

'...When I was two in Pakistan...' discovering the past with bilingual 5 and 6 year-olds

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Building Blocks is seeking to pioneer a specific approach to education in the early years which we define as *holistic*. While broadly adhering to the tradition of progressive child-centred pedagogies, this approach seeks to highlight the importance of a child's cultural experience in relation to her/his learning in the classroom — particularly significant in the context of a multicultural society. We view historical knowledge and understanding as crucial to this reassertion of a humanistic, global, and multicultural view of education on behalf of which educators in the nineties need to launch a vigorous counter-offensive.

The study of history involves the study of people: in common with spiritual, artistic, literary and geographical modes of knowing it helps children to understand themselves better, increases their understanding of the immediate community and the wider world of which they form a part, and develops their ability to understand the experiences of different groups of people across the world. They also learn that past and present are not separate, but part of a continuous humanity.

The first five years of the child's own life experience, together with the lives, stories, memories and belongings of parents and grandparents provide the basic 'raw material' for the foundation of children's historical thinking and for the gradual progression of historical skills and understanding. In the context of their family experiences, children's lives are full of significant events, occasions, people, places, names, images, stories, narratives, objects; they experience the passing of time, continuities and changes in their routines; they observe similarities and differences among people and in the world around them; and they already have, in relation to people, a clear sense of 'young' and 'old'. Historical understanding is therefore already latent in the young child's experience.

We would suggest the following objectives for history at Key Stage 1:

- to enable children to understand who they are and where they come from.
- to increase their understanding of the immediate community and the wider society of which they are part.
- to begin to develop an understanding of the experiences of different groups of people across the world.

In the process of achieving these objectives, we are also seeking to foster the development of certain 'key' attitudes, concepts and skills:

Attitudes

- Self-esteem
- Curiosity
- Enjoyment
- Empathy
- Eagerness to communicate
- Awareness of different perspectives
- Valuing different perspectives
- Motivation to find out more

