INVESTIGATION 1

What did school students learn during the Great War about the British Empire, its Allies and its enemies?

Advice to teachers

This investigation explores Australia’s attitudes to the British Empire and its Allies and enemies during the Great War through information provided to students and activities undertaken by them in schools a century ago.

1. You are encouraged to read the Background information as context before you commence work with students.

2. Provide your students with sources 1.1–1.12.

3. You may distribute the Source Analysis Worksheet on page 18 and ask students to make notes, or ask them to complete the Tuning in activities.

4. Discuss with students what they have learned from the sources and Tuning in activities along with their answers to the overall investigation question.

5. To help them answer the questions, you may choose to provide sources from other investigations in this resource or from the CD-ROM. You may also choose to provide the Background information, but this should be done only after students have formed conclusions based on analysis of the sources.

6. Students may draw comparisons between education today and a century ago, undertake further research or explore personal values and attitudes through the questions and activities in Going further.
Background information

In the early 1900s, reading comprehension activities formed a large part of an Australian student’s school day. Families whose children attended government schools were expected to purchase, for one penny, a monthly magazine related to the child’s grade level, called the *Children’s Hour* in South Australia, the *Commonwealth School Paper* in New South Wales and the *School Paper* in each of Queensland, Tasmania, Western Australia and Victoria. The Victorian magazine was bought by Tasmanian and Western Australian government schools with the only variation during the Victorian-based printing process being the insertion on the front page of the different education department’s name.

As technologies improved, the magazines became more attractive, with illustrations, photographs and maps. The appearance of any item, text or visual, either prepared by an education department official or selected from another source, meant that the item was highly-recommended and expected to be used in some way by teachers and students, with the benefit that a teacher could manage bigger classes if all students were reading and working on the same tasks. Students were also expected to read the magazine at home. They and teachers knew that an inspector could ask questions ‘on the spot’ to check that the magazine had informed the teacher’s work and the students’ views and values. Indeed, an inspector could stay in the school to question at length either party if the answer had not been satisfactory. Government school magazines also found their way into private as well as Catholic schools, although much less frequently in the latter due to the publications’ secular character and pro-Empire sentiments that many Catholic school authorities did not support. Private schools and some Catholic schools (as well as some government schools) produced their own magazines related only to the life of their school but there was no one school magazine shared by the private schools or distributed across the Catholic sector as was the case with the ‘school papers’. Most Australian classrooms also possessed a selection of children’s books and textbooks, mostly Imperial in content.

At the turn of the new century, the amount of Australian content relating to native flora and fauna and the admirable people of the bush (excluding Aboriginal people who were barely mentioned) began to take page-space from the pro-Imperial content in the school magazines and recommended books. However, on the eve of war and upon its outbreak, far more pro-Imperial and martial content began to ink most pages. Progressively, the teaching and learning of most topics became in some way related to the war.

Nations aligned with the Empire were referred to in appealing terms. Australian content in school publications became largely about the Empire’s protection and support of Australia and how Australia had a responsibility to return the same. Whilst not necessarily pro-Empire, many Irish-Australians also believed on war’s outbreak that Australia’s involvement was ‘just’ in support of the assault on Belgium and France’s Catholic peoples. Their and others’ views became more complex and nuanced as the war progressed. Germans and Turks were identified as enemies from the outset. The German presence in Pacific territories was made known early in schools but was almost certainly made to encourage enlistment at that time rather than describe a real risk. Turkey was declared less of an enemy by the end of the Gallipoli campaign. Whether this reporting was because a respectful relationship had developed between Australian and Turkish soldiers or because the loss of the campaign was easier to bear if the enemy was depicted as admirable has continued to be debated. Indeed, older students in a variety of school types across the nation engaged in debates about different aspects of the war. The scant records of such events tend to indicate that the side that argued an affirmative in support of the Empire and Allies almost always won.
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Learning activities

**Tuning in**

1. Which countries during the Great War were members of the British Empire, or its Allies? How do you know?

2. Which countries were the Empire’s enemies? How do you know?

3. What was Australia’s relationship with the British Empire at the time?

4. What reasons were given for why the British Empire was at war?

5. What reasons were given for why Australia and other countries had joined the British Empire’s war effort?

6. In what ways at school did Australian children learn about the war?

7. What questions did some teachers and students ask about the war? Why?
1. Which countries do you learn about today at school? Are those countries similar to or different from those that young people learned about during the war? Explain why there are similarities and differences.

2. How do you find out today about the histories and current affairs of Australia and other countries? How are those ways similar to or different from how young people learned about such things a century ago?

3. School children as well as teachers were largely expected to read and agree with what their school authorities told them. Teachers who may not have agreed often chose to keep their views quiet in public. Why do you think this was so?

4. Do you accept everything you read? What circumstances make you more likely to accept what you read? What makes you more likely to challenge what you read?

5. Find out more about Empire Day, celebrated annually on 24 May in government and private schools for over 50 years from 1901. Find out why the day was rarely observed in Catholic schools. What might this event make students think about the British Empire? The accompanying CD-ROM, and references and archival collections mentioned at the conclusion to this resource, may assist.

6. How may so much emphasis on the magnificence of the British Empire during most Australians’ schooling have influenced their responses to the outbreak of war?

