

Historical research in education: Understanding contemporary situations and conditions through analysis of the relevant history. An Interview with the Lucien Criblez

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Lucien Criblez works and researches at the University of Zurich, where he has held the professorship for Historical Educational Research and Educational Policy since 2008. His publication record encompasses more than 28 authored, edited or co-edited books, and countless journal articles as well as book chapters on the history of education, educational policy analysis, school theory and teacher education. Prior to his position in Zurich, Criblez held a professorial position for pedagogy at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland, where he also served as director of the Institute for Research and Development. Lucien Criblez is one of only few academics who unites theory and practice as he pursued his studies in Bern (1987–1997) and Zurich (1999–2003), while gaining experience in youth work, teacher education and educational administration. He has held multiple public positions related to his areas of expertise.

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Michaela Vogt (MV) & Annemarie Augschöll Blasbichler (AA) (MV & AA):
Professor Criblez, it is an extraordinary pleasure to have you as our interviewee. As a starting point could you please give us a brief insight into your academic career, your motivation for doing research within the fields you chose and the main topics you focused and focus on?

Lucien Criblez (LC): Well, my academic career was anything but linear. Nowadays, that's not really possible any more, at least not in German-speaking regions, mainly due to changes in the promotion policy for young talent pursued by universities and research funding agencies. A «standard career» is now streamlined, rapid and governed by a few standard criteria (publications in prestigious journals; presentations at international conferences; raising of third-party funding; periods spent abroad, preferably in English-speaking countries), even if certain tendencies towards a reversal of this are now also evident. My career was marked by what might be called «disruptions» at an early stage, in fact as early as during my studies. Following a break in my studies and practical work in residential care, I changed from a combination of psychology (major subject) and pedagogy and psychopathology as minors - «educational counselling» was my objective - to education as my major subject. On the one hand, I felt that university psychology couldn't live up to its promises, while, on the other, there was a yawning gap between my «desire to understand» and empirically oriented psychology. However, I discovered that a somewhat «polarised» situation existed in pedagogy at my study location, the University of Bern. Although Pedagogical Psychology under Hans Aebli continued to adhere to the Piagetian tradition, it had already begun to lean heavily towards the American cognitive psychology model. A similar «modernisation» wasn't evident in Historical and Systematic Pedagogy (these two chairs existed in Bern in the 1980s, with additional professorships for both Social Pedagogy and Special Pedagogy in Zurich), which was still strongly committed to the philosophical tradition and the tradition of pedagogy in the context of the humanities («geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik»). However, as a result of the changes in general historiography (social history, history of mentalities, history from below etc.), school and educational history – as well as and the traditional pedagogical history of ideas with its tendency towards hagiography – were exposed to an emerging amount of criticism. Some of pedagogy's «classic ideas» were now labelled as poisonous or black pedagogy («schwarze Pädagogik» in terms of Katharina Rutschky). Furthermore, in the wake of Michel Foucault's writings, school itself was no longer merely regarded as an agency of modernisation but equally as a place for social disciplining. One of Traugott Weisskopf's the last historical lectures (Professor for Historical and Systematic Pedagogy), addressed the topic of «Idea and Reality», which was retrospectively speaking very innovative.

However, new approaches in history primarily found an audience among younger researchers in the history of education. In the context of what was, at the time, regarded as an innovative project-based course of studies, one group of students launched a project for historical youth research and the analysis of changes in debates on youth policy in Swiss parliaments. This research was conducted with a multilevel political system perspective as it considered the federal, canton and community level. We took the canton and city of Bern as an example. On the one hand, the project led to publication of my first book as a co-editor (*Jugendpolitik und Jugendforschung*, 1987), while, on the other, the inexperienced group of young researchers fought over multiple issues and eventually broke up before any further publications. To put it more trenchantly, it could be said that my introduction to historical research was born out of a failed project.

Before «my» professor retired, he hired me as an assistant for one term. My first dissertation project tried to unite my interest in youth policy and history. However, as an assistant of Jürgen Oelkers, whose reputation had followed him to Bern, I found myself increasingly turning away from historical youth research and developing an interest in the history of education. However, only where it did not take the form of traditional school history (where, for example, the combination of the history of ideas and institutional history from Albert Reble was at that time obligatory reading for students for examinations) but was instead designed to be part of a «social history» (Ulrich Wehler) that examined developments in the area of education in their social context. My dissertation (*Zwischen Pädagogik und Politik*; 1993, print version 1995) then became an attempt to apply these broader views to the history of education in Switzerland in the 1930s and 1940s.

