Investigating the Teacher's Life and Work

Ivor Goodson

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Investigating the Teacher’s Life and Work
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Scope
The series will commission books in the broad area of professional life and work. This is a burgeoning area of study now in educational research with more and more books coming out on teachers’ lives and work, on nurses’ life and work, and on the whole interface between professional knowledge and professional lives.

The focus on life and work has been growing rapidly in the last two decades. There are a number of rationales for this. Firstly, there is a methodological impulse: many new studies are adopting a life history approach. The life history tradition aims to understand the interface between people’s life and work and to explore the historical context and the socio-political circumstances in which people’s professional life and work is located. The growth in life history studies demands a series of books which allow people to explore this methodological focus within the context of professional settings.

The second rationale for growth in this area is a huge range of restructuring initiatives taking place throughout the world. There is in fact a world movement to restructure education and health. In most forms this takes the introduction of more targets, tests and tables and increasing accountability and performativity regimes. These initiatives have been introduced at governmental level – in most cases without detailed consultation with the teaching and nursing workforces. As a result there is growing evidence of a clash between people’s professional life and work missions and the restructuring initiatives which aim to transform these missions. One way of exploring this increasingly acute clash of values is through studies of professional life and work. Hence the European Commission, for instance, have begun to commission quite large studies of professional life and work focussing on teachers and nurses. One of these projects – the Professional Knowledge Network project has studied teachers’ and nurses’ life and work in seven countries. There will be a range of books coming out from this project and it is intended to commission the main books on nurses and on teachers for this series.

The series will begin with a number of works which aim to define and delineate the field of professional life and work. One of the first books ‘Investigating the Teacher’s Life and Work’ by Ivor Goodson will attempt to bring together the methodological and substantive approaches in one book. This is something of a ‘how to do’ book in that it looks at how such studies can be undertaken as well as what kind of generic findings might be anticipated.

Future books in the series might expect to look at either the methodological approach of studying professional life and work or provide substantive findings from research projects which aim to investigate professional life and work particularly in education and health settings.
Investigating the Teacher’s Life and Work

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INTRODUCTION

Ivor Goodson

In the past decades there has been a reaction in most western countries to foundational disciplinary theory, such as philosophy of education or history of education. It has been thought that the disciplinary base of the theory leads researchers too far away from the practical world of the teacher.

As a result a number of counter-narratives have sought to re-enter the practitioner’s world and, explore research in this milieu; genres such as teacher’s stories, ‘reflective practice’ and action research are examples of such a move back to action and practice.

Nonetheless a survey of these genres reflects a common problem; in entering the teacher’s practical world they have too often lost contact with the historical context of practice and with theoretical and disciplinary understanding generally. Thus, in trying to bring the teacher back into educational study they have had the paradoxical result of weakening the teacher’s understanding of context, politics, patterns and theories. By entering the world of practice and evacuating these other zones they have in fact ended up ‘domesticating’ the teacher. By focusing at the end of the teaching process on action and on practice they have given up the task of understanding how actions and practice change historically and that they are socially and politically constructed in different ways at different times. Just as some work using action research and practical reflection domesticate the teacher, so also they domesticate the researcher.

What is urgently required are genres which stay close to the teacher’s life-world and which systematically build the links to history, politics and theory. Stenhouse long ago argued that we need a ‘story of action within a theory of context’ and argued that historical methods could provide a base for such integration (L. Stenhouse, 1977, p. 7).

This book seeks to broaden the investigation of how to generate theory building. Since Stenhouse’s death in 1982 a new genre of life history has been generated which has sought to explore the teacher’s story of action in a historical context. This work allows us to concentrate on the teacher’s life-world, but doing so in ways that allows us to explore political and social context and historical patterns and parameters.

We require a ‘theory-building meeting ground’ which brings together the work of the teacher’s life-world with work on the thematic patterns and historical contexts of school life. The teacher’s life history provides the personal grounding for investigation and the development of historical understanding allows a broader discussion of political and theoretical contexts.

New educational theory will change three aspects in particular:
– The context of investigations and substantive theory
– The form of presentation of research

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The ‘meeting ground’: in which action and theory are discussed and elaborated. Life history and historical methods link the personal, the practical and the theoretical in new ways that operate at all three these levels.

Above all, these methods lead to developing theory in the ‘middle ground’: the arena between structural organization and policy of political contexts and the micro-detail of daily life in classrooms and teaching (see Goodson 1994). Middle ground theory seeks to combine the view from below with a focus on strategies and organizational forms that respond to changes in macro-level organizational structure and policy contexts. By focusing on the middle-ground substantive theories at that level can produce connections with daily teaching realities and - facing the other way - with formal theories of a structuralist and post-structuralist kind.

The following 2 chapters look at the use of life histories in the study of teaching, the sponsorship of teachers’ voices and the forms of representation of teachers. The aim in these first 2 chapters is to present the argument for employing studies of life history in our understanding of teachers and teaching and further to review the various movements towards teacher narratives and teacher life histories. As has been explained these are very current movements in most western societies at the moment and must be read against a background of an increasing embrace of practical modes of understanding and a consequent movement away from disciplinary and theoretical discourses. The intention of life history study is to reposition, relocate and rejoin the world of action to the world of theory. It will be argued in this book that life history is a particularly fruitful way to reconnect action and theory in the contemporary educational world. In chapters 3 and 4 some guidelines for the conducting of life history interviews are presented. This is by no means an exhaustive list of the stages and procedures for life history interviews but it provides an introduction to those students and researchers beginning to use the method. Likewise the use of life story data is explored and some examples provided.

The provision of examples of life history work is very important for students and researchers approaching the life history method. Hence in chapter 5, 6, 7 examples of life history are employed. It is important to recognize that life history work is not only focused on the life history interview with the teacher but involves the recovery and analysis of a wide range of documentary sources together with the collection of other testimonies. In chapter 5 the product of some of this life history collection is presented in a portrayal of one particular teacher working in the United States in the 1990s. In Chapter 6 and 7 a more detailed use of life history data in building up a a picture of school life is presented.

The final chapter on life histories and professional practice provides some summary comments about investigating the teacher’s life and work and shows how this data can expand our understanding of teachers and the world of schooling.
REFERENCES


Studies of the teacher’s life and work have increased and improved in recent decades. Writing in 1975, at the end of what Hobsbawm has called a ‘golden age’ for Western society (Hobsbawm, 1994), Lortie (1975) summarized the relationship between teachers and educational research studies in the US. Whilst those were very different economic and social times, his judgement stands up well today:

Schooling is long on prescription, short on description. That is nowhere more evident than in the case of the two million persons who teach in the public schools. It is widely conceded that the core transactions of formal education take place where teachers and students meet. ... But although books and articles instructing teachers on how they should behave are legion, empirical studies of teaching work-and the outlook of those who staff the schools - remain rare. (p. vii)

In general, the point that Lortie makes has continued to be in force in the research discourse as related to teachers - a good deal of prescription and implicit portrayal but very little serious study of, or collaboration with, those prescribed to or portrayed. However, whilst there is continuity, there is also change over time which exists at the intersection of the educational enterprise with social, political and economic history.

A decade after Lortie, in the book Teachers’ Lives and Careers, Ball and I (writing in 1985) argued that British research on teachers had moved through a number of contemporary phases in the last forty years. At the beginning of this period, in the 1960s,

... teachers were shadowy figures on the educational landscape mainly known, or unknown, through large scale surveys or historical analyses of their position in society, the key concept in approaching the practice of the teaching was that of role. (Ball & Goodson, 1985, p. 6)

Thus, in that decade in most research studies, teachers were present in aggregate through imprecise statistics or were viewed as individuals only as formal role
incumbents, mechanistically and unproblematically responding to the powerful expectations of their role set.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s new approaches were well underway which sought to address some of the limitations of these paradigms. Case study researchers began to scrutinize schooling as a social process, focussing their work on the manner through which school pupils were ‘processed.’ ‘The sympathies of the researchers lay primarily with the pupils, working class and female pupils in particular, who were the ‘under dogs’ in the classroom, teachers were the ‘villains of the piece’” (Ball & Goodson, 1985, p. 7). By the 1980s we saw a further shift where attention began to be directed ‘to the constraints within which teachers work.

Teachers were transformed from villains to ‘victims’ and in some cases, ‘dupes’ of the system within which they were required to operate’ (p. 7).

Crucially in terms of the orientation of this chapter, the latter characterization of teachers opened up the question of ‘how teachers saw their work and their lives.’ Writing in 1981, I argued that researchers had not confronted the complexity of the school teacher as an active agent making his or her own history.

Researchers, even when they had stopped treating the teacher as numerical aggregate, historical footnote, or unproblematic role incumbent, still treated teachers as interchangeable types unchanged by circumstance or time. As a result new research methods were needed:

The pursuit of personal and biographical data might rapidly challenge the assumption of interchangeability. Likewise, by tracing the teacher’s life as it evolved over time - throughout the teacher’s career and through several generations - the assumption of timelessness might also be remedied. In understanding something so intensely personal as teaching it is critical we know about the person the teacher is. Our paucity of knowledge in this area is a manifest indictment of the range of our sociological imagination. The life historian pursues the job from his (sic) own perspective, a perspective which emphasizes the value of the person’s ‘own story.’ (Goodson, 1981, p. 69)

Unfortunately, whilst studies of teachers lives and careers now began to be more generally pursued in the educational research community, political and economic changes were moving sharply in the opposite direction, and this was reflected in the kind of studies undertaken. The development of patterns of political and administrative control over teachers have become enormous in the 1980s and 1990s. In terms of power and visibility in many ways this represents ‘a return to the shadows’ for teachers who face new curriculum guidelines (in some countries like New Zealand and Britain, an all-encompassing national curriculum), teacher assessment and accountability, a barrage of new policy edicts, and new patterns of school governance and administration.
NEW DIRECTIONS FOR STUDYING THE LIFE AND WORK OF TEACHING

Recent work by qualitative researchers suggests innovative and interesting ways to address the goal of understanding teachers’ personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1989). The addition of the personal aspect in this formulation is a positive development, hinting as it does at the importance of biographical and personal perspectives. Other traditions have focussed on the reflective practitioner, on teachers as researchers of their own practice, and on phenomenological approaches to practice. Personal experiences thus are linked irrevocably to practice. It is as if the teacher is her or his practice. For teacher educators, such specificity of focus is understandable, but broader perspectives might achieve even more, not solely in terms of understandings, but ultimately in ways that feed back into changes in practical knowledge, public policy, and intimately broader theoretical understandings.

