The experience of education and learning in the lives of students in Irish prisons – a life history approach

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Questions:
I am interested in other people’s experience of using a life-history approach and if there are any pitfalls to be avoided. I’m also interested in theoretical frameworks adopted while using this approach and how helpful it was in the analysis stage. I am currently in the middle of fieldwork and am collecting life histories of male prisoners who are attending education classes within the prison system and I would welcome any comments or thoughts at this stage of my work.

To restore the human subject at the centre-the suffering, afflicted, fighting, human subject- we must deepen a case history to a narrative or tale: only then do we have a ‘who’ as well as a ‘what’, a real person, a patient…’.

Introduction to life history as a methodology
This research is an attempt to listen to the narratives of male prisoners who are accessing education classes in the prison, in order to hear their story of what education and learning has meant in their lives. A life history approach is being used. One attraction of a life history approach is that it allows voices to be heard; in particular it can allow voices that have previously been silenced to be heard. The first significant use of life history was Thomas and Znaniecki’s (1918-1920) landmark study ‘The Polish Peasant in Europe and America’ in which the life record of a Polish immigrant Wladek Wisniewski is presented (Goodson and Sikes, 2001). Literature on the subject of the life history approach reflects its use with groups who have tended to be marginalized; including the elderly, people with a learning disability and people who have been institutionalized (Hreinsdóttir et al, 2006; Atkinson, 2004; Wicks & Whiteford (2006).

Researchers agree that the popularity of the life history approach has at times fallen in and out of favour amongst researchers over the course of the twentieth century. As a research method it seemed to reach its peak in popularity in the 1930s and as a method was promoted by the Chicago School sociologists who collected life histories in the 1920s and 30s. The method however was marginalised in the 1940s
and 50s when surveys and statistical research were favoured (Goodson and Sikes, 2001; Chase, 2005). Since the 1970s a life history method has had a renaissance particularly in educational studies (Goodson and Sikes, 2001; Antikainen, A et al, 1996). Antikainen et al’s study in Finland (in which a life history approach was used to explore the impact of learning and education on people) underlines the importance of educational institutions in people’s lives. They note that ‘educational institutions have had a central role both in the individualisation of socialisation ….and in the institutionalisation of the life-course’ (p9).

Researching a life story provides the opportunity to study identity and concepts of memory, meaning and language. The advocacy potential of a life history approach is also clear - life stories allow a participant to reveal an image of his/her self-identity – and give meaning to their experience. As Becker (2002) notes, a life history emphasises the value of a person’s own story. A life-history approach also has the potential to empower participants and Atkinson (2004) states that the ability of a life history approach to facilitate reflection and insights makes it a powerful research method leading her to conclude historical awareness –of one’s own history and the history of others-is an important step towards empowerment and, therefore, towards inclusion….Life story research can change people’s lives. It can and does empower people.

Theoretical framework
The work of Erving Goffman and Anthony Giddens will provide the theoretical foundation of this work. Goffman’s work is rooted in the theoretical framework of social constructionism which has been used to analyse a myriad of topics such as medical treatment and gender relations. In particular it has been used to focus on social problems such as crime and delinquency. Goffman’s examination of the social situation of mental health patients in his seminal work Asylums (1961) provides a useful link for this thesis, as exploring the impact of education on (prisoner) students’ lives may also include a sub theme of health. Goffman’s work explored the impact of a total institution on the self. He defined a total institution as a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life (p1).
Prison, he states, is a clear example of a total institution. Goffman argues that when a person enters an institution a series of attacks on a person’s sense of self begins. A year conducting ethnographical fieldwork in a mental hospital provided the empirical basis for his analysis. By also using Gidden’s theory of structuration the dichotomy between how far individuals are viewed as creative actors in control of their own lives and how much individuals are constrained by social forces is overcome. Jewkes (2002) for example combines Giddens’ theory of structuration with Bourdieus’s concept of the habitus in her study which explored male inmates’ use of the media and how it relates to their sense of identity. Jewkes notes that Giddens’s theory provides a useful counter to what she terms ‘prison deprivation literature’ and while she agrees that prisons are essentially mortifying environments
she supports Giddens’s view that people are never entirely powerless even those who are confined.

**Report from the Pilot Study**
The decision to concentrate on male prisoners was two-fold. Firstly, the Irish prison population is overwhelmingly male (Irish Prison Service Report, 2007). Secondly there is overwhelming evidence to suggest that men are underrepresented in literacy and basic education programmes (Learning for Life, 2000; Owens, 2000). The Economic and Social Research Institute’s Annual School Leavers’ Survey (Gorby et al, 2006) reported that 64% of early school leavers are boys and according to the OECD those who receive the most formal education are more likely to avail of education and training as adults. It is in this context that I want to interview men who have decided to participate in educational classes within the confines of the prison.

The pilot study was conducted in February and March 2009 and two learners attending the prison school volunteered to take part. Each learner was interviewed twice with each interview lasting approximately one hour. Eleven themes were identified from the pilot study including early school leaving, the importance of the role of the teacher, the influence of peer relations and also the influence of home and community life on views of education and the impact of parents’ relationship with school authorities. Other key themes emerged such as barriers to accessing prison education and motivations to enrol and continue education. A sub-theme of drugs and the environment of the prison also emerged. Apart from issues of data collection, the pilot study reinforced the implications of conducting the study in the environment of the prison and the emotional impact of the study on the researcher.

**References**

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