Historical research into education had then become my core interest in the field of education, although the political context in particular continued to interest me as well. However, on completing my dissertation I then had to consider subsequent options, and I decided to pursue a dual strategy. I started working part time in the educational administration of a medium-sized Swiss canton while also participating in a non-historical research project on «The Effectiveness of Teacher Training». Following the conclusion of the project, I took up a staff position in the educational administration. Given the few professorships available in education in Switzerland (with only two being worthy of my consideration) and, for family reasons, a limited willingness to move on my part, an academic career was an improbable option in my case. This is how I became familiar with an educational administration undergoing a New Public Management transformation in the 1990s. This was also the incident, in which I realized, that ultimately educational institutions and policy could only be understood in terms of their history. But the prospect of being involved in research had not simply left my mind and the work I was doing in the educational administration would not keep me interested forever. An application to the Swiss National Science Foundation to participate in a research project on «Structural Change in Teacher Training» was successful. This project enabled me to attain my habilitation degree at the University of Zurich. After this, my path took me from the establishment of a research department at a newly created university for teacher education (*Pädagogische Hochschule*) to a professorship at the University of Zurich.

Research topics on which I worked on with my colleagues in the last 20 years or so mirror my career pretty accurately. Teacher training and its transformation as well as teacher training policy have interested me since a project at the beginning of the 1990s; this project came up with an inventory of teacher training concepts and also analysed them in the (federal) Swiss context. Since my dissertation, I have time and again dealt with reform at all levels of the educational system in a variety of projects. My main interest in this respect laid primarily in (structural) change and persistence but also targeted questions relating to educational knowledge policy (in the style of Nico Stehr: *Wissenspolitik*). This included questions regarding how educational subjects change and who is responsible for the normative definition concerning school's content; this includes the question of when and on which legitimizing basis these contents are introduced (the history of the curriculum and teaching material). The history of education since the middle of the 20th century was

always of particular interest to me, because contemporary educational history and analyses of educational policy can easily be linked to each other.

MV & AA: *Your professorship unites history of education as well as educational policy. How would you describe the interferences between the two fields of research? What are the main synergetic moments in linking them together, and are there any frictions?*

LC: The creation of a new professorship with the denomination Historical Research in Education and Governance of the Education System (Educational Policy Analyses would have been less time-specific) was to some extent typical of developments in education in Switzerland at the beginning of the 21st century. Firstly, an expansion of the number of professorships in Switzerland commenced in the 1990s and was then primarily continued on a broad scale through the creation of new universities of teacher education at the turn of the century. Secondly, the designation «Historical Pedagogy» was no longer opportune as humanities infused pedagogy saw itself exposed to massive criticism at the time. The Historical Research in Education denomination intended to illustrate a broader historical as well as a historical and social science perspective. Thirdly, in the course of New Public Management reforms – emphasizing efficiency, effectiveness, and output/outcome perspectives – and in the context of the establishment of governance perspectives, researching options and limitations of educational governance systems grew in importance.

Therefore, the dual perspective is an expression of the zeitgeist which also offers an opportunity to conduct historical research in education less as *l'art pour l'art* (Marc Bloch) and more with regard to achieving a better understanding of reform and change processes as well as persistence in the area of education. Historical research in education can also focus more strongly on understanding contemporary situations and conditions through analysis of the relevant history. This in turn permits a prioritisation of contemporary history (since 1950) which was previously neglected in education. In my opinion, this means that a historical perspective can also maintain – or regain – its legitimacy in the context of educational science increasingly governed by employability and so-called useful knowledge.

In terms of research perspectives, three options are enabled through the dual denomination: a purely historical approach, a purely analytical approach to educational policy, and a combination of both. The research projects I conducted at the University of Zurich represent all three of these orientations. Since the 1980s, historical research in education started to orient itself more strongly on the theories and methods of history and cultural studies (and their turns, namely cultural, linguistic, material, spatial ...). This pluralising possible research perspectives in historical research in education as educational policy mainly drew upon theories and methods of the social sciences that were only developed in part for historical work. Therefore, the combination of both denominations creates the challenge of making both perspectives – with their theoretical and methodological strength and weaknesses – fruitful for historical educational research. In my opinion, the historicization of theories and methods in social science (such as in historical or actor-centred neo-institutionalism) and the «social scientification» of historical theories and methods (such as through the inclusion of historical educational statistics) are therefore part and parcel of the fields of work encountered in the historical research of education.

MV/AA: *Keeping both perspectives of your professorship in mind, how has technology changed methodology in historical educational research over the course of your career?*

LC: I wrote my first university term paper on my grandfather's cast iron typewriter and my thesis on a Schneider PC, albeit not a particularly advanced one. Initially, we simply had an electric typewriter in our assistant's office. The production of text alone changed fundamentally. Work with index card boxes was replaced by literature- and word-processing programs. Summaries are recorded in literature databases or not at all, because articles and books can now be stored as PDF files. The accessibility of sources, both historical and contemporary, has been improved enormously through retrodigitisation (including in particular historical journal holdings) and implementation of the principle of public access in policy and administration. Our institute's library can provide me with any book; even from international sources, if necessary. Digitally accessing archive sources is increasingly possible, while larger archives have at least online indexes of their archive collections. On the other hand, concrete historical work, such as in an archive, has hardly changed but accessing and processing options have fundamentally transformed. However, expectations with regard to transparent handling of sources and contextualisation have grown. In addition to the creation of a considerably greater awareness of the involved methodology, this has overall enhanced the quality of research realised by young researchers.

