

FORUM

A Tale of Two Cities. Policy-Based and Science-Based Relevance in History of Education

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Abstract

There are two different ways to seek relevance in the history of education field. One involves closely aligning with contemporary debates to offer a “ready-to-use” historical perspective to education system stakeholders. The other entails diverging from conventional problem frameworks to tackle commonly overlooked or unexplored questions. This requires drawing new perspectives, ideas and knowledge from other research fields.

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Research is relevant when it is a co-construction between researchers and their environment. Over the course of my career, I have considered two different ways to facilitate this co-construction. One way is to stay as close as possible to contemporary debates, in order to provide a historical perspective that can be immediately understood by those involved in the education system. The other is to depart from the most common ways of framing problems, in order to address questions commonly ignored or unasked, which requires drawing resources from other fields of research. The first strategy is policy-driven, the second is science-driven. Obviously, both are uncertain!

Twenty years ago, when I embarked on my PhD, the history of education’s contemporary relevance seemed self-evident. In France, historian Antoine Prost embodied—and to a large extent, still embodies—the ideal synthesis between scientific excellence, marked by his significant contributions to the history of educational reforms and policies in the modern era, and recognized expertise in policymaking in his role as a member of various commissions, committees, and a political cabinet. At that time, the “myth of educational reform” was still alive and kicking in French historiography, and contributing to better reforms was definitely a goal of mine—at least an indirect one—when I chose my research topic. In 2000, curricular reforms in the teaching of literature had just been met with teacher uproar. As I set out to explore how French language and literature teachers addressed the advent of mass secondary schooling and the

introduction of curricular reforms in the twentieth century, I anticipated that a comprehensive historical narrative could bring clarity and common understanding to the debates.

The ability of Antoine Prost to navigate between academic and policy spheres makes him a standout figure in the French academic landscape. But he is not alone. Historians of education, grounded in history as well as in education sciences, have often been sought after to advise decision-makers or even assume direct responsibilities as *recteurs* (a superintendent of schools named by the minister of education to oversee education in a large area). The French Association of Education Administrators and journalists frequently invite historians of education to provide a historical perspective on current debates. These engagements highlight the potential of history of education in shaping relevant educational policies.

As a teacher trainer, I regarded history of education as a valuable discipline for broadening future teachers' perspectives on recurring debates. Whether exploring topics such as religion and education, schooling and social structure, or the respective roles of families and the state, I leveraged history to present a thought-provoking perspective on contemporary issues by studying their origins or making diachronic comparisons. I also aimed to dispel the illusion that what teachers and policymakers have learned will remain valid forever, and to equip them intellectually against a fallacious sense of nostalgia for a mythical golden age, often invoked by those resistant to change.

Over the years, however, my dissatisfaction as a teacher trainer and as a researcher grew with an approach overly aligned with education policies and reforms. The last half-century in France has presented us with a rather unsatisfying conundrum: faced with facts fairly well established since the 1960s regarding the strength of the correlation between socioeconomic status and educational pathways, French education policies offer the somewhat dismaying spectacle of constant hesitation and backtracking without any notable progress. The knowledge of this will not help future teachers pass state examinations, nor will it help them to tackle the problem of inequality in the classroom. Moreover, given the volume of literature on French school reforms available today, the marginal contribution of each new case study has diminished considerably. They all point in the same direction: the huge gap between what governments promise to do and what they are actually able to do, given the resources—in time, money, political clout, knowledge—needed to bring about lasting change in the classrooms.

Initially intended as a useful contribution to future public decisions, my exploration of the formulation of state education budgets in the latter half of the twentieth century made it clear that in a time of tight budgets, in a highly centralized country with strong political biases toward decisions with short-term effects, one could not expect too much from education policies and top-down decisions in the years to come. I came away fully disillusioned about the possible impact of work in the history of education as a contribution to the crafting of adequate education policies, at least in the current French context.