There are similar reservations about the ‘reflective teacher’ or ‘teacher as researcher’ mode of teacher education. The ‘teacher as researcher’ approach suggests a number of problems. Stressing that the teacher becomes the researcher of his or her own practice appears to free the researcher in the academy from clear responsibility in this process. But in my view, such researchers have a primary but somewhat neglected responsibility for sponsoring and sustaining the teacher as researcher. Hence, new traditions are developing which oppose the notion that the focus of the teacher as researcher should be mainly upon practice. In some ways, this focus on practice is the logical outcome of the ‘teacher as researcher,’ for its converse is the ‘researcher as teacher.’

The work of teachers is politically and socially constructed. The parameters of what constitutes practice, whether biographical or political, range over a wide terrain. To narrow the focus to ‘practice as defined’ is to make the focus of research a victim of historical circumstances, particularly political forces. In many ways, ‘the forces of the market,’ as articulated by the politicians of the New Right, is seeking to turn the teacher’s practice into that of a technician, a routinised and trivialized deliverer of a pre-designed package. To accept those definitions and to focus on ‘practice’ so defined is tantamount to accepting this ideology. By focussing on practice in a narrow way, the initiative for defining the research agenda passes to politicians and bureaucrats. Far more autonomous and critical research will be generated if the research community adopts wider lenses of inquiry for the teacher as researcher. We need then to move well beyond the grasp of what I have called elsewhere the ‘practical fundamentalists’ (Goodson, 1995b, p. 145).

The new traditions that seek to broaden the focus of work with teachers ranges from life history and biographical studies (Goodson 1981, 1988, 1992; Goodson & Walker, 1991), to collaborative biography (Butt, Raymond, McCue, & Yamagishi, 1992), to teacher’s professional and micro political knowledge (Goodson & Cole, 1993; Russell & Munby, 1992), and through a wide range of interesting and innovative feminist work (Acker, 1989, 1994; Delhi, 1994; Smith, 1990). This
work seeks to broaden the focus of teacher education and development to include the social and political, the contextual, and the collective.

In particular, life history studies seek to broaden the focus of work with teachers. This work takes the ‘teacher as researcher’ and ‘action research’ modes as valuable entry points, but it moves to broaden the immediate focus on practice and on individual classrooms. Life history work is *par excellence* qualitative work. The pioneering work of Thomas and Znaniecki (1927) and other proponents at the Chicago School in the 1920s and 1930s is part of the qualitative legacy. Subsequent work, notably by Dollard (1949) and Klockars (1975) has continued the tradition of American scholarship. In Britain, the work of Paul Thompson (1988) and his use of life histories to study aging has continued to rehabilitate and develop the life history tradition.

In teacher education and teacher development, much pioneering work has been undertaken. The work of Sikes, Measor, and Woods (1985) is helpful in developing our understanding of teachers’ careers, as is the study, *Teachers Lives and Careers* (Ball & Goodson, 1985). The study by Hargreaves (1994b), *Changing Teachers, Changing Times*, adds a valuable contextual commentary to our understanding of the enormous global changes that are affecting the life and work of teachers.

Lawn (1990) has written powerfully about teachers’ biographies and of how teachers’ work has been rapidly restructured in England and Wales. The teacher, he argues, has moved from ‘moral responsibility’ - particularly with regard to curricular matters - to a narrow technical competence. Teaching in short has had its area of moral and professional judgment severely reduced. He summarizes recent changes in this way:

> In the biographies of many teachers is an experience of, and an expectation of, curriculum responsibility not as part of a job description, a task, but as part of the moral craft of teaching, the real duty. The post-war tradition of gradual involvement in curriculum responsibility at primary and second level was the result of the wartime breakdown of education, the welfare aspects of schooling and the post-war reconstruction in which teachers played a pivotal, democratic role. The role of teaching expanded as the teachers expanded the role. In its ideological form within this period, professional autonomy was created as an idea. As the post-war consensus finally collapsed and corporatism was demolished by Thatcherism, teaching was again to be reduced, shorn of its involvement in policy and managed more tightly. Teaching is to be reduced to ‘skills,’ attending planning meetings, supervising others, preparing courses and reviewing the curriculum. It is to be ‘managed’ to be more ‘effective.’ In effect the intention is to depoliticize teaching and to turn the teacher into an educational worker. Curriculum responsibility now means supervising competencies. (p. 389)

Likewise Susan Robertson (1993) has analysed teachers’ work in the context of post-Fordist economies (see also Robertson, 2000, for a more extended analysis). She argues that again the teachers’ professionalism has been drastically reconstructed and replaced by a wholly ‘new professionalism.’
The new professionalism framework is one where the teacher as worker is integrated into a system where there is
– (i) no room to negotiate,
– (ii) reduced room for autonomy, and
– (iii) the commodity value of flexible specialism defines the very nature of the task.

In essence, teachers have been severed from those processes which would involve them in deliberations about the future shape of their work. And while many teachers are aware that change is taking place and talk of the ‘good old days,’ few are aware of the potential profundity of that change even when it is happening in their midst. Clearly educators have been eclipsed by a core of interests from the corporate sector and selected interests co-opted in the corporate settlement. (Robertson, 1993)

These major restructurings of the work and life of teachers highlight the limitations of those methods which focus on the practical and personal worlds of teachers. Teachers’ personal and practical reminiscences and commentaries relate to their work and practice. So such data in the new domain described by Lawn and Robertson will be primarily about work where moral and professional judgement plays less and less of a part. By focussing on the personal and practical, teacher data and stories are encouraged which forgo the chance to speak of other ways, other people, other times, and other forms of being a teacher. The focus of research methods solely on the personal and practical is then an abdication of the right to speak on matters of social and political construction. By speaking in this voice about personal and practical matters, the researcher and teacher both lose a voice in the moment of speaking. For the voice that has been encouraged and granted space in the public domain, in the realm of personal and practical, is the voice of technical competency, the voice of the isolated classroom practitioner, the voice of the worker whose work has been restructured and reconstructed.

In studying the teacher’s life and work in a fuller social context, the intention is to develop insights, often in a grounded and collaborative manner, into the social construction of teaching. In this way, teachers’ stories of action can be reconnected with ‘histories of context.’ Hence teacher stories, rather than passively celebrating the continual reconstruction of teaching, will move to develop understandings of social and political construction. It is a move from commentary on what is to cognition of what might be.

Studying the teacher’s life and work as social construction provides a valuable lens for viewing the new moves to restructure and reform schooling. Butt et al. (1992) have talked about the ‘crisis of reform’ when so much of the restructuring and reformist initiatives depend on prescriptions imported into the classroom but developed as political imperatives elsewhere. These patterns of intervention develop from a particular view of the teacher, a view which practical genres of study often work to confirm.
All their lives teachers have to confront the negative stereotypes ‘teacher as robot, devil, angel, nervous Nellie’ - foisted upon them by the American culture. Descriptions of teaching as a ‘flat occupation with no career structure, low pay, salary increments unrelated to merit’ have been paralleled with portrayals of teaching as ‘one great plateau’ where ‘it appears that the annual cycle of the school year lulls teachers into a repetitious professional cycle of their own.’

Within the educational community, the image of teachers as semi-professionals who lack control and autonomy over their own work and as persons who do not contribute to the creation of knowledge has permeated and congealed the whole educational enterprise. Researchers have torn the teacher out of the context of classroom, plagued her with various insidious effects (Hawthorne, novelty, Rosenthal, halo), parcelled out into discrete skills the unity of intention and action present in teaching practices. (p. 55)

In some ways the crisis of reform is a crisis of prescriptive optimism - a belief that what is politically pronounced and backed with armouries of accountability tests will actually happen (see later). But the data which will challenge these simplifications, data rooted in the teacher’s life and work, will have to move beyond the currently popular ‘practical’ viewpoints to develop a broader

DEVELOPING A COUNTER-CULTURE: RATIONALES FOR STUDYING THE TEACHER’S LIFE AND WORK

The project of analysing the teacher’s life and work grows from a belief that there is a need for a counter culture which will resist the tendency common in research studies to leave teachers ‘in the shadows.’ This counter culture could arise from a research mode that places the study of teachers and the sponsorship of ‘teachers’ voices’ at the centre of the research action.

The proposal I am recommending is essentially one of reconceptualising educational research so as to assure that the teacher’s voice is heard, heard loudly, heard articulately. (Goodson, 1991, p. 36)

Of course the sponsorship of teacher voices is a somewhat pious incantation and can be a perilous one if too selectively appropriated and employed. Hargreaves (1994 and 1996) has cogently inveighed against the dangers of researchers choosing teacher voices that they are sympathetic with and silencing other voices. This is always, of course, a danger in research and nowhere more so than with a research modality that seeks to empower other voices. Nonetheless, the argument of Butt et al. (1992) carries the important aspiration of employing teachers’ voices so that the danger of selectivity and appropriation can be faced:

The notion of the teacher’s voice is important in that it carries the tone, the language, the quality, the feelings, that are conveyed by the way a teacher speaks or writes. In a political sense the notion of the teacher’s voice
addresses the right to speak and be represented. It can represent both the unique individual and the collective voice; one that is characteristic of teachers as compared to other groups. (p. 57)

The important point in this quote is the counter-cultural potential of teachers’ knowledge standing against the grain of power and knowledge as held, produced, and promulgated by the politicians and administrators who control the educational systems.

