Literacy Attainment: Historical Resources

# Research Project Blog

<http://literacyattainmentdataanddiscourse.blogspot.com/>

## Thursday, 19 July 2012: [Whilst I've been away....](http://literacyattainmentdataanddiscourse.blogspot.com/2012/07/whilst-ive-been-away.html)

In the intervening interval I've been getting my head round numbers. This is an interesting exercise, and one that has also made very clear to me what the discipline in Disciplines is all about. The actual problem I've been wrestling with is how to make sense of the statistical data I had laboriously collected on "payment by results" from the Committee of Council on Education's Annual Reports, presented to parliament between 1862 and 1872.

The data are really in the form of accounts. They enable parliament to see what monies had been spent on education - so there is always a global sum; how much had gone to which provider - until 1870 these were all religious bodies operating either in Scotland or in England and Wales; and how much of the money had been spent on the categories of staff, buildings or equipment. From 1862 the money handed over for running costs was tied to the numbers of children attending school and whether or not they had been entered for exams, arranged as Standards I-VI. The exams tested reading, writing and arithmetic, or the three Rs, an expression which dates from this period. This is the system known as payment by results.

Dealing with the quantitative data through statistical analysis is a discipline in so far as it entails putting to one side a concern for what the numbers stand for and focusing on what the numbers themselves show. As a person inhabiting a qualitative tradition, this runs counter to most of what I know and do. Leaping over the disciplinary boundary to work in their terms means understanding the discipline built into that other tradition. That's where my ethnographic training comes in, I guess, in terms of trying to understand this other way of going about knowledge-making. It's hard work.

All Disciplines bring some issues into focus whilst dispensing with others. Quantitative traditions are neither more nor less stringent in this respect. But the rules that govern the relationships between what is in focus - only numerical data - are different. One of the things I think I've learnt from struggling with the exercise is quite how aware quantitative traditions are of the uncertainty built into the numbers; and the inherently constructed nature of the numbers that represent the data in the analysis. Precisely because they know the numbers can be used to assert many different things, the discipline of statistics has an enormous number of rules about how the numbers can be used, and what the results of the analysis can be taken for. Indeed, they recognise very clearly that the analysis creates the findings. You could argue that it's the caution in the discipline that determines the genre to the written account: the way the findings get written up with an emphasis on exactly how data reduction and then the analysis have been conducted that is seldom matched within qualitative traditions.

One further insight that flows from this is the misuse of quantitative data in public discourse. In public discourse the inherent uncertainty in the numbers is overlooked and ignored. Public discourse turns numbers into "facts". How far statistics itself is aware of what happens when their work travels in this way across the boundaries to their specialised knowledge field elsewhere is for me an interesting question.

## Friday, 9 December 2011: Reading the past...

This week I've been reading my way through the parliamentary debate on payment by results. I've also been looking at large part of the public commentary on the measures, including the representations made to parliament whilst they were still being debated. One of the most striking feature of making my way through this material is how well the case is argued on both sides. Yet in a curious way they also seem to be talking past each other. Each side invokes the case it wishes to fight against, constructing a kind of shadow argument it then takes apart point by point. There is a mobilisation of tropes and rhetorical strategies that makes the other side's position look untenable. This leads to a schizophrenic reading experience as I find myself agreeing first with one side, then the other. Yet I also think this has got me closer to resolving some of the methodological issues I've been thinking about. Not by coming down on one side or another, but rather by spotting the residual and unspoken issues that seem to the rest at the heart of the debate.

In this case one of the points that seems most striking is the repeated difficulty of pinning down what people mean by "reading". I think there are two different versions in play: reading as the basic skill - the knowledge of letters and their combination into syllables and whole words which can be tested through reading aloud. And reading as the voyage through texts that happens once the basic skill has been acquired, and the kind of knowledge that can be built by browsing in this way. In the debates on payment by results these are variously invoked, with little shared understanding of who is really talking about which one, when. This confusion seems to me to run through the opposition to payment by results; but it also runs through pedagogical thinking and the resources and materials currently in place to teach reading. I find myself seeing something that those participating in the debate at the time rarely fully articulate. If I can get this written up then I may finally be doing history

## Saturday, 3 December 2011: Some more on methodology

One of the best things about doing a blog is being able to write what you like as and when. I do have a plan to write about Mrs Trimmer, but at the moment I want to stick with a bit more thinking about history and methodology. I’ve been having some off-blog chat with Judith Green (See comments from Judith on the very first post below), touching on this issue, and she’s very kindly sent me a couple of papers which I aim to read this weekend. But in the meanwhile, here’s the actual methodological problem I seem to be wrestling with in the process of writing up the interaction between “payment by results” and literacy pedagogy.

