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**What We Can Learn From Studying The Past: The Wonderful Usefulness of History in Educational Research**

**Ce que nous pouvons apprendre de l'étude du passé : la merveilleuse utilité de l'histoire dans la recherche en éducation**

**Lo que podemos aprender del estudio del pasado**

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Article abstract

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# What We Can Learn from Studying the Past: The Wonderful Usefulness of History in Educational Research

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## **Abstract**

Why should educational researchers study the history of education? This article suggests that this research is of immediate relevance to current issues of education and may therefore serve a wide variety of purposes. The main argument is that history of education offers four vital contributions: a unique methodological expertise that in turn enables historians of education to provide educational research with vital explanations, comparisons, and the ability to analyse the use and abuse of history in contemporary educational policy and debate. In short, history of education is vital to educational research, not despite its historical orientation, but because of it. Consequently, this paper poses a challenge, both for the field of educational research to promote educational historical research, and for historians of education to explore the untapped potential of this sub-discipline.

Keywords: history of education, educational research, applied history of education, policy

## Lo que podemos aprender del estudio del pasado

### Resumen

¿Por qué los investigadores de la educación deberían estudiar la historia de la educación? Este artículo sugiere que este tema es de relevancia inmediata para los problemas actuales de la educación y, por lo tanto, puede servir para una amplia variedad de propósitos. El argumento principal es que la historia de la educación ofrece cuatro contribuciones vitales: una experiencia metodológica única que, a su vez, permite a los historiadores de la educación proporcionar a la investigación educativa explicaciones vitales, comparaciones y la capacidad de analizar el uso y abuso de la historia en la política y el debate educativos contemporáneos. En resumen, la historia de la educación es vital para la investigación educativa, no a pesar de su orientación histórica, sino por ella. En consecuencia, este artículo plantea un desafío tanto para el campo de la investigación educativa en la línea de promover la investigación histórica educativa, como para los historiadores de la educación en su intento de explorar un potencial propio de esta subdisciplina.

Palabras clave: historia de la educación, investigación educativa, historia aplicada de la educación, política

## Ce que nous pouvons apprendre de l'étude du passé : la merveilleuse utilité de l'histoire dans la recherche en éducation

### Résumé

Pourquoi les chercheurs en éducation devraient étudier l'histoire de l'éducation ? Cet article suggère que ce sujet est d'une pertinence immédiate pour les questions actuelles de l'éducation et peut donc servir une grande variété d'objectifs. L'argument principal est que l'histoire de l'éducation offre quatre contributions vitales : une expertise méthodologique unique qui, à son tour, permet aux historiens de l'éducation de fournir à la recherche en éducation des explications vitales, des comparaisons et la capacité d'analyser l'utilisation et l'abus de l'histoire dans la politique et les débats éducatifs contemporains. En bref, l'histoire de l'éducation est vitale pour la recherche en éducation, non pas malgré son orientation historique, mais à cause de celle-ci. Par conséquent, le présent document pose un défi à la fois pour le domaine de la recherche en éducation afin de promouvoir la recherche historique en éducation et pour les historiens de l'éducation d'explorer un potentiel inexploité de cette sous-discipline.

Mots-clés : histoire de l'éducation, recherche en éducation, histoire appliquée de l'éducation, politique

## Introduction

Education is a complex phenomenon, so it is not surprising that educational research has grown into an interdisciplinary field where research is conducted at a micro level among individuals, at the meso level of institutions, and at the macro level of educational systems (De Corte, 2018). Consequently, the research field is marked by a wide range of methods and theoretical frameworks, and varying understandings of the purposes of educational research. Should educational research primarily contribute to strengthening learning processes, being useful for teachers, or should it first and foremost contribute scientific knowledge to a research field? (Furlong, 2013, Chapter 6; Yates, 2004, Chapter 1).

Starting from this general debate regarding educational research, this article examines the functions of history of education within the wider field of educational research. Admittedly, this is a fairly extensive topic encompassing a wide range of issues that will not be the focus of this article. These include the development of history of education research in national and international settings (see, for example, Bruno-Jofré, 2014; Dekker & Simon, 2014; Lindmark, 2015) and the philosophical and epistemological foundations of history of education research, including questions of presentism and objectivity (Depaepe, 1997; Popkewitz, 2018). I will also only touch upon the questions of theory and method in educational history (Kaestle, 2000; McCulloch & Watts, 2003; Rury & Tamura, 2019, pp. 48–80), and the challenges that this research field has and will face (Goodman & Grosvenor, 2009; Jarausch, 1986). As the list of possible topics for this article shows, the relationship between history of education and educational research certainly is multifaceted.

