

# Development of Critical Thinking Skills in History

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## Abstract

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*History is a written record of human experiences across time and space. The learners of history need to relate various kind of available sources to understand historical events and concepts. It is however observed that the classroom teaching in history is blended with a collection of facts, rote memorisation leading to boredom, leaving very little space for critical thinking among students. It is pertinent for teachers to evolve effective ways of learning history to generate and retain interest in the subject. How we can make the teaching-learning of history effective in schools, is a question frequently asked in different forums. This paper is the outcome of an educational intervention, with an objective to explore the effectiveness of integrating student-centred measures in a social science classroom at the elementary stage as a medium to enhance critical thinking skills and student engagement.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The students of history need to know and understand historical events and concepts. They are also expected to apply different critical thinking skills that are commonly used in the study of history. However, the component of knowledge and skill in this context is often carried forward, posing the two as different. History, as a subject,

is therefore taught as a collection of facts woven into a narrative. But the way history is taught—as a series of lectures, textbook reading, rote memorizing, and test taking—is not only boring to students, but also ineffective in garnering real historical learning (Waring & Robinson 2010, p. 22). Truth be told, if students are not taught to acquire and make use of

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critical thinking skills to interrogate historical information, they cannot have historical knowledge. To link critical thinking skills to content, the instructional focus should be on the process of learning. Research supports the premise that lecture and memorization do not lead to long-term knowledge or the ability to apply that knowledge to new situations (Snyder & Snyder 2008, pp. 91–92). It is the application of the content that stimulates thinking. Referring to various researches, Sayre states that the teacher-centred approaches contribute little to promote critical thinking skills, motivation or the love of the social studies (Sayre 2013, p. 1). So, it is important for teachers to move away from teaching history as ‘given’ and allow students to construct their own knowledge by following vivid and creative methods of learning.

### **DEFINING CRITICAL THINKING**

Critical thinking is often defined as the ‘intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action’ (Snyder & Snyder 2008, p. 90). In other words, it implies questioning that is, not to accept without evidence, and search for the reasons as to why statements are being made. The importance of critical thinking skills lies in the fact that these skills enable students

to deal effectively with social, scientific, and practical problems. Simply put, students who are able to think critically are able to solve problems effectively.

Critical thinking is not a new concept. Savich (2009, p. 4) informs that the impetus for improving critical thinking skills gained momentum in the 1980s when many schools, districts, and states in the United States of America began placing a greater emphasis on critical thinking skills in teaching, curriculum design, and testing. He further states that the United States National History Standards, 1994 encouraged critical thinking skills, active learning, and the use of primary sources and documents.

Critical thinking is not an inherent ability. It is a learned skill that needs to be developed, practised, and continually integrated into the curriculum to engage students in active learning. Once students acquire these skills, they can become confident in their reasoning and apply their critical thinking ability to any content area or discipline (Snyder & Snyder 2008, p. 92). But to learn the process of thinking critically, focused attention needs to be placed on the application of content, the process of learning, and methods of assessment (Snyder & Snyder 2008, p. 92). The acquisition of critical thinking skills should take place in the formative years so that children become more fair-minded and learn to think innovatively in their later life.

### **INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES THAT PROMOTE CRITICAL THINKING**

Critical thinking is considered to be an indispensable part of the twenty first century curriculum. Today, teachers are required to prepare students to live and work in a complex and interactive society, therefore a major emphasis is placed on the development of students' minds (Zachary 2011, p. 15). Zachary further says that though many schools claim to teach critical thinking, there is very little evidence to support such claims. He holds patterns of classroom instruction, characterised by text-oriented, whole-group, and teacher-centred instruction with an emphasis on memorisation of factual information, responsible for this failure in implementing critical thinking (Zachary 2011, p. 15).

Referring to various researches, Sayre points out that student-centred methods of teaching, which incorporate several learning styles, cooperative activities, simulations, technology and so much more, have the potential to promote critical thinking skills (Sayre 2013, p. 1).

Many engaging strategies exist for teaching social studies and critical thinking skills. One such method to implement critical thinking is the use of primary sources.

*Using primary sources enables students to make connections to history that memorizing facts cannot do. Inquiring about*

*various primary sources requires critical thinking skills: extracting information, interpreting, analyzing and making inferences, compiling and organizing information, evaluating information, and drawing conclusions'. (Sayre 2013, p. 9)*

Sayre considers simulation as the second important strategy.