Whilst it may seem to some that the current dominance of the New Right provides an unhealthy climate, and indeed seems unlikely to provide support for long-subordinated voices, on the other side, the postmodernist movement provides a series of supports for such development. Carol Gilligan’s excellent work, *In a Different Voice*, shows the power of representing the voices of women previously unheard. Above all, new post-modern syntagmas sponsor ‘the idea that all groups have a right to speak for themselves, in their own voice, and have that voice accepted as authentic and legitimate’ (Harvey, 1989, p. 48).

As well as the general sponsorship of teachers’ voices, there are a number of specific rationales for studying the teacher’s life and work. Firstly, these kinds of studies provide a wide range of insights about the new moves to restructure and reform schooling. These new initiatives have been widely promoted, but they have seldom been viewed through the lens of the teacher’s life and work. From this point of view, it is often meaningful to talk about a crisis of reform – or more specifically a crisis of prescription - for the new reforms and prescriptions often work, against the history and context of the teacher’s life and work and by not listening to these concerns, new crises are generated. I have recently examined the salience of the belief in curriculum as prescription, but these comments could so easily be generalized into a more serious concern about new reform initiatives.

Curriculum as prescription (CAP) supports the mystique that expertise and control reside within central governments, educational bureaucracies or the university community. Providing nobody exposes this mystique, the two words of ‘prescriptive rhetoric’ and ‘schooling as practice’ can co-exist. Both sides benefit from such peaceful coexistence. The agencies of CAP are seen to be ‘in control’ and the schools are seen to be ‘delivering’ (and can carve out a good degree of autonomy if they accept the rules).

However there is a substantial downside to this ‘historic compromise’ which has a vital implication for the questions associated with teachers’ voices.

There are costs of complicity in accepting the myth of prescription: above all these involve, in various ways, acceptance of established modes of power relations. Perhaps most importantly the people intimately connected with the day-to-day social construction of curriculum and schooling - teachers - are thereby effectively disenfranchised in the ‘discourse of schooling.’ To continue to exist, teachers’ day-to-day power must remain unspoken and unrecorded. This is one price of complicity: day-to-day power and autonomy
for schools and for teachers are dependent on continuing to accept the fundamental lie. (Goodson, 1990, p.300). 

In addressing the crisis of prescription and reform, it becomes imperative that we find new ways to sponsor teachers’ voices. As a generative example, Casey’s (1992) work provides an illustration of studying teachers’ lives to understand the much discussed question of ‘teacher drop-out.’ She notes that a certain set of taken-for-granted assumptions control the way in which the problem of teacher attrition has normally been defined - one which presumes managerial solutions - and how the language confirms this direction by referring to ‘teacher defection,’ ‘teacher turnover,’ and ‘supply and demand.’ Hence, the question of teacher dropout is pushed into certain investigative cul-de-sacs through both the taken-for-granted assumptions and the linguistic phrasing which helps constitute the problem. This capacity to direct investigations in particular directions and in ways that underpin managerialism and prescription is often confirmed by the research methods employed within the academy. Casey, for example, finds that former members of the teaching profession have often been traced statistically, rather than in person, and that information has typically been collected from sources such as district files, state departments of public instruction, or through researcher-conceived surveys. These strategies often work with the grain of power and knowledge as held by managers and the elites which surround the educational systems. Casey argues that, 

The particular configuration of selectivities and omissions which has been built into this research frame slants the shape of its findings. By systematically failing to record the voices of ordinary teachers, the literature on educators’ careers actually silences them. Methodologically, this means that even while investigating an issue where decision making is paramount, researchers speculate on teachers’ motivations, or at best, survey them with a set of forced-choice options. Theoretically, what emerges is an instrumental view of teachers, one in which they are reduced to objects which can be manipulated for particular ends. Politically, the results are educational policies constructed around institutionally convenient systems of rewards and punishments, rather than in congruence with teachers’ desires to create significance in their lives. (Casey, 1992, p. 188) 

Thus, a vital importance of teachers’ voices and testimonies is that they expose the shallowness, not to say falsify, the managerial, prescriptive view of schooling. Hence, it is simple to see why it is that teachers’ voices have been so long suppressed and in whose interests some academics have embraced certain research modes. 

Secondly, another rationale for studying the life and work of teaching relates to the literature on teacher socialization. A major research theme in this literature has designated the period of pre-service teaching training and early phases of in-service
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training as the most formative socializing influence in the life and work of teaching. However, an alternative research tradition has insisted with accelerating force that the matter is far more complex. Many studies in the 1970s through to the 1990s have focused on teachers’ own experiences as pupils.

Such early experiences are seen not only as important as the training periods but, in many cases, far more important. Dan Lortie (1975) has referred to this pupil period as an ‘apprenticeship of observation’ where teachers’ observation and internalization many future role possibilities. Teacher socialization in this manner occurs through the observation and internalization of particular models of teaching experienced as the recipient people. Dan Lortie argues that these models, what he calls ‘latent models,’ are activated, not implanted, during the training period having often been ‘carried in suspension,’ so to speak, through the interim period of time. To explore seriously this alternative view of teacher socialization requires that we do more life history work covering the pattern of socialization of teachers over the full span of their life and work in teaching.

Yet another vital reason for studying the life and work of teaching arises from feminist studies, most particularly the exciting work of Acker and Middleton.

Their work and other feminist studies provide vital and insightful studies into teaching as a gendered profession (Acker, 1989, 1994; Middleton, 1992). Other specific studies have pursued the issue of women’s life and work in teaching: for instance, Margaret Nelson’s (1992) attempt to reconstruct the work experiences of women teachers in Vermont in the early twentieth century is a particularly important indication of the life history approach to studying the teacher’s life and work. She notes:

Numerous studies have shown that there is a gap between what we can discover when we rely on published accounts of some historical event and what we can discover when we ask questions of the on-site participants of those same events. This gap looms larger when we are looking at women’s history because of the private nature of so much of women’s lives. (Nelson, 1992, p. 168)

She adds later, ‘Public history often ignores minority views. But women’s lives are further hidden because important information is overlooked, consciously avoided, or distorted’ (Nelson, 1992, p. 185).

Sue Middleton has cogently argues that ‘writing one’s autobiography becomes, in this framework, in part a process of deconstructing the discursive practices through which one’s subjectivity has been constituted’ (Middleton, 1992, p. 20). In this sense, her argument leads into a further rationale for studying the life and work of teaching, which in a sense is associated with the earlier section about managerialism and prescription. Our studies of the life and work of teaching should help produce a wider range of teacher-centred professional knowledge. I have pursued this argument at length elsewhere but, put briefly, the issue is how to develop a modality of educational research which speaks both of and to the teacher (Goodson, 1991, 1992, Goodson and Sikes 2001, Goodson 2005). To move our educational research study in this direction, we will require a major upheaval and
reconceptualising of educational research paradigms. However, the emerging work from a range of genres from teacher thinking, through to teacher journaling, the teacher’s professional knowledge, as well as the emerging corpus of work on reflective practitioners and action research is a solid starting point for a newly reconceptualized mode of educational research, as well as a basis for a new form of teacher professionalism (see Goodson & Hargreaves, 1996).

STUDYING TEACHERS’ LIVES AND CAREERS

Studies of the teacher’s life and work develop structural insights which locate the teacher’s life within the deeply structured and embedded environments of schooling. The arguments for employing data on teachers’ lives are substantial, but given the predominance of existing paradigms should be spelt out:

In the research on schools in which I have been involved - covering a wide range of different research foci and conceptual matrixes – the consistency of teachers talking about their own lives in the process of explaining their policies and practices has been striking. Were this only a personal observation it would be worthless, but again and again in talking to other researchers they have echoed their point. To give one example, David Hargreaves (Hargreaves, Hester, & Mellor, 1975), in researching for Deviance in Classrooms, noted that again and again teachers had imported autobiographical comments into their explanations. He was much concerned in retrospect by the speed with which such data had been excised when writing up the research. The assumption, very much the conventional wisdom, was that such data was too ‘personal,’ too ‘idiosyncratic’, too ‘soft’ for a fully fledged piece of social science research (Goodson, 1981).

Of course in the first instance (and in some cases the last instance) it is true that personal data can be irrelevant, eccentric, and essentially redundant. But the point that needs to be grasped is that these features are not the inevitable corollary of that which is personal. Moreover that which is personal at the point of collection may not remain personal. After all a good deal of social science is concerned with the collection of a range of often personal insights and events and the elucidation of more collective and generalizable profferings and processes.

The respect for the autobiographical, for ‘the life,’ is but one side of a concern to elicit the teachers’ voice. In some senses, like other forms of good ethnographic investigation, this form of qualitative educational research is concerned to listen to what the teacher says and to respect and deal seriously with that data which the teacher imports into accounts. This, then, inverts the balance of proof. Conventionally those data which do not service the researcher’s interests and foci are junked. In this model, the data the teacher provides has a more sacred property and is only dispensed with after painstaking proof of irrelevance and redundancy.

Listening to the teacher’s voice should teach us that the autobiographical, ‘the life,’ is of substantial concern when teachers talk of their work. And at a commonsensical level, I find this essentially unsurprising. What I do find
surprising, if not frankly unconscionable, is that for so long some researchers have ruled this part of the teacher’s account out as irrelevant data.

Life experiences and background are obviously key ingredients of the person that we are, of our sense of self. To the degree that we invest our ‘self in our teaching, experience and background therefore shape our practice.

A common feature in many teachers’ accounts of their background is the appearance of a favourite teacher who substantially influenced the person as a young school pupil. Such teachers often report that ‘it was this person who first sold me on teaching’ or that ‘I was sitting in her classroom when I first decided I wanted to be a teacher.’ In short, such people provide a ‘role model’ and presumably influence the subsequent vision of desirable pedagogy as well as possible choice of subject specialism.

Many other ingredients of background are important in the teacher’s life and practice. An upbringing in a working class environment may, for instance, provide valuable insights and experience when teaching pupils from a similar background. I once observed a teacher with a working class background teach a class of comprehensive pupils in a school in the East End of London. He taught using the local cockney vernacular, and his affinity was a quite startling aspect of his success as a teacher. In my interview I spoke about his affinity, and he noted that it was ‘coz I come from round ‘ere, don’t I?’ Background and life experience were, then, a major aspect of his practice. But so they would be in the case of middle class teachers teaching children from the working class or teachers of working class origins teaching middle class children. Background is an important ingredient in the dynamic of practice (see Lortie, 1975).

