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Editorial

Richard Aldrich and the Importance of Historians of Education

By Rob Freathy and Jonathan Doney

Professor Richard Aldrich (b. 1937), Emeritus Professor of the History of Education at the Institute of Education, University of London, sadly passed away on 20 September 2014. As Gary McCulloch explained on the History of Education Society's website, '[Richard] was one of the most distinguished historians of education of his generation, and one of the most significant figures in the national and international field'.¹ He was secretary of the History of Education Society (HES) for five years and president for four, and he was also chair / president of the International Standing Conference for the History of Education (ISCHE) from 1994 until 1997. His death represents a great loss for his family and personal friends, but also for the academic field and the many colleagues at home and abroad to whom he showed friendship and collegiality. Many of these colleagues first met him at conferences run by the HES or ISCHE, where he was always a welcoming, warm and supportive presence, asking gentle, but penetrative questions, and offering fair-mindedness constructive criticism. He was a mentor to many early career researchers and students new to the field, and a colleague whose opinion had to be taken seriously. One of his legacies is a voluminous body of rigorous and incisive historical research that will remain significant and relevant for a long time to come.

A defining feature of the prolific number of publications that Richard Aldrich authored and edited (20 books and over 90 learned articles)² is their commitment to 'the connections between past and current issues in education, and to the political dimensions of educational reform'.³ (A selection of Aldrich's papers has been made available to view online throughout 2015 by the publishers Taylor & Francis.)⁴ The title of his edited selection of his own articles, *Lessons from History of Education* (published by Routledge, London, 2006), highlights his approach, which sought to provide historical perspectives upon current educational issues. For Roy Lowe:

'Confronted by the challenge of Thatcherism during the 1980s, [Richard] was probably the historian who argued most strongly the need for the History of Education to relate to contemporary events and developments and he steered the work of those within the Institute towards effective comment and contextualisation of a political agenda that was challenging all those working in education'.⁵

In recent years, Aldrich argued that historians of education should seek to address the challenges of globalisation, move beyond Eurocentric histories, and engage with new literature and big issues, such as education for survival and neuroscience.⁶

For Aldrich, '[t]he study of history is not merely informative; it is also potentially instructive'.⁷ He identified four basic lessons: (i) an enlarged understanding of human experience, which promotes the capacity to better interpret historical and contemporary situations; (ii) the demonstration 'not only how people have lived their lives in the past, but

also how we may live better in the present and future'⁸; (iii) the demonstration of 'the complexity of human events, including the co-existence of continuities and changes';⁹ and (iv) the provision of an accurate map of the past that can inform discussion and decision-making by locating us, and recent and contemporary events, in time.¹⁰ Accepting that 'historical perspectives upon current educational issues are widely employed, for example, by individuals, by politicians and by the press', Aldrich argued that a full and accurate record of the past can prevent the past from being abused or misused to advance a contemporary cause, and can provide a greater understanding of the various ways in which past, present and future are connected.¹¹ For him, a historical consciousness, and an ability to identify ourselves in historical time, enhances our capability to promote truth, justice, understanding and goodwill in the world, to defend liberal democracy, and to address global issues, such as peace, overpopulation and the environment.¹²

These reflections on what we might learn from the history of education provoke a number of responses. Firstly, we note that this historical consciousness is more than the application of knowledges about the past to issues of the present. The comparison of what happened 'then' with what is happening 'now', foregrounds the extent to which the relationship between past and present tends to go unquestioned. Should we simply accept an implicit construction of the past as an entity that is discrete and separable from the present, or is that unhelpful? Do the past and the present (and by implication, the future) have to be considered as discrete and separated? Here the emphasis that Aldrich puts on historical consciousness is both illuminating and liberating. Whilst, as Penny Tinkler and Carolyn Jackson state, 'historians of education have a duty to employ evidence from the past to facilitate greater understanding of the present',¹³ adopting the notion of 'history as present' offers a useful counterpoint.¹⁴ Rather than considering past and present as separate, albeit related, the development of 'historical consciousness' breaks down perceptual divisions between them, and focuses on the ways in which the past is *woven into* the present, how 'traces of the past are embedded in contemporary practices, discourses and experiences'.¹⁵

