

The necessity of historical inquiry in educational research: the case of Religious Education

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Abstract:

This article explores the mixed fortunes of historical inquiry as a method in educational studies, and exposes evidence for the neglect of this method in Religious Education research in particular. It argues that historical inquiry, as a counterpart to other research methods, can add depth and range to our understanding of education, including Religious Education, and can illuminate important longer-term, broader and philosophical issues. The article also argues that many historical voices have remained silent in the existing historiography of Religious Education because such historiography is too generalized and too biased towards the development of national policy and curriculum and pedagogical theory. To address this limitation in educational research, this article promotes rigorous historical studies that are more substantially grounded in the appropriate historiographical literature and utilise a wide range of original primary sources. Finally, the article explores a specific example of the way in which an historical approach may be fruitfully applied to a particular contemporary debate concerning the nature and purpose of Religious Education.

Key words:

Educational research methods, historical inquiry, Religious Education

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Introduction

We believe there is a paucity of rigorous historical inquiry in Religious Education (RE) research. If true, such a deficiency is serious because it can lead researchers to adopt narrow perspectives and ahistorical epistemologies that take present-day understandings for granted. At worst, this can lead to a form of ‘ideological fundamentalism’¹ that makes past or present RE policies, theories and practices normative and impervious to criticism because they are no longer understood in relation to their historical contexts. RE is subject to historical influences as much as religion itself and as much as any other curriculum subject. In one way or another, the school curriculum seeks to transmit or transform the cultural context in which it is taught, and because this context is forever changing, curriculum studies must recognise the significance of the historical dimension. It is the purpose of this article, therefore, to promote the legitimacy of historical inquiry in RE research and to argue more broadly that it has a necessary place in the eclectic domain of educational research. By this challenge to our peers, at least supported by a few lone voices who have either engaged in such studies (for instance Dennis Bates and Terence Copley) or called for more (Schweitzer, 2006, 167), we hope to achieve a higher measure of esteem for this particular method of inquiry.

Historical inquiry in educational research

The scarcity of rigorous historical inquiry in RE research first needs to be set within the wider landscape of educational research. For whenever educational researchers, from whatever branch of the discipline, are currently trained to engage in research, they are more likely to be encouraged to devise social scientific research projects that involve qualitative and/or quantitative data collection through field-work methods, than historical research projects that involve the analysis and interpretation of documentary and/or non-documentary primary sources. The literature supporting research training shows this bias. Whilst some older and more established general surveys of educational research mention historical methods (e.g. Charlton,

1968; Simon, 1983; Kaestle, 1988; and Cohen and Manion, 1994, plus successive editions), many others ignore historical inquiry altogether (e.g. Creswell, 1994; Halpin and Troyna, 1994; Keeves and Lakomski, 1999; Robson, 2002; Suter, 2005). In response to this methodological neglect, we argue that (i) education is a process with a past, present and future; (ii) anything with a past is susceptible to historical inquiry; (iii) there is no irrefutable reason why the study of education should be limited to research on current and future policies, theories, practices and settings; (iv) there are good reasons why the study of education in the past should be considered a worthwhile activity; and (v) any general discussion of educational research should be expected to acknowledge the validity, utility and processes of historical inquiry.

Let us explore the wider landscape of educational research further with reference to one particular national context. Historical perspectives have been a component of educational studies in English Higher Education throughout the 20th century (Richardson, 1999a and 1999b). By the 1960s, the history of education was included alongside philosophy, sociology and psychology as one of the 'foundational disciplines' in educational studies and teacher education, albeit the poor cousin in this quartet (McCulloch, 2002). However, since then, the history of education and historical inquiry as a critical aspect of educational research, have been in decline in teacher education (Aldrich, 1990). This is the result of a number of factors, not least governmental encouragement, especially since James Callaghan's Ruskin College speech of 1976 which instigated the so-called 'Great Debate' on education (Callaghan, 1976; McCulloch, 1989, 24) and Kenneth Baker's unfounded assertion that student teachers spent too long on 'theory and history of education and not nearly enough time learning how to handle a class' (Aldrich, 1990, 47- 48). State intervention has served to create an instrumental view of educational research and teacher education that is increasingly geared towards targets, ends and immediate results (Pring, 2000, 27-30) and, ultimately, an apprenticeship model of professional learning. Moreover, in recent years, a greater emphasis has been placed upon practitioner-based inquiry in the professional development of teachers, which to some extent is embodied in England's new *Masters in Teaching and Learning* qualification (Training and Development Agency, 2009). As a