This article will focus on two questions regarding history of education and educational research: What distinguishes research in history of education? What contributions can history of education make to a broader field of educational research? I will answer them by arguing that history of education is marked by its use of source materials and its stress on change and continuity. I will thereafter present a typology, arguing that the history of education has the potential to make at least four general contributions to educational research: (a) the methodological expertise to examine historical evidence, which in turn enable it to provide (b) explanations, (c) comparisons to present-day education, and (d) examinations of the uses and abuses of history in educational policy and practice. In short, history of education is vital to educational research, not despite its historical orientation but because of it.

It is important to note that this article on educational research and history of education is not written in defence of the latter, as such a task would be futile. It is certainly true that there are not ten good reasons for anything (Stigler, 1969, p. 226). Instead, this article provides insights into what history of education is, and what it can accomplish. Although numerous studies have provided examples of this, the role of the history of education within educational research and education policy remains under-conceptualised.

Within this under-conceptualization lies the first of the challenges presented in this article. Although history of education research has inherent value, I believe it would benefit from continuing to develop and clarify its contribution to the field of educational research. This challenge is an invitation to historians of education to discuss and use the field's partly untapped potential within educational research and policymaking. In this respect, my use of terms such as *usefulness*, *contribution*, and *value* are not an attempt to present an instrumental view on history of education—imagine the many meanings and contexts of these terms, not least in everyday life. Instead, these terms are used to identify the challenge this article also poses to the broader field of education to make proper use of the potential of history of education and its methods. As will be evident from this article, the field of educational research requires both historical and experimental research.

The following examination of the relationship between history of education and educational research is largely based on studies published in an Anglo-Saxon context, with examples mainly taken from primary and secondary schooling and with a slight emphasis on research literature stemming from the expansive Swedish research in history of education. My analysis is inspired by discussions on the role of history of education in relation to educational research (Goodman & Grosvenor, 2009; Popkewitz, 2011; Tröhler, 2008), the teaching profession (Armytage, 1989; Depaepe, 2001) and educational policy (see, for example, Aldrich, 2014; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). However, the discussion below is primarily based on debates in the disciplines of history (Tosh, 2019) and economic history (Abramitzky, 2015; McCloskey, 1976), and the role of historical research in truth commissions and transitional justice (Sköld, 2016), modern-day abolitionist movements (Diptee, 2018), and tobacco litigation (Delafontaine, 2015). The theoretical contribution that this article makes in outlining the position of history of education in educational research depends mainly on the use I have made of these debates. In my view, we have a lot to learn from what Sara Horrell (2003) termed “the wonderful usefulness of history” in those contexts.

## Knowledge Through Source Materials

Like educational research in general, studies in history of education address a wide range of phenomena. Listing important themes in *History of Education*—one of the major journals of the field—Goodman and Grosvenor (2009) acknowledged topics such as primary, secondary, and higher education; disability; popular and non-formal education; teachers; teacher training; curriculum; psychology; and education and citizenship. In the recently published *Oxford Handbook of the History of Education* (Rury & Tamura, 2019), the themes mentioned include inequality, gender, migration, ethnicity, schoolteachers and administrators, curriculum history, non-formal education, technology and education, and transnational and comparative education.

Despite shared research interests, the historical orientation presents history of education with a specific position in educational research that resembles that of church

history in theology, art history in art science, legal history in law, and economic history in economics (Richardson, 1984). In educational research, history puts historians of education in a unique position. They are the only educational researchers that are less concerned with the present, and instead attempt to understand and explain our educational past. However, as historian Marc Bloch (1954) pointed out, this is not a fully satisfactory definition; partly because it is awkward to delineate a field of research solely on the basis of the criterion that it has already happened, and partly because the distinction between history and other fields of research becomes difficult to maintain. Is it even possible to conceive of an educational science research that is devoted solely to immediately contemporary events, since the publication of results from interviews or observations unavoidably examines situations in the recent past?

A better definition is that historians are interested in the time dimension of human life, and that educational historians therefore devote themselves to processes and sequences that include change and continuity, both in the recent past (for example, the introduction of childcare vouchers in Sweden in 2009), and in the more distant past (such as the classroom climate in early 19th-century Prussian secondary schools). Thus, educational historians are interested in different parts of the process that led us to the position where we are today, and how those past human practices, visions, and ideals differ from those of our current society (see Tosh, 2019, p. 129).

As a result, history of education is certainly an empirical science in the common-sense use of the term, since educational historians certainly investigate historical sources that we can observe, read, and measure. History of education may even be empirical in a stricter sense of the word, such as when employing quasi-experimental designs (for the latter, see, for example, Cappelli & Vasta, 2020). However, this interest in change and continuity puts a very specific mark on history of education because of our comparatively limited access to the past. Anyone who has tried to remember what they did on the first Monday of the previous month would have insight into these challenges. Experiments, observations, and surveys may only provide a minor glimpse into the past, and although interviews in oral history studies are useful, they also have clear limitations (Portelli, 1981).

