, to understand why things happened in history, children have to understand the differences between the way we live today, and how people lived in the past. This means understanding the social, cultural, intellectual and emotional factors which influenced people's lives and decisions.

But not everybody in history thought or felt the same things in the same way. Understanding how conflicting beliefs or ideologies influenced people's decisions, and how that influenced historical events is equally important.

Being able to take a historical perspective is a big challenge for students, but doing so can enable them to discover surprising and alternative explanations for historical events, and a wider perspective from which to evaluate current social issues (looking at today with historical glasses).

So how do we help children to take such perspectives?

1. Ensure students understand which event or time period they need to think about.
2. Ask them to list the different groups or people involved (a little like when examining cause and consequence).
3. Focus on one of those individuals, or one group of people, and think about their position in society. Provide students with evidence to help them understand that position in society. For example, a portrait of one of the Beys makes clear that they were rich and privileged.
4. Then ask children to think about how that position in society would be different from someone similar today (or a similar group today).
5. To help them, children could compare the circumstances faced by those people in the past with the circumstances we face today. You could ask children to think about economy, religion, family life, media, technology, recreational activities etc.
6. Finally, children should think about how these different circumstances influenced the thoughts and actions of those historical figures.

Ask children to undertake this process for the different people or individuals, and then compare their responses. You could ask them to compare the following between different historical people:

1. Motivations (why did they do what they did?)
2. Actions (what did they do?)
3. Responses (how did they and other respond?)

Taking historical perspectives is the most challenging of these key historical concepts. In the missions, the children only really encounter it in the Mission about the Beys, but this shouldn't stop you going on to consider such ideas with your class. Role play is a really useful tool to help.