

History of Education Teacher?

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The mission and aims of the History of Education Society include the promotion of ‘the study and *teaching* of the history of education’ and ‘links with the study and *teaching* of history at all levels’ (our emphases).¹ During our tenure as editors of *History of Education Researcher*, we regret that we have not received any submissions devoted specifically to the *teaching* of the history of education. We know opportunities for such teaching are limited in certain contexts, for example, in instrumental forms of teacher education orientated around apprenticeship models of professional learning.² Nevertheless, we also know that such teaching does occur at graduate and postgraduate level in higher education institutions, both nationally and internationally, through History, Education and/or cognate disciplines. Our concern is that it has not been recently discussed in the pages of the *Researcher*. Perhaps an unintended consequence of the journal’s title is that it encourages an orientation toward research and away from teaching. In our ‘Notes to contributors’, ‘[w]e welcome full article submissions ... from new *researchers* and from established *researchers* beginning work on new material’. Does this offer sufficient encouragement to would-be contributors to perceive the journal as a forum for discussing ‘history of education’ teaching?

In the first and other early editions of the *History of Education Society Bulletin*, a number of articles were published that focused on teaching history of education.³ These were followed by a cluster of articles at the beginning of the 1980s and 1990s.⁴ However these are overwhelmed by other material, primarily presenting the results of research. The question is whether, in accordance with the aims of the Society, the *Researcher*’s editors and contributors should attempt to revivify pedagogical, curricular and other questions pertaining to the teaching of the history of education. We think so, for its own sake. But also because it relates to another of the Society’s aims, that is, ‘to promote the public profile and an informed public understanding of the history of education’. Thus, in our final contribution as editors of this journal, we present a few related ideas with the intention of throwing down a gauntlet not merely handing on the baton. We focus here on what we should teach students about the history of education and its study.

Curriculum content?

A ‘history of education’ curriculum can be determined by a range of possible parameters and content including, but not limited to, the following examples. It can be organised chronologically in relation to particular timeframes, such as: 1830s-1860s (church and state); 1870-1940 (universal state provision); 1941-1976 (education as welfare) or post-1976 (secular, multi-cultural and post-industrial education). The presupposition is that history can be divided meaningfully into discrete eras, periods, epochs or phases, perhaps separated by significant events, acts, turning points, etc. These temporal markers further presuppose a particular context – in this case England - because a significant date of transition in one jurisdiction may be inconsequential in another. Thus, the curriculum can be organised around particular geo-political and other specified contexts (e.g. local, regional and national) and/or the relationship, similarities and differences, and interchange between a number of them (e.g. multinational, international and transnational). Alternatively, it can address particular phases, sectors and types of education, for instance: nursery, primary and secondary schools; grammar, technical, reformatory and other types of schools; youth movements and services; further and higher education; teacher and other professional education; vocational and work-

based education and training; and adult, continuing and community education. This category of content might also include diverse educational media, such as: libraries, galleries and museums; broadcasting (film, television, radio and theatre); literature (books, magazines, etc); and digital media and information technology. Another possibility; the curriculum can include some or all of the following educational topics: qualifications, assessment and testing; curriculum (e.g. null-, hidden-, cross- and subject-specific-curriculum); pedagogy and teaching; learning and learning outcomes (e.g. knowledge and skills); architecture and physical spaces; and tools and technologies (e.g. from slates to interactive whiteboards). Moreover, the curriculum can tackle social issues, including: childhood, youth and family; equality and diversity (e.g. gender, race and ethnicity); special educational needs and disability; and socio-economic disadvantage and mobility. Furthermore, it can incorporate the study of: politics, policy and legislation; organisation, governance and inspection; finance and economics; and leadership, management and administration. Lastly, it can cover the wider intellectual and cultural context, including: religion(s) and worldviews; philosophies and ideologies; and educational ideas and movements.

There is no doubt that in listing examples of possible curriculum parameters and content we will have omitted subject matter close to the hearts of some readers. That is inevitable. Our question is whether it is possible for us as a community of academic practitioners to determine criteria by which to select and sequence curriculum content, even if we do not prescribe the detailed examples by which these criteria should be met. Is it possible-given the breadth and range of the field-to create a curriculum that is not overcrowded, incoherent and confusing for students, but which also conveys key messages and covers core ground? If so, what messages and ground are significant and central? How can we secure progression, continuity, coherence, breadth and balance in students' learning in this field? Are we clear about our aims and purposes as 'history of education' educators, and how and why the history of education could be considered relevant and meaningful to students?

What's the Big Idea?

