

Chapter 13

Historical Research

(Reminder: Don't forget to utilize the concept maps and study questions as you study this and the other chapters.)

What is Historical Research?

Historical research is the process of systematically examining past events to give an account of what has happened in the past.

- It is not a mere accumulation of facts and dates or even a description of past events.
- It is a flowing, dynamic account of past events which involves an interpretation of these events in an attempt to recapture the nuances, personalities, and ideas that influenced these events.
- One of the goals of historical research is to communicate an understanding of past events.

Significance of Historical Research

The following gives five important reasons for conducting historical research (based on Berg, 1998):

1. To uncover the unknown (i.e., some historical events are not recorded).
2. To answer questions (i.e., there are many questions about our past that we not only want to know but can profit from knowing).
3. To identify the relationship that the past has to the present (i.e., knowing about the past can frequently give a better perspective of current events).
4. To record and evaluate the accomplishments of individuals, agencies, or institutions.
5. To assist in understanding the culture in which we live (e.g., education is a part of our history and our culture).

Historical Research Methodology

There is no one approach that is used in conducting historical research although there is a general set of steps that are typically followed. These include the following steps although there is some overlap and movement back and forth between the steps:

1. Identification of the research topic and formulation of the research problem or question.
2. Data collection or literature review.
3. Evaluation of materials.
4. Data synthesis.
5. Report preparation or preparation of the narrative exposition.

Each of these steps is discussed briefly below.

Identification of the Research Topic and Formulation of the Research Problem or Question

This is the first step in any type of educational research including historical research.

- Ideas for historical research topics can come from many different sources such as current issues in education, the accomplishments of an individual, an educational policy, or the relationship between events.

Data Collection or Literature Review

This step involves identifying, locating, and collecting information pertaining to the research topic.

- The information sources are often contained in documents such as diaries or newspapers, records, photographs, relics, and interviews with individuals who have had experience with or have knowledge of the research topic.
- Interviews with individuals who have knowledge of the research topic are called oral histories.
- The documents, records, oral histories, and other information sources can be primary or secondary sources.
- A primary source is a source that has a direct involvement with the event being investigated like a diary, an original map, or an interview with a person that experienced the event.
- A secondary source is a source that was created from a primary source such as books written about the event. Secondary sources are considered less useful than primary sources.

Evaluation of Materials

Every information source must be evaluated for its authenticity and accuracy because any source can be affected by a variety of factors such as prejudice, economic conditions, and political climate.

There are two types of evaluations every sources must pass.

1. External Criticism—this is the process of determining the validity, trustworthiness, or authenticity of the source. Sometimes this is difficult to do but other times it can easily be done by handwriting analysis or determining the age of the paper on which something was written.
2. Internal Criticism—this is the process of determining the reliability or accuracy of the information contained in the sources collected. This is done by positive and negative criticism.
 - Positive criticism refers to assuring that the statements made or the meaning conveyed in the sources are understood. This is frequently difficult because of the problems of vagueness and presentism.
 - Vagueness refers to uncertainty in the meaning of the words and phrases used in the source.
 - Presentism refers to the assumption that the present-day connotations of terms also existed in the past.

- Negative criticism refers to establishing the reliability or authenticity and accuracy of the content of the sources used. This is the more difficult part because it requires a judgment about the accuracy and authenticity of what is contained in the source.
- Firsthand accounts by witnesses to an event are typically assumed to be reliable and accurate.

Historians often use three heuristics in handling evidence. These are corroboration, sourcing, and contextualization.

- Corroboration, or comparing documents to each other to determine if they provide the same information, is often used to obtain information about accuracy and authenticity.
- Sourcing, or identifying the author, date of creation of a document, and the place it was created is another technique that is used to establish the authenticity or accuracy of information.
- Contextualization, or identifying when and where an event took place, is another technique used to establish authenticity and accuracy of information.

Data Synthesis and Report Preparation

This refers to synthesizing, or putting the material collected into a narrative account of the topic selected.

- Synthesis refers to selecting, organizing, and analyzing the materials collected into topical themes and central ideas or concepts. These themes are then pulled together to form a contiguous and meaningful whole.

Be sure to watch out for these four problems that might be encountered when you attempt to synthesize the material collected and prepare the narrative account.

1. Trying to infer causation from correlated events is the first problem. Just because two events occurred together does not necessarily mean that one event was the cause of the other.
2. A second problem is defining and interpreting key words so as to avoid ambiguity and to insure that they have the correct connotation.
3. A third problem is differentiating between evidence indicating how people should behave and how they in fact did behave.
4. A fourth problem is maintaining a distinction between intent and consequences. In other words, educational historians must make sure that the consequences that were observed from some activity or policy were the intended consequences.