

# EDUCATIONAL HISTORY AND THE PUBLIC GOOD

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History of education, once foundational and central to educational discussions, study, and debates, is considered by many educational historians to be in crisis; its role in teacher education and in public debate concerning educational policies is, at best, marginal. It is both prudent and pressing that we collectively rethink the purposes and roles of educational history in our society and schools. Our personal educational histories, the memories of our own experiences in classrooms and schools, cut deep; so much time spent during such important stages in our lives leave their mark upon us. Collectively, and in popular culture, our educational past is a subject returned to and recalled with alternating unease and delight. Beyond these personal histories, which are rooted in our memories and stories, what do we know about the history of schooling, or the history of educational ideas, in our communities?

The picture becomes more elaborate when we consider how education and schooling has changed and evolved in larger contexts, including our province, country, or continent. What is certain is that educational thinking and educational practices have changed. We who have graduated from studies might be inclined to tell anyone who will listen about how differently our experiences were than those of students in today's schools are. The evolution of education, which is marked out, documented, and studied in the field of educational history, is hard and fast evidence that schools respond to, and often initiate, broader social change. One way of thinking about this is to state that schools do change. Schools can change. Schools will change. We can be instruments of change in education. We, reformers, dreamers, and stakeholders in public education, ignore educational history at our peril.

More than seven decades ago, L. J. Bondy of St. Michael's College in Toronto, Ontario soliloquized as follows: "I wonder how far we must go before we begin to realize that modern education is gradually turning its back on all that is cultural and thereby betraying its most fundamental purpose" (Bondy, 1938, p. 121). What is this purpose, which Bondy believed that education had already begun to neglect in the 1930s? How is our modern education to compare to what was considered modern in the period before World War II, and how far have we gone as reformers? These questions, amongst others, in relation to our understanding of schools in relation to communities and society, are vital; they beg us to consider whether the entire directions that we pursue as educators are wrong or misguided. They may not be, but human history is marked with errors and sins as frequently as it is with triumphs and glory.

History's fundamental purpose rests not with the memorization and recall of facts, figures, and dates. These aims, while sometimes linked to the modern age as much as progressive teachers related it to outdated history education in the previous century, submit history to the yoke of textbooks and examinations. Likewise, history education conceived of as dispositions, skills, and abilities, regardless of whether these constitute the habits practiced by historians in their craft, are only reductions to technical habits unless concentrated upon questions exploring our humanity, values, relationships, and the relation of these with our environments. As Ken Osborne (2001) has noted, historical study is most meaningful when exploring our worldviews and the meanings of what it means to be human. The fundamental purpose of historical study, akin to the *aporia* that was central to classical philosophy, must concern our wondering about how to live well and ethically. History is a means of engagement with who we are – individually, collectively, culturally, diversely – on this planet.

Take a casual stroll through the nearest video store or commonplace. Take, also, the opportunity to consider the literature that shapes most educational reform, policy, and practice. In the former, and throughout our culture and society, history is prominent. In the latter, and across educational departments and Faculties, the history of education is marginalized. History of education's peripheral status is an exception rather than the norm. The aberration is more alarming in light of large scale projects, centres, and networks that have received substantial funding grants to research the teaching of history, historical consciousness, and the complex relationship between the past and our present identities; in the Canadian context, of note are the *Canadians and their Pasts* project, *The History of Education Network*, and the *Centre for Historical Consciousness*.

Just as teacher candidates must understand that they do not have to conform to contemporary practices without suspicion or doubt, they need not emulate the past. Educational history, at its best, counters backwards-looking attitudes towards pedagogy, and seeks to remove blinders restricting critical evaluation of the present. History of education in teacher preparation can seek to foster forward-looking, hopeful, and imaginative habits of mind. As stakeholders in education, each of us as citizens must reflect upon reforms to schooling, teaching, and learning, which relate our public education to the values of our communities as well as our visions of what is right and good. The history of education, seen here both as a discipline of study and as an approach to schooling, traces stories marking the inevitability of reform and change across cultures and contexts. The extent to which the individuals and institutions planning and implementing these reforms – Departments and Faculties of Education, teachers and administrators, parents and students – are informed by history and rooting progressive visions in an understanding of the past is dubious.

Umberto Eco's final novel, *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*, portrays a protagonist who has a loss of his episodic, or autobiographical, memory (Eco, 2005). His amnesia will not allow him to connect who he is at present to who he has been; the character's semantic, or public, memory, however, is intact and allows him to recall

cultural artefacts, scholastic facts, and popular stock phrases or categorizations. He remembers when Napoleon died, for example, but has no sense of his own family, job, and personal status. Today, amidst dramatic social and technological reforms that are transforming communities across the globe, we educationists are, I argue, in a state of amnesia. Who are we as educators, and what are our influences? What relations bind us to public needs and to the public good? Why are our institutions structured as they are, and to what end are we working? In other words, who are we, how did we get here, and where are we going?

## References

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