

Editorial

'Location, location, location': Some reflections on geographical and spatial parameters

There is, we are told, a brass plaque attached to an old stone bridge in rural Dorset, in south west England, that says, 'On this spot in 1765 nothing happened'. Whilst no doubt a prank played on unsuspecting visitors with an historical interest, the plaque reminds us of something important: History is unwaveringly local. All history is local history, because all events have to take place somewhere (*locus* is Latin for 'place'). In one sense, the term 'local history' simply pays attention to the places where past things happened. The geographical or spatial focus of study can delineate types of history as much as human categories (e.g. children), themes (e.g. education), approaches (e.g. oral history) or theories (e.g. Marxism). How one defines 'local' is of course a moot point: the word is used in multiple ways. Does it relate to cities, counties and provinces? Countries and nation-states? Continents and international regions? The Earth and its solar system? A 'local historian' and an astronomer might not agree, although they both share an interest in time and space.

The criteria historians use to select the locale(s) upon which to focus their studies should not be arbitrary, even if pragmatic; considerations, such as access to, and availability of, sources will predominate for some. It is not the case that one geographical or spatial parameter is necessarily superior to another, but they will be different. Nobody would question the utility of microscopes and telescopes, so long as the selected instrument and the purpose of the research cohere. The historical study of one location might provide insights into national politics and policy-making from above, while another might reveal the impact of legislation on ordinary people on the ground, for example. It is not always possible within a single study to focus with equal intensity on the small details and the big picture, but there is a risk, in terms of identifying significance and meaning, if individual threads are de-contextualised from the historical webs of which they are a part.

The key is to be critically reflective about units of analysis, and how these shape our understanding of the past. It may well be that 'On this spot in 1765 nothing happened', but that does not mean that nothing happened elsewhere, or that something did not happen here at another time. In *The English Flag* (1891), Rudyard Kipling asked 'And what should they know of England who only England know?'. We might also ask, focusing on internal rather than external comparative differences, 'And what should they know of England who only Dorset know?' and vice versa! Historians need to be: wary of inappropriate generalisations across units of analysis; aware of the relationships, similarities and differences between units of analysis; mindful of the internal diversity within them, for example, in terms of language, ethnicity and religion; and attentive to disputed and changing borders. Is it more or less meaningful to focus on 'Switzerland', for example, as opposed to one or more of the 26 cantons of which it is formed? How far can Swiss history be understood in isolation from Western and Central European history? To what extent should Swiss history consider German, French, Italian and Romansh languages and cultures? There are many ways to cut the cake, and in any given project, it might be that ingredient-level analysis is preferable to a single linear slice! This might mean sampling the same thing as it occurs within and between different locations (e.g. international and transnational histories) or different things occurring within one location (e.g. area studies). In all cases, the selected location should not be considered as self-evident, but as something that has been constructed in the imagination of the historian or the historical actors under study. The normalisation of the study of a particular locality can lead to uncritical decision-making and unquestioned historical assumptions.

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All of the above considerations can be applied to research and teaching in the history of education, as this edition of *History of Education Researcher* demonstrates. The nature of many archives is that 'the local' (broadly defined) is foregrounded. An archive allows us to see what goes on at a particular local level, even if what goes on within this locality has ramifications for what goes on elsewhere. The administrative and policy files of government departments concerned with education were generated at specific times and places, by selected individuals and groups of people, just as much as the records of those controlling and organizing education at a 'local' level. A brief scan of the list of major accessions to archives in 2014, included later in this edition, includes many examples of newly available sources relating to geographically-specific local situations, for example, the records of the 'Society for Providing Church of England Education for the Young Chimney-Sweeps of Bath'. Similarly, the archives of the University of Manchester, described by James Peters, essentially comprise records specific to that institution. The challenge for the historian is to set such archival materials in context and to explain their wider significance and meaning. The alternative, often associated pejoratively with antiquarianism, is to focus excessively on empirical evidence without a sense of its place in historical time and space.

Arguably, the best 'local histories', and local histories of education, bring the small details into focus, so as to allow the development of a more nuanced understanding of the bigger-than-local picture. This is certainly true of the articles included in this edition. Phillip Eigenmann's article focuses on migration, a contemporary issue, and an issue that can be framed in transnational and international terms. By tracing the changes in educational policy that affected Italian immigrants in Switzerland, he is attentive to two 'national' localities and the relationships between them. In being so attentive, he foregrounds the issue of education within the processes of developing national identity – an issue which is also central to the review, by Kira Mahamud, of Augustin Escolano's book *La España cubista de Luis Bello. Visiones desde la escuela*. Likewise, the article by David Griffith centres on the effects of the 1902 Education Act, a piece of national legislation. By recounting in detail the effect of that Act on one community, we are able to begin to grasp the effect on the nation. The local politics behind decisions, the careful negotiations between stakeholders and gatekeepers of discourses in the local setting, all inform our understandings of the complexity and potential diversity of implementation.

Rob Freathy and Jonathan Doney