



## REVIEW

# Reflections upon Some Fundamental Issues in Educational Historiography

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### ABSTRACT

This paper categorizes educational historiography as part of “historiography” because educational historiography is leaning towards historiography in spite of being a fundamental educational discipline with the dual disciplinary attributes of education and historiography. It is argued that the nature of a discipline is partly defined by its researchers and its roles, but more importantly, by its origin, major research topics and objectives, basic research theories, methodologies and paradigms, as well as its relations with cognate disciplines. And each of the above factors is elaborated on to illuminate the dual disciplinary nature of educational historiography. From the perspective of educational science, what reflects the nature of education the best is people’s “educational activities,” which can be defined as the aggregate of specific activities directed to promoting valuable human development, and the various ways educators and learners participate and interact in the educational process. This paper maintains that the history of educational activities constitutes an upside-down triangle relation with the histories of educational thoughts and system. The history of educational activities is the origin, premise and foundation, whereas the latter two are the derivatives and results. Therefore, the history of educational activities must be studied as part of the research on the history of education.

## 1. Introduction

It’s imperative for researchers to gain insights into the disciplinary nature of educational historiography, revealing such aspects as its research topics, methods, conventions, disciplinary functions, scholars’ overall academic training, and development trends (Seller, 1991). There are two competing views regarding the disciplinary nature of educational historiography (McCulloch, 2011). Some put it under the education discipline and downplay its connection to historiography, while others consider it a

new discipline across education and historiography. This paper sets out to discuss the limitations of the above views before proposing an alternative opinion on the disciplinary nature of educational historiography, followed by an explanation to justify the new perspective.

Another fundamental topic in the field pertains to the research subjects of educational historiography. What are they? Previous researchers maintained that educational historiography, as a discipline, studied the history and principles of education, particularly, the history of educational thoughts and system (Anderson, 1956; Sloan,

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1973). This paper problematizes this view because it is inadequate when overlooking an essential component in educational historiography, that is, the history of educational activities.

## **2. The Disciplinary Nature of Educational Historiography**

It's crucial for researchers of educational historiography to understand its disciplinary nature, which is composed of the following aspects: its research topics, methods, conventions, disciplinary functions, scholars' overall academic training, and development trends (Seller, 1991). In-depth analysis would be presented in the following pages.

Two types of perspectives currently prevail in the field regarding the disciplinary nature of educational historiography. According to McCulloch (2011), based on some landmark works that were recently published in the field of educational historiography, some scholars with the "education discipline" view argue that educational historiography is part of the education discipline despite its close ties with historiography. Whereas other researchers with the "dual disciplines" opinion maintain that educational historiography is a new discipline with an overlap of education and historiography, resulting in a nature of dual disciplines. In this sense, it cannot be simply labeled as education or historiography; instead, it should be considered as education and historiography at the same time.

Both views have merits meanwhile suffering from their limitations. Despite advocating for the status and role of educational historiography as a fundamental discipline in education, the first view does not take into account the basic disciplinary features of educational historiography or its distinction from other educational disciplines; whereas the second view fails to recognize that the dual disciplinary nature of educational historiography are not equally shared by the two disciplines, but leaning towards one of them. Even though the basic disciplinary features of educational historiography and its differences from other educational disciplines are taken into consideration. The authors prefer to categorize educational historiography as part of "historiography" because educational historiography is leaning towards historiography in spite of being a fundamental educational discipline with the dual disciplinary nature of education and historiography.

What are the grounds of the above argument? The nature of a discipline is partly defined by its researchers and its roles, but more importantly, by its origin, major research topics and objectives, basic research theories, methodologies and paradigms, and its relations with cognate disciplines (Seller, 1991). The above five aspects

indicate that educational historiography is more of historiography than education although it's a discipline with the nature of dual disciplines, as a result of the overlap of historiography and education and function as a fundamental discipline in a number of educational disciplines. In other words, educational historiography should be labeled as "historiography" rather than "education".