Of course, whilst class, gender, and ethnicity are but part of the larger picture, teachers’ backgrounds and life experiences are idiosyncratic, unique, and must be explored therefore in their full complexity. Treatment of gender issues has often been historically inadequate (see Siokes et al, 1985). Recent work is more encouraging - see Nelson (1992), Smith (1990), Casey (1992), and Middleton (1992).

The teacher’s life style, both in and outside school, his or her latent identities and cultures, impact on views of teaching and on practice. Becker and Geer’s (1971) work on latent identities and cultures provide a valuable theoretical basis.

Life style is of course often a characteristic element in certain cohorts; for instance, work on the generation of 1960s teachers would be of great value in studying professionals who came in with profound and particular commitments to education as a vehicle for social change and social justice. In a recent study of a teacher focussing on his life style, Walker and I stated:

How the connections between youth culture and the curriculum reform movement of the sixties is more complex than we first thought. For Ron Fisher there definitely is a connection, he identifies strongly with youth culture and feels that to be important in his teaching. But despite his attraction to rock music and teenage life styles it is the school he has become committed to, almost against his own sense of direction. Involvement in
innovation, for Ron at least, is not simply a question of technical involvement, but touches significant facets of his personal identity. This raises the question for the curriculum developer, what would a project look like if it explicitly set out to change the teachers rather than the curriculum? How would you design a project to appeal to the teacher-as-person rather than to the teacher-as-educator? What would be the effects and consequences of implementing such a design? (Goodson & Walker, 1991, p. 145)

This I think shows how work in this area begins to force a reconceptualization of models of teacher development. We move in short from the teacher-as-practice to the teacher-as-person as our starting point for development.

The teachers’ lifecycle is an important aspect of professional life and development. This is a unique feature of teaching. For the teacher essentially confronts ‘ageless’ cohorts. This intensifies the importance of the lifecycle for perceptions and practices. Focus on the lifecycle will generate insights into many of the unique elements of teaching. Indeed so unique a characteristic would seem an obvious starting point for reflection about the teachers’ world. Yet our research paradigms face so frankly in other directions that there has been little work to date in this area.

Fortunately work in other areas provides a very valuable framework. Some of Gail Sheehy’s somewhat populist work in *Passages* (1976), *Pathfinders* (1981) and *New Passages* (1995) is I think important. So also is the research work on which some of her publications are based carried out by Levinson. His work, whilst regrettably focussed only on men, does provide some generative insights into how our perspectives at particular stages in our life crucially effect our professional work. (For women’s lives see new work just published by Levinson, 1996.)

Take for instance the case study of John Barnes, a university biologist. Levinson is writing about his ‘dream’ of himself as a front-rank prize-winning biological researcher:

Barnes’s Dream assumed greater urgency as he approached 40. He believed that most creative work in science is done before then. A conversation with his father’s lifelong friend around this time made a lasting impression on him. The older man confided that he had by now accepted his failure to become a ‘legal star’ and was content to be a competent and respected tax lawyer. He had decided that stardom is not synonymous with the good life; it was ‘perfectly all right to be second best.’ At the time, however, Barnes was not ready to scale down his own ambition. Instead, he decided to give up the chairmanship and devote himself fully to his research.

He stepped down from the chairmanship as he approached 41, and his project moved into its final phase. This was a crucial time for him, the culmination of years of striving. For several months, one distraction after another claimed his attention and heightened the suspense. He became the father of a little boy, and that same week was offered a prestigious chair at Yale. Flattered
and excited, he felt that this was his ‘last chance for a big offer.’ But in the end Barnes said no. He found that he could not make a change at this stage of his work. Also, their ties to family and friends, and their love of place, were now of much greater importance to him and Ann. She said: ‘The kudos almost got him, but now we are both glad we stayed.’ (Levinson, 1979, p. 267)

This quotation I think shows how definitions of our professional location and of our career direction can only be arrived at by detailed understanding of people’s lives. Studies of professional life and patterns of professional development must address this dimensions of the personal.

Likewise, career stages and career decisions can be analysed in their own right. Work on teachers’ lives and careers is increasingly commanding attention in professional development workshops and courses. For instance, the Open University in England now uses our Teachers Lives and Careers (Ball & Goodson, 1985) book as one of its course set book. This is a small indication yet symptomatic of important changes in the way that professional courses are being reorganized to allow concentration on the perspective of teachers’ careers.

Besides the selection of career studies in Teachers Lives and Careers, a range of new research is beginning to examine this neglected aspect of teachers’ professional lives. The work of Sikes et al., (1985) has provided valuable new insights into how teachers construct and view their careers in teaching. More recent work on women’s lifestyles to add to earlier work on men’s life stages will help new studies in this area (see Levinson, 1979, 1996).

Moreover, work on teachers’ careers points to the fact that there are critical incidents in teacher’s lives and specifically in their work which may crucially affect perception and practice. Certainly work on beginning teachers has pointed to the importance of certain incidents in moulding teachers’ styles and practices (see Lortie, 1975).

Other work on critical incidents in teachers’ lives can confront important themes contextualised within a full life perspective. David Tripp’s (1994) recent work provides a range of elegant examples of critical incident studies. Also, Kathleen Casey has employed ‘life history narratives’ to understand the phenomenon of teacher drop-out, specifically female and activist teacher dropout (Casey, 1988, 1992; Casey & Apple, 1989). Her work helps to understand this phenomenon which is currently receiving a great deal of essentially uncritical attention given the problem of teacher shortages. Yet few of the countries at the hard edge of teacher shortages have bothered to fund serious study of teachers’ lives to examine and extend our understanding of the phenomenon of teacher drop-outs. I would argue that only such an approach affords the possibility of extending our understanding, and this is particularly important when new initiatives, such as those suggested by the Labour Party in the U.K., seek to bring back teachers who are over 50 into the profession.

Likewise with many other major themes in teachers’ work. The question of teacher stress and bum-out would, I believe, be best studied through life history
perspectives. Similarly the issue of effective teaching and the question of the take-up innovations and new managerial initiatives. Above all, in the study of teachers’ working conditions, this approach has a great deal to offer.

Studies of teachers’ lives might allow us to see the individual in relation to the history of her or his time, allowing us to view the intersection of the life history with the history of society thus illuminating the choices, contingencies, and options open to the individual. ‘Life histories’ of schools, subjects, and the teaching profession would provide vital contextual background in this respect. The initial focus on teachers’ lives, therefore, would reconceptualize our studies of schooling and curriculum in quite basic ways (see Goodson, 1991, 1995a).

These different approaches to studying teachers’ lives may seem too linear and logical for some current post-modern fashions. They might then be attacked from one of the more fashionable post-modern positions for their desire to provide coherence and closure to disparate and diverse lives in teaching. Such fashionable post-modernisms flow easily from the pens of some academics who study teachers, especially those who have never taught in school. But such persons look in the wrong place for the’ closure’ of teachers’ lives - our academic discourses are not the main place that closure takes place, much as we might want to believe in their centrality.

Teachers’ lives are subject to degrees of closure because they take place in one of the most historically circumscribed of social spaces. Schools are subject to a battery of government regulations, edicts, tests, accountabilities, and assessments - these provide parameters for the actions of teachers. Further, teachers are subject to systematic and invasive socialization during their education as well as pre-service and in-service training. The circumscription of space and the systemic nature of socialization are what predominantly ‘frame’ and ‘close’ teachers’ lives.

So to follow post-modern fashion and see teachers as having ‘selves’ that are free-floating and multiple, subject to constant flux and change, ignores the circumscribed spaces and socialized trajectories of teachers’ lives. Strategies for self-formation therefore take place in juxtaposition to the institutionalized and socialized practices of schooling. By focussing our study on the teacher’s life and work in such closely patrolled institutional arenas, the intention, far from seeking academic closure, is on the contrary to create space for reflexivity. Such work aims to develop strategies for teachers to scrutinize and analyse their world of work - their lives in teaching - in ways that offer as flexible and informed a response to the socially constructed world of schooling as is possible.

NOTES

1 The question of whether to use ‘the teacher’s voice’ as a generic category or ‘teachers’ voices’ is of more than semantic import. For any voice is multi-faceted whilst singularly embodied and embedded.
INVESTIGATING THE LIFE AND WORK OF TEACHERS

REFERENCES


CHAPTER 1


CHAPTER 2

THE USE OF LIFE HISTORIES IN THE STUDY OF TEACHING

Ivor Goodson

ORIGINS OF THE LIFE HISTORY METHOD

The first life histories, in the form of autobiographies of Native American chiefs, were collected by anthropologists at the beginning of the century. For sociologists the major landmark in the development of life history methods came two decades later with the publication of Thomas and Znaniecki’s mammoth study The Polish Peasant in Europe and America (Thomas and Znaniecki, 1927). In exploring the experience of Polish peasants migrating to the United States, Thomas and Znaniecki relied mainly on the autobiographical accounts, diaries and letters provided by the migrants themselves. For these authors, life histories were the data par excellence of the social scientist:

In analysing the experiences and attitudes of an individual, we always reach data and elementary facts which are not exclusively limited to this individual’s personality, but can be treated as mere incidences of more or less general classes of data or facts, and can thus be used for the determination of laws of social becoming. Whether we draw our materials for sociological analysis from detailed life records of concrete individuals or from the observation of mass phenomena, the problems of sociological analysis are the same. But even when we are searching for abstract laws, life records, as complete as possible, constitute the perfect type of sociological material, and if social science has to use other materials at all it is only because of the practical difficulty of obtaining at the moment a sufficient number of such records to cover the totality of sociological problems, and of the enormous amount of work demanded for an adequate analysis of all the personal materials necessary to characterise the life of a social group. If we are forced to use mass phenomena as material, or any kind of happenings taken without regard to the life histories of the individuals who participated, it is a defect, not an advantage, of our present sociological method (pp.1831-1833).