Secondly, we perceive an expansion in such a functional use of historical research, in line with the trend identified and promoted by Aldrich. For example, a recent funding call from Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA), focuses on 'Uses of the Past'; the suggestion being that awareness of 'the past and its profound effects upon present decision-making and cultural practice can assist Europe in building effective policies to encourage societal resilience, creative thinking, responsible citizenship and intelligent responsiveness to new challenges'.¹⁶ The report of 'Sub-panel 25: Education', arising from the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF), the most recent of the periodic assessments of research quality in UK higher education institutions, appears to adopt a similar, functionalist, view of History of Education: 'The best historical research was well-sourced with primary materials and demonstrated its *significance for contemporary issues in education*' (our emphasis).¹⁷

Does this mean that History of Education research is *only* good when related or connected to contemporary educational issues? Who set these criteria and upon what underlying assumptions about the field, the wider discipline(s), and the purpose of academic research? What does it mean to demonstrate significance *for* contemporary issues in education? Is this different from demonstrating significance in terms of (academic and other) discourses *about* those contemporary educational issues? To demonstrate significance, is it enough to identify similarities and continuities between past and present educational issues? If so, with what frame of reference? Is it on the level of particular educational theories, policies, practices and settings, or with regard to the general human condition *sub specie aeternitatis*? If relevant

and instructive comparisons and contrasts between past and present are expected, then what significant lessons from history is it really possible to draw bearing in mind the plurality of variables at play? Perhaps the kinds of knowledge being produced by historians of education do not necessarily have to be significant for contemporary educational issues in the sense of having a tangible, immediate and explicit impact upon policy or practice for example, but can be significant nonetheless because they have the potential to increase knowledge and understanding, provoke deeper reflection and awareness, and question existing, well-rehearsed, and widely accepted historical narratives, relating to those relevant contemporary educational issues.

Anthony Di Mascio, in his article *'Do Historians of Education Matter?'* makes three significant, and timely conclusions in this regard. He suggests that existing histories of mass schooling need to be re-examined, being open to wider chronological parameters than is currently the case. Furthermore, he raises a more fundamental issue for us; the need to 'contest the labelling of [the] field as a sub-field of either history or education'. He suggests that we should 'embrace it as a specialized field in order to better position [our] research on educational history at the forefront of public knowledge'.

The fruitfulness of re-examining taken-for-granted assumptions about educational history is exemplified in Emma Lautman's article on *'Educating Children on the British Home Front, 1939-1945'* in which she addresses methodological issues centering on the interpretation of oral history. Focusing on two narratives, she problematizes the way in which education during the war is remembered from the vantage point of adulthood, and argues that oral histories of education have relevance and an illuminating power that has, so far, been under-explored.

Finally, Judith Taylor questions existing narratives about the limitations on girls education in *'Gender, bigotry, class or cash? Educating poor Catholic girls in Nineteenth Century Birkenhead and Liverpool'*, showing that contrary to expectations that academic identities, policies, and practices were limited chiefly by gender, class, and religion, evidence suggests that financial considerations were more significant in this locality at this time.

Each of these three articles, in different ways, enrich our understandings of the History of Education; they increase our knowledge, and they provoke deeper reflection; they question existing, well rehearsed, and widely accepted historical narratives. Similarly, they each tell us something about the present; illuminating the current marginalization of historians of education and the need to contest this; the current understandings of how war affects education, and the need to reconsider this; and current understandings of how investment in the educational system affects outcomes for students. Perhaps what we see here is an enacted legacy of Richard Aldrich's work, whereby '[t]he study of history is not merely informative; it is also potentially instructive'.¹⁸

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- ¹² *Ibid.* 42-43.
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