consequence of the above, the prime purpose of educational research in England today appears to be the improvement of teachers' performance and the attempt to address short-term problems arising from immediate classroom needs. Nevertheless, despite this background of decline, historical inquiry in educational studies has recently gained endorsement from the leaders of the UK's educational research community² and enjoys a growing pertinence as a discipline contributing to educational research (McCulloch, 2002, 116).

Historical inquiry in RE research

The tendency to disregard or devalue historical inquiry in educational studies may have impacted upon the perceptions of RE researchers who, for the most part, will have received their postgraduate research training in education departments. Yet RE research straddles the boundary between the social sciences and humanities if only because the RE curriculum includes elements of both. In this regard, it is influenced by the higher education disciplines of Religious Studies and Theology which respectively adopt a more social scientific (e.g. the identification of common dimensions in religions) and humanities-based (e.g. the exegesis of sacred texts) approach. Those who have come to RE research under the influence of Theology, in particular, are more likely to be sympathetic to historical inquiry, even though British departments of Theology and Religious Studies are increasingly devoid of ecclesiastical and religious historians (Strudwick, 1995, 360-2). Nevertheless, sympathy towards the humanities subjects and possession of an historical consciousness are not, without the requisite research training, guarantees of proficiency in the utilization of historical research methods.

The surveys of the content of the *British Journal of Religious Education (BJRE)* (1992-2002) and the North American journal *Religious Education (RE)* (1993-2002) carried out by English, D'Souza and Chartrand (2003; 2005a; and 2005b) reveal a neglect of the utilization of historical methods and a lack of historical consciousness among RE researchers. The surveys revealed that around half of the research reported in the

pages of *BJRE* was ‘theoretical’ (philosophical and non-empirical pieces), with the other half being ‘fieldwork’ (presentation of findings from qualitative or quantitative data). Only 7.7% was deemed to be historical in *theme*, but not necessarily historical in *method of inquiry* (English, D’Souza and Chartrand, 2003, 316). The contrast between their survey of articles in *RE* and *BJRE* showed the former to have at least a greater representation of articles with a historical theme (23.4%). The authors accounted for this dissimilarity by characterizing ‘the history of religious education in North America as being connected to religious traditions, and as emphasizing the theological basis for its development’ (English, D’Souza and Chartrand, 2005b, 208). The contestable implication of this statement is that it is not true for RE in British and other contexts. Furthermore, it does not satisfactorily explain the proportion of historical research articles in either journal. One might speculate that the comparative difference is related to the siting of North American and some European RE scholars in departments of Theology, where historical inquiry has greater esteem, rather than in Education departments. Similarly, in distinction to the English context, some RE scholars on the Continent are Practical Theologians who utilise the tools of philosophy and history more readily, for example, Klaus Wegenast (e.g. Wegenast, 2006) Nonetheless, on the whole, we may conclude from these collective surveys that only a small proportion of RE researchers internationally undertake historical inquiries.

This neglect of historical research in RE is demonstrated further by Francis, Kay and Campbell’s book *Research in Religious Education* (Francis et al, 1996). This focuses on psychological research perspectives (e.g. psychometric attitudinal studies). The one chapter which purports to use historical methods simply provides a history of the methodologies the authors seek to promote. A similar criticism could be levied at Jackson’s *Rethinking Religious Education and Plurality: issues in diversity and pedagogy* (2004) which devotes one chapter to ‘The relevance of research to religious education’ (pp. 143-160). In a section on ‘Non-empirical research’, he includes *one* sentence on historical research in RE. This is inadequate because, firstly, historical research is empirical as well as theoretical (although the form of empirical research usually differs

from that in social scientific field-work), and secondly, one sentence is not sufficient to explore the relevance of historical research to RE and in itself reflects the paucity of work in the field (although some contrary evidence can be cited from his own national context).³ Overall, as a mainstream activity, historical inquiry is considerably underutilised and undervalued in RE research.⁴