Thomas and Znaniecki’s pioneering work established the life history as a bona fide research device. The prominent position of the life history was further consolidated by the flourishing tradition of sociological research stimulated at Chicago by Robert Park. In the range of studies of city life completed under Park, The Gang (Thrasher, 1928), The Gold Coast and the Slum (Zorbaugh, 1929), The Hobo
(Anderson, 1923), and *The Ghetto* (Wirth, 1928), the life history method was strongly in evidence. Life history studies reached their peak in the 1930’s with publications such as Clifford Shaw’s account of a ‘mugger’ in *The Jack-Roller* (Shaw, 1930) and Edwin Sutherland’s *The Professional Thief* (Cornwell and Sutherland 1937). Howard Becker’s (1970) comments on Shaw’s study underline one of the major strengths of the life history method:

> By providing this kind of voice from a culture and situation that are ordinarily not known to intellectuals generally and to sociologists in particular, *The Jack Roller* enables us to improve our theories at the most profound level: by putting ourselves in Stanley’s skin, we can feel and become aware of the deep biases about such people that ordinarily permeate our thinking and shape the kinds of problems we investigate. By truly entering into Stanley’s life, we can begin to see what we take for granted (and ought not to) in designing our research – what kinds of assumptions about delinquents, slums and Poles are embedded in the way we set the questions we study (Becker, 1970, p.71).

From this statement Becker leads on to the assertion that Stanley’s story offers the possibility ‘to begin to ask questions about delinquency from the point of view of the delinquent’. So that it follows that:

> If we take seriously, as his story must impel us to do, we might well raise a series of questions that have been relatively little studied – questions about the people who deal with delinquents, the tactics they use, their suppositions about the world, and the constraints and pressures they are subject to (p.71).

Becker’s claims for the life history merely reiterate those made by contemporaries of the Chicago sociologists in the 1930’s. Perhaps the best attempt to analyse the methodological base of the life history method was Dollard’s *Criteria for the Life History* (Dollard, 1949). Foreshadowing Becker he argued that ‘detailed studies of the lives of individuals will reveal new perspectives on the culture as a whole which are not accessible when one remains on the formal cross sectional plane of observation’ (p.4). A central problem with Dollard however is his recurrent assertion, in the fashion of the times that the individual appears as a microcosm of the group features of the culture. This is a view, which as we shall see later is difficult to sustain. Yet a lot of Dollard’s arguments have a somewhat familiar ring, perhaps reflecting the influence of George Herbert Mead. He notes that ‘as soon as we take the post of observer on the cultural level the individual is lost in the crowd and our concepts never lead us back to him. After we have ‘gone cultural’ we experience the person as a fragment of a (derived) culture pattern, as a marionette dancing on the strings of (reified) culture forms’ (p.5). In contrast to this the Life Historian;

> Can see his life history subject as a link in a chain of social transmission. There were links before him from which he acquired his present culture. Other links will follow him to which he will pass on the current of tradition.
The life history attempts to describe a unit in that process: it is a study of one of the strands of a complicated collective life which has historical continuity (p.15).

Dollard is especially good, though perhaps unfashionably polemical, in his discussion of the tension between what might be called the ‘cultural legacy’, the weight of collective tradition and expectation, and the individual’s unique history and capacity for interpretation and action. By focussing on this tension, Dollard argues, the life history offers ethnographers a way of exploring between the culture, the social structure and individual lives. Thus Dollard believed that in the best life history work ‘we must constantly keep in mind the situation both as defined by others and by the subject, such a history will not only define both versions but let us see clearly the pressure of the formal situation and the force of the inner private definition of the situation’ (p.32). This resolution, or attempt to address a common tension, is seen as valuable because ‘whenever we encounter difference between our official or average or cultural expectation of action in a ‘situation’ and the actual conduct of the person this indicates the presence of a private interpretation’ (p. 32).

After reaching its peak in the 1930’s the life history approach fell from grace and was largely abandoned by social scientists. This was firstly because the increasingly powerful advocacy of statistical methods gained a growing number of adherents among sociologists, but perhaps also because among ethnographically-inclined sociologists more emphasis came to be placed on situation rather than on biography as the basis for understanding human behaviour.

Since the 1930’s little attention has been paid by mainstream sociologists to life history methods. Only recently have there been signs of rehabilitation, significantly among deviancy sociologists: studies of a transsexual (Bogdan, 1974), a professional fence (Klockars, 1975) and, with a fine sense of history, once again a professional thief (Chambliss, 1972). Other marginal groups re-exploring life history methods are journalists-cum-sociologists, like Studs Terkel (1975) in the USA and Jeremy Seabrook (1976) and Ronald Blythe (1969) in the UK, and a growing band of so-called ‘Oral Historians’ (Thompson, 1978).

Among these scholars, albeit in marginal or fragmented groups, a debate is underway which promises a thoroughgoing re-examination of the potential of life history methods. See especially the works of M. Huberman, (1993), P. Munro (1998), K. Plummer (2001). But before we consider the contemporary appeal of the life history and apply this to ethnographic studies of the school, it is important to discover why life history method was for so long eclipsed by the social survey and by participant observation. In this examination the emphasis will be on distinguishing fundamental methodological stumbling blocks from the political and personal reasons for the decline of life history work.
CHAPTER 2

REASONS FOR THE DECLINE OF THE LIFE HISTORY

By 1966 Becker was able to summarise the fate of the life history method among American sociologists in this manner: ‘given the variety of scientific uses to which the life history may be put, one must wonder at the relative neglect into which it has fallen’ (Becker, 1970). Becker notes that sociologists have never given up life histories altogether but neither have they made it one of their standard research tools. The general pattern was, and is, that: they know of life history studies ‘and assign them for their students to read. But they do not ordinarily think of gathering life history documents or of making the technique part of their research approach’ (pp.71-2).

The reasons for the decline of life history methods are partly specific to the Chicago department. From the late 1920’s life histories came under increasing fire as the debate within the department between the virtues of case study (and life histories) and statistical techniques intensified. Faris in his study of Chicago sociology records a landmark within this debate:

To test this issue, Stouffer had hundreds of students write autobiographies instructing them to include everything in their life experiences relating to alcohol usage and the prohibition law. Each of these autobiographies was read by a panel of persons presumed to be qualified in life history research, and for each subject the reader indicated on a scaled line the position of the subject’s attitude regarding prohibition. Inter-reader agreement was found to be satisfactory.

Each of the same subjects had also filled out a questionnaire that formed a scale of the Thurstone type. The close agreement of the scale measurement of each subject’s attitude with the reader’s estimate of the life history indicated that, as far as the scale score was concerned, nothing was gained by the far more lengthy and laborious process of writing and judging a life history’ (Faris, 1967, pp.114-5).

Even within Chicago case study work the life history declined as against other ethnographic devices, notably participant observation. One element of the explanation of this lies perhaps in the orientations of Blumer and Hughes. These two sociologists provide a bridge between the Chicago school of the 1920’s and 1930’s and those Matza has termed the ‘neoChicagoans’ such as Becker and Goffman. Blumer’s symbolic interactionism places primary emphasis on process and situation, and explanations in terms of biography like those in terms of social structural forces, are regarded with considerable suspicion. Hughes’ comparative approach to the study of occupations may have tended to limit interest in biography in favour of a concern with the typical problems faced by occupational practitioners and the strategies they adopt for dealing with them. An additional factor, which hastened the decline of the methodological eclecticism of Chicago sociology with the life history playing a central role, was the decline of Chicago itself as a dominant centre for sociological studies.
The fate of life history methods is inextricably linked to the evolving aspirations of sociology as a discipline. Hence the methodological weaknesses of the life history method came to be set against the need to develop abstract theory. When sociology was highly concerned with providing detailed accounts of specific communities, institutions or organisations such weaknesses were clearly of less account. But in the life history of sociology the pervasive drift of academic disciplines towards abstract theory has been irresistibly followed: in this evolutionary imperative it is not difficult to discern the desire of sociologists to gain parity of esteem with other academic disciplines. The resulting pattern of mainstream sociology meant that sociologists came to pursue ‘data formulated in the abstract categories of their own theories rather than in the categories that seemed most relevant to the people they studied’ (Becker, 1970, p. 72).

Alongside the move towards abstract academic theory sociological method became more ‘professional’. Essentially this led towards a model of single study research defined by Becker in this way:

I use the term to refer to research projects that are conceived of as self-sufficient and self-contained, which provide all the evidence one needs to accept or reject the conclusions they proffer…The single study is integrated with the main body of knowledge in the following way: it derives its hypotheses from an inspection of what is already known; then, after the research is completed, if those hypotheses have been demonstrated, they are added to the wall of what is already scientifically known and used as the basis for further studies. The important point is that the researcher’s hypothesis is either proved or disproved on the basis of what he has discovered in doing that one piece of research’ (Becker, 1970, p. 72).

The imperative towards this pattern of sociological research can be clearly evidenced in the traditions and organisational format of emergent professional sociology. The PhD student must define and test his hypothesis; the journal article must test the author’s own or other academics’ hypotheses; the research project or programme must state the generalisable aims and locate the burden of what has to be proved. But this dominant experimental model, so fruitful in analogies with other sciences, and hence so crucial in legitimating sociology as a fully-fledged academic discipline, led to the neglect of sociology’s full range of methodology and data sources.

It has led people to ignore the other functions of research and particularly to ignore the contribution made by one study to an overall research enterprise even when the study, considered in isolation, produced no definitive results of its own. Since, by these criteria, the life history did not produce definite results, people have been at a loss to make anything of it and by and large have declined to invest the time and effort necessary to acquire life history documents (Becker, 1970 p.73).

Becker ends by holding out the hope that sociologists will in the future develop a ‘further understanding of the complexity of the scientific enterprise’, that this will
rehabilitate the life history method and lead to a new range of life history documents as generative as those produced by the Chicago sociologists in the 1920’s and 1930’s.