The most important consequence of this distance from our past is that educational historians cannot create their own source materials, with the main exception of the insights provided by oral history. Instead, history has been described as knowledge through source materials (see Veyne, 1984, p. 5). As a result, historians of education may conduct both quantitative and qualitative studies, but they are nevertheless constrained by existing source materials.

This constraint has a wide range of implications for what is meant by “systematic” and “scientific” in this field of research. In addition to qualitative and quantitative research methods, this means that historians of education must have additional competencies in the use of source materials. Since historians of education cannot independently construct their own empirical material, the identification and selection of source materials becomes a crucial methodological choice. Which material they

choose affects both what information they can obtain about a phenomenon and how this information is presented. For example, an educational policy event may appear in completely different ways depending on whether memoirs, newspaper materials, curricula, school inspector reports, or meeting minutes are used. Thus, for an educational historian, it is crucial to understand both the possibilities and limitations of the available source materials, and have an expertise in understanding how various kinds of source materials may be combined (Myrdal, 2012).

The ability to identify and work with source materials is often termed *source criticism* (Edelberg & Simonsen, 2015). The main questions that this historical method addresses vary, and certainly depends on the purpose of the research. If you want to reproduce a dramatic course of events in the best way, a traditional source criticism addresses the source's authenticity, its independence in relation to other sources, and the source's tendency, i.e., the extent to which the source gives a balanced picture of what has happened (Thurén & Werner, 2019). For educational historians, who often indirectly try to elucidate more general questions about matters such as discourses, the conditions of the teaching profession, or the development of the school system, four questions may be of particular importance: what the sources speak of and what remains in silence, how the context of the sources affects the information that the sources provide, the historical actors that produced the sources; and finally the role or weight of the source materials with regard to the matter they speak of (see Ågren, 2005).

## The Long Shadow of History

This orientation towards the past, coupled with a reliance on source materials, provides history of education with unique opportunities to contribute to educational research. Despite this, the role of history of education often remains unclear, even among historians of education. To what extent should historians of education provide knowledge that is useful, and what are the possibilities to learn from history (Depaepe, 2001)? In what respect should historians of education strive for relevance (Labaree, 2012b)?

The answers to such questions cannot be too simplistic. History of education obviously has value in itself. Educational historians must assume that the history of the education of all societies, cultures, and eras has inherent interest. Like certain forms of mathematics, physics, or philosophy, history of education (regardless of scope, time period, and geographical area) is always important, irrespective of the wider societal interest at a certain point of time (see Abramitzky, 2015, pp. 1241–1242). In addition, history of education offers insights that may be relevant for purely existential reasons when dealing with basic human experiences such as love, pain, or death. History of education certainly examines such existential themes when addressing issues including childhood friendship, bullying, the history of school punishment, and memories of schoolteachers, school lunches, and school buses.

However, history of education can also make additional contributions to educational research. Apart from the methodological expertise presented above, history of education may explain features of current educational phenomena, since such phenomena are part of, and the result of, a historical development. In this respect, historical evidence presents researchers with exceptional opportunities to shed light on the historical roots of a practice, policy, or vision. By providing a historical background or an analysis of the development up to present day, we assume that current educational practices are not only decided by current social, cultural, or political context; past decisions always affect future decisions (Mahoney, 2000).

Within the field of educational research, the most striking formulation of this use of educational history was made by Émile Durkheim when he took up his professorship in the Educational Science department at the Sorbonne in 1906. According to Durkheim, an analysis of our current education system is not enough in order to understand or explain it. Instead, understanding it requires a historical perspective and method to analyse the sequences and processes that have led to our current situation.

Only history can penetrate under the surface of our present educational system; only history can analyse it; only history can show us of what element it is formed, on what conditions each of them depends, how they are interrelated; only history, in a word, can bring us to the long chain of causes and effects of which it is the result. (Durkheim, 1956, pp. 152–153)

Other disciplines have also noted this significance of historical perspectives. Administrative history is valuable in administrative science, since administrative structures and processes are determined by decisions made in the past (Raadschelders, 1994, p. 123). Within economics, economic history has received a firmer position partly because of its ability to analyse how the past casts a long economic and political shadow (Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2017). Among the best-known studies that illustrate the significance of history is the study of why we still use a QWERTY keyboard, despite several reasons why it is suboptimal (Abramitzky, 2015: p. 1242).

This importance of processes and long timespans has been conceptualised in organizational theory using the term *imprinting*, which indicates how certain initial conditions leave a lasting mark on an organization even after these conditions have changed (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013). In sociology, the concept of tradition has denoted how cultural heritage can be transmitted and affect contemporary actions (Langlois, 2001). The concept of path dependence also provide vital theoretical perspectives on the significance of history. Definitions of this concept indicate that our decisions are dependent on previous decisions, and that what we do is affected by existing institutions, traditions, and habits that we have inherited from the past (Mahoney, 2000).