The relevance of historical inquiry in educational research

In this section, the pertinence of historical inquiry to educational research will be asserted, but prior to that it is necessary to justify historical inquiry more generally. Historical inquiry is important because it addresses an intrinsic desire to understand what humans have thought and done in the past and how our world owes its distinctive character to the way in which it has grown out of past circumstances and mentalities (Tosh, 1991, 15). Historical inquiry provides “opportunities for creating interpretations of human experience which may be of interest in themselves and which [...] may promote the capacity better to interpret other situations – both historical and contemporary” (Aldrich, 1996, 63). Through engaging in historical inquiry, researchers enlarge their sympathies and develop particular intellectual capabilities, standards of judgement, powers of reasoning and critical awareness. Historical inquiry enables us to understand, explain and critique our present and particular traditions (e.g. long standing practices) and knowledge (e.g. through recognizing its contextualized nature). Finally, such inquiries have “the potential to demonstrate not only how people have lived their lives in the past, but also how we may live better in the present and future” (Aldrich, 2006, 2).

In terms of the contribution that historical inquiry can make to educational research in particular, first, historical research can illustrate how a *past* educational policy, theory, practice or setting, emerged from, reflected or challenged a range of factors in a specific spatial, temporal and socio-cultural context (McCulloch and Richardson, 2000, 50). In this regard, the history of education might be studied for its own sake regardless of whether it contributes to our understanding of current educational issues. Second, a number of such studies can be used to understand the co-existence of change (i.e. the turning points),

pressures to change (i.e. the contextual factors) and continuity (i.e. the points that failed to turn). For Aldrich (2006, 4), “[a]n understanding of the complexities of continuity and change is important in guarding against the assumption that the past has existed merely to lead to the present and that educational progress is similar to that in science and technology”. The evolution of education is not an inevitable process of teleological progress. Instead, changes and continuities adapt to specific contingencies and conditions. Third, historical methods aid understanding of how specific *contemporary* educational theories, policies, practices or settings originated and how they developed under the influence of social, cultural, political and economic factors. This ‘rear-view mirror’ version of history is useful because it helps locate “ourselves and our society accurately in time” (Aldrich, 2006, 2); it provides an understanding of where contemporary issues and problems came from (Robinson, 2000, 51-2); it demonstrates long-term ideological trends; and it provides historical nous through which to understand and interpret contemporary events. This latter may temper a tendency to see contemporary challenges as entirely novel (McCulloch, 1989, 182; McCulloch and Richardson, 2000, 125-6; Robinson, 2000, 51-2). In addition, historical ignorance allows popular, simplified or distorted interpretations of the past to be hijacked and misrepresented to support or uphold specific new policy directives without having undergone historical scrutiny (Robinson, 2000, 51-2). Thus, for Aldrich (2006, 2-3), “our journeys in the present and the future may be enhanced by having as accurate map of the past as possible” because “it is clear that the lack of an historical perspective can lead to avoidable errors, not least in the re-invention of the wheel (a potentially flawed wheel) by educational reformers ignorant of the fate of previous similar schemes”. Therefore, we argue that historical research in educational settings adds depth and range to our understanding of the present and illuminates important longer-term, broader and philosophical issues (Tosh, 1991, 17).

The relevance of historical inquiry in RE research

For all the reasons above, historical inquiry in educational research is necessary. When utilized as one tool in the multi-disciplinary armoury of educational researchers, it is a methodological component that adds depth

to perception and extends understanding. This is also true in the field of RE research. Historical inquiry in RE can alter the depth in, and angle from, which past changes in policy and theory are studied; review the subject's aims and purposes over time, amongst pupils, parents, practitioners, politicians, administrators and academics; examine experiences of, and responses to, curricular and pedagogical change within and across periods; and enlarge understanding of all of the above in terms of their particular historical context.