What is this argument based upon? First of all, regarding its origin, educational historiography is an inter-discipline of historiography and education. It develops under the nourishment of historiography, and possesses a natural "blood tie" with historiography. The development of educational historiography in China and other countries reveals that its emergence and development has more direct and closer relationship with historiography than with education. Take educational historiography in America as an example (Cremin, 1955). It came into being just as a part of historiography, and was studied by amateur historians, such as missionaries, literati, scholars, celebrities and teachers by the 1870s and 1880s. In 1884, American Historical Association was established by some young scholars who studied historiography in Germany, marking the transition of educational historiography from an amateur research field to a professional one as well as the formation of educational historiography as an independent discipline (Cremin, 1955).

Moreover, educational historiography was also profoundly affected by the Western historical theories and methodologies (Power, 1962). For instance, educational historiography in France was directly influenced by various historical theories and research approaches that prevailed in different historical time periods. Before 1920s, the dominant historiography research method in France was history of positivism. Under its influence, positivism was also the main research method for educational historiography in France. The Annalist School prevailed in France from the 1920s to the late 1960s because the positivist historiography was the dominant approach for historical research. As a result, studies with an emphasis on wholeness, macro-scope, groups and issues advocated by the Annalist School gained popularity. Since the 1970s, "the New Historiography" School evolved from the Annalist School impacted research in educational historiography, leading to the proposed concept of "New Educational Historiography". Studies on educational historiography in Germany had been greatly affected in numerous ways by the Rankean School from the late 18th Century to the 19th Century, the New Historiography School in the late 19th Century, and the radical schools of historiography after the 1950s.

Furthermore, International Standing Conference for

the History of Education (ISCHE), founded in 1978 by educational historiography societies or associations from different countries, is the most influential body of educational historiography in the contemporary world and a participating member of the International Committee of Historical Sciences (ICHS) (Burke, 2000). In addition, American Educational Historiography Association is still closely connected with American Historical Association. And its journal *History of education quarterly* is listed as a Journal of History on its website.

The situation in China is similar to that. Apart from a large number of documents and research findings of educational historiography in the historical works ever since the ancient time, the emergence of *Chinese educational historiography* is also directly and closely connected with historiography and historical scholars in the modern time. *Chinese Educational Historiography*, the first Chinese treatise on educational historiography in the modern time, was written by Liu Yuzheng, a renowned Chinese scholar of history. Chen Qingzhi, compiler of *Chinese Educational Historiography*, the most influential and lengthy “university series” in the Commercial Press in the Republic of China, had studied History and Geography in Beijing Higher Normal School. Zhou Yutong, who wrote *Chinese School System* and *The History of Modern Chinese Education* in the 1930s, was a famous historian with profound knowledge in the study of historiography. As for Shu Xincheng, Wang Fengqi and other scholars who compiled various treatises and documents of Chinese educational historiography with far-reaching impacts on the younger generations, they did not major in history, but they all had aspired to study history since their childhood. Chinese educational historiography, in a sense, was initially established by a group of scholars of history.

Secondly, as far as its research topics and objectives are concerned, educational historiography is primarily a discipline that studies the historical issues of education and humans’ educational activities, thoughts and systems in history rather than on the reality of education (Cunningham, Chitty, & Robinson, 2012). This is the major difference between educational historiography and other educational sub-disciplines regarding research topics, such as pedagogic principles, educational philosophy, educational ethics, educational psychology, educational politics, educational economics, educational sociology, educational culturology, educational laws and educational technology. It focuses on the “diachronic” rather than “synchronic” educational phenomena, emphasizes on the emergence, development and evolution of education, values the descriptions of “historical processes” and the analysis of “historical truths”, aims to reveal the causes and

motives hidden behind historical representations through the restoration and reproduction of historical activities and events of education, thoughts of educational figures and educational historical systems so that reasonable explanations and interpretations could be made, from which useful historical revelations and references could be drawn. In short, it studies historical issues rather than the current situation of education. Studies on historical issues of education and explorations into historical principles of education should be the specific research focuses and objectives for educational historiography.