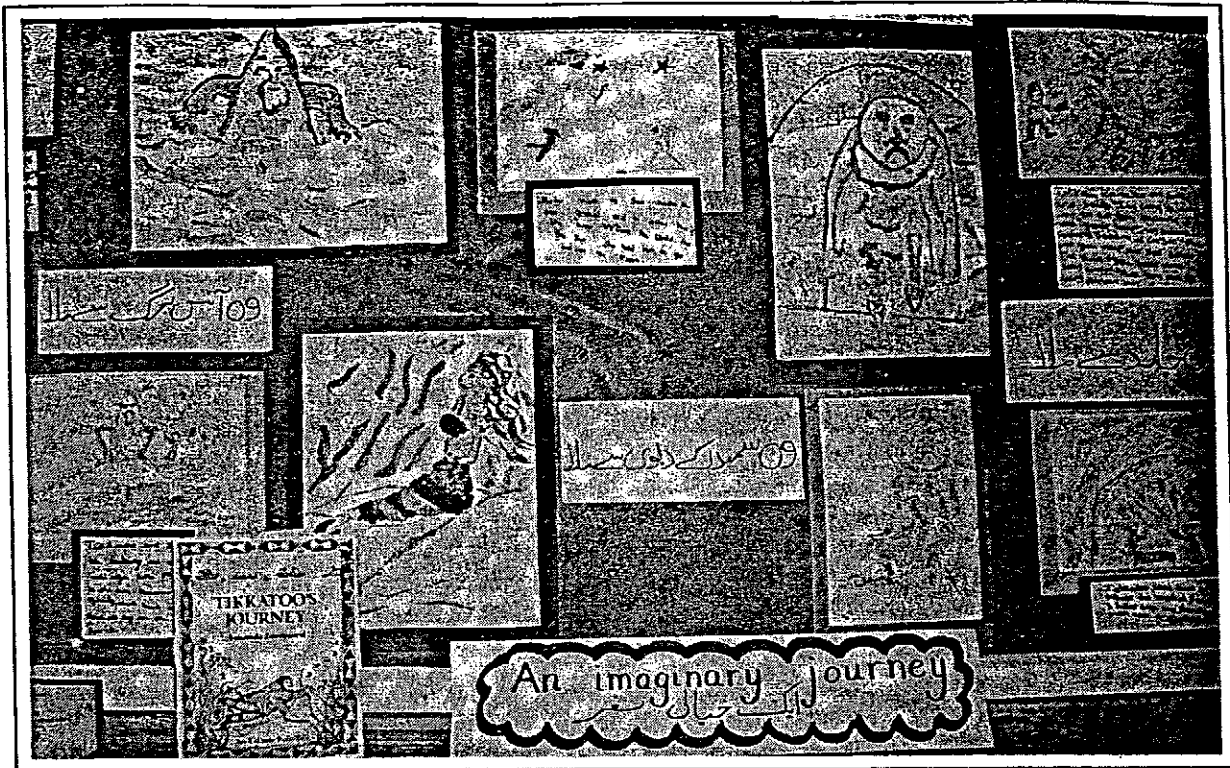
Concepts

- Sequence
- Continuity/Change
- Similarity/Difference
- Agedness
- Time/Chronology
- Cause/Effect
- Co-operation/Conflict
- Evidence

Skills

- the development of oral descriptive and narrative abilities
- the development of vocabulary related to the passage of time, eg. days of the week, yesterday, today, tomorrow, months, years, seasons, birthdays, festivals, special occasions, old, new, then, now, long ago, before, after
- the development of the ability to place objects, actions, events, etc in a sequence — to understand the physical effects of time on objects and to talk about why events happened
- the development of visual literacy
- the development of ability to use memory and recall
- the development of the powers of imagination and reasoning
- the development of the ability to represent a historical experience through talk, writing, drawing, painting, role-play, model-making, design etc.

Children's own experiences and those of their immediate family, then, are a good starting-point for introducing aspects of the past. 'Family history' has obvious advantages: firstly, it recognises that



children's own experiences matter. By bringing their backgrounds and identities into the classroom the teacher is affirming that the children's — and their families' — lives are important. Secondly, by creating a positive context that enables all children to 'bring in' and express their diverse cultural experiences, to 'make sense' of them, and to share insights with each other during normal classroom interaction, the teacher is helping the children to recognise each other's qualities and to value one another as unique individuals. This not only has beneficial effects on children's self-esteem and motivation, but may also, at this initial stage of schooling, nip the development of racist feelings and attitudes in the bud. Finally, this approach also enables the school to develop links with parents in the most natural way possible since parents can, in addition to their own life experience, also provide access to such 'sources' as grandparents, old documents, images, and artefacts.

The History Project at Maybury

The vast majority of children at Maybury County are of South Asian (Pakistani) decent and speak either Urdu or Panjabi as their first language. We launched the project at an Open Day for parents, children, and members of the local community. Parents were informed through a letter (in both Urdu and English) and, with somewhat greater impact, in more informal ways by teachers and other staff at the end of the school day. The role of the bilingual assistant, Miriam Quizilbash, was vital here. In communicating with parents, we stressed how much we needed the knowledge, information and expertise that they could provide, as we very much wanted to build on the children's experiences — the places and countries they came from, their journeys, travels, and visits

since settling in Woking, places and languages they were familiar with.

The Open Day was held close to the start of term so as to generate maximum enthusiasm. All classes from Nursery to Years 2/3, worked very hard in the first two weeks of term on the displays. We had collaboratively planned the term's topic on *Journeys* in great detail and had a blown-up version of the whole-school topic flow-chart as one of the displays. Next to it, a map of Britain was set beside a map of the world, indicating the journeys that each adult member of the school had made to come and live in Woking. Around them were flags indicating the countries or origin of the children at the school, drawn and coloured in by the children themselves. Right at the bottom of the display, two children had drawn time-lines: drawings representing *Important journeys in Imran's life* and *Important journeys in Joanna's life*.

