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Historical method applied to educational research

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//Abstract

This paper proposes the use of the historical method for analyzing educational phenomenon. Educational issues are part of social ones; therefore the historical method is also appropriate for analyzing them. The paper starts by describing some principles of the historical method, and explains when this method is useful in educational research. Then, it examines the different steps and procedures involved in this method.

//Keywords

History, methodology, primary sources, historical time.

// Recommended reference

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1. Previous elements to apply the historical method

History as a social science, and the method used in this field, are designed to describe, analyze and explain social phenomena (Le Goff, 2001). Julio Aróstegui (1995) considers that history essentially addresses two factors.

The first factor is *time*, the ontological component of history. History is conceived not only sequentially (as a sequence of events in a chronological line), but also diachronically, which allows a broader, analytical perspective. This approach involves focusing on elements that have been stable over time (permanencies), which become visible when changes are taken into account. However, it is not enough to reveal regularities and transformations; we also need to explain them. Human beings as social subjects do not act arbitrarily. Their behavior is the result of an accumulation of individual and collective experiences over time (Williams, 2000). Therefore, explanations of historical phenomena should examine causes, which are frequently classified as either structural or circumstantial. The core of a search should be particular elements of a certain process that are the consequences of human actions (the circumstances), as well as long-term components that vary little (the structures). Taken together, these aspects enable us to understand social reality. From this perspective, circumstantial and structural causes are complementary in analyses of social phenomena, in other words, *multicausal*, because we cannot explain past or present issues from one side only (Braudel, 1980). Like social issues, educational phenomena also involve long-term, multiple factors (structures) and short-term ones (circumstances). However, depending on the characteristics of the topic under study, we can focus more on some factors than others (Aróstegui, 1995).

The second factor is that the results are presented using narration. According to Jörn Rüsen (2004), narration requires the capacity of interpretation, and finding a path through temporal changes. Thus, when we analyze educational phenomena using the historical method, we must try to go beyond relationships between facts, and focus on presenting changes and permanence as the center of the discourse.

An example of the application of this perspective to educational issues can be found in the compiled studies of Thomas Popkewitz (2015), entitled *The "Reason" of Schooling. Historicizing Curriculum Studies, Pedagogy, and Teacher Education*. In the chapter "Numbers in telling educational truth. Fabrications of kind of people and social exclusion", Popkewitz uses structural and circumstantial explanations to analyze the role that numbers have played in education systems. For the structural elements, the author considers how numbers have played an important role in education since the eighteenth century. He argues that numbers are related to a culture of objectivity. For a short-term explanation, Popkewitz focuses on the role of PISA measurement in education policy. The issue of numbers has elements that we can trace into the past, but it is also a current phenomenon.

2. When should the historical method be applied to social phenomena?

Selecting a method is an epistemological decision. It involves a specific approach to the nature and shape of social systems, in order to find out about people and meaningful elements of their lives (Ruiz-Bueno, 2009). Every enquiry should be guided by clear questions and objectives, and an ontological awareness of the subject.

The historical method is common in historical science but has also been used in research on the history of education, and could help in studies of other education topics when three principles are met:

- The aim is to explain phenomena (Duby, 1994) by searching for causes, not just focusing on description. Historical science aims not only to create narratives that reconstruct the past but to analyze the many causes of past events.
- The aim is to consider the social context of the phenomenon under study (Braudel, 1980). Social issues, including educational ones, are a consequence of direct and long-term cultural, economic, social and political causes, amongst other factors. Causes of social issues are located in certain coordinates of space and time. If we consider these elements, we can explain a phenomenon in greater depth, because history does not search for generalizations, but explains specific cases in a certain moment and place.
- The aim is to explain past situations in terms of their own reality. We cannot understand the past using the symbolic systems of the present. However, if we examine the context in which social phenomena came about, we can understand them in greater depth.

We can use the historical method when the research perspective follows these principles, provided that we have enough sources (evidence). History builds knowledge from vestiges (Le Goff, 2005) produced in the context of the studied phenomenon. These sources are usually called primary sources, and include written, visual and oral material. However, other kinds of subsequent discursive construction or secondary source can be used, such as previous studies on the subject. Ivo Mattozzi (2004) considered that secondary sources not only offer data and information, but also provide concepts, problems, explanations and systems for assessment that make a topic easier to approach.

In fact, every educational issue can be studied using the historical method, if reality is conceived as the product of one context among others, located at specific coordinates of space and time, and if enough sources are used to make the method feasible. Consequently, the historical method could help to explain certain education cultures, characterize education systems, or establish long-term studies.



3. Applying the historical method to educational research

The historical method considers the social research process in general terms, from the statement of the problem, to the results of the presentation. The following table summarizes two proposals for methodological enquiry, which both include similar stages.

Table 1.
Historical method procedures

Ciro Cardoso	Julio Aróstegui
Statement of the problem	Statement of the problem
Theoretical framework and development of the hypothesis	Development of the hypothesis
Construction of the research project	
Documentation: collecting sources	Observation of sources: criticism and analysis
Analysis and data processing	Verification of the hypothesis
Synthesis and writing	Writing of the results
(Cardoso, 2000)	(Aróstegui, 1995)

- a. *The statement of the problem.* In this stage, we delimitate the topic of enquiry, which means that we determine its temporal and spatial coordinates, as well as its social, political and economic limits (Aróstegui, 1995). In educational research, it is important to ensure that the epistemological nature of the topic allows a historical approach under the principles presented in the first and second part of this article.