While this does not imply a historical determinism, such perspectives highlight the costs and challenges of change. In historical sociology, path dependency has been used to highlight how historical processes may become a self-reinforcing sequence,



where a practice or a policy may be hard to change even though it has become impractical or questioned. Examples include the insistence of the British to drive their cars on the left-hand side of the road and the challenges of implementing major healthcare reforms (Wilsford, 1994). Studies into path dependency have also examined how the present state of things is the result of so-called reactive sequences. Instead of phenomena being the result of a single contemporary decision or shift, studies have recognised how they may be analysed as part of a chain of events, each of which being a reaction to a preceding event (Mahoney, 2000).

In educational research, studies engaging with how history matters have shed light on the macro features of educational systems. These include the organization of school systems in tracks, which in many countries still reflects the segmented school systems of the late 19th century (Hörner et al., 2015); how current teacher reforms are reliant on 20th-century teacher reform traditions (Zeichner & Liston, 1990); and regional variations in schooling. Any study of the performance of the Italian school system must take into account the power of the historical legacy of the North-South divide (Cappelli, 2019). In order to understand students' test scores in Poland, we need to be aware of historical persistence. Polish test scores still reflect the school systems of Prussia, Austria, and Russia (Bukowski, 2019).

Historical investigations are also required to understand micro features of the classroom. As researchers have indicated, some of these features have remained the same over the last 100 years, including the organization of the classroom (see Figure 1), age-graded classes, and the division of the day into periods (Cuban, 1984). A concept that has shed light on such phenomena of continuity and persistence is *grammar of schooling* (Tyack & Tobin, 1994), which highlights the fact that history matters in determining the practices and organization of present-day education.

The fact that history matters is also evident in processes of change. To understand why childcare vouchers were introduced in the welfare state of Sweden – what may seem to be an apparent contradiction – one cannot just study the decision of 2009, but must study the incremental process from the banning of private preschools from the public system of preschools in 1984 (Westberg & Larsson, 2020). In order to explain the phenomena of international large-scale assessment, we cannot merely examine the current situation, but have to examine the history of comparative education, the creation of international networks and organizations in education, and the developments in applied psychology (Ydesen & Andreasen, 2020). A similar situation applies for classroom practices. In that respect, studies have indicated why bullying became a problematic issue that teachers should address (Boge & Larsson, 2018), and why, since 1958, Swedish primary school teachers have not been allowed to physically punish schoolchildren (Qvarsebo, 2006).

**Figure 1**

*A Classroom in Växjö, Sweden in 1914*



Although not identical to contemporary classrooms, some physical features and practices remain familiar today. Source: (1914) *En klass med pojkar*. Småland Museum, Växjö, Sweden. ID VHAL008.

This ability to study questions of change and continuity using historical evidence means that historians of education are well suited to make important theoretical and methodological contributions to educational research. These include the techniques and methods required to examine issues in terms of sequences and processes using longer timespans. Perhaps even more importantly, historians of education can provide answers to general and fundamental questions that are of vital importance to educational researchers, public educational debate, and policymakers. Such fundamental “big think” questions deal with issues including why schooling during the 19th and 20th centuries became a global institution encompassing virtually all children in the world (Meyer et al., 1992), and how the belief became established that education can solve both societal and individual problems (Depaepe & Smeyers, 2008). In public debate, questions about why some countries seem to perform better than others, and why academic standards seem to decline, have given rise to a never-ending series of articles, books and speculations. Educational research certainly needs to engage with such fundamental issues, and historians of education are well suited to do the job.

## The Potential of Historical Comparisons

In addition to enabling explanations, historical evidence provides comparisons that help us understand the present. To begin with, history of education research can, through comparisons, analogies, and contrasts, recontextualize contemporary phenomena and place them in a new light (Aldrich, 2014). This belief in the value of examining phenomena as part of a longer process or sequence may be framed in terms of traditional historicism. We can only fully understand a phenomenon's true nature in their development over time, as part of trajectories that reveal change and continuity. Historical perspectives consequently allow us to avoid simplified narratives, nostalgia, progress, innovation, and inertia (for example, the belief that the challenges of teaching remain fundamentally the same). It is surely relevant to ask whether it is possible to identify the main features of our present educational system, or present educational practise, without comparing them with the past (Tosh, 2019).

In this respect, historical investigations may enable us to understand whether a certain issue is new, changing, unique, self-evident, or persistent, and thus enhance our understanding of contemporary issues as part of a development enabled by certain conditions. If we are to examine an issue in our current educational system, it is immensely helpful to know whether it is a relatively new theory, practice, structure, or policy; if it is recurrent, or if it has been observed for the last 50 or 100 years.