Flanked by a colourful poster showing an Indian passenger train being guided to a stop by two guards, was an exhibit of storybooks involving journeys and travel, including stories to which parents had contributed in various ways. The captions accompanying the displays were in both Urdu and English, written in a way that was 'inviting' to parents: one of our main aims was to attract parents' help and participation in the activities scheduled for later in the term... This is a story which parents have translated. Can you help us to translate some other stories?... This is a story written by a mum for her child. Would you like to write a story for your child?... This is a picture story about a child's first journey. Would you like to put words to the pictures?

In another corner of the room, alongside an old photograph of the headteacher, Jean Irwin, captioned



Who is this?, we had a tape-recorder going and two accompanying captions, one behind the other. The first one read *1938! Who is speaking on this tape?* The second: *This is a taped story of when Mrs Irwin was a child. Would you like to do a taped story for us?* Underneath a bright red poster of a 1910 No.11 London Transport bus, was a display about *How we used to travel*, with images of old aeroplanes, ships, lorries, cars, trains, rickshaws. Next came a montage on *Ways of communicating with family and friends who live in other places*, featuring children's drawings and writing on postcards and letters, particularly cards sent on special occasions: Eid, Diwali, Chinese New Year, Christmas, Easter.

Some older children acted as official guides and took visitors on a tour of the exhibits. The event was very well attended and many parents, inspired by the displays, began to reminisce amongst themselves about old times. One grandad recalled his childhood in pre-partition India and promised Rebecca to come into her classroom and tell the children about his experiences in the second World War as a soldier in the British Indian Army. Some mothers, encouraged by their children, expressed interest in writing or recording a story about their child. And throughout the afternoon children could be seen huddling together in small groups discussing various aspects of the visual displays with great animation. The Open Day strengthened the school's relationship with parents, reinforced collaboration and teamwork amongst staff, and generated a great deal of motivation and enthusiasm for the History Project throughout the school.

Perhaps the essential feature of the History Project was our use of stories. In the two Reception/Year 1 classes we adopted a 'literary' approach to stories which were told or read at the start of the day in both

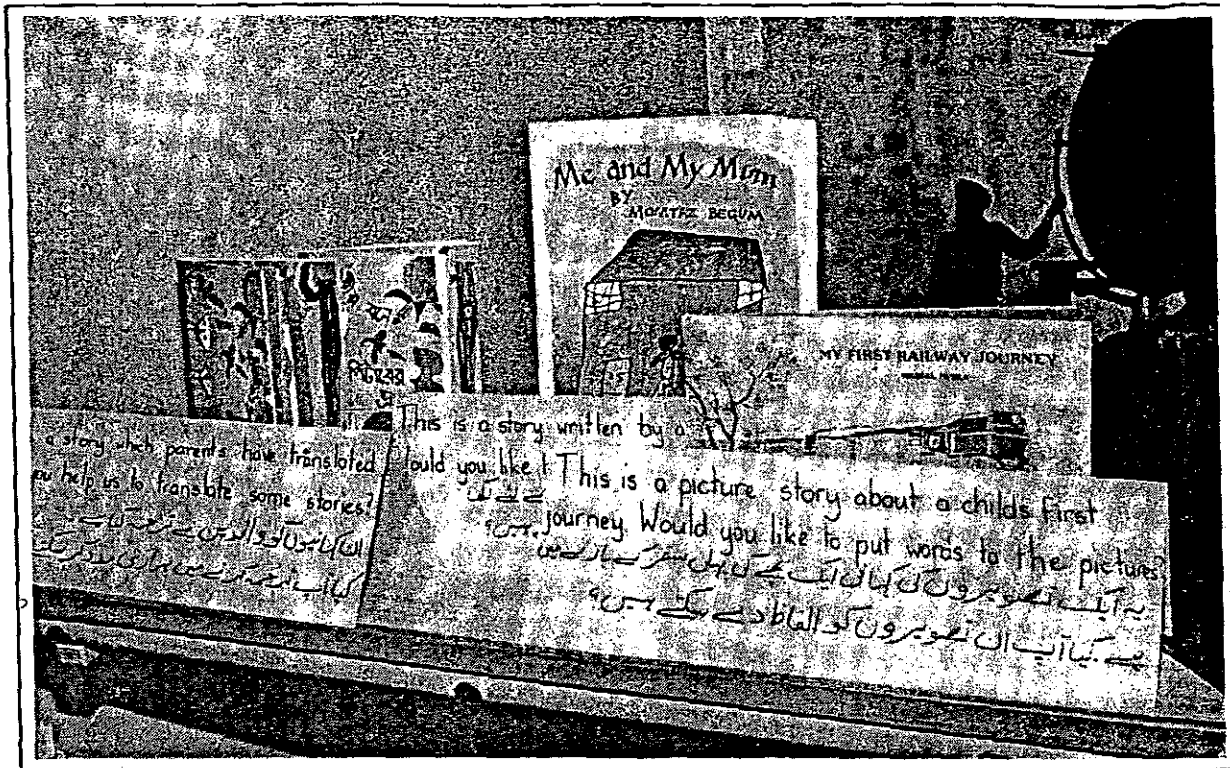
English and Urdu/Punjabi, with a view to inspire children not only to listen and speak, but also to 'see', remember, imagine, and create. In selecting most imaginative stories we wished to ensure not only their relevance to the topic, but also their