But the ongoing dialogue I had with public finance researchers throughout this work also showed me the scientific fruitfulness of a hybridization between two fields of research that were previously unaware of each other. This intellectual experience has led me to think differently about the relevance of my work, to assess it no longer in relation to the contemporary framework of educational debates, but in relation to knowledge

dynamics and frontiers. To warrant the relevance of my future work, I would now rather bet on the maturity of neighboring fields of research and the analysis of their results in order to tackle questions that, until now, we have not been able to ask or think about in the history of education field because we lacked relevant knowledge.

One of these questions is truly the “elephant in the room”: What has been the cognitive impact of extending the length of initial training, an extension that has affected more or less all groups, including those that were among the most qualified a century ago? In what way has this generalized lengthening—which goes beyond the mere massification of secondary and higher education—changed the representations and uses of knowledge and ignorance in different social groups? The best we can say is that the broadening and extension of education (more people educated; longer time in initial training) has not brought the promises envisioned by educational utopias. There is a huge discrepancy between what we expected from educated societies and the pitfalls we are encountering today, as if all this knowledge had been poured out for nothing.

It is this cognitive dissonance that historians of education have until now persistently ignored, probably because the macro-narratives that underpin and inform our investigations have made certain phenomena hard to envision. The progressive narrative takes for granted the promises of the Enlightenment, of education as a source of progress for the individual, for societies and for humanity, as if the educated mind would spontaneously cherish, seek, keep, and use all kinds of knowledge. Critical sociology has led us to consider the effects of education on the perpetuation of inequalities of gender, class, ethnicity, and so on, and it sees cognitive issues primarily as instruments of power relations, which amounts to ignoring the transformative power of knowledge. The influence of the progressive education movement (what we call in France *éducation nouvelle*) on educational research also had the effect of downplaying the importance of cognitive issues in relation to other challenges. Consequently, when it comes to questioning the cognitive and metacognitive effects of extended schooling (i.e., additional years of initial training), our knowledge is more than patchy.

To tackle these issues, it is necessary to reconsider what historians of education can draw from other fields of research—the history of sciences and knowledge, on the one hand, and psychology and neurosciences, on the other. Hybridizations of humanities and social sciences are rather easier to advocate for and achieve; I won’t develop that point. The call for collaboration with natural sciences is less common. As historians, we tend to shun the risk of anachronism and positivism. However, specialists in the history of animals or history of human-animal relationships—for example—draw on the contemporary work of ethologists, taking into account that this knowledge is historically and sociologically situated. Historians of education could do the same with current research in developmental psychology and the neurosciences, applying the same precautions. Their work on human cognition and metacognition, as well as on human development, opens up perspectives on memory, the link between cognition and affect, the structuring of knowledge, and the diversity of cognitive strategies. This knowledge supplies bases of support for questioning and describing the effects of training on the cognitive attitudes of educated people and examining their changes over the past century as the length of schooling has increased.

Asking these kind of questions means taking a step back from the immediate concerns of those in charge of education systems. But if we widen the focus, this orientation

might not be that irrelevant in terms of policy and practice. The issue of public disinvestment in education is on the agenda, to varying degrees and in different contexts, and “neo-liberalism” might not be the only explanation. If the extended education of a large proportion of the population appears above all as a means for individuals to position themselves in a competition, or as the place where mainly social skills are forged, it is not surprising that, for central governments, other budgetary priorities take precedence over educational issues. Putting the question of people’s relationship to knowledge and ignorance back at the center of the debate, placing it in a historical perspective, and showing what the vast expansion of schooling has changed and what it has not changed would certainly be an unexpected but (who knows?) possibly precious contribution to critical issues. As for future teachers, this endeavor would at the very least enable them to understand that they are pioneers in an anthropological adventure whose outcome is anyone’s guess.

Whichever path the historian of education chooses—relevance based on policy or relevance based on science—the likelihood of a piece of research having an influence beyond a small circle of specialists remains limited, most of the time. If this is not to be the case, levers need to be activated that go beyond the usual perimeter of the academic community. But that is another adventure.

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