In the period following Becker’s strictures, sociology has been subject to a number of new directions which have sought to re-embrace some of the elements lost in the ‘positivist’, theory-testing models (Morris, 1977; Cuff and Payne, 1979). However, the one new direction which clearly stresses biography, the phenomenological sociology of Berger and Luckmann (see Berger, 1963, and Berger and Luckmann, 1967), has led to little empirical work as yet. Hence research in interpretive sociology has displayed a heavy emphasis on situation, under the influence of interactionism and ethno-methodology. The paradox is that the new directions in sociology have moved away from the ‘positivist’ model, but directly to situation and occasion, and as a result life history and biography have remained at the sidelines of the sociological enterprise. For instance, interactionist studies have focussed on the perspectives and definitions emerging among groups of actors in particular situations, the backcloth to this being presented as a somewhat monolithic ‘structural’ or ‘cultural legacy’ which constrains, in a rather disconnected manner, the actors’ potentialities. In over-reacting to more deterministic models, this situational emphasis most commonly fails to make any connection with historical process. Thus, while interactionists retained their interest in the meaning objects had for actors, these meanings increasingly came to be seen as collectively generated to deal with specific situations, rather than as the product of individual or even collective biography.

Viewing sociology’s evolution over half a century or so provides a number of insights into the life history method. Firstly, as sociologists began to take seriously their social scientific pursuit of generalisable facts and the development of abstract theory, life history work came to be seen as having serious methodological flaws. In addition, since life history studies often appeared to be only ‘telling tales’ these methodological reservations were enhanced by the generally low status of this as an ‘academic’ or ‘scientific’ exercise. Paradoxically even when antidotes to the experimental model of sociology developed these took the form of interactionism and ethno-methodology both of which stressed situation and occasion rather than biography and background. Moreover, since these new directions had status problems of their own, life history work was unattractive on this count as well. At the conference where the present paper was originally delivered, a classroom interactionist rejected the exhortation to consider life history work by saying:- ‘We should not suggest new methodologies of this sort…because of the problems of our academic careers. Christ! Ethnography is low status enough as it is’. Set against the life history of the aspirant academic we clearly see the unattractiveness of the life history method.

Leaving aside the political and personal reservations over life histories however, there are clearly important methodological problems. Two major problems underpin the opposition of sociologists to the method. Firstly there is the problem of representativeness or typicality. The aspiration to develop generalisable insights has intrinsic as well as political justifications. Life history work cannot guarantee
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typicality, representativeness or, therefore, contributions to general theory. At the same time there is a second problem that life histories are a considerable undertaking. With low guarantees of generalizable findings, then, they couple the awkward necessity for large time commitments.

REHABILITATING LIFE HISTORY: PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES

To rehabilitate the life history we need to indicate its relationship to sociological theory and alongside this to overcome the other major objection, the time-consuming nature of the exercise.

As we noted earlier some deviant sociologists have recently embraced life history methods and are engaged in trying to resolve the ambivalence between the method and sociological theory. Faraday and Plummer (1979) present the relationship of life history to their theoretical enterprise in three ways: in the examination of existing theory (as Becker, 1970 p.67 says “even though the life history does not in itself provide definitive proof of a proposition it can be a negative case that forces us to decide a proposed theory is inadequate”); in the exploration of data ‘in order to generate sensitising concepts, theories and conceptual frameworks’. In areas of inquiry in which little is known the life history therefore provides ‘a sensitising tool to the kinds of issue and problems involved in the field’. Finally life history utilises theory.

There is no intrinsic disconnection of the life history from theoretical work. It is clearly not very good at testing or validating existing theory, although it might be useful in finding a falsificatory case. It is quiet good when combined with a general orientation in theory which enables one to see how the theory might make sense of that field as a whole, but in no conclusive way. It is at its best when it is being used in an exploratory fashion for generating many concepts, hunches and ideas, both at the local and situational level and on a historical structural level and within the same field and in relationship to other fields’ (Faraday and Plummer, 1979, pp. 773-795).

In general the life history is congruent with the main theoretical assumption of interactionism that the individual life is not as clear or ordered as many social science accounts, especially those following the experimental model, would have us believe. The greatest strength of the life history is in its penetration of the subjective reality of the individual: it allows the subject to ‘speak for herself or himself’. But above and beyond this, the life history ‘can give meaning to the overworked notion of process’ (Becker, 1970, p.69). In the experimental model we might give people a questionnaire at various stages in their life and attribute a process to the changing answers at different periods. But there is a gap in such a procedure: the life history can fill that gap. The well-documented life history:

Will give us the details of that process whose character we would otherwise only be able to speculate about, and the process to which our data must
ultimately be referred if they are to have theoretical and not just an operational and predictive significance. It will describe those crucial interactive episodes in which new lines of individual and collective activity are forged, in which new aspects of the self are brought into being. It is by thus giving a realistic basis to our imagery of the underlying process that the life history serves the purposes of checking assumptions, illuminating organisation and re-orienting stagnant fields (Becker, 1970, p. 70).

The focus of the life history is clear: the personal ‘reality’ and process. The life historian is initially only concerned with grasping personal truth: ‘on the (more important) issue of attaining universal truth he or she remains mute’. The problem of this focus, as with much of interactionism, is that the personal experience and process often gets divorced from the wider socio-historical structure. The life historian must constantly broaden the concern with personal truth to take account of wider socio-historical concerns even if these are not part of the consciousness of the individual. The fully researched life history should then allow us.

To see an individual in relation to the history of his time, and how he is influenced by the various religious, social, psychological and economic currents present in his world. It permits us to view the intersection of the life history of men with the history of society, thereby enabling us to understand better the choices, contingencies and options open to the individual’ (Bogdan, 1974, p. 4).

In rehabilitating the life history it is important to see the sociological enterprise not as monolithic but as multi-faceted. Becker’s image of the mosaic is useful: ‘each piece added to a mosaic adds a little to our understanding’ or Levi-Strauss’s analogy with the jigsaw. Seen in this way the place of life histories should become evident. The object is not to resolve the tension between experimental and interactionist models: both have a place. The questionnaire can test pre-selected themes but in doing so closes off avenues of exploration; in complement, interactionist studies and life histories trace the personal situation and life in evolution. By rehabilitating the life history the jigsaw puzzle might finally fall into place, for there is always a better chance if all the pieces are used.

LIFE HISTORY AND THE STUDY OF SCHOOLING

The Contemporary Situation: A Brief Review

In reviewing the history of sociology, it has been argued that the experimental model of sociological investigation, with its emphasis on single studies to test pre-selected hypotheses, whilst for long dominant, has neglected participant perspectives and interactional processes. Paradoxically the interactionist and ethnomethodological models, which have sought to explore these neglected areas, have focussed on situation and occasion with the result that biography and historical background have continued to be neglected. To a great extent these patterns of
development for sociology in general hold true when one reviews the sociology of schooling.

Reviewing contemporary interactionist and ethno-methodological studies of schooling one might discern two characteristic assumptions. Firstly because of the focus on situation and occasion, little attention has been given to the individual biography, personal views and life-style of teachers. Partly this may have arisen by anthropological analogy. For instance, Philip Jackson’s work on Life in Classrooms, although full of insight, presents teachers as a particular kind of species reproducing within busy, tiring and unchanging environments:

Not only is the classroom a relatively stable physical environment, it also provides a fairly constant social context. Behind the same old desks sit the same old students, in front of the familiar blackboard stands the familiar teacher (Jackson, 1968, p. 166).

As a result in these accounts the teacher becomes depersonalised, neutral above all interchangeably: the same old familiar teacher we know so well.

A second characteristic assumption is also epitomised in Jackson, the assumption of timelessness: this is at one with interchangeability – whatever the time, whoever the teacher, everything is much the same. This anti-historical approach is also a feature of interactionist and especially ethno-methodological approaches:

a fundamental assumption of the ethno-methodological approach is that the social world is essentially an ongoing achieved world. The everyday world of social events, settings and relationships is all the time created and achieved by the members of society and these events, settings and relationships are assumed to have no existence independent of the occasion of their production (Payne, 1976, p.33).

But while there is some truth in this, the actors creating the social events which Payne describes do nevertheless have an existence which is independent of, and previous to, the social events in which they are involved. Such a neglect of historical and biographical background makes problematic the construction of general categories within which to situate these ethno-methodological and interactionist accounts of specific events. Hence, it would be possible for a variety of social events to be portrayed, and for their internal logic to be laid bare, without getting at any general understanding of why events differ and why what is common to certain events, in this case school lessons, recurs over time. A knowledge of personal biographies and historical background would add breadth and depth to the studies and fulfil the aspiration, indeed obligation, to develop more generalisable categories of understanding.

Two characteristic assumptions in ethno-methodology and interactionism have been discerned: those of teacher interchangeability and of timelessness. As noted, these new approaches have shared with the dominant ‘positivist’ model of sociology a neglect of personal biography and historical background. The existence of these two characteristic assumptions will not be proven at length in this chapter.
CHAPTER 2

The study of a book like *School Experience* (Woods and Hammersley, 1977) would however confirm that there are grounds for believing that these characteristic assumptions are common and influential in the direction and selection of studies of schooling by ethno-methodologists and interactionists. Similarly, that excellent study *Deviance in Classrooms* (Hargreaves, Hester and Mellor, 1975), although marked by an eclecticism of approach, nonetheless misses many opportunities to follow up biographical data. The authors concede that teachers often ‘import’ life history data into accounts of their practice but as is so often the case, this data is edited out in the final version. Even the most recent work displays this tendency with its focus on generalised teacher and pupil strategies (Woods, 1980a and 1980b). Yet elsewhere Woods (1979, p.3) has noted that ‘the social scientist has to begin to develop a perspective that enables him to develop the connection between macro-sociological and historical processes on the one hand and individual biographies on the other’. But in the absence of life history data this can only remain a pious hope. We are left in the position of having a clearly discerned portrait and analysis of a series of differentiated teacher strategies, without any understanding of how particular teachers come to adopt particular strategies. In understanding something so intensely personal as teaching it is critical that we know about the person the teacher is: our paucity of knowledge in this area is a manifest indictment of the range of our sociological imagination.