*'Simulations are a useful method of using cooperative learning to engage students, connect to history and promote critical thinking by having students take on the role of individuals or groups from history, and make decisions that those people would have had to make in a particular historical time period'. (Sayre 2013, p. 9)*

Other tools mentioned by him are debates, role playing, Socratic or higher-order questioning, project-based learning, and incorporating various interactive technologies. Similarly, graphic organisers, mind maps, graphs, diagrams, cooperative learning, discussion projects, and authentic assessments are some other important strategies mentioned by others to enhance critical thinking. Acknowledging the absence of conclusive data about the best strategies to promote critical thinking, Zachary informs us about researches that suggest basic principles to implement critical thinking and emphasises on providing a supportive environment in classroom which encourages discussion, questions,

probing, and pondering to foster critical thinking (2011, p. 19).

### **SCHOOL CURRICULUM AND HISTORY TEACHING**

In India, broad guidelines regarding content and process of education at different stages are formulated by the national government. These guidelines are further elaborated by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) in the form of Curriculum Frameworks. So far, four Curriculum Frameworks have been prepared by the NCERT, and all these frameworks have emphasised the need to equip students with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary for leading a productive and happy life.

*The Curriculum for the Ten Year School—A Framework* (NCERT 1975, p. 32) states that, ‘the child learns better by doing, by discovering and not by merely listening submissively to a display of factual knowledge’. In addition to this, *National Curriculum for Elementary and Secondary Education—A Framework* (NCERT 1988, p. 8) calls for the need to replace the existing teaching methods based on rote learning, with interactive methods of teaching which would focus on ‘learning’ and which would stimulate curiosity and independent thinking, and develop problem solving skills. The *National Curriculum Framework for School Education* (NCERT 2000,

p. 18) considers ‘problem solving’ and ‘critical thinking’ among others as some of the core skills important for successful living. *The Position Paper on Teaching of Social Sciences* (NCERT 2006, p. v) outlines the indispensability of social science in, ‘laying the foundations for an analytical and creative mindset’. *The Position Paper* (NCERT 2006, p. viii) calls for the need to revitalise social science teaching, ‘towards helping the learner acquire knowledge and skills in an interactive environment’.

Following the concerns of social science teaching, the *Syllabus for Classes at the Elementary Level* (NCERT 2006, p. 164) clearly mentions that ‘...students need to see history not simply as a set of facts about the past—economic, social, political, and cultural — but that they have to learn to think historically’. Accordingly, the syllabus aims to introduce students to different type of sources and encourages them to reflect on them critically. By building discussions around these sources, the history textbooks allow the learners to develop analytical skills.

Viator rightly asserts that social science classrooms can and should be the place where students learn critical thinking skills (2012, pp. 198–200). In addition to this, he argues that the space most conducive to the development of these thinking skills is the history classroom (2012, p. 200).

### **NCERT's ACADEMIC ATTACHMENT TO SCHOOLS**

This study was part of the NCERT's academic attachment to schools where the faculty working in different constituents of the NCERT undertook field work in different schools of the country for a minimum period of three months. The objective of this academic attachment included teaching in the school along with carrying out research; try-out of educational materials, advocacy, or any other such intervention in accordance with the mandate of the NCERT in general, and underlying philosophy of the *National Curriculum Framework 2005* in particular.

#### **Selection of School**

The premise for the selection of school for field work was that the school be adhering to the principles and approaches towards teaching and learning as delineated by the NCF 2005, while using the textbooks and teaching-learning materials designed by the NCERT. Additionally, selecting a school that catered to the needs of the rural children was also thought of, so as to gain an understanding of the nuances of teaching and learning therein. Thus, the Government Middle School, Sikandarpur, district Gurugram, Haryana was identified for a three-month academic attachment from December 2013–February 2014.

#### **About the School under Study**

The school under intervention was a small, rural school with merely 10

rooms, including a kitchen and a computer room. Out of these, only three rooms are used for teaching. The total school population was about 100–115 students. The computer room, though equipped with a number of computers, was rarely in use for learning. Hardly any form of teaching aid was seen in the classroom.

The majority of students belong to the poorer communities in the surrounding areas, particularly children of migrant labourers from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Jharkhand. Very few students are from Haryana. The students in the school are being served mid-day meals.

