

## Editorial

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This present issue of Reflecting Education celebrates the work of some students who have participated in a graduate History module. The module is called 'Social Histories of British Education' and it covers the period from 1800 to 1980. It aims to bring together examples of historical research on formal and informal agencies of schooling, pursuing themes such as changing governance of education, curriculum, selection, education and equality and inequality, teachers and teaching. Among other things, we consider the history of educational policies and practices at different system levels, as a means of interpreting the social relations of education (including power relations), the role of education in civil society and in the life chances of different groups in society. Emphasis is placed on learning as an active, goal-oriented process of constructing knowledge, meaning and understanding. Seen from the angle of personal 'experience', participants reflect critically on the complex relationship between the historical and the contemporary. Sometimes hotly debating what we have learned about educational processes and what should be left in the past.

'Social Histories' recruits a socially, culturally and educationally diverse range of students from across the life-course. Most learners are working in an unfamiliar disciplinary context and those who self-identify as historians are in the minority. Most have a different prior education in terms of subjects studied and a different learner identity. Therefore, it is essential that academic staff facilitate the development of an inclusive learning environment. Individually and collectively, all participants reflect on and critically enquire into their own past and continuing participation in education. Learning together, there is a concern to make the link from historical structures such as the education context, through the political context, to retrieving personal 'experiences'.

Participants are encouraged to explore a wide variety of modes of writing and thinking about history-making. These include autobiographies, biographies, documents, journalism, moving image, novels, photographs and other visual representations, oral testimonies, statistics and numeric data. Many of these are the gatherings of my own research on a group of women whose participation in English educational policy-making has only recently been recovered from historical obscurity: the women members of the London School Board and the London County Council Education Committee (Martin 1999, 2007, 2008). Our inquiries often focus on the way people interact with, challenge, resist and make history, especially the absent presence inside histories already told. The module uses Blackboard to provide a virtual learning environment that supports students learning. It offers a vehicle for communicating with staff and students, a repository for digitised readings and a living archive of biographical resources compiled by the module leader and module participants. A 'Picture Gallery' brings together a variety of visual images connected to the face-to-face teaching sessions, helping us to furnish an account of past events and to provide an analysis of those events, thinking about the process of making histories through the use of evidence and interpretation.

Many of the students are teachers. The professional context maybe prison education, early years care and education, primary or secondary school, further education college or university department. “Teachers, men as well as women, must insert what they know into public discussion of education, and to do that they need to begin from their own histories” (Miller, 1995, p. 26). These are the concluding words of Jane Miller in an article in which she reflected on the use she made of autobiography in English lessons in inner city schools and university classrooms. In common with Miller, participants on the ‘Social Histories’ module recognise the rich potential that sources of the kinds described offer those wishing to address what Harold Silver (1992) refers to as ‘not knowing’ in the history of education as a disciplinary field. Among other things, this means taking on board what might be described as a historical amnesia surrounding the people who inhabit ‘classrooms’ and the forms, dimensions and meaning of their experiences. Therefore, we take the view that biographical approaches can enable teachers to work in creative ways to support students other than historians as they embrace the unfamiliar disciplinary context. In this spirit, the hope is that the practice of making histories of education will support teachers in developing understanding of pedagogical practices and relations at a deeper level and in the local contexts in which they are located.

This special edition demonstrates the research and teaching possibilities associated with these methodologies that connect with a concern with neglected voices (including the voice of the child) and a concern to capture the diverse experiences of pupils and students over nearly two centuries of change in British education and society. We see the ways in which the assessment process for the ‘Social Histories’ module (see explanatory endnote) contributes to the discovery of new source materials, demonstrating the impact of new theories and new methods for making histories of education.

It is my belief that the articles included in this special edition make an original contribution to the academic study of education. This is because they show the relevance of history for teachers, parents and policy makers, as well as the recipients and consumers of education, concerned to reflect on the meaning and purpose of education past and present. Much of the writing gives attention to inequalities while documenting reflections on the linkage between broader educational policy and practice and the politics of ‘experience’.

The first article by Nina Weiss captures the socio-cultural experiences of the children of a vibrant Jewish community in London’s East End in the period 1880 to 1950. All are vividly brought to life here, as are key debates with regard to the making of identity, both personal and collective. The reader gets a sense of the influence of formal and informal agencies of education, including the importance of local libraries. The reminiscences of Communist MP for Stepney Phil Piratin (b. 1907) corroborate this. In *Our Flag Stays Red* Piratin remembers how material circumstances thwarted his early ambition to be an architect and he left school to start work in the fur trade. However he ‘continued to read a great deal’ and like the individuals about whom Nina writes, he became a ‘regular borrower from the Whitechapel Library’ (2006, p. 6).

The next article, by William Baker, makes a strong case for evaluating the impact of new theories and asking new questions of the historical data on the questions of pupil militancy and school strikes. Illustrating the ways in which the boundaries of history of education as a

discipline have become more porous in recent years (Goodman and Grosvenor, 2009), William identifies an important area for future research. He shows the importance of creating spaces in which we might listen to the voices of working class boys beyond living memory and hitherto largely ‘hidden from history’.

Our next pair of articles, by Andrea Yardley Honess and Niko Gaertner, shifts away from the pupil’s perspective to raise questions about the careers and organisations of teachers. The life and work histories of past head teachers are used to shed light on professional knowledge and teacher professionalism. Once again, we see the possibilities for re-framing facets of interest to teachers and teaching practice through the application of new theories. Andrea makes a fine job of this, with her consistent interweaving of narrative and analysis with the application of social identity theory.

Cari Tuhey moves forward chronologically and thematically to explore the wider political context of education in the 1920s. She uses a variety of primary source materials to reconstruct the activities of the Teachers’ Labour League: an organisation which is particularly difficult to uncover in the archive. She asks questions about the state’s control of teachers and the experiences of a number of individual teachers who became entangled in what she describes as the official ‘line’ within the Board of Education at this time.

The edition concludes with a pair of articles that take as their starting point the theme of selection. Robert Galvani and Claudia Sumner, provide insight into the ‘experiences’ of secondary schooling after grammar schools’ fees in the statutory system were abolished in 1944. Both demonstrate the persistence of class inequalities in education, despite the dreams of 1945 and an evolving English system of education with policy initiatives designed to provide greater equality of opportunity attached to the ideal of ‘secondary education for all’. Robert is writing in a way that gives body and meaning to his own experience, giving a historical public substance toward public discourses around selection, making a connection with people’s lives and with his own life.

We hope you enjoy reading this collection of articles. As the contributions in this volume make clear, there is no single educational or school story. The authors model collaborative approaches that bridge the gap between the disciplines of education in the UK. In this way, the contributors become the history makers, drawing together insights and practices in creative and original ways that take forward the practice of learning from lives in educational settings.

## **Endnote**

What follows is taken from the Social Histories module handbook for 2008-09. The coursework to be prepared for assessment is:

A auto/biographical account of educational experience comprising 5,000 words that will draw on at least THREE but no more than FOUR of the biographical texts presented in the module (this may be interpreted from the following list of examples - autobiographies, biographies, diaries, family stories, letters, media/research interviews, oral history,

photographs). The narrative will interweave description and analysis to gain insights into at least one of the following themes/issues:

- Comprehensive schooling
- Curriculum
- Educational reconstruction
- Gender and education
- Pupils and students
- 'Race' and education
- Selection
- Sixties idealism
- Social class and education
- Teachers and teaching

The information gathered must be located in its social and historical context with a clearly specified time frame.

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