Douglas Fish Course: MA History Education (2011-12)

Investigating Research Coursework Three

Dissertation research proposal: Which story? A student perspective on what constitutes the 'right' history education.

"History is one of a series of discourses around the world...these discourses do not create the world but they appropriate it and give it the meaning it has. That bit of the world which is history's object of enquiry is the past...history as a discourse is thus in a different category to that which it discourses about, that is, the past and history are different things" [Jenkins, K, 2007: 7].

As Jenkins points out, that which has come to pass is distinct from what people write and say about it; indeed he goes to argue that we could not record the past in its entirety as so much of it has occurred without human observation and or recording of the events[2007: 12]. Therefore, with regard to school history, one could say that this leaves those responsible for students' education wondering how to go about selecting - as Cannadine puts it, "The *right* kind of history' [2011] for them to learn about? In the case of this paper, the research interest arose from my work as a history teacher trying to understand how students perceive history as a subject; what meaning does it hold for them personally? it is these on-going questions which have prompted the research interest of this dissertation, specifically: what do the students themselves see as the 'right' history education and how have they come to form these views?

Literature review

There has been a good deal of research into history curriculum change and improvement in England, (Phillips, R [1998], Barton, 2009 and Cannadine, 2011); as well as a number of studies into the teaching and learning of history in secondary schools – including the views of students' themselves (Grever, Pelzer & Haydn, 2011 and Andrews, McGlynn & Mycock, 2009). Indeed, Barton argues that "Rather than asking students to deny their own interest and perspectives, educators should seek to deepen and enrich students' ability to use history in a variety of contexts and for multiple purposes" [2009: 265]. He seems to take the view that if we remove the lived context of a subject (like history) then, "we may leave students ill-equipped to engage with history in the multiple contexts they are likely to encounter in their lives outside school [2009: 267]...we can turn the subject into a dispassionate study of time and chronology, of the reasoning of people in the past, of the use of evidence, but if we do not link these topics to the social uses of history, then we will fail to address all the reasons people want to know history in the first place" [2009: 280]. Likewise, Phillips, I, believes that school history should be a subject which can provide pupils with a "series of reference points for understanding the present through the past [as well as being] part of a shared or common heritage which helps to define or understand communities whether they be local, regional, national or international" [2008: 5].

Yet, how does a student define their 'common heritage'; how does their own lived context shape their perception of this and what are the implications for school history? Andrews, McGlynn and Mycock argue that, "Educational policy-makers and practitioners [need to] pay careful attention to students' self-identity and the context in which this is formed when seeking to inculcate an inclusive national identity in history classes" [2009: 365]. Conducting a survey of several hundred UK undergraduate students across five universities, the researchers try to establish the specific relationship between students' self-identities and their attitudes towards history; examining a number of possible variables that might affect their responses. [2009: 365]. Using a Likert scale to gauge students' responses to an number of questions on their attitudes towards history, they found that whilst the majority of students favoured the positive representation of minority groups in school history; a similar proportion, however, regarded national identity to be of greatest importance to their sense of self-identity – their "imagined community" - resulting in a preference to a more traditional version of history [2009: 372]. Although the researchers point out how only limited generalisations can be made from their findings – for example, a university population (in this case overwhelmingly white British) may not represent the general school population – they make an important claim, arguing, "Given that students' attitudes towards history are only partially shaped by what they learn in school, it is essential for policy-makers and educationalists to take account of young people's ideas about their own identity and how these relate to national history" [2009: 375].

In related work, Grever, Pelzer and Haydn -conducting student surveys across three schools; each in urban areas of England, France, and The Netherlands - and interviews in the latter - argue that "recent attempts to revive history in primarily national terms may result in a model of school history that many students consider irrelevant" [2011: 207]. Asking the students what they saw as important in history education, the researchers found that those of native birth in all countries saw the history of that country as most important to learn about in class (although they ranked world history highly as well); non-native, or migrant children, however, generally saw world history such as that of religion and WWII as most important – the former seen by native students as much less relevant [2011: 225]. Although they acknowledge the difficulties of designing a national school curriculum – such as the issue of what to include (and exclude), already mentioned above - the authors argue that a broader perspective of history teaching, as well as historical content, should be considered –specifically, "[a curriculum] which connects with the interests and concerns of young people...we need a revised, globally situated and open history of nation-states, and a balancing of local, national, and global histories" [2011: 226].