Broadening the qualitative approach

To avoid wandering too far in criticising qualitative approaches there is the need to once again reaffirm the commitment to such approaches: many of the arguments in the introductory pages have after all been used in the past to support participant observation. Denzin (1970, p.70) has summarised the position rather well: ‘The life history parallels participant observation. Its basic difference lies in the breadth of coverage, not in causal intent’.

We have argued that interactionist and ethno-methodological studies of schooling have generated a predominant but implausible model of the teacher: largely interchangeable, subject to timeless problems and employing a variety of standard but apparently spontaneously developed strategies to deal with them. Whilst not wishing to argue that teachers do not have important characteristics in common we argue that there are important distinctions in attitudes, performance and strategies which can be identified in different teachers and at different times. To understand the degree of importance of these distinctions we have to reconnect our studies of schooling with investigations of personal biography and historical background: above all we are arguing for a reintegration of situational with biographical and historical analyses. Through such a reintegration we might move away from studies where the human actor is studied in a manner contrivedly divorced from his own biography and history of the situation. A model of human action is required which points to the role of both situational and biographical/historical factors and their interrelation.
Programmatic arguments for new directions are however relatively easy. The rest of the article tentatively defines the major dimensions of life history investigation and then seeks to illustrate this through two examples of recent work in the field. Essentially, my argument involves four claims placed below in order of ascending generality (and, possibly, difficulty):

- that the teacher’s *previous career and life experience* shape his view of teaching and the way he sets about it;
- that the teacher’s *life outside school, his latent identities and cultures*, may have an important impact on his work as a teacher. This relates to ‘central life interests’ and commitments (as in the case of a teacher recently interviewed who burst out ‘but you must understand that my whole centre of gravity is elsewhere, well outside these bloody school walls’). Becker and Geer’s (1971) (p.56-60) work provides a theoretical basis here;
- that the teacher’s *career* is a vitally important research focus. Bogdan and Taylor (1970, p.121) have argued that in the life history ‘the researcher codes the subject’s words according to certain phases or periods in his or her life, what many qualitative researchers call a previous *career*’. The work of Strauss, Hughes and Becker, provides a conceptual base (Becker et al, 1961). Also notable is Becker’s study of ‘The Career of the Chicago Public School Teacher’, which is premised on the belief that the concept of career is ‘of great use in understanding the dynamics of work organisations and the movement and fate of individuals within them’ (Becker, 1952, p.470).
- that we must, following Bogdan, seek to locate the life history of the individual within ‘the history of his time’. Clearly there are limits to this aspiration with regard to schooling. But ‘life histories’ of schools, subjects, and the teaching profession would provide vital contextual information. For instance if we compare below the school Kensington in its early years with the situation after 1979 it is almost as if the teacher would be encountering different micro-worlds altogether, the same could be said in comparing the innovative Leicestershire school Countersthorpe in its early years around 1970 with it’s subsequent restructuring in the years after 1980: it is surely not possible to regard such changes in ‘arena’ as variables to be held constant in the study of teachers in action.

In adding this fourth investigative focus we are, Bogdan notwithstanding, broadening the traditional domain of life history to include the ‘life histories’ of collectivities. Life historians have however noted the need to locate the individual life experience ‘within the broader socio-historical framework’. In studies of schooling this is particularly important and for this reason I have chosen examples of life history work which take this focus.

The two studies which are described in the next section have been chosen to illustrate how profitable life histories might be and to show that quite wide-ranging biographical and historical studies can be completed with a reasonable economy of time. Both examples attempt to link the life histories of key participants within the life histories of collectivities, in one case a school, in the other a school subject. (In both cases all that can be presented in such a short article are short summaries of
the research: to do these studies justice the reader is recommended to consult the original work).

‘Kensington Revisited’

Louis Smith’s work in the ethnography of schooling spans the last twenty-five years. In the *Complexities of an Urban Classroom* (Smith and Geoffrey, 1968), he studied the classroom teacher in action and later in 1971 in *The Anatomy of Educational Innovation* (Smith and Keith, 1971) he produced a detailed organisational analysis of one showpiece elementary school innovation, being concerned with the dynamics of educational change at work in a particular school at a specific point in time.

He has come to view this work as limited in a number of ways and has set out to remedy these limitations. This new research on the same educational institution, Kensington School, attempts to answer two questions: Firstly what is the current structure of Kensington as an educational organisation and has the school reverted to its pre-innovational pattern? Secondly, what interpretation/explanation can be made of the changes that have occurred between 1964 and 1979? Smith notes in his research proposal that ‘Methodologically this will involve a special kind of case study, a mix of ethnography and recent history’. Participant observation, interviews/oral history, and primary documents e.g. local newspapers, school records and bulletins are viewed as sources of data.

Central to Smith’s research follow-up are these two questions: ‘what has happened to the original staff?’ and ‘How do they perceive the impact of the Kensington experience on their professional lives?’ He writes:

In answering these questions the hope would be to capture each part of the school and its original faculty at a second period in time, to make comparisons and to draw inferences about innovation and its effects on the lives of a small group of people’.

Smith asserts that the major concern here is ‘to place the issues of educational innovation into the broader context of the individual’s life’ (Smith, 1980).

A good deal of the research pursuing these issues deals with the individual headmasters of Kensington. Data on these key individuals was often collected by retrospective interviews with members of staff at Kensington. The impact of the different perspectives of the first headmaster, Eugene Shelby, and the second, Michael Edwards, are eloquently caught in a series of such interviews as evidenced in the following transcript:

**Teacher:** The kids were not allowed to make as many choices. (In Shelby’s era) they were allowed to make choices all day long. And choices in important things such as ‘Do I want to go to math class today, or do I want to go out and play?’ And if they wanted to go out and play, they played. The first year I was there and we divided up for classes, there were three of us, and the first morning when we changed (students) ‘You go here for this class, here for that class’, half of our
group went out the door. I said, ‘Where are you going?’ I ran after them. ‘We’re going for fishing poles’. I said, ‘No you’re not. What do you want fishing poles for?’ ‘Oh, we’re going down to the creek to fish’. And they all came back in and we started to ask questions.

Observer: So was that tightened up then?
Teacher: Oh yeah, right away. We simply did that. ‘You may go out at recess time and we’ll do that, but you don’t have that choice now. We will go to maths class when it’s time. We will go to social studies class when its time.’

Observer: Now was that Mr. Edwards’ influence, or the teachers’ influence?
Teacher: Right at that point it was a teachers’. We went to him and said, ‘This is what happened, and this is what we did at the moment’. And I can remember the three of us talking to him about it, and he said, ‘Oh no, the kids will have class’…Once we said to the kids, ‘This is the way we’re going to do it now, we’re all new and this is what we’ve decided to do’. There was nothing else, we did it that way. And the amazing part of this, the kids never said…or very seldom said, ‘But last year we…’ I always found that very amazing.

Observer: So they adjusted and adapted quite easily.
Teacher: Yeah, and another thing I remember is when I passed out textbooks, the kids were terribly excited, ‘This is my book?’ ‘Yes, it’s your book’ ‘All year’. They really liked that textbook that they could keep in their desk. (Smith, L. et al, 1985, pp. 18-19)

The initial focus has moved however from a concern with individual teachers life histories to a more broadly concerned pattern of investigation of the life history of an elementary school. The mode of investigation is now dignified as a ‘longitudinal nested systems model’. Smith in his most recent, and as yet provisional paper, describes the genesis of the model in this way.

We have moved from an initial set of predictions and the beginnings of a new perspective into a lengthy discussion of Kensington’s history. When we sought to explain the changes in the School, we found ourselves drawn into two dimensions or contexts, time and space. Kensington School’s immediate geographical and social context is the Milford School District. It was not surprising to find both the School and the District to have interdependent histories. As we began exploring these histories we found plots and themes that enmeshed with even more far ranging contexts. It was as if Kensington’s history was circumscribed by Milford’s, and these two in increasingly broader contexts in space and time. When we first conceived of returning to Kensington School, its fifteen year history seemed to define our task. We found that we could not explain the changes in this once innovative school with such a narrow conception. Our search for antecedents has pushed us back near the turn of the Century and widened our view to include Suburban County, Midwest State, the United States, and even the world community. The changes we found at Kensington originate in the histories of each of
these broader systems. Our notion of ‘Longitudinal Nested Systems’ is an
effort to come to grips with the role of these interdependent systems in
shaping the school we found on our return visit (Smith, L. et al, pp.18-19).

The ‘search for antecedents’ is clearly open-ended and in such a brief description
the focus might appear far too broad. In fact the study does not move far away
from a detailed concern with explaining the changes at Kensington School and the
broad spectrum of potential antecedents are closely defined and related to the
school in question. The chart (on page 146) notes the levels of investigation
(Smith, L et al, pp. 18-19).

The first section of the history of the Kensington innovation is told through the
periods of each headmaster’s incumbency: Shelbys brief ‘Innovative Lighthouse’
1964-66, ‘The Revisionary Decade’ of Michael Edwards (first section the ‘golden
of traditional stabilization’ John Wales 1979 onwards. Each era is viewed through
life history data on the headmasters and personal testimony from the staff. The
school superintendents of Milford School District are similarly treated within the
context of a history of this district since 1910.

By broadening the focus of historical investigation from headmasters’ life
histories to life histories, to life histories of the school and the school district, the
whole manner of study can be transformed. Smith concludes that he was:

Trying for a description and analysis of changes in the innovative Kensington
School between its opening in 1964 and its current status fifteen years later in
1979-80. As a piece of contemporary empirical social science research that
represents a long time period. From an historical point of view it is not only
recent history but also a relatively short time period. One aspect of our meta-
theoretical perspective assumes that a view of the history of the Milford
School District will enhance our understanding of the changes in the
Kensington School. More recently, as our data has accumulated, as new
directions for inquiry have arisen out of available people, documents, and
themes and as analysis and interpretations have continued, we have found
shifts in the very nature of the problem. Now one of our guiding questions is
not so much ‘How and why did this school change from 1964 to 1979?’ but
also ‘Why did the Kensington School appear at all in the Milford School
District?’ Such is the process of inquiry (Smith, L., et al, pp.18-19).

