



The
Life
of a
School

A RESEARCH GUIDE

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Studying the Life of a School

In the past decade or so, there has been an increasing interest in employing a combination of archival and life history methods to understand the complexities of schooling. This book uses our own exploration of the history of a particular school (Beal Technical School) to discuss the methods and problems of researching the story of a school. It seeks to offer the new researcher a series of practical guidelines and examples for doing such research. At the same time, it includes elements of the case history of a case study, leading to an extended discussion of complex issues of representation which will hopefully be of interest to the new and the more experienced educational researcher.

The introduction is quite short, with just a brief description of the project, but after describing the format of the book, it explains why we chose to write it.

Each of the chapters in section 1 includes an introduction to the range of possible resources, a reflective description of our own experiences, and some suggestions to others. Discussion includes thoughts on the biased nature of all sources and questions on the nature of source survival. Besides discussion, it will be important to include examples of original sources.

Each of the chapters in section 2 comprises at least one representation that we have constructed from the history of Beal and discussions of the process by which it was constructed. We are thereby trying to provide examples of different ways of representing the school and in doing so, we illustrate how the particular nature and form of our sources affect our subsequent accounts.

Chapter 5 tells a conventional historical narrative which covers the broad sweep of the school's history. It is based primarily on traditional archival sources and also includes some statistical sections.

Chapter 6 discusses an approach based on critical incidents and provides an example based on one such incident in Beal's history. Discussion includes a search for sociological models and a review of the potential of methods of the Annaliste historians.

In chapter 6, we also talk through the details of “life inside a research project.” There are few studies of the strange and compelling process conducted within research projects. Partly with this in mind, we decided that keeping a “methodological diary” would aid our reflexivity and offer insights into the research process for a wider audience.

In chapter 7, we go through the classroom door and examine a particular curricular subject as it was taught at Beal. Discussion of this reconstruction refers to recent developments in curriculum history and especially, to the social construction of the school subject (Goodson, 2009).

In chapter 8, we discuss the way in which popular memory constructs an alternative history of a school. Using a specific myth from Beal, we examine the collectivising ability of an institution and the repercussions this has on individual memory. We also touch on the role of newspapers in this regard.

Chapter 9 turns to a more vernacular reconstruction of the history of the school, one that emphasises the structuration of everyday experience. Discussion centres on the importance of including these sorts of reconstruction in historical studies and relating them to the understanding of oral history.

The conclusion talks about how the various representations of the history of a school are related and how it is vitally important to focus on the “everyday world” of schooling.

Methodological Entry Points

Single Events as a Narrative Style

The analysis of one event in the history of a school is a popular choice for historians of education (McCulloch, 2011; McCulloch & Richardson, 2000). A tale set in a limited scope of time, with a small group of actors, can be treated in an easily comprehensible text. A longer history, told through events, provides an eminently readable story. People tend to partly experience their own lives as a series of events, each with a particular place in time. As a narrative device, events tie into this human experience; events can be presented as a compact set of causes and outcomes with a beginning, middle, and end. As stories, they are complete in themselves, though they may have much longer-term causes or implications.

This sort of approach can highlight an event in a way that brings a much longer scope of history into foreshortened view, with the event being used as a springboard for extended discussion. Choosing events is the key decision to make in this type of approach. The choice may be driven by your theory: Definitions can give certain events theoretical purchase, or the choice may

arise from reading the data—with the sources seeming to indicate that an event was important. In general, a combination of historical and ethnographic work tends to focus closely on reading the data (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1992).

The benefits of this kind of approach derive chiefly from the ability to focus your work. A specific incident provides a tremendous focal point for any general theoretical explanation. It is possible to go into a single action in exhaustive detail. To probe your interpretation, you can turn the incident on its head, analyse it in every way possible, and consult as many alternate readings as are available before placing yourself as an arbiter of the various claims on the past. You may even wish to explore the counterfactual—the “what-ifs.”

The choice of a single event also provides focus for your research task. By choosing a particular time, place, and cast of characters, you limit the range of documents and other sources you have to survey to understand the issues at hand. Lengthy research processes, such as selecting informants or searching newspaper articles, could be shortened. At the same time, you can proceed much more deeply into the relevant sources. You can hunt down and unearth details that would be easily skipped in a broader approach to school history. You could easily find yourself with knowledge from all sides of an issue.

The most obvious drawback in this approach is the question of whether you have developed a meaningful story line and viable contextual location. If you only examine one event, how do you know how important it stands in relation to other events which occurred in the history of a given school? Beyond that, the setting of a specific, single context may limit the importance of your argument. It is crucial to include an examination of context in your description, but it is difficult in a single-event study to determine the degree to which events are contingent upon that context.

A study of short-term events is open to the criticism that it misses the long view. Readers may rightly question whether the fact that, for instance, a particular principal sponsored a particular curriculum initiative has substantial meaning in the overall history of that school. Historians who study broad economic and social structures often feel events are of minor importance, representing the acting out of preexisting imperatives.

As a final warning, if you do choose to focus all your energy on a single event, missing sources can present huge or insurmountable problems. If one actor remains an enigma (because she left no diary and no one else understood her), if the minutes of a controversial meeting are lost, or if a proposed curriculum scheme was tossed out once it was turned down, the basis of your whole interpretation may be jeopardised.