7. How may students with German, Austrian or Turkish heritage have felt as they read ‘recommended readings’ during the war? Explain.
Source 1.1

‘Dear Children – You are living at the greatest moment in the history of the world. In fifty years’ time those of you who are alive will be able to say, ‘I remember the great war, which for better or for worse, changed the whole world’. Nothing in your history books is nearly so important as what is going on day by day. No one knows what the end is going to be, but the happiness of your lives depends upon it.’


Source 1.2

Sons, be welded each and all
Into one imperial whole,
One with Britain, heart and soul!
One Life, one Flag, one Fleet, one Throne.
Briton’s, hold your own!’

Department of Public Instruction, Queensland, School Paper, Jan. 1915, p. 29.

Source 1.3

‘India listens to young John Bull and Miss Britannia, and Russia and Canada are taken up with the sad story of Miss Belgium. In the center, la belle France lays down the law to Heather Jock and the Little Woman from Wales ... [M]erry Master Pat and a young lady from Montenegro are very friendly with the dark-eyed daughter of Italy; and, while the little Serb tells his troubles to the little Jap, young Australia looks on.’

Source 1.4

Contents page of the History textbook used by Roland, Edith, Dorrine and Bessie Dennis at Perth State School, Tasmania.

*Education Department, Tasmania, The Tasmanian History Readers: The Royal School Series, Book IV, Hobart, 1911.*

Source 1.5

‘In the First World War one important effect was the arousing of interest in current affairs – war maps appeared in class rooms and the movements of troops were plotted by means of coloured pins. For the first time, lessons were given on contemporary affairs.’


Source 1.6

Postcard that belonged to Edith Dennis of Perth State School, Tasmania, posted to her by her brother, Roland on active service in Belgium. She took her postcard to school for ‘show and tell’ in 1917.
Source 1.7

‘Empire Day will be observed as usual this year [1916] ... The morning programme should be made as varied and attractive as possible. Suitable stories and poems should be read and recited and appropriate songs sung. Wherever possible the Union Jack should be hoisted and saluted. The National Anthem [‘God Save the King’] should be sung in every school.

The thoughts of the pupils will naturally be directed to the battlefields, where free men from all parts of the British Empire are fighting to fulfil a solemn international obligation [to defend neutral Belgium following Germany’s invasion] and to vindicate the principle that small nationalities are not to be crushed in defiance of international good faith by the arbitrary will of a despotic power ...

It is to be hoped that the day will be celebrated with that reverence and humility which the awful nature of the struggle seems to impose on all of us. There is abundant room for quiet pride in the almost unexampled heroism of the soldiers of the Empire and of our brave Allies.’

Education Department of Western Australia, *Education Circular 1916*, p. 276, quoted in Western Australian Government, *Education in Western Australia*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, Western Australia, 1979, p. 236.

Source 1.8

From a pamphlet, entitled *Will You Let These Die—An Appeal for the Children of Belgium*, by W. A. M. Goode.


Source 1.9

“‘People used to tell us that the Turks were cruel, and that they tortured and wounded; but no Australian who was at Anzac believes that now.’ This article for Grade V-VI readers in April recounted how a Turkish soldier had, at risk to himself, rescued and tended wounded Australian soldiers in No-Man’s Land. The Australians rewarded the “kind Turk” by throwing tins of bully beef into his trench. Later, either he or his fellows tossed over a packet of dates. “Here was one Turk, at any rate, who wasn’t cruel.” There was the qualifying “one Turk”, but the article heralded the end of negative reporting in the School Paper about the Turks.’

Rosalie Triolo, ‘*Our Schools and the War*’, Australian Scholarly, Kew, Victoria, 2012, p. 264.
Source 1.10

‘Debating topics in the [St Joseph’s] College Debating Society focussed on the issues of war. Conscription, naturally, was the topic of many debates in the years when a conscription referendum was being held …[also]: ‘Is the censorship applied to communications from a seat of war to Australia too strict?; ‘Did the Allies commit to an error by undertaking the Dardanelles campaign?; ‘Is this a Trade War?; ‘Is a League of Nations practicable?’


Source 1.11

‘Brother Brendan’s comment on the war in the editorial of the [1915 school] magazine, though clearly filtered through Catholic eye, shows no lack of commitment to the war effort, or of loyalty to Empire:

“The war now waged with deadly enmity [hostility], is likely to change completely the map of Europe. England’s supremacy at sea is questioned; the compulsory training imposed by France on the men (including the priests and religious) of that nation, and her achievements in air navigation are put to severe test; while Catholic Belgium, true to her trust, is made once more the battlefield of Europe … [W]e hope to chronicle in the [next] issue of this magazine the lifting of the war clouds from the nations, and the reign of universal peace”.


Source 1.12

‘The war … called into question all the familiar patterns and people in school life. What should one say to a “German” student, and to a “German” teacher? Would boys be called up for service in the reserve, or even to the front? Would there be the usual Oval football match in the following year, with the raids and fights between boys of the rival schools …? What was to happen to brothers, homes and careers? And for those who were old enough, or could think deeply enough about the world as they knew it, what was the purpose of the savagery of the battlefields? … Should there be limits on the supremacy and effectiveness of science? Should German language, German culture and German boys be accepted? Was sport good training for character development and war? Who should fight? Did God ordain war?

In a school wearied by war and its bloodletting, some of the questions were too hard to answer.’