

Book Review

”Life history research in educational settings – Learning from lives”

By I. Goodson & P. Sikes, 2001

What is a life history research?

According to Goodson & Sikes life history research provides information about insights and aspects that participants answer to ‘big’ questions (such as Who are you? Why has your life taken the course that it has? *or* What are the influences on your life and what impact do you have?) have for social life. Issues in life histories are seen important, firstly because individuals have different views of their life (such as the professional self or the child/parent self), secondly there is an interactive relationship between perceptions and experiences of life and historical and social contexts and events, and finally because life histories provide evidence about how individuals negotiate their identities, experiences and make sense of the roles (and rules) in social worlds in which they live.

The authors bring out also problematic issues in life history research. They state that life history research is about conceptions and perceptions individuals have from their life, where ‘reality’ and ‘truth’ are not straightforward. Also social life is complex and hardly is applied in interpretations or statistical representations. Life history research is viewed as narrative constructed.

Short history of the life history research

The authors state that the first time this method was used were the autobiographies of American Indian chiefs, collected by anthropologists in the twentieth century. So the idea of life history research seems to be that someone from outside collects and reports your life from a scientific point of view. Researcher Thomas and Znaniecki developed life history research by doing a large study from a sociological point of view of Polish peasants migrating in Europe and United States 1918-1920 using letters and diaries. Since their study life history research has been used when researching social

minorities (such as *The Ghetto* by Wirth 1928 and *The professional thief* by Sutherland 1937). One of the major strength of life history research is mentioned to be “putting the reader in the skin of a special individual”. So it seems that the idea of life history research is to make audience to identify themselves in the subject of research and brings empathy and understanding towards individuals who has experiences social exclusion. Life historians are also seen by authors to bring a subject of their research as ‘a link in a chain of social transmission’ and in the other hand as in ‘cultural legacy’ (comparing the collective tradition and expectation to individuals unique history and capacity for interpretation). Somehow here I found strong connections to my own field of research where I try to bring out small children’s agency to their own life in early childhood education institutions. Life history research in the field of education has been used for method of study mostly because teaching is a profession with personality, so the public and private person ‘cannot be separated’. Life history approach demand for holism states the authors and claim that the number of life history studies has been growing past century (since 1990).

The postmodern paradigm has been leaded both new problems and opportunities in life history research. The notion of a self as a knowable and essential is stated as a part of ‘social production of individualism’ which leads to new pursuit of progress and emancipation. The language about ‘self’ is viewed as a tool of constructing identities, but also as a textual representation to catch ‘essential self’ for researcher and audience.

Techniques for life history research

Goodson and Sikes state that face-to-face informal interview is the most commonly used strategy for data collection in life history research. Goodson use the term grounded conversation, where positive and trusting relationship is tried to establish. Researcher should share her own experiences and conceptions to form ‘a common ground’ for her and the interviewee and also listen to interviewee without judging them. This is concerned ethical way of doing research.

Even most of life history researches are carried out with face-to-face interview; it is also possible to use group work. Then the major focus should be on relationships and interaction dynamics inside the specific group. The participants can be open and frank with their friend or colleagues, or in the other hand, they may speak more straight with unknown peoples. Some individual say nothing in group situations while some others only ‘get excited’ with group that share same experiences. Group situation can be used also for participants interviewing each others: People from different backgrounds can mean questions from perspectives that researcher could not reach by her own.

The authors propose to use both methods: the face-to-face interview and group meetings, if possible, to form an overall picture of research subject.

Teacher's life histories and professional practices as a focus of a study

Teacher's life histories can give an important part of information and help the research also understand how education and schooling are affected by wide range issues (such as personal values, perceptions, learning processes). That because, according to authors, teaching is a very personal profession with its interactions, relationships and values. Life history research can be also viewed as a strategy for personal and professional development which can be seen essential in teaching profession (why not in other professions as well?).

Authors seem to think that is not (ethically) right to categorize and classify different teachers in some kind of typologies or profiles, where every individual teacher is suppose to fit in. But when categorization is viewed irrelevant, life historians can still rise forward different issues that are concerned important, even essential for group of teachers working with same kind of issues (such as curriculum development). The idea in here seems to be not to stigmatize teachers in certain type of persons or professionals only because they view curriculum development one way or another, but to trying to find their ways to change or develop within the issue of developing curriculums. The work of life historian can be viewed as 'raising issues' from participants life, but due respect and honestly towards participants. Issues connected to professional work cannot and should not be separated from the lives of those professionals, but to help understand the connection of work and different stages of life.

Life history research can also be used for benefit professional development. The authors list that it can benefit from 1) self-reflection and creating self-knowledge 2) giving space for reflection 3) learning about school and schooling and to compare theories to experiences and 4) therapeutic benefit in times of crisis.

Discussion

Postmodern paradigm of educational research views every individual as independent being with different background (cultural, educational etc.), with different experiences and with different conceptions. So modeling those individual in profiles or typologies is considered unethical and even false research. Life history research seem to give a method that takes account those differences, respects the participants of research, but can still answer questions about professional development, connections of life and work and rises forward the true voice of participants not only as teachers (or other professionals) but also as individuals carrying out the professionalism they have chosen.

As a kindergarten teacher I would like to read a life history research established with different early childhood education teachers, to respect their differences, individuality, but also to bring out shared values, experiences and ideas of people how carry out kindergarten teacher professionalism.