When I write social science, or ethnography, I’m normally structuring what I have to say around the concepts that have evolved from the data – so somewhere lurking behind the writing is a pile of unsorted stuff, which in the process of analysis has fallen into sharp categories, which I can now define according to a relatively explicit set of principles – probably turns out that way through a combination of learning to be an ethnographer of social context from Brian Street and learning how to formalise the relations between data from Basil Bernstein. I know I get to quite tight theoretical formulations from applying Bernsteinian principles of languages of description to what I do.

But here’s the thing: historical data doesn’t seem to be amenable to being used that way. I’m beginning to see that “low-level description” has a clear function within the discipline in a way that I would reject in social science. In other words, it’s the unboundedness of historical data that matters. And when it gets wrapped up in someone else’s too tight categories, the lens distorts rather than liberates the data. This is making the act of writing very hard because – just when I think I’ve nailed something, I end up checking whether I’ve got it right, and return to the data, which however I’ve defined the data set, then tries to creep back out into more than one category. In other words, it is not the discursive unity of the past that surprises me, it’s its resistance to being pinned down. It’s more diverse and contradictory than the big narratives we’d like to tell about it allow. Positively post-structuralist in its resistance to staying in a single shape.

## Monday, 28 November 2011: "A profusion of entangled events"

I've taken to this quote from Foucault. It sums up pretty much how I think about my swim through history - tangled up and confused as the past often seems to be. Here's the longer version:

"The world such as we are acquainted with it is not this ultimately simple configuration where events are reduced to accentuate their essential traits, their final meaning, or their initial and final value. On the contrary, it is a profusion of entangled events.... the true historical sense confirms our existence among countless lost events, without a landmark or a point of reference.

Historians take unusual pains to erase the elements in their work which reveal their grounding in a particular time and place, their preferences in a controversy - the unavoidable obstacles of their passion." ~ Foucault, 1994.

The quotations come from Foucault’s essay, Nietzsche, Genealogy, History. The first certainly sums up the trouble visiting the 19th century seems to be causing me. The second remains an interesting counterbalance to the silence in the literature on historical method. Certainly the major nineteenth century historiography itself increasingly seems wedded to the point at which it was created between the 1970s and 80s. More recent work takes another tack, looking at a different range of actors from another point of view. Foucault's point was not that historians could escape the dilemma of always writing from now, but rather that they should be upfront about their interests in re-working the past - whilst also allowing the past to speak back to us in its own terms. I guess that is the research dilemma I'm wrestling with.

## Saturday, 19 November 2011: Of Battledores, Hornbooks and Spelling Books

This week I’ve been browsing around the net looking for examples of battledores and hornbooks. The net is a really good resource for doing this. They’re some of the earliest resources made for teaching children how to read. The hornbooks came first. They typically just have the alphabet, some simple vowel/consonant combinations and then the Lord’s Prayer. The Battledores were an eighteenth century innovation. Made out of cardboard some were highly coloured, and the alphabets were typically illustrated too, one woodblock picture for a word illustrating each letter. This site gives a good range of examples

<http://mulibraries.missouri.edu/specialcollections/exhibits/childrenliterature/Horn.htm>

Looking around the net for images, it turns out this is a blogging hotspot. I like the way the net gets used like this to map and share enthusiasms. I can’t quite think what the antecedent might be. There is no obvious equivalent that would facilitate this kind of display of the objects and the commentary. Except of course a book, which would have been much more expensive to produce and would once have put this kind of exercise out of most people’s hands. I can remember from my A Level course on Tudor and Elizabethan history, when we did a paper on Elizabethan architecture that style books containing ideas for design motifs were widely circulated, and influenced what and how people chose to decorate their buildings. Did they also represent a different kind of demarcation line between professional and amateur knowledge? Maybe that is part of what is in flux: changes in technologies provide different possibilities for knowledge exchange, diffusion and appropriation.

## Friday, 11 November 2011: On blogging and telling tales

There seem to be three rules to blogging
1. Keep it short
2. Write often
3. Have something to say

So far I seem to be breaking the rules. Well here's my second offer, sparked off by reading an extract from Jeanette Winterson's autobiography in the Guardian Weekend Review, which set me off thinking about history.

In commenting on her first fictionalised account of her early life, Winterson said "adoption drops you into the story after it has started. It's like reading a book with the first few pages missing. It's like arriving after curtain up. The feeling that something is missing never leaves you - and it can't, and it shouldn't because something is missing. It's why I am a writer - I don't say "decided" to be, or "became". It was not an act of will or even a conscious choice. To avoid the narrow mesh of Mrs Winterson's story I had to be able to tell my own."