The issues considered above may be part of a wider (and on-going) debate over the nature and purpose of school history, which was particularly severe around the time of the introduction of the UK National Curriculum in 1991, and, as Phillips, R explains, "initiated fundamental discussions in educational and political circles and became public property, provoking literally thousands of articles, letters and editorials" [1998: 1]. What the research articles appear to have focussed on, however, is more the *historical knowledge* students are learning rather than their experience of *history teaching*, and it is the intention of this research paper to investigate *both* of these further. I shall now examine a suitable method of approach for its enquiry; indeed, as Silverman argues, "The choice between different methods should depend upon what you are trying to find out" [2011: 7].

<u>Methodological approach</u>

The interest of this paper is specifically English secondary history education, placing it within the field of educational research. I shall be approaching it as a qualitative case study of history teaching and learning at a mixed gender state secondary school, catering for pupils 11-18 - the school being located in what might be considered an affluent, rural area of South-eastern England. The nature of UK secondary education, where students usually attend their classes at a particular site, on a weekly basis, makes such a study appropriate; as Creswell puts it, "the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bounded system" [2007: 73]. The aim is to allow the students to speak for themselves about school history and what they believe is important in terms of content coverage, as well as the way in which it is taught. However, for the purpose of interpreting data, the research shall also follow a grounded theory approach, given that, in the words of the IR Handbook, "The general principle of grounded theory is that it is vital to let the empirical setting be heard" [IOE, 2011: 7]; that is, the voice of the students in the school context. Therefore, the research will be looking to generate a theory as to students' views on school history – and a subject in its own right - as the research progresses.

According to Kunkwenzu and Reddy, "The popularity of grounded theory stems from the opportunities it provides to describe a formal set of methods or procedures that guide a systematic approach at the various stages of the study -data development, its analysis and outcomes" [2009: 133]; they appear to argue that this allows one to create a new research paradigm, which according to Guba, is "a basic set of beliefs that guide action" [Cited in Creswell, 2007: 19] – also by Creswell as "alternative knowledge claims" [2007: 19]. With this in mind, perhaps one could argue that the theory it is hoped this research will generate will aid this author in their future choices regarding teaching and learning of school history. Therefore, drawing on lessons from Kunkwenzu's approach, semi-structured interviews will be the principal method of gathering data, as per her argument that, "Interviews help to map and understand the respondents' life world because the method provides basic data for creation of understanding of relationships between social actors and their situation" [2009: 137]. In hoping to explore the complex issue of school history and allow the students to speak for themselves, therefore, interviews with students shall form the main part of the research; although, as argued by Dowling and Brown, interviews can be subject to interviewer bias and be difficult to analyse [2010: 78]. Indeed, although Clark [2005] describes grounded theory as having 'positivist underpinnings', she comes to rely on "postmodern perspectives...'the acknowledged participant' [rather than] the 'all knowing analyst'" [Cited in Creswell, 2007: 64].

Sampling, data collection and analysis

Regarding the sample of my own work, I intend to interview at least one group of 3-4 Year 10 students as well as the same number from Year 12; this shall be on the back of focussed observations of their school history lessons. I made the decision to interview these age groups because of their chosen interest in history, as well as the assumption they will be able to provide a more developed explanation as to the significance of history in their lives outside school, such as being able to take a more sceptical view of reports in the media. As these students will have opted for History as a GCSE and A-Level subject, and because their participation shall be on a voluntary basis - from a single history class from each year, with letters of consent sent only to the parents of those agreeing to participate - the sample will be purposeful and not random; as explained by

Creswell, "[This will mean the selection] of individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study" [2007: 125]; specifically the 'homogenous' type of purposeful sampling he identifies because it "focuses, reduces, and simplifies [the sample] and facilities group interviewing" [2007: 127]. Given Kunkwenzu's reference to the challenge of data analysis using a grounded theory approach [2009: 139], any such simplification regarding the sample would seem a logical step under the circumstances.

As stated earlier in this paper, the research will be placed in a school setting, where the student participants shall have the chance to talk about their experience of school history; as well as, what it means to them in a wider context. In line with the argument by Andrews, McGlynn and Mycock that attitudes towards history are only in part shaped by what they learn in school [2009: 375], my research shall seek to explore the extent to which school history has contributed to what the students see as important in the subject; this as well as its significance in their formation of these views. At no point will students be interviewed alone; indeed the research shall follow the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research, and make clear to them they can withdraw at any time [2011: 6]; the names of participants and the schools themselves shall of course remain confidential [2011: 7]. Certainly there could be the issue of representativeness, for example, all participants may turn out to be male (or female) and be expected to gain the highest marks in exams; also problems of replacement due to illness, timing and other causes could all have implications for the research process and reliability of the method and findings.