The medium of instruction is Hindi, although many students' home language is different. In this school, teachers generally teach using the transmission method that is, 'teachers talk and learners listen'.

#### **Motivation for Educational Intervention**

My motivation to undertake this research stemmed primarily from my own experience of interacting with students and teachers during various programmes conducted by the NCERT and other agencies. Students usually report apathy and boredom in history classes where the emphasis is on rote memorisation and the regurgitation of accepted facts and conclusions. They show little interest in the content in history textbooks, are not able to relate to any of the content in a meaningful way and find the

subject monotonous. It was realised that much of the distaste for social sciences, particularly history, stems from the way it is taught.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to empower students in the classroom to become critical of, and not merely recipients of, the knowledge conveyed to them. The research objectives for this study are —

1. To develop the critical thinking skills of students in history
2. To improve classroom teaching practice in history to make it more participatory

The educational intervention answers the following research questions.

1. How student-centred teaching methods can be used to improve the critical thinking skills of students in a history classroom?
2. How can teaching practice be improved in the classroom?

### **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

The research design model used in this study was action research. This method was used because this study focused on implementing student-centred teaching methods to determine its effects on students' critical thinking skills. Both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis were utilised. Qualitative methods included an instructional plan and a reflective journal. The reflective journal was

kept to record the successes and challenges of implementing critical thinking. Quantitative methods included the use of questionnaires and a survey. Questionnaires were used to see if students were able to answer questions that tested their understanding of the critical thinking skills. A survey was administered to the students to determine the impact of critical thinking skills and students' attitudes about the use of critical thinking skills. A pre/post-test was administered to decide whether the use of critical thinking skills improved after the intervention. The research stretched over a period of five–six weeks during academic attachment.

The initial interaction with the Head and other teachers of the school helped to establish the purpose of the field work, which generated an understanding of the needs of the students. This also included meeting the subject teachers with regard to the specific stage, class, timetable and topics.

The first week of the intervention in school was devoted for familiarisation with the school environment and students in different classes. The first session was taken with Class VI. The following conversation took place in an informal manner —

1. Which subject do you study in this period? (The children loudly responded—'history'.)
2. Do you like studying history? (The children reluctantly said—'yes'. This may be because the teachers might have cautioned them.)

3. Why do you think history is taught to you?
4. What is history?
5. What good and bad do for think about the way your teacher teaches you in class?

The students' responses were quite varied, but they served two purposes. First, it gave the students an opportunity to delve more with the subject, gain confidence and a familiarisation with a new way of learning history, which is away from lecturing. The students provided the following responses.

1. History is learning about our past.
2. They like history because it tells them how people lived in the Stone Age.
3. History is taught to them so that they can know about what happened in the past.
4. The teachers do not explain things to them. They make us read our books and instruct us to answer the questions given at the end of the chapter.

The exercise was fruitful and provided valuable feedback and insight to ascertain their level of understanding in history. A pretest was conducted, and the response so obtained formed the basis for the present educational intervention.

### **Pretest**

The purpose of the pretest was to determine the students' prior knowledge of history, and application of critical thinking skills. The pretest was administered to the students

in the second week of intervention. The first instruction for the pretest was that the students must read the questions and not refer to the textbook for answers. They were also told that they could discuss questions with the student sitting next to them. Each student had to complete a worksheet without worrying about the right or wrong answers. They were assured that there were no correct or incorrect answers. Hence, they should submit their responses freely, drawn from their own experience and understanding, and without any fear of failure. The activity contained the following questions and instructions.

1. What is history?
2. Why do you think the study of history is important?
3. What did you enjoy about the study of history? You can give any example/s.
4. Do you know what critical thinking is? If you do not know, just say No. If you do, give a short explanation.
5. Have you ever been asked to think about your school work in a critical way?

Many students' responses for question 1. — what is history? were similar, or revolved around the same idea of what the study of history is about. A few other students, however, provided different responses. The following sentences below are a sample of the responses of students that provided similar answers. Their responses are typed verbatim.

- 'It teaches us about what happened in the past'.
- 'It teaches us about what happened in the past before we were born'.
- 'History tells us what happened years ago, our history of lives'.

There was a common understanding amongst most of the Class VI students that history is about a study of the past. From the very beginning, it was apparent that students in Class VI were taught history as a subject that contained information about the past. It seems that students had no idea that history can be critically studied or that questions do not necessarily have to be about understanding content.