There is a general truth here about the stories we tell about ourselves, and the difficulty we have in disentangling them from others that run alongside or threaten to displace our own. This seems equally true of history. Reading back into the nineteenth century primary sources, I find myself stumbling over a multitude of others' stories, whose shapes I cannot fully understand, nor fully trace. Where to look to discover the start or find the end? Pulling at one thread, others unravel alongside.

I am not sure if this is a product of coming to the discipline from other traditions, or whether it is a recognised problem within history. Certainly dealing with the secondary sources intensifies the problem. Data is there, clues are scattered, but they are already tied into a particular sequence and narrative frame. How to reframe the evidence without arguing back. Does history deal with this as a methodological problem and if so how? I can't find these points directly addressed within the discipline, though the potential truth of the many different kinds of stories created are openly acknowleged. I'm intrigued to know if historians would recognise the dilemma or have a response to my questions.

## Wednesday, 19 October 2011: Welcome to the LADD blog

The Literacy Attainment, Data and Discourse fellowship has been going for just over six months now. During that time I've read my way into what I now see as "my period" in history: the 1780s - 1860s. This is quite a peculiar place to have ended up, given that I am not a historian by training, and expected the LADD project to focus on a later period in the nineteenth century, the 1860s to 1890s.

So how did I get to here? Partly thanks to Michele Cohen, the historian I have been working with for the Fellowship. I had discovered and very much enjoyed her work on the variety of explanations and hypotheses that underpin public discourse on boys’ and girls’ relative educational attainment at different time periods (Cohen, 1998, 2005). Knowing that I lacked any background in history as a discipline, I asked Michele if she would provide specialist advice to the project on the study of educational attainment in its historical context, including the use of primary sources. She was written into an advisory role at the application stage.

Michele is a specialist on the long 18th century, and in our first conversation for the project she showed me some extracts from Priscilla Wakefield and Clara Reeve's writing on education (Wakefield, 1798; Reeve, 1792). These looked so different from the kind of texts I had been reading from much later in the 19th century, that they began to suggest a very different approach to understanding why public debate on education conducted in the late 19th century looked the way it did.

Most of the historical analysis of education in the 19th century focuses on the rise of a publicly funded education system which adopts the basic forms we still find: an age-related structure organised in three parts: primary, secondary, and higher education, with an entry point at 4/5 yrs, transition points at 11 and 16, and exit points now extended to roughly 18 and 22. Organisation by age is far less widely regarded as a legacy of the nineteenth century than organisation into differentiated pathways through the curriculum at 11. In particular the assumption is that the classed origins of education in the nineteenth century spills over and shapes the distinctions in curricular access written into the grammar school system, and still expressed in the sharp divide between vocational and academic routes through education that persists to this day.

The classed origins of the system in the nineteenth century are linked to the emergence of elementary education as an institutional arrangement designed for the poor. From this point of view the history of the formation of a publicly funded education system records the on-going attempt by the middle classes to constrain access to education, and maintain their own distinct class position. Attempts to thwart this and enlarge access for all on equal terms recur in the battles led by progressives and radicals which successively take place: over establishing the board schools in the nineteenth century; in opposition to the grammar school/secondary modern system in the 50s and 60s; up until the establishment of a comprehensive system of secondary education in the 1970s. This highpoint is now under attack from neo -liberal policies that seek to privatise education, fragment and exacerbate competition for scarce educational resources, and turn the clock back to a point before the State intervened for the public good. The ideological and material battle goes on.

The 18th century texts of Reeves and Wakefield complicate this story, not because of their radicalism, but rather precisely because of the nature of their conservatism. In particular, this older discourse expresses a very different view of what counts as knowledge, how it should be ordered and owned, and who is entitled to access it under what terms. To recast this argument in Bernsteinian terms, there is a different knowledge-knower relationship embedded in the discourse (Maton, 2007). This makes it possible to recognise that the (re)founding of new educational institutions during the early 19th century, their diverse forms of social organisation and curricula, the various permutations that are first tried out and then begin to settle, all represent part of a far more seismic shift in ideas, resources and social structures happening at the same time, that continues well on into the first half of the 19th century. What happens to elementary education in its organisational form - a building, a social entity, the relations it embeds and begins to cement between interested parties, the forms of knowledge it encompasses - plays out in relation to much larger shifts, one of which sees the middle class we recognise, and the professional and managerial roles they now occupy within the economy, come into being (See Hunter, 1988 for a longer exposition on this point). The middle class are not already in place, thwarting educational progress, rather they emerge alongside a more mobile working class as the economy itself re-structures through the application of new forms of knowledge to processes of production and industry. This produces a very different point of comparison between then and now. Arguably we are now witnessing something very similar at the start of the 21st century as the internet and computing power re-order working practices into new forms and challenge older ways of knowing.