Moreover, according to Aldrich (2003, 134-135), historians of education have a duty, shared by historians of RE, "to rescue from oblivion those whose voices have not yet been heard and whose stories have not yet been told". In this regard, there is an opportunity in RE research for life-history methods to be utilised in order to unearth the realities of the effects and effectiveness of the subject over recent generations by amassing interview data from the professional agents who enacted the multiple ideals for the subject that have been generated by theorists and policy-makers in the contemporary period. Through these life-histories, it may be possible to discover the connections between individuals and the documented thoughts and theories of our academic progenitors, and to demonstrate that the personal, professional and social worlds of RE teachers are not hermetically sealed, but co-exist in an interactive relationship over time (Goodson and Sikes, 2001). Ultimately, life-history methods, alongside documentary resources and a range material artefacts, could enable the RE community to develop its understanding of what the subject has been about, what it is about and how it might develop.

Overall, we maintain that many of the current debates in RE might benefit from the insight and hindsight that historical inquiry can offer, not least when debates about the aims, methods and content of RE are perennial. If we wish our knowledge of the history of RE to be more than the distillation of myth and rumour, and for present and future developments to be informed by the lessons of the past, then rigorous historical research needs to be undertaken.

The historiography of RE in one national context

Despite the impression given above, we must recognize that there *is* an existing historiography of RE, albeit of a limited nature and one which often reflects an unevaluated oral tradition. In an article of this size, it would be impossible to survey the whole field internationally, so here we focus upon the historiography of RE in English schools. It includes contributions from Dennis Bates (1996; 1994; 1992a; 1992b; 1986; 1984; 1982; 1976); Adrian Bell (1985); Priscilla Chadwick (1997); Geoffrey Chorley (1984); Terence Copley (2008; 1999; 1998); David Day (1984); Jack Earl (1984); John Elias (1984); Rob Freathy (2008a; 2008b; 2007); John Greer (1985; 1984a; 1984b); Michael Grimmitt (1984); Michael Hand (2004); John Hull (1984); William Kay (1997); Ursula King (1990); Alan Loosemore (1993); Cathy Michell (1991; 1985; 1984); Gerald Parsons (1994), Jack Priestley (2006; 1991); Norman Richards (1986); John Sadler (1985); John Sutcliffe (1984); and Penny Thompson (2003).

At first sight, this would appear to be a significant body of research, but even here the contributions range from a minority that are grounded in the relevant historiographical literature, based upon novel primary sources and provide substantive conclusions, to an overwhelming majority that are descriptive, lacking original source material and do not make good use of the available literature. Too many contributions fail to evidence historiographical awareness, for example, by explaining the research methodology and too many constitute synoptic overviews that have used secondary sources to perpetuate a familiar and largely unchallenged narrative. In this sense, there has been too much ‘lumping’ (i.e. synthesis of previous research and presentation in accessible forms to a wider audience) and not enough ‘splitting’ (i.e. essential engagement with the minutiae of research and production of detailed articles and monographs) (Aldrich, 2006, 5).

Even when primary source work has been undertaken, the research tends to focus narrowly on the history of RE national policy and/or curriculum and pedagogical theory (including the life and work of specific

theorists). This particular level of inquiry can ignore, the myriad of facets in the history of RE, such as the classroom experience of teachers and pupils; the macro-, meso- and micro-politics of education, including who controls and organizes schools and the curriculum; the development of Theology, Religious Studies and cognate disciplines; the training and professional development of teachers; the particularities of local contexts and educational settings; the influence of networks, pressure groups, centres and organizations; the perceptions of RE in public discourse; and the wider historical context, including the changing relationship between religious organizations and the state; the processes of secularization, immigration and religious pluralization; and the social, political, economic and cultural structure generally.

It is possible to explain this historiographical tendency in terms of the relative *inaccessibility* of the unpublished and/or non-documentary sources that would be required to write the history of RE from the alternatives perspectives noted above. As an example, in order to explore the historical day-to-day realities of RE classroom life, it would be necessary to privilege the voices of RE teachers and pupils over those of the policy-makers and academic theorists who currently dominate the post-war historiography of RE. However, the lack of originality and rigor in much of this existing historiography leaves the way open for all kinds of problematic and somewhat mythical renderings of the history of RE in England. Thus, we maintain that it is only through rigorous historical studies that are grounded in the appropriate historiographical literature and utilise a wide range of original primary sources that the RE community can challenge the assertions, generalizations and mythologies that are written about the subject's past, and begin to shape the future with a more well-grounded professional self-knowledge and understanding.