In this context, it is important to note that the function of educational history cannot be reduced to the question of whether we can learn from the past. As human experience indicates, we are not always able to learn specific lessons and we tend to make the same mistake at least twice. Since history is change, specific lessons are also difficult to find. A practice that had a certain impact one, 10, or 20 years ago does not necessarily have the same impact today. Nevertheless, our educational past is useful because it forms an incredible collection of experiences that, both in volume and width, supersede that of our living present (Tosh, 2019, p. 7). Diane Ravitch has compared the function of educational history with that of our memory (Hampel et al., 1996, p. 492), which I find striking. Although we tend to repeat mistakes in our daily lives, having past experiences and an understanding of how things work is immensely important, both in our private and professional lives. Thereby, the question that Ravitch poses is not whether we can learn from history, but how we can gain a correct understanding of the past and draw relevant conclusions to improve our understanding of the present (Hampel et al., 1996, p. 492).

This function of educational history rests partly on an interest in comparisons and reference points. If we want to examine average teacher salaries, wage dispersion, or the gender gap in teacher salaries, we need to make comparisons over time to determine the size of these phenomena. In such analyses, change and continuity is of the utmost importance. Both the causes and remedies of teacher shortages are perceived differently depending on whether we understand it as merely a current and temporary problem, or interpret it as a recurrent problem throughout the 19th and 20<sup>th</sup>

centuries. Here, history of education is necessary to understand the ebb and flow of teacher surpluses and shortages. Similarly, our perception of childcare policies will differ depending on whether we see childcare as a temporary challenge for present-day families or as a challenge for working families during the last century (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 6), which also holds true for the issue of school violence and bullying.

In this respect, historical research is certainly useful for policy. Studies in cognitive science have indicated that analogies and comparisons are vital to human cognition, and that we tend to use the analogies that we have in mind and are available to us. This is perhaps most striking in times of crisis. When the global financial crisis hit in 2008, there was resurgent interest in expertise on the Great Depression of the 1930s (Eichengreen, 2012). The impact of the novel corona virus (COVID-19) has raised public interest in the historical expertise on pandemics in general, and the Spanish flu (1918–1920) in particular. In order to decide on public health intervention today, it is relevant to be informed about how such interventions in the past affected not only mortality but also economic growth (Correia et al., 2020).

There are plenty of opportunities for history of education research to play a similarly important role in education policymaking. It may guide us on relevant considerations when implementing a reform, and thus promote our ability to determine what is important and what is less important (see Horrell, 2003, p. 186). It may also enhance our understanding of new policy proposals. The lack of a historical perspective may enable politicians to present proposals that are formulated like a radical new beginning, but in fact will only result in little difference (Goodman, 1995). In this respect, Ravitch and Vinovskis (1995) noted that it is common to perceive educational problems as unprecedented, caused by contemporary societal challenges. Instead, they argue that neither perceived problems nor our solutions are new. In this context, history of education provides a necessary background. Why reinvent the wheel when engaging with such complicated matters as educational policy, and why formulate reforms without knowledge of how similar reforms fared in the past? (Ravitch & Vinovskis, 1995, p. ix; see also Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