Thirdly, the research theories and methods of historiography are the fundamental ones of educational historiography, as well as the main tools and means on which educational historians depend. The specific research subjects and tasks of educational historiography require educational historians to adopt the fundamental research theories and methods that are usually employed by historians (Cohen, 1999). At the macro level, the fundamental research theories of historiography can be divided into two types, namely, historical materialism theories and historical idealism theories. More specifically, these include Marx’s and Engels’s theories of historical materialism, Leopold Von Ranke’s historical theories of objectivism and positivism, the historical view of cultural form by Oswald Spengler and Arnold J. Toynbee, the “long-period” theory of Marc Bloch, Lucien Febver and Fernand Braudel, the theory of “new historiography” of Jacques Le Goff and Jacques Revel... etc.

The fundamental research methods of historiography mainly consist of historical analysis, historical research, literature analysis...and so on (Cohen, 1999). Historical analysis is the method of analyzing and studying history by using the principle of historicism. Historicism was first put forward by the bourgeois scholars at the end of the 18th Century. Then Marx and Engels, building upon their predecessors’ achievements, integrated historical methods and historical materialism to specific practices, leading to the founding of the principle of Marxist Historicism, which, requires people to start from historical reality while studying every historical issue and make analysis in the context of the interrelations and development of social conflicts.

The historical analysis method entails the following on the part of the researchers: First, researchers should analyze and study the specific historical figures and phenomena in their historical contexts and analyze specific issues case by case. Second, they need to look at history with an overall, ongoing and changing perspective. Third, they should study issues through the interconnection and practical results of historical development and view his-

tory in a practical and realistic manner. Fourth, they need to be good at identifying typical cases and understand the primary trend and patterns based on typical cases in the process of studying historical issues. Historical research method is a traditional method of historical study, including “external research”, “internal research” and “theoretical research”. Through such methods, it examines, discriminates, compares and contrasts, and supports literature and facts, in an effort to restore history and provide basic factual basis for historical analysis. Literature analysis method is a method used to gain a scientific understanding of facts by collecting, identifying and organizing literature as well as studying literature. In addition, other methods, such as comparative historiography, cliometrics, oral history and psychohistory are also commonly used in historiography.

The above mentioned research theories and methods of historiography have been used by educational historians in the process of the advent and development of educational historiography and play an important role in the study of educational history. The historical research theories and research methods of objectivism and positivism were advocated by the famous German history school—Rankean School that emerged in the 19th Century (Grosvenor & Lawn, 2001). They emphasize on historical data, restoration of the original appearance, and interpretation of the background. They also attached importance to the method of combining “external evidence” and “internal evidence”. This kind of historical view directly influenced the entire educational historiography field in Europe for a long time. For example, K. Von Raumer’s four-volume book entitled *The History of Education* is an in-depth and meticulous overview and study of the history of education and the thoughts of educationalists of Europe and even the world based on abundant historical data.

The French Annalist School that emerged in the mid-20th Century and the subsequent theories and methods of “New Historiography” also had great impacts on the development of educational historiography in Europe, America and even the world (Grosvenor & Lawn, 2001). As for the study of educational historiography in China, from the date of its inception, it inherited and drew upon the research methods of traditional Chinese historiography, such as textual research, discrimination, organization and compilation, to carry out research. This approach is especially evident in the studies of the older generation of educational historians (such as Liu Yizheng, Zhou Yutong, Shu Xincheng, Meng Xiancheng, Mao Lirui, Chen Jingpan, Shen Guanqun, Chen Xuexun, Cao Fu and Teng Dachun). Without these theories and methods of historiography, it is difficult to imagine what unique theories

and methods educational historiography would have, and how can relevant research be carried out and results be achieved in order for educational historiography to earn a spot in academia?

Fourthly, as far as research conventions are concerned, educational historiography is mainly based on the empirical research conventions of historiography, rather than the research conventions of education centering on critical thinking. The research conventions of historiography emphasize the “five natures” of historical research, namely, originality of historical data, authenticity of historical facts, completeness of the process, objectivity of the conclusion and simplicity of the text (Karier, 1979). They require historical data to be original, rich and credible, and reject the use of second-hand data. They also disapprove the idea that “whatever is available is acceptable” and emphasize that “isolated evidence cannot prove anything”, “claims can be made only with evidence”, “caution should be used in verification”, “over-criticism, empty talk, and compliments shall be avoided”. These are all the inherent academic norms of historiography. They were gradually established since its founding.