The responses of many learners for question 2. — why do you think the study of history is important? showed a similar pattern of how they understood the study of history. The following are the answers of some students that answered question two. The students' answers are written verbatim.

- 'The study of history is important because it tells us about our life of many years ago and where it started'.
- 'Yes it's important, because I need to know what happened long ago'.
- 'It is important because it help us about the things that happened in the past'.

Again, we see a common pattern emerging, of how students understand history. At this stage, it also became clear that most students

in class did not think that the study of history can involve critically thinking about the content in textbooks.

The students' responses for question 3. — what did you enjoy about the study of history? were varied, but still revolved around the same theme. The word 'past' was not used by students in their answers to question three, but a reference was made to some past event of a particular country, or famous individuals such as leaders of countries. What is also significant about many learners' responses for question three was that they wrote about the content of history they remembered from the earlier grades and some learners even wrote about the content found in books other than the prescribed history textbook.

Almost all the students did not write any answers for question 4. — do you know what critical thinking is? The intention of this question was to discover if students understood what the term critical thinking entails or means in the general sense of the word. Most students simply did not write any answers, and those who answered question 4. simply wrote, 'No, I don't know'.

In the fifth question, many students wrote that they have never been asked to think about their school work in a critical way. Some learners wrote that other people have told them to be critical, but did not provide any detail about exactly what critical thinking entails.



The responses of the participants showed from the start that they were not able to think independently and merely recalled the content learned. There was definitely a pattern that emerged in the answers provided by all participants. There was nothing in their answers to suggest that schooling stimulated students to develop independent thinking about the content of history lessons. The findings at this early stage of research revealed what was stated by Hester (1994, p. 6) in his book about school improvement in which education or schooling is expected to teach or develop critical thinking skills across the curriculum.

The answers students provided, showed clearly that students understood the study of history to imply the study of 'facts' found in textbooks, which is mainly about the past, and of heads of states. It did not matter if students came from different states; they all responded to questions in similar ways.

It seems that it was the first time that students were given questions to answer, in which they had to use their own understanding. They could also not use their history textbooks to find answers. It appeared that many students engaged with the questions and did not seem too concerned if their answers were correct or incorrect.

It appears that teaching and learning in schools continues to revolve merely around the transmission of

knowledge, which is not the purpose of schools (Hester 1994, p. 6). Hester further argues that a 'learningful' school is a place where teachers and students must find meaning in their 'intermingling' experiences, a task which is both creative and self-generative. The study of History is more than the collection of facts, as explained in *What is History?* (1987, p. 1). The acquisition of critical thinking skills not only benefits young students in schools and students at the university, but will also help when they leave school and enter the world of work or perhaps in confronting problems in daily life (Flores, Matkin, Burbach, Quinn & Harding 2012, p. 212). Thus, in an attempt to inculcate critical thinking in students, it was decided to take up an action research project.

## **STAGES IN EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTION**

### **Activity 1 — Discussion/ Question and Answer**

(Understanding 'history', 'historian' and 'primary source' through questioning)

Various researches emphasise the importance of asking the right questions to stimulate students' critical thinking skills. These researches call for the need to integrate questioning techniques into class discussions to support an educational environment where students can demonstrate and practise critical thinking skills (Snyder & Snyder 2008, p. 95).

Initial discussion with students, and their responses on the pretest gave an idea to start the educational intervention with a brief presentation on 'what is history'. The intention of this presentation was to dispel the idea that history is merely the study of long-past events and long-dead people. The topic was introduced by explaining that history does not have to be about such events or people, but that it can be about the events in the students' own lives, or events that happened in their States that are important to them.

The students were then encouraged to gain a better understanding of the role of a historian and the sources historians use to construct historical narratives through questioning. First the words 'historian' and 'primary sources' were written on the blackboard. Students were then asked to explain these terms using their own words. After a few minutes, students were asked, 'Who is a historian'. A couple of students suggested that—

- 'a historian is an actual historical personality or a person that historians would study'.
- 'a historian is someone who knows about history'.

Next, the students were asked to think about 'what primary sources are?' They had a wide range of answers, but the most common were 'sources we use', 'sources we get', 'sources used long ago', and 'sources that historians need'.