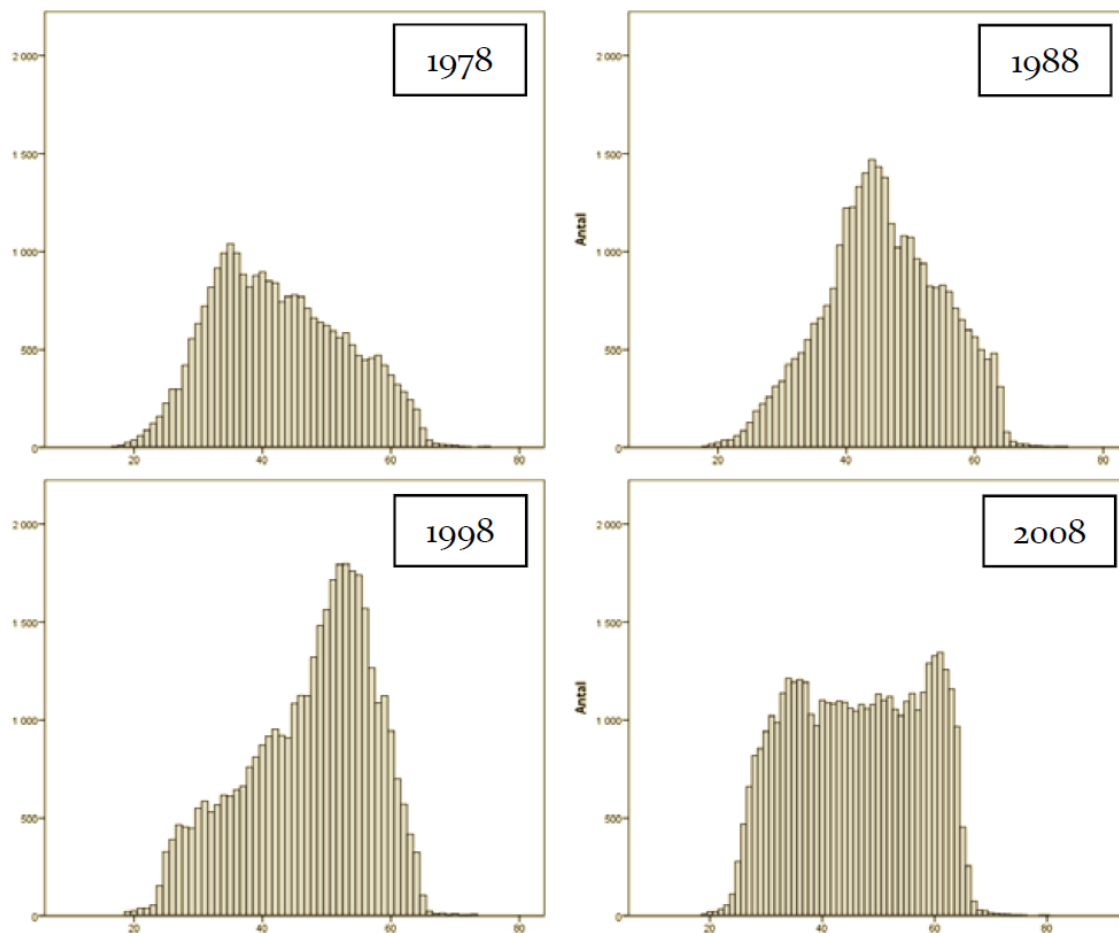
In education, historical perspectives are thus particularly useful when examining educational reforms, including those targeting curriculum, grading systems, school inspection, school choice, school transport and school lunches. If we are to correctly understand a reform, we need a proper understanding of the conditions preceding the reform, but also of previous reforms and reforms attempts. This also holds true for policy. If one intends to introduce grades for behaviour to reduce discipline problems, it is useful to be informed why they were originally abolished, and why previous proposals to reintroduce such grades were unsuccessful. Clearly, such knowledge does not answer the question of whether grades for behaviour should be reintroduced, but it does provide useful information in order to avoid the problems previously associated with such grades. Another example of the usefulness of historical knowledge is the recurrent issue of teacher shortages, mentioned above. In this context, historical research can provide politicians with information about how and

when teacher shortages occur, and thereby provide insights into both how teacher shortages have been handled and how they could be managed in the future (Figure 2).

This historical knowledge seems to be particularly important in the field of education, where politicians are constantly faced with competing aims or values that need to be managed rather than with problems that can be solved. An interesting example of this is teacher training reform. This topic contains a wide range of dilemmas that need to be dealt with, and without historical knowledge there is the risk of constantly repeating past mistakes. In a study of US teacher training, Jack Schneider (2018) identified three dilemmas that have turned policymakers to solutions that had already been discarded by their predecessors: length versus volume, specificity versus generality, flexibility versus security.

**Figure 2**

*The Age Structure of Swedish Secondary School Teachers, 1978–2008*



A proper understanding of the changing demography of the teaching profession is useful both when planning educational reform and when deciding on the volume and organization of teacher training. Source: Bertilsson (2014), p. 85.

In addition to providing points of comparison, history offers educational researchers a wider set of evidence. Economic historians have noted that the past offers the opportunity to study rare events, phenomena that scientists are unwilling or unable to create, or phenomena that does not exist today but may occur in the future. These include the open borders of 19<sup>th</sup>-century migration, the impact of the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century economic crisis, or the functioning of markets during the division and unification of Germany in the post-war era (Abramitzky, 2015, p. 1245). In this respect, history of education may offer what Tyack and Cuban (1995) have dramatically described as “a whole storehouse of experiments on dead people” (p. 6).

In this respect, historical evidence offers certain advantages to historians of education. It allows us to study phenomena with the benefits of psychological distance and a generous timeframe. History of education enables us to study the long-term effects of school reforms (Tyack & Cuban, 1995) and may also provide us with evidence that our contemporary educational system does not. History offers a wide range of personal sources (diaries, letters, etc.) and personal data that makes it possible to conduct studies that other educational researchers cannot conduct, for ethical reasons (see McCloskey, 1976). Since the past provides a larger mass of evidence than the present (including a wealth of statistics, journals, manuals, observation protocols, school board minutes, and school inspector reports from the last two hundred years) history of education widens the opportunities to study how education works.