Representational Events

While a study of events can be justified by claiming that the events are important, it is also possible to base the claim on their capacity to be representative. A representative event is one which provides, in contained form, an illustration of long-term or widespread change. The event in itself may not be critical but provides understanding of critical change. Of course, to make this claim, you need to identify those broader patterns and make a convincing case for them. The degree of fit between your chosen incident and wider patterns is always at issue; readers may object that your chosen institution is not representative but simply the result of idiosyncratic actors and structures.

Critical Events

The alternative to justification based on representativeness is one based on the importance of a given event in itself. The starting point for discovering critical events is to simply search the sources for any reference to occurrences deemed important. Many—but not all—events which alter school history are outlined in press clippings, discussed in the official records of school boards, or commented upon in school newspapers or yearbooks. While it will be your job to judge whether contemporaries were right in attributing importance to a given action, the sources provide a very good starting point.

An alternate approach to identifying critical events involves looking for disjunctures in the discourse surrounding a school. On reading collections of school memoranda, yearbooks, or clippings, you may frequently find a lack of continuity between the rhetoric at one time and at a later time. Tracing back to the point where change first appears provides a milestone for finding critical events connected to the disjuncture.

The lived experience of people who had a day-to-day connection to the school provides an important measuring device for defining critical events. Experiential analysis of the life stories and oral histories collected by your research team is crucial. This sort of analysis can be carried on across lives—comparing those connected with the school before and after a suspected significant turning point. A comparison within the life story of someone who was linked to the school, both before and after, might be identified by you in collaboration with the subject (see Kincheloe, 2004, 2005; Kincheloe & Berry, 2004; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997, 2007).

Once you have found your critical event, you must give some thought to justifying your choice. Probably the most obvious way to justify the choice of a particular event is to be able to point to significant long-term results. An event which changed the history of a school in a meaningful way should be obvious to

all. If this is not true at a surface level, it is up to you to make it readily apparent to your readers. History provides us with hindsight—this is not just a truism, it is a powerful tool. Use it to judge the importance of events. Experiential analysis can also provide justification for your claims. If oral accounts suggest that the experiential nature of your school changed significantly at the time of your chosen event, this is compelling evidence.

Writing Critical Events Narratives

A crucial element in the telling of critical events narratives is the time spent setting the stage. For the meaning of a change to be understood, what went before must be shown. The constraints on actors, the structures of institutional life, the role of tradition—all of these pre-existing elements provide fodder for interpretation (Kincheloe, 2004, 2005; Kincheloe & Berry, 2004; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2007).

Once you move into an examination of the particular incident, you must make sure you tell all sides of the story. A narrative of an event from the point of view of a single source is nothing more than chronicling. Instead, your job is to find the common ground and points of convergence among sources. You must attempt to oversee the conflicting tales and construct what you can from them. Your construction will probably not be able to take account of all interpretations, and you must mention those sources which provide versions incommensurable with your own narrative.

Event-based history tends to emphasise the role of heroes. Men (too often in the past, mystical “gentlemen”) and women who acted in the context of their times to produce change, or react to it, provide the narrative impetus behind events. To be effective, the actors have to be present as rounded people, not mere caricatures of interested groups. In crafting an events-based history, then, you must be aware of the subtle nuances of personal history. People are not all self-aware, logically acting, unconstrained individuals. Instead, they are only partially aware of both their own motives and subconscious knowledges and the surrounding structures. They may act in ways which seem to contradict a rational assessment of their own interests. They constantly operate under an intricate network of constraints that stretch from their own sense of self, through social norms, to the regulatory apparatus of the state (Goodson & Lindblad, 2010).

Finding Conjunctures

In chapter 7, we define and employ the notion of conjunctures to develop an intersectional view of school (see Goodson, 2004, 2010).

There are two routes to identifying a conjuncture. First, you can approach the question by looking for an important event in the way described above and then seeing if it did in fact mark a conjuncture. A conjuncture provides actors with structures of opportunity. Once an important event has been suggested, analyse the trends at the other levels of time to see if the event did represent the seizing of opportunity. Of course, opportunity missed cannot be identified this way.

A second way is to work in the opposite direction, by identifying those periods when a conjuncture was possible. In this case, you have to decide what phenomena you see fitting into which type of time. Mind sets, trading cycles, and geography have traditionally been put into the category of long time and, thus, are unlikely to change in any study of recent educational history. Conjuncture occurs when several medium-term cycles enter coincidental periods of change. Thus, a way to search for conjuncture is to chart the medium-term cycles. Decide upon those cycles which are likely to have an effect on your chosen area of interest. These will be external to your school, operating at the level of local, regional, national, and international trends in things such as curriculum reform, educational structures, or resource allocations, as well as broader social and economic areas (Goodson & Hargreaves, 2006). Reconceptualising our study of curriculum change and school change along these lines offers a promising perspective for studying the life of a school.

From this historical base, we can move into the analysis of curriculum history and the painstaking reconstruction of the everyday life of the school. In this way, to paraphrase E. P. Thompson (1968), we can save the teachers and the students of school from the enduring “condescension of history.”