Students were then asked to think of all the activities in which they were

involved during the previous 24 hours. The students were asked to provide any evidence that proves they existed during the last 24 hours. Several answers were given, such as—'My father saw me doing my homework yesterday at my house'. This student suggested that his father could vouch for his existence. Another answer was, 'I left my book at my friend's house yesterday'. In this case, the book would be the proof of the student's existence. At this stage, the students were asked—'Are there any answers that do not involve or depend on people as proof of your existence?' To this, one student responded—I went to a doctor yesterday and he prescribed some medicines for me' as proof of existence. Another answered, 'My attendance has been marked in the attendance register'.

Then there was a discussion on how these answers tell a story about a past event or place and are primary sources. The discussion about primary sources continued, as students were shown different primary sources from the period of ancient Indian history that they were studying. Artefacts were discussed, and the students were asked why each source was relevant to the period of ancient Indian history. While reviewing the artefacts (for example, replicas of goddess, seals, pots, etc.), the students began to discover, through instruction and open discourse, how primary sources are the tools that historians use, to tell a story.

## Activity 2 — Analysing Primary Sources

Written by real people dealing with complex issues and problems of their times, primary sources have a unique capacity to engage students in the study of the past (Maloy & LaRoche 2010, p. 52). The use of primary sources is one of the most engaging ways to support students' higher order thinking skills (Woysner 2010, p. 36).

In keeping with the previous theme, an excerpt was shared with students from the lesson 'Ashoka, the Emperor who Gave Up War' in the prescribed social science textbook in history *'Our Past 1'*. The students' task was to analyse the account of 'Ashoka's inscription describing the Kalinga War'.

Before the lesson started, the students were divided in groups. In a class of 34 students, there were seven groups — six groups consisting of five students and one had four students. When the students were seated, it was explained what the activity is about and what is expected of them. It was also explained that a historian who wanted to know more about this excerpt would ask questions about it and critically analyse the elements within the excerpt.

The students' first task was to read carefully the excerpt given in the textbook, then discuss the words or ideas that occurred to them when reading the excerpt, and finally, write down answers to the questions

provided to them. One person in each group had to write down the words and another student had to read out the answers. The students had to make a list of all the words or ideas they collected by reading the excerpt. The following questions were posed.

1. Is the excerpt a primary source or not?
2. Who wrote it/got it written?
3. When was it written—at the time of the event described or later?
4. To whom was it written? Why was it written?
5. What does it say? What does it tell about the past?
6. What are the keywords and what do they mean? What is it about?
7. Can we trust what it says? Was the person there?

Many students' responses for question 1. and 2. were similar. The students believed it to be a primary source, as the description in the excerpt is from Ashoka himself. It was then revealed to them that the excerpt is from an inscription by Ashoka in which he expresses his remorse over the Kalinga war.

With regard to question 4. most of the students said that the massacre perpetrated during the Kalinga war, left deep impressions on Ashoka, and that he was full of remorse. As a result, he decided to get his ideas inscribed for both, the future generations, as well as for people in general, so as to keep them away from war.

The students' responses for question 5. were varied, but it still revolved around the same theme.

One student said, 'It tells us that kings fought wars and annexed other areas, and that wars affect everyone in the land'. Another student pointed out, 'It also tells about the repentance of king Ashoka who, after seeing a lot of bloodshed, decided not to wage war anymore and instead work for 'dharma'.

The two questions that seemed to be the most challenging to the students were question number 3. — when was it written — at the time of the events described or later?, and 7. — can we trust what it says? Was the person there? At first, the students did not seem to know where to begin their investigation for this question, so their attention was focused on the line where it is mentioned that Ashoka defeated and conquered Kalinga eight years after becoming king. Then, the students were given a clue that Ashoka's formal coronation took place in 269 BCE. Then they were asked, 'Based on the information, can you figure out when was it written?' The students then made educated guesses about the time with responses such as, 'I think the inscription was written somewhere after 261 BCE'.

With regard to question 7. one student said, 'The inscription is about the conquest of Kalinga by Ashoka and his repentance thereafter'. Another student said, 'Ashoka is addressing people in this inscription in the first person and expressing his remorse for unleashing terrible violence against Kalinga'.

The lesson was concluded by saying that since this is Ashoka's own edict where he is saying what he himself experienced, it is more trustworthy and genuine than any other later textual account of the same event.

An assessment of the activity entails that the students managed to respond to the given excerpt and gave their understanding of what happened during the period. It is also evident that students can apply logic to the historical events by studying excerpts and discussing ideas with fellow students.

