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Topic of the Year: Small but Kind of Mighty

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Section

CHILDREN'S
CORNER Translated from Archeokids
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The source-chest

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Keywords

 Gamification, school, history

It is possible to make children acquainted even with general and 'difficult' issues such as the different kinds of sources historians analyze, and how they are put together to reconstruct our past. It is just a matter of referring to children's own experiences and... have them play a creative game.

The game that I am going to tell you about is part of a didactic initiative carried out during the winter of 2016 with a third-grade class. It was a rather anomalous initiative because normally, when one is asked to organise a similar project at a school, one follows the conventional school curriculum for teaching history: prehistory in third grade, Ancient Greece in 4th grade, and Ancient Rome in 5th grade. Instead, this time I was able to experiment with something new, which would prepare the children more generally for studying history. I proposed to collectively answer several questions: why do we study history? How do school textbooks acquire their information? Who concerns themselves with studying the past? Where does one find the information necessary to reconstruct history? When is it suitable to use one and/or another piece of information?

It was quite the challenge.

Usually, showing children objects made by people of the past is the best move to make them understand the significance of time and history, because this way they have a visual perception of it. But in this case I was dealing with absolutely abstract concepts and questions, and I was forced to resort to activities that referred to the present — much more familiar to the children — rather than to the unknown past.

And so, to approach the subject of historical sources (what they are, how and when they are used), we played a game called 'the source chest'.

The fundamental goals of this lab/game are twofold: to understand that there are varying types of sources, and therefore different types of scholars who analyse them, and to discover that it is possible to reconstruct a past and unknown event simply by putting together the various traces and documents that we have at our disposal.

How does the game work?

Before beginning our *investigation*, we read a brief story together, or rather a series of events told by a child about an ordinary day of his; the report, however, contained a lacuna. It broke off while narrating the events of the morning and then only resumed with the happenings of the

evening. Obviously, certain things happened in between, which could be deduced by compiling various pieces of information from several different sources.

The following story is the one used at the school, but it can be altered one, ten, or even a hundred times so as to always have a different game.

My dad is a tall and kind man. He leaves home in the morning at 8 o'clock and comes back at 5, sometimes bringing me and my sister some kind of pastry.

Today, something slightly strange happened: like every morning, we had breakfast and got ready to leave, but while Martina, my sister, and I were putting our coats on, I saw mum and dad talking to each other in whispers. What were the two of them quietly talking about? Then we left the house and...

It's past 8 o'clock in the evening; my grandparents have just arrived and I'm terribly hungry. Martina, on the other hand, does nothing but cry and mum is at a loss to console her — she even tried to make her put on her prettiest dress, but all in vain. Dad, for his part, has not returned home yet. Where could he possibly be?

At 8:15, the front door opens: it's dad. But what has happened to him? His clothes are all creased, his hands are filthy and bandaged and he stinks of fish! Under his arm, he holds a colourful bag that seems to have something inside.

But why did such a thing have to happen today of all days? In the meantime, Martina cries and cries...

Now that the children's attention has been captured and their curiosity piqued, the second phase of the game begins: the opening of the chest.

Inside the chest we have certain visual and written sources, as well as objects, which, when analysed in detail, directly or indirectly reveal certain interesting elements that aid in reconstructing the missing piece of the story. It goes without saying that this is the moment of greatest excitement and eagerness, because the solution seems to be within reach. But,

just as researchers often only have damaged, partial, or altered documents and traces, so our sources are not crystal-clear or immediate, and need to be examined attentively and vigilantly.

What does the chest contain?

- ◆ a handwritten note signed by the mother in which she reminds the father that the store 'The Rag Doll' closes at 6 in the evening;
- ◆ two copies of a receipt for the cost of repairing the brakes of a bicycle (each copy only has partial pieces of information and it is only by combining the two that one can obtain all of the necessary data);
- ◆ a torn photograph of a fishmonger;
- ◆ a torn photograph of a cyclist on a descent;
- ◆ a bow of gift-wrapping ribbon;
- ◆ a bandage;
- ◆ a check bearing the same date as the receipt;
- ◆ a page of a child's diary, recounting a funny episode that she witnessed in front of her house: the lightning-fast descent of a cyclist who had clearly lost control of his bike and his inevitable collision with a market-stall;
- ◆ an advertisement for a doll.

Somewhere midway between 'Clue' and a historical investigation, the children play at being detectives, but in doing so they realise that objects and documents, when properly interrogated, along with a correct configuration of the given information, can recount a story whose voicelessness is merely apparent. When this happens, their eyes light up and seem to say: "Oh, I've figured it out, so everything's related..."

The activity was originally intended for schools, but nothing would stand in the way of organising a similar game on the beach or at the park, challenging one's friends, perhaps with an interrupted story of your own. And at the end of the investigation, don't forget to tell the epilogue of Martina and her brother's story.

Here it is:

Martina, seeing her dad, initially pouted but then observing him more carefully, she saw how tired and pained he was. At that point, I imagined she was sorry for him, even if she didn't take it particularly well that he had returned home late on the day of her birthday!

Mum then gave dad a reproachful look, but one could see that she wasn't truly angry; in

fact, I think she was amused by dad's strange appearance. She then dried my sister's tears and made us all sit down at the dinner table, except for dad who was sent to take a quick shower. When he came back, the celebrations finally began, we ate plenty of excellent foods, including the chocolate cake brought by my grandparents, and Martina was finally able to open her birthday gift: the elegant doll that she had wanted for such a long time.

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