Applying historical perspectives, historians of education can address many research questions. For example, history offers amazing opportunities to study entire academic careers (Dalberg, 2018), long-term changes in outdoor school spaces (Norlin, 2018), and the impact education has had on economic growth in the long run (Ljungberg & Nilsson, 2009). Historical statistics offer impressive opportunities to study how determinants such as inequality and political voice affect the development of school systems (Chaudhary et al., 2012)—which remains an important political issue—or the impact that schools can have on pro-nationalist sentiments (Cinnirella & Schueler, 2018). Historical perspectives also offer unique opportunities to study the long-term impact of reforms and the mechanism of failed reforms. This includes studies of the reforms that have struggled to make an impact, such as reform movements in mathematics education (Prytz, 2018), or the varying successes of comprehensive school reform in Europe (Greveling et al., 2015).

## **Revealing the Uses and Abuses of History**

Apart from offering explanations and useful points of comparison, history of education matters since history is always in use. History permeates our discourses and is, in this sense, unavoidable. It is central to all discourses and practices of nostalgia, commemoration, and remembrance that pervade our society, and is a part of everyday

life as a way of understanding life and how it should be lived (Delafontaine, 2015, p. 1516). Media exposes us to history in a way that has been described as unprecedented (Tosh, 2019, p. viii). This presence of the past was well formulated by economist Deirdre McCloskey, who argued that we may be “willing or unwilling slaves of historical example, but slaves we are” (McCloskey, 1976, p. 454). This is particularly true in the field of education, perhaps because we all have the experience of education in our own personal past to use as a point of comparison.

Although history in this context has a lot of potential to contribute to present-day debate, historical research may also provide an analysis not only of how history has been portrayed in contemporary educational policy and debate, but also how it is used and to what end. A classic example of an analysis of the use of history is Ernest May’s *“Lessons” of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (May, 1973), which clearly shows how American foreign policy was influenced by various and often restricted perceptions of historical events. In the context of economic policy, the uses of historical examples have even been compared to that of a rushed consumer who merely picks up the first item they see in a store without comparing prices or reflecting on what they really need (Eichengreen, 2012, p. 297).

History of education has an important task in terms of examining such misrepresentations and use of historical examples. Berliner and Biddle (1995) conducted an excellent example of this kind of historical analysis in their book *The Manufactured Crisis*. The strength of the book is that it not only deals with the myths about history of education but also analyses how these myths have been used for political purposes in certain historical contexts. Berliner and Biddle examined how the crisis of the American school was portrayed during the 1980s, including in the influential report *A Nation at Risk* (1983). They examined how this crisis was manifested, for example as declining academic standards among US college students, and school violence. But most importantly, they deepened the analysis by placing it within a broader context. In so doing, they were able to examine why this crisis was invented in the early 1980s, identify the groups that supported this discourse, and the impact that this crisis had on US educational policy. As a result, the book is a good example of a historical analysis that not only demythologises (Depaepe, 2010), but also addresses the question of the actors, social networks, and the political aims and implications of historical myths.

In addition to the potential to examine the historical myths that surround us, there are more specific opportunities to work on issues that are of particular political or legal interest. Peter Burke (1997) argued that historical research has an important responsibility in political manipulations of history, not least regarding the historical narratives that our politics, institutions, and legal system have tended to shy away from. In this context, Burke noted the ancient Greek historian Herodotus’s description of the historian as the guardian of the memories of glorious deeds, and argued that the purpose of the modern historian is quite the opposite: to preserve the memory of those skeletons in the closet. According to Burke (1997, p. 59), the historian is a kind of a

*remembrancer*, an old euphemism for a debt collector. Burke argued that, as such, historians remind us of what we may prefer to forget.

As remembrancers, historians of education have the potential to make a wide range of important contributions. These may include shedding light on educational institutions' problematic past in terms of gender, violence, or politics. This includes the expulsion of pregnant schoolgirls from secondary schools (Larsson, 2018), the long tradition of violence in elite boarding schools (Sandgren, 2015), and the relationship between education and Nazi ideologies (Herrmann & Oelkers, 1988). This may also be useful in educational politics, where historical studies may remind politicians and political parties about past decisions that they would prefer to forget. In this respect, researchers do not provide us with the history we necessarily enjoy, but with the history that we actually need.

History of education may also serve a more sought-after function in contexts of conflict resolution and reconciliation. In this respect, historians have served as expert witnesses in trials of war crimes, including World War II and the Yugoslavian wars, and in US civil litigation targeting tobacco companies (Delafontaine, 2015, pp. 2–3), for example. This role of historians has been described as the result of a historical turn, where the truth about the past has become an important part of human rights discourses or transitional justice processes, for example in so-called truth commissions (Keynes, 2019). In this context, the task of truth commissions has been described as reducing the amount of lies in public discourse (Cole, 2007, p. 119).