As the lesson concluded, the students were asked, 'How would we change the definitions of historian and primary sources, knowing what we now know?' As a whole class, the students co-constructed a new definition for historian as 'someone who looks at excerpts to learn about history'; and the new class definition for primary sources became 'the things used to prove that something exists, and that give us details or provide evidence about the past'.

As the lesson came to a close, a final effort was made to authentically relate the content of the lesson to the students' lives by asking them to compare the role of a historian to certain television shows with investigative formats. The students came to realise that in certain television shows, the characters conduct investigations and analyse evidence similar to the way historians do.

### Activity 3 — Multiple Perspectives

Citing various works, Savich (2009, p. 2–3) finds the use of multiple texts, which allow students to see different viewpoints and perspectives on historical issues and problems, as an effective strategy for improving the critical thinking skills. But at the same time, he cautions that the use of multiple texts be supported with specific instruction by the teacher.

The next lesson opened the students' minds to different perspectives of historical events and taught them to think more critically about historical information and sources. The purpose of the lesson was to show that people see things differently from different standpoints.

To build on this idea, the students were introduced to the topic — 'Revolt of 1857'. In this lesson, the students were expected to understand and identify that there can be different viewpoints on the same topic and that different viewpoints can send different messages to those who read it. For this, a reading of selected translated extracts from *Our Empire Story, Told to Boys and Girls* (H.E. Marshall, 1912) was done by the investigator followed by watching parts of the movie *The Rising: Ballad of Mangal Pandey* (K. Mehta 2005).

During this lesson, the students were to arrange themselves in groups of four or five. In this lesson, first excerpts were read to students. Thereafter, they had to read the extract and discuss among themselves the questions given to them. The next

day, first they were shown the movie and were given time for discussing the questions and writing down their answers. The third day was allocated to listening to answers from the individual learners in the groups.

The activity for this lesson contained the following questions.

1. What is the content of Marshall's text and the movie *The Rising: Ballad of Mangal Pandey*?
2. How is the issue of the greased cartridges dealt with in these?
3. How is the outbreak of rebellion depicted in these?
4. How are the rebels depicted in each of these?
5. What acts of violence are depicted in Marshall's text and *The Rising*?
6. Who are the heroes and villains in the two representations of 1857?
7. How are the results of 1857 depicted?
8. Can you think of a reason to explain the viewpoints of the two—the writer and the director?

The group work was successful in many ways. Even though the questions were short and required short answers, some students in their respective groups argued about what to write down. For the investigator, that was a positive outcome because students felt confident to express what they thought were the correct answers. It did not matter because students were debating possible answers to questions. Although many groups worked diligently on trying to find out the answers, individual learners in certain groups were

playful and not willing to participate in the activity.

However, the group work seemed to work well and most students participated in the lesson. The students in each group jotted down the responses and read it out to the class. It appeared, judging from the way students responded to the questions, that most of the questions were answered, or attempts were made to answer all the questions. The answers provided by the students differed but it was again clear that students struggled to interpret information.

Many students found the last question challenging. In order to facilitate, the investigator had to explain that the two accounts of 1857 offer very different versions of the historical events, their causes and implications—Marshall's history is a part and parcel of the imperialist venture and is an unabashed celebration of the British rule in India, while the *Rising: Ballad of Mangal Pandey* is a contemporary Indian take on the same event, but from the exact opposite point of view, depicting the legitimate struggle of the Indians against the British oppressors. One student answered, 'Well, the British administrators have one side to the story, and the people in India have another side to the story'.

When asked if every rendition of every historical event would be the same, the students all agreed that they would differ—that every historical event would be remembered

or interpreted differently by the people who rule and people who are ruled upon. Finally, the students were asked, what they should do when looking for credible information about historical events? The class reached a consensus that they must search in multiple places to find information and then evaluate this information carefully. The students learned that they can confidently use historical information only after they have considered multiple perspectives and evaluated information critically.

At this stage of the research, it appeared that the students were beginning to learn how to think critically about the historical content given to them. Some authors regard the ability to think independently and autonomously as an indication of a critical person (Paul, Binker, Martin, Vetrano & Kreklau 1989, p. 2). The students were beginning to show these dispositions to think critically when given the opportunity to do so. They may have written the words directly from the extract but their ability to identify or distinguish between fact and opinion was significant in their development to becoming autonomous thinkers.