Although both historiography and education focus on empirical study and critical thinking, relatively speaking, historiography focuses more on empirical study whereas education focuses more on critical thinking. Showing their different focuses is only meant to emphasize the respective characteristics of the two disciplines. It has nothing to do with the debate about which one is more important and better. In fact, both are necessary for academic research, and are indispensable.

Apparently, considering the two research orientations, educational historiography should belong to the former rather than the latter. If educational historiography research and results are measured on the basis of the research orientation of education that centers on critical thinking, with the papers of educational historiography written more like the educational papers with strong critical thinking skills, rather than the research orientation of historiography that focuses on empirical studies, what will educational historiography be like today?

Fifthly, from the perspective of its relationships with cognate disciplines, the relationship between educational historiography and history is the most direct and closest one. History is probably one of the most ancient disciplines of the human society, and is also a discipline featuring diverse human knowledge (McCulloch, 2011). History is more or less connected to almost any other disciplines. At least the history of each discipline itself is an integral part of history. The same is true with educational historiography and even other disciplines in education.

Educational historiography is considered an inter-discipline of historiography and educational science, and a sub-discipline of history. Historians not only research on political historiography, economic historiography, social historiography, cultural historiography, military historiography and legal historiography, but also study the issues in educational history (Seller, 1991). Historians understand and regard the history of education as an integral part of the history of human society. They need to study the history of education in light of various complex structures and relationships of human society. They also need to explore and discuss the relationships between educational history and political history, economic history, social history and cultural history, in order to gain insights into how each of them impact one another, and uncover the principles of their interaction. Such disciplines as political historiography, economic historiography, social historiography, cultural historiography, military historiography and legal historiography, primarily belong to the discipline of history rather than political science, economics, sociology, cultural discipline, military discipline and legal discipline respectively. Likewise, educational historiography should fall within the category of history discipline rather than educational science.

Certainly, since educational historiography is an inter-discipline between historical science and educational science, it is closely related to educational disciplines. Educational historiography is a vital and fundamental discipline of educational science. Apparently, in the past, the history of Chinese and foreign education, educational science (principles) and psychology used to be three compulsory courses for all students at normal universities. Even today the history of Chinese and foreign education is still a compulsory course for students in the Education Department of normal universities. It is safe to say that researchers in any sub-discipline of education can not do a good job in their research without learning or examining the history of educational historiography. Is there any contemporary renowned educators who have not made painstaking efforts in studying the history of Chinese and foreign education? Whose works do not reflect the distinctive characteristics of a thoughtful combination between history and logic, while demonstrating a deep sense of history with profound insights? Some of the well established scholars in education even started their initial work from the research into the history of Chinese and foreign education. Nevertheless, these facts can only testify the essential and prominent role of educational historiography in the work of researchers of educational science. They cannot be used to substantiate the claim that educational historiography belongs to educational science.

Some skeptics might wonder, since currently the researchers of educational historiography and students majoring in educational historiography are from the Education Department of universities, and educational historiography is managed under educational science, and most studies and results of educational historiography are published in education journals, do all these indicate that educational historiography belongs to educational science? If it belongs to the discipline of history, why isn't it the other way around with everything being managed by the History Department? In fact, it is not difficult to figure out that the status quo is primarily caused by the current educational management system, talent nurturing system and academic management system. In addition, another reason is that the system of historiography is way too large to pay enough attention to all of its sub-disciplines. Moreover, a subjective reason is that the existing academic standards of educational historiography researchers and their achievements are not high enough to enable them to be widely recognized in the field of historiography.

It should be noted that there have been numerous scholars, including the "big names in the field", who were and are still passionate about educational historiography (Sloan, 1973). And in recent years, their interests have been growing. More and more researchers are involved in studying the history of universities, the history of Christian universities, the history of educational exchanges between China and foreign countries, the history of education reform in the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China, and the history of education societies. They participate in and even host a wide variety of conferences on the research of educational historiography and publish research findings on educational historiography in different kinds of history research journals, as well as advise and train students who are involved in the research of educational historiography. They regard this as one of the top priorities of returning to the general history and advancing the research of historiography, which used to centered around the traditional political history. This indicates that researchers in the field of historiography have not yet forgotten or neglected educational historiography and that educational historiography is not considered a domain exclusively owned by the field of education or education scholars. Instead, it is still favored by the field of history and historians. If a researcher of educational historiography turns a blind eye to this fact and refuses to go along with it, he or she is about to stumble.