In these processes of justice, the historian's expertise in examining historical evidence and interpreting them in their historical context have been given great authority to identify reasonable and shared historical narratives that provide a basis for reconciliation and peace. In this context, historians of education can surely play several important roles. These include the potential to offer the acknowledgement of harm, identify and recognise victims, and preserve their memories (Cole, 2007; Keynes, 2019).

Historians of education and historians of childhood have played important parts in many important processes. In Australia and Canada, as two prominent examples, studies have addressed the treatment of indigenous children. In Canada, for example, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has shown that the residential school system was part of a policy to assimilate aboriginal people (Norlin & Sjögren, 2019, p. 72). Internationally, an expanding research field has addressed the issue of historical institutional child abuse in Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, organised through groups such as the Irish Commission into Child Abuse (2000–2009), the Swedish Commission into Child Abuse and Neglect in Institutions and Foster Homes (2006–2011), the Dutch Samson Committee (2010–2012), and the Danish Godhavn Inquiry (2010–2011) (Sköld, 2016; Dekker & Grietens, 2015).

These commissions and inquiries indicate the challenges that historians of education face when participating in such public contexts: the need to balance scientific accuracy with the persuasiveness required when participating in political or legal



processes. This also implies the challenge of presenting scientifically founded results that relate to and respect the experiences of individuals, many of whom have suffered and continue to suffer (Sköld, 2016). Thus, such studies not only indicate the vital role of historical perspectives, but also provide lessons for historians of education and other educational researchers. The challenges of finding a balance between scientific rigour, persuasion, and individuals' experience are, for sure, central to all (or almost all) research in the humanities and social sciences.

## In Conclusion

This article has addressed the potential of educational history in educational research. Because the educational past has a double connection with present education—we are the product of past events and use history to understand and justify present and future actions—history of education is not merely relevant to historians of education but for a wider field of educational researchers.

The main contribution of this article is that it offers a typology of four functions of history of education in educational research. The first is methodological: educational history offers the expertise to examine continuity and change in the past using historical source materials. Secondly, history of education enables us to provide explanations to current educational practices and policies by exploring the processes and sequences that led to them. In addition to such studies of the long shadow of history, history of education has a third function: it provides historical evidence and points of comparisons that elevates our understanding of contemporary policies and practices. Here, the ability to examine historical evidence and analyse phenomena as part of educational processes and sequences allows historians of education to answer “big think” questions regarding the long-term development of educational systems that are of interest not only to educational research but also to educational policy and a wider audience.

Fourth and finally, history of education is important since history is unavoidable. Since we are constantly using the past to understand where we are and where we are heading, history of education enables us to examine how history has been used and abused in educational contexts, and for what purposes. Here, historians of education and historians of childhood have played an important role in the processes of justice and reconciliation regarding the treatment of indigenous children and historical institutional child abuse. This potential of the historian of education as a remembrancer who reminds us of our history—whether we want to or not—should not be underestimated. Examining the darkness of our educational past is surely a part of the duty of educational research towards those who have suffered from the inequalities and violence of our educational system.

By examining these multiple functions of research in educational history, this article challenges historians of education. Although history of education certainly has a value in itself, the relevance and value of historical perspectives for present-day concerns

indicate that historians of education can be even more active and ambitious to position their research within a wider field of educational research. As this article shows, the use of historical evidence places historians of education in a unique position to contribute to this field. One of the main challenges I present in this article is for historians of education to clearly acknowledge this.

This wonderful usefulness of educational history does, however, not imply that historians of education should constantly strive to make their research relevant to a wider audience of educational researchers. As David Labaree (2012b) has pointed out, there are risks involved when trying too hard to be relevant in a complex field where contexts and research aims differ. In such fields, striving for relevance could lead to counter-productive short-sightedness, leading to research that many will perceive as irrelevant.

Instead, this article challenges historians of education to pose questions that also matter in the wider field of educational research. Instead of looking for relevance or usefulness, this would be a matter of framing historical research to reach a wider audience, relating investigations in educational history to issues deemed important to a large number of educational researchers. Much of the untapped potential of educational history lies in writing for a larger audience of educational researchers, addressing fundamental issues within this general research field and highlighting the methodological and theoretical advances that history of education allows.

In addition to challenging historians of education, this article also challenges the field of educational research to promote history of education in order to strengthen analyses of present-day educational policy and practice. In introductory courses on educational research, presentations of educational research methods, multidisciplinary research projects, and calls for educational research funding, historical perspectives, methods, and research should have a self-evident position. As this article has shown, history of education has an untapped potential to contribute to our understanding of present educational issues and thus also for the development of current policy and practices. Marc Bloch has perhaps formulated this role of historical research most succinctly: “Misunderstanding of the present is the inevitable consequence of ignorance of the past” (Bloch, 1954, p. 36).

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