MV & AA: *Taking technology as one optional starting point, what potential for further developments do you see in the field of history of education, and which opportunities have not been taken yet?*

LC: (Retro)digitisation and technologizing (big data) will make working with serial sources and data much easier in the future. This is particularly important for the analysis of long-term developments or *longue durée* as Fernand Braudel puts it. Simultaneously, this increases expectations with regard to the quality of historical research in education. As a result, it becomes a more important part of historical social science, even where historical perspectives of ideas or culture are adopted. The growing digitisation of sources and archives will make historical analyses in education considerably easier in the future but also increase complexity and the awareness of ignorance. Overall, a closer proximity to sources and also a greater emphasis on comparative studies – even though restrictions regarding regional and national languages remain – will arguably also result in greater questioning of previous «master narratives».

MV & AA: *Further developments also potentially relate to challenges and problems. Could you define some for the history of education that arise from your analysis for the present and the near future?*

LC: The question can be answered from a variety of perspectives. In general, it primarily hinges on three significant challenges: greater «social scientification», a greater theoretical orientation and greater contextualisation in historical educational research work. From a disciplinary point of view, explaining the purpose of a preoccupation with history and its «usefulness» vis-à-vis the public, vis-à-vis the academy, vis-à-vis the discipline and, in particular, vis-à-vis students and young researchers will remain an extremely important task. Methodologically, the most

important thing is the acceptance – and long-term integration – of different historical perspectives and approaches. Further, with regard to publications, the emphasis is to simultaneously become more comparative in international terms while avoiding the neglect of regional and national history. The reason for this is that, despite globalisation, education is still primarily defined on a national or sub-national level. On the other hand, German-speaking historical research in education in particular can learn from its anglophone counterpart; its aim is not solely to publish books and articles that have been seriously researched from a scientific point of view (this of course is always the indispensable prerequisite!) but also to tell historical educational «stories» well to the public, not only to one's own discipline.

In addition, I believe that historical education should play a greater role in historical educational research. If one seriously considers educational history to be an important part of social history and further assumes that it cannot be understood without a knowledge of the societal context, educational historians need to make greater efforts in the future to address the contexts of their «education histories». Specifically, a lot needs to be understood about economic, political, social, cultural and legal history (etc.). If possible, not just in a regional or national context but also on an international level. These are high demands, which we should aim at, for example, in the education of doctoral students.

MV & AA: *What are your personal visions for the further development of the discipline – for example regarding important topics or the presence in academia and society?*

LC: Within the educational science, historical educational research is likely to remain important because an understanding of the volatile present as a transition from the past to the future is ultimately only possible through a preoccupation with history. On the other hand (and simultaneously!), historical research in education within the discipline will probably remain the somewhat exotic activity it has become following the end of the hagiographical phase – purely because the purpose of a preoccupation with history and its «usefulness» will need to be explained time and again. In thematic terms, greater attention should be paid to areas of education that have attracted little regard up until now (although I'm probably overemphasizing the research situation in Switzerland), namely university history as educational history, preschool history, family educational history and the history of exclusion, etc. When it comes to disciplinary policy, we should take greater care of young academic talent in historical educational research. After all, young up-and-coming talent is ultimately the multiplier of issues relating to the academic sub-discipline. In addition, a greater presence in the public and the media would be helpful for the discipline's reputation but also to legitimise historical research in education in the spirit of «Do good and talk about it!».

MV & AA: *You are often featured in the Neue Zürcher Zeitung (NZZ) and discuss multiple education-related topics in public. What are your plans and ambitions for the future – maybe for example taking your expertise about schools and educational policy outside of university and into politics?*

LC: In addition to my academic role, I've also been a member of the Zurich Education Council for almost 10 years. While acting as an advisory body to the Zurich Department of Education, the Education Council also reaches decisions

on important educational questions and approves obligatory teaching material. Due to the fact that education in Switzerland and Western Europe is still largely a public/state responsibility and, in particular, also publicly/state financed, the political discourse with regard to education and schooling is also ultimately of central importance. As a professor at a publicly financed university, I'm probably somewhat old-fashioned when I say that I consider it my duty to make my knowledge and findings from research available not only to the scientific community but also to the broader public. Political opinions or positioning must be avoided here as what is important is a critical reflection on education as a public responsibility. The provision of information should, particularly in the era of fake news, remain one of the noblest duties of science – including historical research in education.

MV & AA: *Thank you so much for your time and the insights you provided during this interview. All the best for your future endeavours, projects and ambitions!*

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