Historiography is arguably one of the oldest and most inclusive disciplines. It consists of a wide range of sub-disciplines, while providing a foundation for other disciplines—the history of each and every discipline

(Seller, 1991). Its research tasks are undoubtedly overwhelming, which renders no time for further research into its countless sub-disciplines. As a result, a delegating system needs to be initiated to share the research responsibility among researchers of cognate disciplines, who, are more than happy to be entrusted with the tasks because fundamental history-oriented disciplines are needed. This could be one of the leading reasons for the above-mentioned situation. However, it does not mean that the “delegating” relationship equals to ownership. It is like a family that has too many children to raise and has to ask the kids’ aunts to help out. Nonetheless, legally speaking, these children raised outside of the family still belong to their parents instead of their aunts.

It can be inferred from the above analysis that educational historiography is an inter-discipline of historiography and educational science, being endowed with the dual disciplinary attributes. However, it initially derived from the nutritious soil of historiography. Its earliest research team came from the field of history. And until now quite a number of historians are still engaged in the research of educational historiography. Its research topics and tasks are the educational problems and phenomena in history. Educational historiography explores the historical patterns of education and primarily adopts the research theories, research methods and research orientations of historiography. The research trend of historiography directly affects the trend of educational historiography, which seems to have a more direct and closer relationship with historiography than educational science. Therefore, it can be safely concluded that educational historiography primarily belongs to historiography rather than educational science. However, this categorization does not deny the fact that educational historiography still partially belongs to educational science, nor does it deny its dual disciplinary attributes. It just means that the disciplinary attributes of educational historiography are more similar to those of historiography.

The authors lament that today’s research of educational historiography, which focuses too much on “educational science” and emphasizes too much on logical reasoning while lacking solid empirical evidence, has lost its inherent disciplinary attributes and characteristics. This is actually quite detrimental to the development of educational historiography. At this point, we can not help but recall the words of Mr. Chen Xuexun, Chairman of the Educational History Committee of Chinese Educational Society, who told the authors in Wuhan over two decades ago that: “The day when the outputs of educational historiography researchers are published in such top journals as *Historical Research*, *Modern Chinese History Studies*, *Journal of*

*Chinese Historical Studies and World History* and widely recognized in the field of historiography is the day when educational historiography is fully established.”

It now seems that Mr. Chen Xuexun’s words are meaningful and thought-provoking. Our lack of understanding of the disciplinary attributes of educational historiography for a long time has led to lower academic standards and requirements, which further widened the existing gap between educational historiography and the discipline of history. Therefore, as educational historiography researchers, we should recognize the disciplinary attributes, establish disciplinary standards, actively follow the academic trends of the history discipline, and keep up with it by paying close attention to its research outputs, so as to lay a solid foundation for our “history” and add more elements and characteristics of “historiography” to our research work, so that Mr. Chen Xuexun’s vision of educational historiography may turn into reality sooner.

### **3. On the Tripartite Categorization of the Subjects of Historiography**

What are the research subjects of educational historiography? Various educational historiography works in the past tell us that educational historiography is the discipline that studies the history and principles of education (Anderson, 1956; Sloan, 1973). Specifically, its research subjects are history of educational thoughts and system. Is this understanding accurate? Certainly, it is not totally wrong. After taking a closer look, however, we would discover that it is inaccurate and unscientific.

The authors argue that this understanding leaves out a more fundamental and critical subject in the research of educational historiography, namely, the history of educational activities. Just as educational science research can not be carried out without studying people’s educational activities, educational historiography will lack its premise and foundation without the studies on people’s educational activities in history, regardless of the efforts devoted to the studies on the history of educational thoughts and system. It will only be reduced to an educational historiography that “sees people without their behaviors” and “sees things without the stories”.