- potential for exploring the children's past experiences
- relevance to the cultural experiences of the children
- availability in the children's first languages, enabling first language and bilingual story telling.
- capacity for positively conveying the ways of life of diverse peoples past and present
- strong and positive illustrations enabling children to interpret the pictures.

Although not all the stories we used met all of the above criteria, it was fascinating to observe the children contributing their own experiences and bringing their own knowledge to bear on stories such as *A Balloon for Grandad*, *Katie Morag* and *The Grandmothers*, *Do You Believe In Magic?* *When Grandma Came*, *The People Who Hugged The Tree*, *The Bird Who Was An Elephant*, *The Day of Ahmed*, *Secret*, *Abrar's Holiday*, and many others. The following exchanges, during the telling of *A Balloon for Grandad* convey this process quite vividly:

Miriam was asking the children, in Urdu, if they knew what a 'grandad' was.

'Abu', replies Hinna. 'Budhe hai' (he is very old), adds Hiram.



Rebecca then asks the whole class how many of them have a grandad, and several children put up their hands.

'Does your grandad look like Abdullah?' she enquires of Ali. 'What sort of clothes does he wear?'

'White kurta and shalwar', he answers.

'He has black hair and a black beard', Faisal joins in.

'Where does your grandad live, Faisal?'

'In Pakistan', he answers.

'Do you write to him?'

'Sometimes.'

'Abu lives with us at home', chips in Ali.

'Is your grandad a young person, an old person, or a very old person?'

'An old person. I was two years old in Pakistan when I last saw him'.

'Do you send him photos to see what you look like?'

'My mum does sometimes'.