The students were also able to identify that what was written or shown is not necessarily the truth. In discussions about these two after the class, many students said that they are starting to understand that the content of history is not necessarily a fact, but someone's 'opinion' or interpretation of events. It was an

indication that some students could see that two different viewpoints were expressed.

### **REFLECTION ON EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTION**

This action research project was aimed to instil critical thinking skills among the students of elementary stage of school education. The experience, nevertheless, made the investigator more sensitive to the needs of students and much more critical and reflective of one's own teaching practice.

During the process of educational intervention, it was observed that while a majority of the learners actively participated in the discussion, some of them were trying hard to cope with the classroom activities at their own pace, and a remaining few giggled and were quite distracted. But during the course of intervention, the children in these two categories keenly involved themselves in the ongoing activities. The students seemed to respond much better to Activity 3 relating to multiple perspectives, as they did not have to rely on textbooks, and were given the opportunity to respond spontaneously. This was, however, not the case at the beginning of the intervention. The fact that they were willing to ask probing questions about the textbook is evidence that they started to think more autonomously and critically.

When reflecting on the methods of teaching employed to improve critical

thinking skills in the classroom, one can conclude safely that students welcomed the change from passive memorisation of content, to analysis and comprehension.

Given an opportunity to ask questions, and their engagement in group tasks, apparently helped evolve a new and a creative history classroom, strengthening critical thinking skills among elementary stage children. The following responses of students, upon completion of the study, support this.

- Madam wants us to think for ourselves.
- We must not accept everything we read in textbooks.
- We can write our own history.

On the closing account, this educational intervention offered a new way of looking at learning—that learning about an idea is not the same as living with that idea. It is viewed as a means to feel and think about a way of life.

Reflecting on intervention helped to understand that it is possible to construct knowledge in collaboration with teachers acting as facilitators of learning.

### **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

This study is confined to one school and one specific stage of education with which the investigator was attached for three months. The techniques that were used to collect and analyse data were applied within a particular time period, with limited resources.

## **FINDINGS**

This research study showed that the student-centred teaching methods provided a better understanding of history, resulting in improved critical thinking skills. When the results from the pretest and post tests were compared, the student-centred teaching method resulted in higher average test scores. The results demonstrated that majority of the students in the class preferred this method of instruction. It was learnt that students were more assertive and could relate to history and historical issues much more meaningfully in the classroom. Through this method, they could not only comprehend the issues but also relate them to their own lives. Students made efforts to articulate and to express their own ideas and responses to historical events and conducted small projects independently, rather than solely relying on textbooks. The inquiry approach was more effective than memorising facts. Students were able to view history as constantly evolving and changing, and recognise that history is not dead and static. This research project demonstrated that students learned to appreciate the complexities, uncertainties, and ambiguities inherent in historical issues and problems.

## **CONCLUSION**

The findings of the study showed that when critical thinking skills were integrated in lessons, students gained a deep and meaningful understanding

of history. Students find history as an interesting subject. Based on the test score results (pretest to post test), one can conclude a substantial difference in the level of understanding of students. The history teachers should be encouraged to implement similar activities that stimulate historical inquiry.

By employing the activities delineated here, teachers can help students to develop genuine historical and critical thinking skills. More importantly, the students who enhance their historical and critical thinking skills today, will be aware of, and prepared for the academic, civic, and societal challenges that await them in the years ahead.

This study was an attempt to teach Class VI students to think critically about the content in history textbooks. The findings of the study cannot be generalised in a wider setting. The study, however, has a potential to give directions for further researches in the area of history education, in general and school education, in particular. When the intervention was being conducted, the changed classroom atmosphere was visible. Students appreciated the different forms of teaching methods and were open for discussion. The reflective pedagogy with the idea of stimulating critical skills amongst Class VI students made the action research project very fulfilling. Teachers are placed in a unique position to develop the critical and creative abilities of all learners. This



research project highlights the idea that action research is a viable option that teachers and other practitioners can use to improve their practices.

As a learning model, the inquiry-based intervention provided an environment, encouraging children to extrapolate learning from their experiences and ability to apply them, as much as the historians do. Piaget (1952) shaped our understanding of the thought processes of children.

Children search for reason and often ask questions related to causality and justification. This is equally important to learn history because stimulating ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions at an early age encourage children to think about the objective of teaching history in schools. However, the responses from the learners signified that bringing change in one’s classroom is not impossible if one is determined to bring change.

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