In the school sector, in response to similar questions, a range of subject areas have recently adopted the concept of 'Big Ideas' to address the perception that learners were learning disparate and disconnected facts, for example, in Science Education and Religious Education.⁵ The notion of 'Big Ideas' originates from constructivist models of education – such as 'Understanding by Design'⁶ – challenging the oppositional conception of teacher and learner, and re-conceiving teaching and learning as cooperative, inquiry-led, activities that focus on 'real-world' problems.⁷ In such an approach, each 'Big Idea' acts as an intellectual tool, promoting deep learning of theory and overarching concepts, instead of uncritical, rote-learning of details and disparate facts.⁸ The goal is to promote 'understanding' with the capability of making sense of what otherwise might appear to be 'meaningless, isolated, inert, or confusing' information.⁹ A 'Big Idea' is thus an interpretative (theoretical/conceptual) lens through which to understand detailed knowledge content, and to identify connections and see patterns within it.¹⁰

As an example, the 'Principles and Big Ideas of Science Education' project encompassed '10 Principles of Science Education' and '14 Big Ideas *in* Science', with the latter being divided into '10 Big Ideas *of* Science' and '4 Big Ideas *about* Science', acting as over-arching concepts that cut across scientific domains. These included 'ideas about the world around (such as scale, symmetry, causality, form and function) and ideas about the way in which scientific ideas are generated through human activity' (i.e. epistemologically- and methodologically-orientated).¹¹ A related project, by Barbara Wintersgill and Rob Freathy,

developed six 'Big Ideas for Religious Education', focusing on theories, concepts and generalisations which could be applied to understand both religious and non-religious worldviews.¹² This was followed by a call for these 'Big Ideas' to be re-categorised as 'Big Ideas *of* the study of religion(s) and worldview(s)' and to be augmented by a new category of 'Big Ideas *about* the study of religion(s) and worldview(s)', mirroring the epistemological- and methodological-orientation of the '4 Big Ideas *about* Science'.¹³ In both projects, 'Big Ideas' were expected to have long term relevance; act as lenses to view, and make sense, of detailed content; express the central concerns of the subject; and be memorable and transferable to events outside the classroom.¹⁴ Thus, to replicate this approach in the study of 'history of education' would entail generating 'Big Ideas *of* the history of education' and 'Big Ideas *about* the history of education', that is, ideas about the focus of study (history of education), and ideas about how such ideas are generated through human activity (historiography and historians of education).

Big Ideas of/about the history of education?

Is it possible for us to identify 'Big Ideas *of* the history of education'? Are there particular theories, concepts or generalisations about education in the past which all students in the field should grasp? What would these be? We can posit broad headings for such 'Big Ideas', including:

- Change and continuity
- Space and place
- Actors and networks
- Structures and contexts
- Architecture and materialities
- Exchange and transfer

Yet the development of these becomes more difficult when one attempts to describe and explain at greater length the theories, concepts and generalisations that can be legitimately asserted under each heading. It is not easy, if indeed it is possible at all, to establish 'Big Ideas' that apply universally across time and space, in all contexts, from all perspectives, without invoking charges of reductionism or oversimplification. Have historians of education created a well-defined and uncontested body of knowledge from which 'Big Ideas' can be derived? Are not some or all theories, concepts and generalisations in this field of inquiry highly contested and self-evidently enthused with ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions that not all historians of education share? In recent years, one might argue that the field has turned towards the particular, heterogeneous, idiographic and subjective, and away from the general, homogeneous, nomothetic and objective. Perhaps this is why conferences and publications addressing designated themes often contribute to knowledge by expanding our horizons rather than getting us closer to any single one. A singular understanding (or limited range of understandings) of the history of education may fail to equip students for future encounters with highly-contextualised, particular and varied historical examples of educational policies, theories, processes, settings, etc.

Fundamentally, the above considerations relate to how we conceptualise and construct our focus (or foci) of study, and how and why we seek to understand it. That is why it is so important that any consideration of 'Big Ideas' in relation to the history of education integrates consideration of epistemological and methodological matters (i.e. Big Ideas *about*, as well as Big Ideas *of*, the history of education). Any history of education curriculum developed in accordance with the 'Big Ideas' approach must highlight aspects of conflict and contestation, which point to the variety and influence of epistemological and methodological

approach, and encourage students to be reflexive learners, asking questions of their own positionality and the situational and contingent nature of knowledge. To this end, based on earlier and analogous work in schools,¹⁵ we have created four possible ‘Big Ideas *about* the history of education’ which accord with our preference for multi-disciplinary, epistemologically- and methodologically-orientated, inquiry-led and reflexive approach to teaching. These ‘Big Ideas’ address four fundamental questions: what is the focus of study, by whom is it being studied, how is it being studied, and why is it being studied.

1. Encountering the history of education: contested definitions and contexts

There is no uncontested definition of ‘education’; of how to -or whether to- differentiate it from ‘schooling’, ‘training’, ‘instruction’, ‘formation’, ‘learning’, etc.; of when and where it should take place; of who should be the giver and receiver of it; of what its aims, methods, contents and outcomes should be; etc.. There is no uncontested definition of what the study of the history of education is, or what it should involve. A critical-analytical, empathetic, and inquisitive approach is required, with students demonstrating a willingness and ability to engage with both familiar and unfamiliar educational theories, policies, practices, settings, etc from the past. Content explored in the study of the history of education should not be accepted uncritically and is not uncontested. It is the product of, and open to, interpretation. Explanations, theories and models in the study of the history of education are those that best fit the facts known at a particular time, but have to take account of spatial, temporal, cultural, socio-political and other contexts and variables.