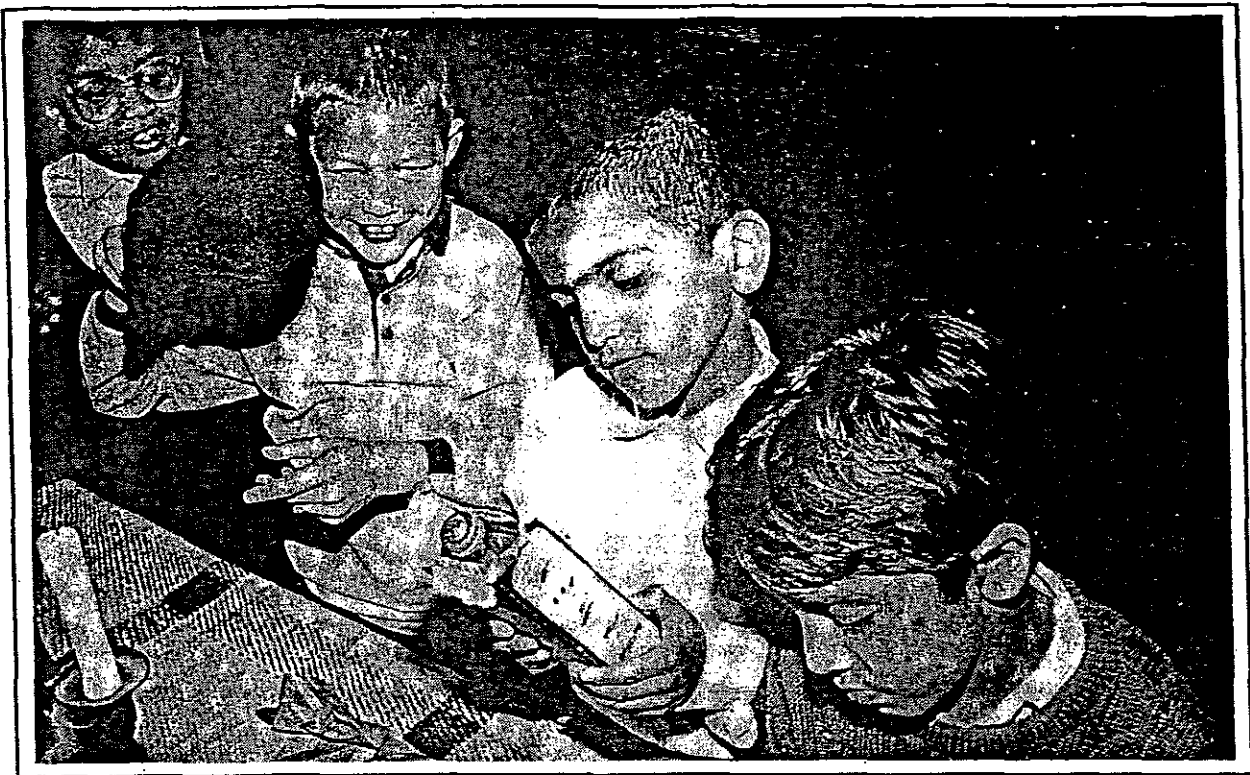
Stories were used as mini-topics, the telling of the tale leading to a range of activities across the curriculum. The stories featuring grandads or grandmas led to the children writing letters to one of their grandparents. Children drew a picture of their grandad or granny or, if they did not have a 'real' grandparent, drew how they would like her/him to look. They thought and then wrote (with the aid of their word-cards and with the support of the adults in the classroom acting as scribes) about the 'special'

things about their grandparents. We also suggested that they ask their grandparents when they were born, which country they were born in, whether or not they went to school when they were five, and how they spent their day. Some children were able to write a few words in Urdu before taking their thoughts to Miriam to scribe for them. With addresses provided by parents, we took the children to the nearest post-box to post their letters.

Using the stories, the children also engaged in visual observation: in small groups, we discussed the 'events' in the story pictures and this often led to children producing impressive paintings and drawings which suggested how much the stories had motivated them and set their imagination alight. We went on a number of outings, visiting for instance an old school in Godalming, and exploring the local neighbourhood for 'things old' and 'things new'. Later in the term, a few mothers came into the classroom, eager to work collaboratively with their child on a story. Hinna's mum, for instance, helped her to remember and recall their previous summer's holiday in Pakistan, and those memories provided the basis for their story, illustrated by Hinna herself.

Another important dimension of the Project was the children's work with pictures. Indeed, pictures are a particularly appropriate way of learning about the past for 5-7 year-olds who are only just beginning to read. We collected a range of postcard pictures (mainly from the London Transport Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Museum of London), as well as a smaller number of large images, of 'journey scenes'.

The pictures offered historical contrasts between present, recent past, and more distant past, and were geographically set in Britain or the Indian



subcontinent. Again, we felt that the pictures should contain some elements with which the children could identify, something that was within both their personal and cultural experience. We worked with the children in small groups, arranging the pictures in sets of three: 'new', 'old' and 'very old'. Most of the children showed a keen sense of observation and were able to pick out the details of the happenings in each picture. I vividly recall an occasion when I was discussing three pictures with a group of children — a man riding a mountain bike on a snowy mountain (colour photograph), St. Pancras Station 1950 (black-and-white photograph), and a Mughal scene depicting a horseman asking for water from a group of women (colour painting). All the children easily distinguished the one contemporary image (the mountain bike) from the two others set in the past. Saadia and Nasser then observed that the St Pancras picture was older than the Mughal scene because the buildings were white and the sky was blue. Adil reasoned that the Mughal scene was the more distant in time because 'the man was riding a horse', while Rifat observed that it was older because of 'the shape of the buildings'. This was a particularly acute observation, as the buildings in question were not very prominent and could easily be missed at first sight. Indeed, the Mughal image attracted a great deal of interest and comment, particularly from the girls. Rifat and Ayesha identified the scene as in some way familiar, as 'Pakistani.' The usually quiet Ayesha commented that 'when she's in Pakistan my mum sometimes dresses like these ladies.'