Something of the high risks and high uncertainty of the late 18th century and their capacity to generate high levels of innovation in many different spheres, are now beginning to be (re)recognised and fruitfully explored in new terms across a range of academic literatures, most notably in literary and cultural studies (Goodlad, 2000; Janowitz,2004 ; Rauch, 2001); in feminist history (Cohen, 1998; Hilton, 2007; Watts, 1989) and in histories of publishing, print media and children's literature (Fyfe, 2004; Hilton, 1997; Lightman, 2000; Grenby, 2005; Myers, 1986; Ruwe, 2005; Norcia, 2010) . Much of this work is cross-disciplinary in character, and has used feminist and post-structuralist approaches to interrogate the texts they select whether in the form of poetry, children’s literature, educational texts and textbooks or polemical and religious tracts (Janowitz, 2004; Myers, 1986; Grenby, 2005; Ruwe, 2005; Cohen, 2005; Norcia, 2010; Butts and Garrett, 2006). Despite renewed interest in the history of the curriculum (Tröhler et al, 2011; Monaghan and Saul, 1987; Green and Cormack, 2008), education as a field has been at the margins rather than the centre of this conversation.

*This work suggests a new set of analytic and conceptual tools through which to approach the primary sources*.

The biggest challenge I've faced in the project so far has been reading my way into the nineteenth century. It's too big and too vast to make much of a dent on the available primary sources within the available time frame without being highly selective. The sampling principles that history most commonly deploys are to select a case - an individual; a site - and scope the primary sources accordingly; or to follow a story already told, reviewing the source literature and looking for new evidence. Following the latter approach would place my 19th century case - the use of statistics by the Committee of Council on Education (CCE), the funding body for education prior to the establishment of a proper Department of State - within a broader story of the history of the emergence of publicly funded state education, waged as an ideological battle for or against extending education within the parliamentary process. Approach the questions the CCE was considering from the point of view of the earlier period, leaving open how these may later resolve themselves, and the enquiry takes on a different complexion.

In particular it has meant reframing my understanding of the introduction of payment by results in 1862. In the conventional historiography this is a decisive policy event which has a pernicious effect on the future development of a publicly-funded education system, trapping elementary education for the poor into a restrictive model of the curriculum tightly focused on the three Rs, and designed to be cheap. Lowe's maxim, "If it is not cheap it shall be efficient; if it is not efficient it shall be cheap" - a phrase he used in parliamentary debate on 13th Feb 1862 - is widely used to sum up the policy. Yet this is to overlook two more crucial innovations he introduced in the Revised Code: the concept of successive "Standards" in the curriculum; and the idea of age-grouping pupils - the latter proposal was defeated in the debate, leaving schools to sub-divide students into proficiency groupings. Arguably, these two proposals have had far more far-reaching effects on schooling than did the change in the mechanism for publicly funding those schools that applied for government grants at the time. Exploring how these concepts arose, were understood, applied, and debated in contemporary sources has become a key part of this study. Such an exploration places literacy attainment firmly back in the social context of contemporary discourse, exactly as the study intended. But shifts the focus very much to the processes of curriculum change taking place at this time.

Uncertainty in the early nineteenth century over what the elementary curriculum should look like cannot be answered at this point by reference to a middle class curriculum. The terms in which the latter were defined in the late 18th century were themselves being rendered redundant as new kinds of knowledge, making greater claims for their use value, were emerging and circulating outside the confines of formal education and the classical curriculum that still dominated provision for the (male) middle class. Understanding the role elementary education played in resolving these issues means revisiting some of the existing sources, but in the light of new questions. Statistics, as an emerging discourse of "useful knowledge" in the nineteenth century, provides another light on the unsettling of the old and the formation of the new. It's strengthening and shaping as a discipline and form of enquiry within what begins to call itself the social sciences parallels the attempt to define a relevant curriculum for the new elementary schools in terms that radically re-order and revise the older forms of curricular knowledge locked into earlier models of educational provision to be found elsewhere.

The Fellowship continues to scrutinise and understand hypothesis-building within statistical approaches in the quantitative social sciences. But in its historical phase this enquiry now also focuses on a broader set of concerns rooted in the sociology of knowledge, and given new impetus by reaching back to a period before a mass education system was clearly envisaged or fully worked out.

The blog opens up this starting point for comment. Setting an ethnographer loose on historical data may be asking for trouble... I'd be interested to know how this proposition reads to those coming to this from different perspectives.

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