One opportunity for further historical research in RE in England

The above criticisms can be explored in relation to one example. In a recent publication, Phillip Barnes and Andrew Wright (2006, 65-66) argue that “[t]oo many educators have operated with an unduly optimistic

interpretation” of the evolution of RE in England in the late 1960s and early 1970s, according to which advances followed “sequentially and rationally” with confessionalism, commitment and indoctrination giving way to neutrality, professionalism and education.⁵ By contrast, Barnes and Wright maintain that “the story is more controversial, convoluted, and ideological” than this because the form of ‘post-confessional’ phenomenological RE that developed also exhibited a partisan and uncritical alternative confessionalism, albeit one that was “moderate, liberal, ecumenical and in certain respects secular”. Moreover, Barnes (2007) argues that the beliefs, assumptions, values and commitments constituting this new ‘liberal paradigm’ were shaped by Enlightenment commitments, which underpinned its use of supposedly ‘objective’ phenomenological methods, and Romantic reinterpretations of religion, which located the ‘essence’ of religion in the inner subjective experiences of all religious adherents rather than in particular beliefs and doctrines. According to Barnes (2007, 19 and 24), this ‘liberal paradigm’ continued to exert an influence over the ‘post-confessional’ history of English RE for the next thirty years, as it provided the foundations for phenomenological RE in the 1970s and 1980s; experiential RE in the early 1990s; and some more recent interpretations of spiritual education. Finally, Barnes and Wright (2006) conclude that this ‘liberal paradigm’ is now unsuitable for RE in religiously-unaffiliated state-schools because it constitutes the proselytisation of one particular pluralist theology and fails to take seriously the plurality of distinctive interpretations of the nature of religion. For this reason, Barnes (2007, 27-9) argues that it should be replaced by a new ‘post-liberal paradigm’.

It is a controversial thesis that has generated much discussion among the RE community, partly because religious educators are sensitive to accusations of proselytisation which damage the subject’s claims to academic respectability and religious impartiality. The thesis also reflects a wider academic discourse concerning the problematic relationship between political liberalism and religious pluralism that has become particularly significant since the ‘9/11’ terrorist attacks in New York in 2001. For historians of education, these revisionist arguments, regarding the origins and development of the so-called ‘liberal paradigm’ of RE,

require historical scrutiny (as well as any theoretical riposte). First, insufficient primary source work has been utilised in exploration of the reasons for, nature of, and responses to, the alleged ‘paradigm shift’. Indeed, one might question whether there has ever been one ruling paradigm in England that has defined RE theory, policy *and* practice at both national *and* local levels rather than, for example, a range of alternative models of RE vying for ascendancy in different contexts, sectors and settings. Second, the arguments focus primarily on how the beliefs, assumptions, values and commitments of RE theorists developed in response to specific philosophical and theological outlooks, but they do not discuss how these theories became embedded locally in policy and practice, or how these RE theories, policies and practices might be located within the wider historical context.

Ultimately, if an historical perspective is to be used to promote a contemporary cause (e.g. a new ‘post-liberal paradigm’ of RE), then it is incumbent upon the researchers to ensure that such usage is as accurate as possible, both in its representation of the past and in the connections it establishes between the past, present and future (Aldrich, 1997). As it is, Barnes and Wright’s historical accounts leave too many questions unanswered, for example, (i) What would primary archival and/or oral sources tell us about the relationship between the wider historical context (i.e. political, economic, social and cultural conditions) and the alleged ‘paradigm shift’ and between RE theory, policy and practice?; (ii) How, if at all, did the new theories become embedded in policy and actual practice, for example, through the aims, methods and content of Agreed Syllabuses and classroom pedagogies?; (iii) What role did specialized RE networks, pressure groups, centres and organizations play in the changing nature of policy, curriculum and professional practice?; (iv) How in reality were the competing discourses surrounding RE shaped and influenced by those seeking an alternative model of RE?; (v) Were the major agents of change really the university academics in Education, Theology and cognate disciplines?; and (vi) How were the curriculum changes influenced and perceived by other stakeholders, such as parents, teachers, the faith communities, politicians and the media? The answers to these questions can only be derived from rigorous historical studies that are grounded in the appropriate