Essentially this historical study allows us to move to a view of ‘innovation as
aberration’ – a perspective some way from Smith’s 1971 study.

Smith’s work therefore moves from an initial concern to study the impact of
innovation on teachers and headmasters’ lives to an attempt to locate these within
the history of the district and the times. The momentum of this ascending order of
study is somewhat breathless in the present account because of the need to
compress our summary of is research. But if Smith’s work serves best to illustrate
the methodological dynamic at work in the pursuit of life history study the second
instance illustrates in rather more detail the kind of material which is actually generated in life history interviews.

‘SCHOOL SUBJECTS AND CURRICULUM CHANGE’

The aim of the study reported in School Subjects and Curriculum Change (Goodson, 1982) was to trace the reasons behind the promotion of a new school subject: Environmental Studies. The research method employed was to begin by collecting the life histories of the major participants in the promotion of this new subject. The patterns of decision, the changes of direction and the stated rationales given by these promoters of the subject were echoed in the evolutionary profile of the subject, which was later reconstructed. In a real sense the life histories of these key personnel constituted the life history of the subject in question.

The main advocate of the subject began his teaching in a secondary modern school. His career after leaving school was interrupted by the war and, having undergone ‘emergency training’ after the war in rural studies, this teacher had a vision of his subject as the ‘curriculum link’ connecting school to environment and life.

I had a strong feeling that education wasn’t just book learning, it involved common sense applied to a problem – I talked to many farmers and they would talk about the kind of intelligence a farm worker would need to apply to his job. (Interview with Sean Carson, April 8th 1976).

Moreover the ‘best boys, the most able, who today would be in the sixth form went into farming gladly’ so that in the beginning his subject was not restricted to the least able students who attended the Secondary Modern Schools.

As the tripartite system of education gradually emerged in the form of new school buildings and modified curricula, it became clear that rural studies was only developing in secondary modern schools. Furthermore secondary modern schools were increasingly concerning themselves with external examinations. His classes began to change their composition:

The advent of external examinations gradually prevented the more capable children from taking part and eventually led the scheme to be aimed at the less able children only.

In moving to teach in Hertfordshire the changing pattern became still more evident. The adviser in the county had been a leading advocate of rural studies as the ‘hub of the curriculum’ integrating school and environment but the head of the new school ‘didn’t see rural education I that sense’:

He was already thinking ahead to raising the standards of this school to what would eventually be C.S.E. None of this existed, but he was thinking in term of this. Although I understood when I got here that I could have anyone who wanted to volunteer for my subject it never in fact worked out. The classes were streamed. I only ever got the lower of the three streams.
A further problem followed:

While at first I could do what I liked with that bottom stream and I did the same sort of thing as in Kent, over the next few years this was whittled away from me as more specialism invaded the curriculum, and these kids eventually spent practically no time running the farm.

The result of the ‘whittling away’ of rural studies as more specialism invaded the curriculum was that the more examination-oriented subjects began to take most of the financial resources. Rural studies had a standard of provision below even the other practical subjects (which were themselves badly under-resourced). The subject ‘had to adapt or perish’.

By now I saw rural studies as a specialist subject with weak links. My alternative vision was that it could have been an all pervasive educational approach…

…By 1954 I’d already given up hope of getting rural studies seen in the way I’d taught it in Kent…That’s the sort of dreams I was well aware of giving up…a lot of kids don’t learn through paper and pencil…we do far too much of this. A lot of kids could achieve success and use all the skills that we talk about in the classroom, such as analysing and comparing, through physical activities…With the farm it was a completely renewing set of problems and the fact that it was a farm was incidental. (Interview with Sean Carson, April 8th 1976).

In retrospect the renunciation of this vision of rural studies has come to be viewed as the crucial turning point in trying to develop a subject of interest to most pupils. The promotion of the subject to win resources meant that these pupil needs had to be foregone: ‘I’ve always felt dissatisfied since. I’ve met many teachers who’d come across the same realisation. (Interview with Sean Carson, April 8th 1976)

But at the same time the promotion of the subject was seen as the most important consideration particularly as in 1958 he had become as Adviser in Rural Education. His visits to schools convinced him of the need for more resources and he saw enhanced status as the strategy for demanding more resources. In particular he called a meeting of County Rural Studies Associations with a view to forming a National Association. He saw this as ‘a way to raise the standard and status of rural studies because we decided that unless it was raised nationally we wouldn’t be able to do it in my county’.

However, the Association made little headway in gaining status for the subject. By 1962 ‘it became increasingly obvious to me and one or two others, that it wasn’t going to get anywhere!’ The reason was that resources and status were invested in examination subjects. The problem for rural studies was that as a practical subject it was hardly amenable to written examinations. As examinations in the subject were tested one teacher protested that: ‘Once again we see the unwanted children of lower intelligence being made servants of the juggernaut of

These protests had to be overcome if status and resources were to be won.

I.G. Why did you finally ‘embrace’ examinations?

The Adviser: Because if you didn’t, you wouldn’t get any money, any status, any intelligent kids.

I.G. Did you ever think ‘this is going to be a big problem…’?

The Adviser: No, I didn’t see that as clearly as I maybe should have done. I just thought ‘If you’re outside this you’ve had it in schools’. It was already happening in some schools. Where a rural studies teacher was leaving they didn’t fill the place, because they gave it to someone in the examination set.

I.G. So you had to climb aboard?

The Adviser: Yes, or rural studies would have definitely disappeared.

In promoting rural studies as an examination subject a new problem arose. The subject had always been taught in secondary moderns, normally to the least able. ‘We therefore felt that we were labouring under a heading of Rural Studies which had certain connotations in the eyes of many people and that really the word rural wasn’t right.’

As a result a changeover to Environmental Studies was promoted. An ‘A’ level scheme based in the county where he served as an adviser was planned:

We decided that the only way to make progress was to get in on the examination racket…we must draw up an examination…we decided that the exam was essential because otherwise you couldn’t be equal with any other subject. Another thing was that comprehensive education was coming in: once that came in, no teacher who didn’t teach in the fifth or sixth form was going to count for two pence. So you had to have an ‘A’ level for teachers to aim at.

In 1973 five years before his (premature) retirement an ‘A’ level in Environmental Studies was accepted by the Schools Council. However, the battle for acceptance was fiercely contested, causing bouts of ill-health and exhaustion, and in the end the range of limitations put on the new ‘A’ level were such as to threaten its viability. Environmental Studies has not proved the vehicle for status that it was conceived as and upon his retirement his replacement was in the field of multi-cultural education and world studies.

I have dealt at some length with one life history episode covering the years 1945-78, the active professional years in the career of one influential teacher and adviser. I have done so in order to show how life history data can provide insights into the changing stages in a teacher’s view of his work. This evolution has to be set against the changing patterns of educational organisation and examination systems, more particularly the specific context of the school subject has also to be presented in evolution: in this example the symbiosis of individual life history and subject history is unusually strong but it is nonetheless symptomatic.
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The teacher’s career pattern in this instance reflects a move away from practically-oriented pedagogy towards high-status academic pedagogy directed towards formal written examinations. The reasons for the transition in this teacher’s life history are clearly instanced but they help elucidating a process that is familiar and fundamental in recent English educational history. By focussing on the individual tensions and dissatisfactions in the process of educational ‘progress’ new insights are developed. The teacher, who later becomes an adviser, is seen in the process of compromise between pedagogic ideals and professional status enhancement: moving from an ‘idealistic’ phase in the thirties towards frustration and uncertainty in the forties and finally career and subject aggrandisement in the fifties.

The implications of the life history for teachers’ classroom ideologies’ have recently been tentatively examined by Scheinfeld and Messerschmidt. Their study looks at teachers of different ages, one of 25 and another of 34. The differences in their teaching styles are related to their different life stages, most notable are the different centres of gravity. The younger teacher ‘exhausts herself in teaching’ and ‘alludes to a limited life beyond her work in the classroom’. The older teacher ‘has accepted teaching as her vocation’ but ‘vocation is not the only concern; there is a life beyond work’. ‘She does not confront the occupational structure (like the younger teacher), but rather the world outside the occupational structure’ (Scheinfeld and Messerschmidt, 1978, Mimeo).

Whilst these insights are fairly commonsensical what is new is Scheinfeld and Messerschmidt’s systematic attempt to relate the teachers’ life-stages to classroom pedagogy. The study of the genesis of Environmental Studies also confirms an evolutionary link between subjects, subject pedagogy and personal life stages. It is surely time these links were explored and that classroom events were investigated within the context of teachers’ life histories, and the histories of the subjects they teach, the profession to which they belong, and the schools in which they teach.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has argued that studies of schooling have neglected personal and collective biographies and that to remedy this deficiency life history data should be collected. We have noted that even interactionist and ethno-methodological work has neglected biography, by concentrating on the occasion or the event, most notably the school lesson. These studies have been characterized by assumptions of timelessness and teacher inter-changeability. To remedy these failings the life history must be rehabilitated, we must explore elements of individual difference and change through personal biography, and integrate these with historical factors by studying the evolving background of the teachers’ professional lives. The latter emphasis leads us to view the individual against the broader patterns of evolution in schooling: such as the development of school innovations, school subjects, educational systems and the teaching profession itself.

In life history work, then, we gain insights into the way in which, over time, individuals come to terms with the constraints and conditions in which they work,
and how these relate to the wider social structure. As a result, the fate envisaged by Hargreaves (1978, p.9) of ethnography deteriorating ‘into a proliferation of unique case studies’ should be avoided. The life history approach has the potential to make a far-reaching contribution to the perennial problem of understanding the links between ‘personal troubles’ and ‘public issues’, a task which, as C. Wright Mills (1959) pointed out many years ago, is the essence of the sociological enterprise.

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