

The BERA History special interest group

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The American researcher Ellen Condliffe Lagemann points out that educational research needs 'an arsenal of varied methods and perspectives if we are to develop a rich and rigorously analytic understanding of education in all its forms' (Lagemann 2005, p. 9). She goes to explain that history contributes to such an arsenal in a significant way 'when it connects with enduring dilemmas or current puzzles and, in so doing, helps one see the present in more depth' (p. 17). This is not in order to derive simple lessons from the past but 'to understand the past in its own terms, as different from the present, and in drawing such a contrast help to illuminate both past and present' (p. 17).

Lagemann is surely correct in these remarks. To put the matter another way, educational research that disregards history is missing an important weapon from its arsenal, a significant means of illuminating education.

Coming closer to home, our own Brian Simon argued famously half a century ago that 'There is, perhaps, no more liberating influence than the knowledge that things have not always been as they are and need not remain so.' (Simon 1966, p. 92). Simon was one of the earliest presidents of BERA, and was a vigorous advocate of bringing different disciplines and specialisms together in a common cause of understanding education – its assumptions and limitations no less than its methods and solutions (Simon 1978, p. 7).

So we can all be pleased, whether or not we have particular historical interests ourselves, that BERA is now introducing a special interest group in History. For myself and many others, it is an occasion for special celebration. AERA has Section F and EERA has Network 17; now BERA also has a natural home and base to organise activities in this area.

I should emphasise also that the History SIG is designed to serve a broad and diverse constituency, and would identify in particular four related but distinct areas that we will seek to promote:

- 1) History of education – educational changes and continuities over the longer term in relation to a changing social and political context;
- 2) History in education – representations of history in the school curriculum, textbooks, museums, pageants, the media and other educational institutions;
- 3) Historical perspectives on current issues – the origins, antecedents and implications of policies and practices in education;
- 4) Educational life-histories and biographies – the contributions of individuals, groups and networks to educational change over the lifecourse.

Our work will also explore theoretical and methodological debates around oral, visual and sensory history, social and professional memory, transnational and cross-cultural approaches, and ethical and legal issues. We will engage with inequalities in education and society, and with the common concerns of other SIGs across the range of BERA's activities.

So please do join us if you would like to support this new area of our work. I am keen to have a strong programme at the Leeds BERA conference in 2016, so applications to present papers in this area are most welcome, and I will look forward to working with other SIGs to develop areas of shared interest.

References

Lagemann, E.C. (2005) 'Does history matter in education research?: A brief for the humanities in an age of science', Harvard Educational Review, 75/1, 9-24

Simon, B. (1966) 'The history of education', in J.W. Tibble (ed), The Study of Education, RKP, London, 91-131

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