From the perspective of educational science, what reflects the nature of education the best is people’s “educational activities.”(Cremin, 1955) “Educational activities” here refers to the aggregate of specific activities directed to promoting valuable human development, and the various ways educators and learners participate and interact in the educational process. The main reasons are as follows. To begin with, educational activities are the basic form of

existence in the phenomena of education. As Hugh Gina (cited in Cremin, 1955), a scholar of former Soviet Union, has put it, "Human activities are the origin from which the society and all its values exist and develop. It is also the source from which human beings and personalities develop and take shape; without studies on such activities, it would be unlikely for researchers of educational science to fulfill any task in relation to education, teaching and development"(p73). In addition, educational activities are the key factor that affects human development, which is the result of the interaction or activities between the subject and the object. Individual activities are the key factor for individual development. The fact that educational activities are the primary factor for human development not only does not exclude the leading role that education plays, but also points out the direction of such research efforts, which aim at optimizing the leading role of education in human development. It is difficult to imagine how the principles of education can be identified without studying educational activities. Without that, how can the problems in education and teaching be resolved? And how can valuable human development be facilitated? Therefore, the research on people's educational activities should be regarded as a top priority in the research of educational science across different countries in the world.

Likewise, the history of educational activities should also be a significant component in the research on educational historiography. The history of educational activities is the history where educators and learners participate in education and interact with one another in various ways (Butts, 1967; Clifford, 1976). It is a key factor that affects the development process of people's educational thoughts and system. The history of educational activities is not only the origin of the history of educational thoughts and system, but also the premise and foundation, as well as the channel and the bridge connecting to the history of educational thoughts and system. The history of educational activities constitutes an upside-down triangle relation with the histories of educational thoughts and system. The history of educational activities is the origin, premise and foundation, whereas the latter two are the derivatives and results. Therefore, the history of educational activities must be studied as part of the research of the history of education.

Then, here is a question. Since the history of educational activities is so vital, why hadn't it attracted the attention of academia and been studied independently? This might be related to people's one-sided and over-generalized understanding of educational facts and phenomena. People think that the history of educational activities is included in the history of educational thoughts and system, and that studying the latter two means the former would also be

studied. Over time, this idea is passed down, takes roots and is now taken for granted. It should be noted that the history of educational activities should be considered one of the three research areas of educational historiography, with the other two being the history of educational thoughts and the history of educational system. The previous perception and practice of embedding the history of educational activities in the history of educational thoughts and the history of educational system is inappropriate. That is to say, the history of educational activities was not getting enough attention but being neglected. In future research, the studies on the history of educational activities should be underscored and emphasized, and treated separately.

Another relevant issue needs to be pointed out: "Educational activity" does not equal to "educational practice", neither does "the history of educational activities" equal to "the history of educational practices" (Donato & Lazerson, 2000). These are two sets of concepts, which can be both related and distinctive. First of all, based on its connotation, educational practice does not equal to educational activity. Educational practices, in a broad sense, refer to the specific practical activities that carried out by real people who comply with the social norms at that time. These activities include all the activities in the society that affect people's ideology and moral standards, and enhance people's knowledge and skills, including educational thoughts, systems and activities. In contrast, the educational practices in a narrow sense primarily focus on school education, particularly being reflected in the interrelation among the key players involved in school education and the mechanism of activity. Furthermore, a close look at their relationship reveals the fact that educational activity is not the same as educational practice. Educational activity is a concept right in the middle between educational behaviors and educational practice. In other words, the concept of educational activities is broader than specific educational behaviors, meanwhile it is narrower than the macro educational practices. Therefore, "the history of educational activities" does not equal to the macro "history of educational practices", which covers the history of educational thoughts and the history of educational activities, nor is it the same as the history of various specific educational behaviors. Nevertheless, the history of educational activities is closely related to the history of educational practices and the history of educational behaviors. Thus, studying the former entails that we are also, in a sense, studying the latter two histories.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In a nutshell, this paper explores the dual disciplinary

nature of educational historiography and places it under “historiography”. We argue that the nature of a discipline is mainly defined by its origin, major research topics and objectives, basic research theories, methodologies and paradigms, as well as its relations with cognate disciplines. Our analysis of the above factors sheds lights on the dual disciplinary nature of educational historiography. In addition, this article contends that the nature of education can be best reflected through people’s “educational activities.” As a result, the history of educational activities should become an area of research in the field of educational historiography.

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