Some examples are:

- educational results of a school reality, considered according to its space and time coordinates;
- curriculum studies of a specific reality;
- uses of resources for teaching in a specific school reality.

In all these cases, researchers should take into account the object/subject's spatial and temporal location and contextualize the educational reality. To achieve this, we must consider the subjects, the history of the community/locality/country, the education system's characteristics, and any other element that individualizes the topic.

In this stage, the research objectives in relation to the problem should be stated.



The theoretical framework and development of the hypothesis. This stage should consider all the theories and concepts that are related to the problem (Cardoso, 2000) or other theories that have provided answers in previous studies (Prats, 2011), to identify and propose tentative answers or hypotheses to the research problem.

In educational research, we should consider the topic, the ontological, epistemological and operative conceptualization, and the main concepts. At the same time, we should review previous studies, if available, to determine the exact basis of the enquiry. This stage could also contain some *a priori* answers that we would prove or disprove during the research.

- b. The stage of working with the sources.* Historians usually carry out document searches in archives and libraries. However, in educational research, we can use the curriculum and other documents on regulations governing education systems, educational materials, teaching resources, oral material from interviews, and field observation notes.

Sources can be classified in various ways, but the most widely used method is positional criteria: direct sources (or primary sources) and indirect (or secondary sources).

Sources need to be reliable and adequate, and Julio Aróstegui establishes some simple procedures for ensuring this, as summarized below.

Table 2.
Summary of procedures for ensuring source reliability and adequacy

	Elements	Specific procedures
Reliability	Authenticity	Dating techniques (stratification, radioactivity, verifying explicit data)
		Linguistics techniques (lexicography, language analysis), literary erudition and historical criticism
		Analysis of the history of the source
	Filtering information	Internal coherence of the source
		External verification of the information
		Researching by comparative survey
Contextualization	Document classification techniques	
	Document analysis of "series" or "families"	
	Comparison of various sources	
Adequacy	Information demand	Selection of documents according to specific taxonomies
		Precise amount of information
		Diversity in contents and format
	Documental collection	Collection of exhaustive sources
		Searching for comparable sources
		Possibility of analyzing sources
		Ordering sources according to hierarchy
Selection	Assessing the primary supposition	
	Searching for new sources, according to the results of assessing the primary supposition	

Source: Aróstegui, 1995, pp. 355–357.



In educational research, depending on the enquiry problem, we should start searching sources that are directly related to the objectives. These could include educational school projects, past and present regulations, teaching resources such as textbooks and digital aids, institutional reports, and the design and administration of questionnaires, interviews and classroom observation guidelines. The sources should meet authenticity and reliability criteria to ensure that they are suitable and provide the necessary information.

- c. *Observation, classification and analysis of sources.* Once we have selected and critically examined our sources, they should be observed, classified and analyzed. This stage includes a complete study of the sources to extract the information we need, according to our objectives and initial questions, to build a coherent narrative. Once we have carried out an analysis of the sources, we can start to interpret them (Cardoso, 2000). Historians frequently use document files to classify and analyze sources, and to provide easy access to information. During this stage, it is important to identify changes and continuities in a permanent dialog with the context of the phenomenon.

Various procedures can be used to approach sources (Aróstegui, 1995), which can be classified as either qualitative (non-numeric data) or quantitative (numeric data).

Sources can also be classified according to format, which is particularly useful in educational research. We can distinguish between document observation (basically, written documents) and direct observation (sampling, interviews, questionnaires, tests and participative observation) (Aróstegui, 1995). This classification is not selective, but complementary to other techniques.

Historical analysis is determined by the research question and its theoretical construction. Therefore when we *read* a document, we are not just attempting to understand its superficial meaning; the way we read it should be guided by specific elements (Aróstegui, 1995). In this way, analysis involves a comparison, in which information about a source is ordered and reorganized in permanent contrast with the theory, to interpret it rigorously.

Historical analysis also enables complementary techniques to be used on the same source, to extract results from different perspectives that can go beyond the description of a topic to its explanation.

- d. *Synthesis and writing of results.* The written presentation of results is a very important part of the historical method, because it is the point at which the researcher reconstructs the facts. In this stage, the scholar can also identify conflicts between several aspects of the phenomenon and draw different conclusions about the main question (Mattozzi, 2004). The narrative should consider the context of the topic in its historical moment, to avoid adopting a historicist perspective or judging the facts according to current meanings. The interpretation should take into account the space and time.

Through narrating the results, the meaning of the analysis is given a coherent account (Rüsen, 2006). During the writing process, data from the sources can be used as a part of the body of the text. Consequently, the sources are incorporated into the presentation, analysis and summary of the results. In educational issues, the explanatory text can be incorporated into the paper, and could include quotations from regulations, fragments of interviews, textual phrases from journals and some secondary sources.

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