Data collection will entail the audio recording of observations and interviews, followed by the transcription of those intended for use in my dissertation. In developing the data, it is envisaged at this stage there will be two or more interviews with each group: one shall precede the lesson observation with a focus on what the students see as important in history at the time of the interview; the second will be on back of the observation and shall focus on how the students came to their positions on subject. As Kunkwenzu and Reddy explain, but recording, transcribing and coding the data after each interview, they were "able to identify emerging categories and issues, identify follow-up issues and plan for the next meeting with each [participant]" [2009: 137]. Therefore, as soon as the interviews begin, so will the process of memo-writing and data coding and analysis; memo-writing allowing the recording of "ideas about the evolving theory throughout the process of open, axial and selective coding" [Creswell, 2007: 67].

Indeed, through what Henwood and Pidgeon outline as, "procedures for systematic inquiry in grounded theory" such as 'open coding', 'constant comparison' of data and personal 'memo writing' [Cited in Kunkwenzu and Reddy, 2009: 134], I hope to order and categorise the data until 'saturation' point is reached and a theory developed [2009: 135]. Although the interviews will be guided by the questions laid out in the research statement, it is my intension to guide the participants with a series of sub-questions and prompts - for example, asking what they see as the relationship between school history and their lives outside school, and how importantly they rate history compared to their other school subjects. As Kunkwenzu and Reddy generate a theory as to how trainee teachers in Malawi experience struggling to establish themselves as teachers [2009: 145]; and Morrow and Smith one about survival and coping strategies for childhood sexual abuse [Cited in Creswell, 2007: 90]; I hope to create one explaining students' perceptions of school history

and how they might arrive at their positions on this. The outcome could of course be very different for the reasons mentioned above as well as unknown factors thrown up by the nature of the research.

I hope that this research project shall benefit my personal and professional development in two major respects: improving the quality of classroom practice as a result of discussions with student about what they see as good teaching and learning; also the academic benefit derived from the critical insight of this research shall, I believe, help me to better adapt to future changes in the episteme which governs history teaching and the subject in general; different governments bring different perspectives, and, as Creswell explains, these "[philosophical assumptions] represent a different paradigm for making claims about knowledge, and the characteristics of each differ considerably" [Creswell, 2007: 15]. With a National Curriculum review of English school subjects currently underway and due for implementation September 2014 [www.education.gov.uk, accessed 26.02.11], I hope that but undertaking this work – to return that of Cannadine mentioned earlier in the paper – I will be better placed to facilitate "the right kind of history [as an educator]" [2011].

References

Andrews, R., McGlynn, C. and Mycock, A. (2009) Students' attitudes towards history: does self-identity matter? *Educational Research,* 51, 365–377.

Barton, K. (2009) The Denial of Desire: How to make history education meaningless, in: National History Standard: The Problem of the Canon and the Future of History Teaching, Chapter 10. 265-282.

Cannadine, D., Keating, J. and Sheldon (2011) The Right Kind of History: Teaching the past in twentieth-century England. Basingstoke. Palgrave Macmillan.

Creswell, J. (2007). Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among five approaches. Second Edition. Thousand Oaks. Sage.

Dowling, P.C. & Brown, A.J. (2010) Doing Research/Reading Research: Re-interrogating education. Second Edition. London. Routledge.

Foucault, M. (2002) The Order of Things: An archaeology of the human sciences. Abingdon. Routledge.

Gorard, S & Huat See, B (2011) How can we enhance the enjoyment of secondary school? The student view, in: British Educational Research Journal: 37(4). 671-690.

Grever, M, Pelzer, B & Haydn, T. (2011) 'High School Students' Views on History', in: Journal of Curriculum Studies. 43(2). 207-229.

Jenkins, Keith. (2007) Rethinking History. Abingdon. Routledge.

Kunkwenzu, Esthery Dembo & Reddy, Chris. (2009). 'Using grounded theory to understand teacher socialisation: a research experience.' Education as Change. 12(1). 133-149.

Phillips, Ian. (2008) Teaching History: Developing as a reflective secondary teacher. Sage. London

Phillips, R. (1998) History teaching, nationhood, and the state: a study in educational politics. London. Cassell.

Silverman, D. (2011) Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for analyzing talk, text and interaction. Fourth Edition. London. Sage

http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/curriculum/nationalcurriculum [accessed 26.02.12]