From the children's point of view the highlight of the Project was definitely the *Suitcase at Left Luggage* activity. The idea here was to explore the contents of a lost suitcase containing various artefacts, objects, and memorabilia so as to enable the children to:

- discuss and hypothesise about the age of the various artefacts and their uses in the light of their own experiences. What could they be certain about and what was merely a possibility?
- enjoy playing 'detectives', i.e. using the contents of the suitcase as clues to establish the identity of its owner. Was the person young or old, male or female? Who was (s)he (English, Pakistani, etc.)?
- think about questions such as 'where was the traveller coming from?' and 'why did (s)he choose to carry these items with her/him? (The idea being that people carry what is important to them — their history — when they move from one place to another).

The contents of the suitcase were made up of a selection of items that were chosen to represent a cross-section of the artefacts that we had been able to assemble, we decided that the 'traveller' would be a grandad who had lost his suitcase while travelling from Pakistan to Britain. The artefacts included an old school sports magazine from British India (written in Urdu), an old army cap, two teddy bears (one old, one new), an old book, *English Journey*, by J. B Priestley published in 1934, baby clothes (wrapped up as a present), an old adult-size *kamiz-pajama*, a child's *thali* dinner set (wrapped up as a present), a Pakistan Airlines ticket, a framed portrait of the grandad, four small photographs — three of the grandad and a very old one of some of his family.

The children's attention was fully engaged as the suitcase was opened and, one by one, the items taken out and handled. Again, their eagerness to hypothesise, to 'have-a-go' — even when way off the

mark — was remarkable. In the end, Hiram was the one who put enough of the clues together to suggest that 'the man in the picture' must be the traveller because many things in the bag were 'very old' and that he 'might be' a grandad since he looked a bit like her own!

The History Project ended with a well-attended assembly during which the children talked about and presented examples of their work to parents. The entire school community felt that it had been a great success and that it had clearly demonstrated the viability of a holistic approach to the early years curriculum. We concluded that the past is accessible to young bilingual children if we relate the stories, images, artefacts, and other resources we use to their cultures and personal histories. As the work of the children at Maybury indicated, children are then able to bring their often considerable knowledge and experience to bear in making deductions from historical sources (which incidentally is a level 3 attainment according to the National Curriculum!). However, this can only happen if they are given opportunities to use and develop their first language as a tool for thinking alongside their acquisition of English. At Maybury, the fact that all the historically-oriented activities were conducted in both Urdu/Panjabi and English meant that children were able to draw on the past experiences 'stored' in their first language.

Recently, the media debate surrounding the publication of the controversial league tables of school performance at Key Stage 1 has focused on the existence of 'large numbers of children with a first language other than English' as one significant factor apparently explaining the 'performance' of some schools. In this way, rather than pin-point the government's failure to instigate effective policies, resources, and curricula for bilingual education in English primary schools, the terms of the debate have simply reinforced the popular misconception that speaking a language other than English (especially a non-European language) is *per se* a source of problems and difficulties in educational life. The experience of the children at Maybury County First School suggests otherwise.

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Acknowledgements to the children, staff, parents, and families at Maybury County First School.

Teachers interested in discussing this approach developed by Building Blocks or in developing the appropriate historical resources for use at Key Stage 1 are invited to contact the Equality Learning Centre, 35b Holloway Road, London N7 6PA.

Speaking about the Past: oral history for Key Stage One, by Sandip Hazareesingh, Penny Kenway and Kelvin Simms, will be published by Trentham Books in the Autumn.