2. Encountering oneself as a historian: reflexivity, reflectivity and positionality

Who we are (place, era, culture, aspects of identity, etc.) affects what we know about the history of education. Encounters with past peoples, policies, practices, etc., assists us in understanding ourselves better. In turn, this equips us better to investigate and understand the history of education. Neither ‘knower’ and ‘knowledge’ exist independently of one another. Historians of education should examine their own positionality, considering the role of the self in interpreting the subject matter. This means reflecting on how the coalescence of aspects of one’s identity (nationality, ethnic identity, gender, sexuality, educational biography, professional or other employment history, etc.) affects *how* we experience the world, *how* we conduct inquiry into the history of education, as well as the *results* of our historical inquiries. Thereby, we are prompted to interrogate why we think/believe what we do, and how our identity affects our knowledge and view of the world in the past and present.

3. Encountering interpretations, methodologies and sources: discernment and diversity

The study of the history of education can draw upon numerous interrelated subject areas, including social, political, cultural and economic history, textual studies, film studies, sociology and anthropology, philosophy and ethics, languages, archaeology, gender studies, etc. It can involve many different theoretical and practical approaches, often in a complex series of combinations, such as post-structuralism, feminism and Marxism, as well as textual criticism, oral history, life history, material studies, etc. Accordingly, students of the history of education should demonstrate appropriate use of a variety of interpretations, methodologies and sources, engaging in critical analysis of relevant (non-)documentary and other data sources, as well as arguments about them. Here, ‘ways of knowing’ coalesce with the ‘knower’ and ‘theories of knowledge’ to precipitate ‘knowledge’.

4. Encountering the ‘real world’: relevance and transferability

The study of the history of education is a vital tool in gaining knowledge and understanding of education in the past, as well as enhancing the present and future engagement of students

in contemporary public and private educational affairs. Study of the history of education offers many transferable skills, which are invaluable in many domains of life experience, including further education and employment. Studying the history of education helps people to explore and comprehend their individual and collective, public and private, encounters with educational theories, policies, practices, settings, etc. Knowledge, understanding and skills attained through the study of the history of education are useful in varied careers, such as teaching; educational leadership and administration; heritage, culture and arts industries; media and communications; social work and children's services; public and civil services; etc. Education is regularly the focus of public and political debates on topics including public expenditure, community relations, human rights, social justice/mobility, economic productivity, and the morality of young people. Historical knowledge and skills can be deployed in relation to these debates.

Conclusion

Designing a curriculum for teaching the history of education on the basis of these four 'Big Ideas *about* the history of education' might engage students in direct discussion of, and inquiries into, any 'Big Ideas *of* the history of education' that we care to develop. Curriculum content chosen and ordered in accordance with 'Big Ideas *of* the history of education' will implicitly and covertly endorse underlying theories, concepts and generalisations, which students will have little option but to passively receive and uncritically accept, that is, unless they are framed as hypotheses to be tested or even as questions to be answered. If so, then students can be reconceived as nascent members of the communities of academic inquiry concerned with the history of education, entering into the kind of informed, critical and sensitive dialogues which are at the heart of the field of study. Through learning about and implementing a range of interpretations, methodologies and methods, with regard to a diversity of sources, and considering their influence on the outcomes of studies, students would not only learn about the history of education, but also how to learn about the history of education. Similarly, through personal reflection and reflexivity, they would learn about their own and other people's images, understandings and interpretations of the subject matter. Taken together this approach would facilitate (i) consideration of curriculum content selection (in terms of avenues to be explored, rather than indisputable and immutable knowledge); (ii) critical reflection on the validity and credibility of the 'Big Ideas *of* the history of education' themselves; and (iii) discussion of relevant epistemological and methodological questions. This would also potentially enable students subsequently to move beyond any provisional set of 'Big Ideas' - through the application of critical and creative thinking, and undertaking of original rigorous inquiries - towards the construction of their own new or revised 'Big Ideas'.

References

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⁶ G. Wiggins and J. McTighe, *Understanding by Design* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1998).

⁷ Harlen, *Working with Big Ideas*, 8 and 38-40.

⁸ Harlen, *Principles and Big Ideas*, 43.

⁹ G. Wiggins, 'What is a Big Idea?' (2010). Available online at:

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¹⁰ Wiggins, 'What is a Big Idea?'.

¹¹ Harlen, *Principles and Big Ideas*, 16.

¹² Wintersgill, *Big Ideas for Religious Education*.

¹³ R. Freathy and H. John, 'Religious Education, Big Ideas and the study of religion(s) and worldview(s)', *British Journal of Religious Education* (2018), DOI: 10.1080/01416200.2018.1500351. [Accessed 09.11.18]

¹⁴ Wintersgill, *Big Ideas for Religious Education*, 11.

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