historiographical literature and utilise a wide range of documentary sources (including non-published archival material) and non-documentary sources, such as oral testimonies (e.g. life-histories of teachers), audio-visual material (e.g. radio and television programmes and films) and built and physical artefacts (e.g. classroom spaces, curriculum resources and equipment). Therefore, overall, whilst we respect the contribution of Barnes and Wright to contemporary theoretical discourse, the wider and hidden history of the alleged ‘paradigmatic’ change in RE has yet to be written.

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored the mixed fortunes of historical inquiry as a method in educational studies, and exposed evidence of the neglect of this method in RE research. We have argued that historical inquiry makes an essential contribution to the generation of well-grounded perspectives on education, including RE, and fosters important skills and dispositions in the researcher. We have also criticized much of the existing historiography of RE for being too generalized, too biased towards the development of national policy and academic theory, and rarely proficient in its utilization of historical research methods. Finally, we provided one example of a contemporary debate in RE which would benefit from further historical investigation. The revisionist theories at the heart of this debate are particularly relevant to our argument because, whilst we applaud Barnes and Wright for challenging the existing historiographical record, we are concerned that they have undermined their own arguments through a lack of historical rigor and, what might be interpreted as, a partisan and presentist approach which seeks to advance a contemporary cause.

It is important, finally, to comment upon the prospects for historical inquiry in RE research. Firstly, by noting the neglect of historical inquiry and the gaps in the historical record, we have demonstrated that there are plenty of opportunities for educational researchers to undertake historical research on RE. Secondly, the call to study RE through an historical perspective is one which all RE professionals, at whatever career stage and in whichever sector, should consider because historical inquiry enables us (i) to gain an understanding of, and

explanation for, current RE theories, policies and practices, and (ii) to extend our gaze in a beneficial way beyond the limited horizons of present professional standards, teaching practices and curriculum policies. Thirdly, it should be recognised that the abilities required to imagine a past are not so dissimilar from those required to envision a future. In each case, we are challenged to understand change and continuity and to recognise ourselves as part, and potential shapers, of history.

Notes

1. Gerd Theissen (1979: pp 1-11 and 72ff) uses the term 'ideological fundamentalism' to discuss the resistance of some believers to historical criticism of the Bible and Christianity because of its relativizing effects. According to Theissen, neither the past nor the present should have a normative epistemological standing; one should see the past and the present as flowing both ways in their interpretive function and in the construction of reality.
2. <http://www.rae.ac.uk/pubs/2009/ov/>: RAE 2008, Panel K, "Sub-Panel 45 Education Subject overview report" (2009) [Accessed 21st January 2009]. On recent research submissions, the report concluded: 'There was original and high quality theoretical, scholarly and critical work in philosophy, sociology and history of education. This was not all related directly to immediate policy priorities or practical concerns but often offered challenging new agendas. It is important to the field as a whole that resources and opportunities continue to be available to enable such cutting edge contributions to thrive as well as to encourage greater interplay between these and other research traditions' (p. 3).
3. The Culham Institute's 'Register of Research Theses in Religious Education 1980 onwards' includes some 135 Masters and Doctoral theses that have been completed in the UK between 1980 and 2005 and that have been categorised as 'history of religious education'. The majority of these theses were finished during the 1980s. See <http://www.theredirectory.org.uk/resreg.php> [Accessed 9th January 2009].

4. This neglect is also reflected at an international level. At ISREV 2006 there was only one historical research paper – on the history of RE in Japan – and at ISREV 2008 just three historical papers - on the perception of other religions historically within Islam; RE and national identity in Norway, and pupils’ workbooks in Norway.

5. Confessionalism is a term, often used pejoratively, in RE discourse in England to refer to teaching that seeks to engender particular religious beliefs and practices in pupils. The concept is derived from the notion of a ‘Confession of Faith’ (i.e. declaration of articles of belief) on behalf of the teacher and pupils.

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