

Life History Method to Study Policy Changes and its Impact on Teachers' lives: Experiences, Dilemmas and Reflections

Abstract

This paper is based on the methodology used for the doctoral research that is, life history method to study policy changes and its impact on teachers' lives. The paper sketches out the process of data collection from the beginning to end. It throws light on the participants' views that is, teachers' views on the methodology used by the researcher. In the last two sections, the paper delineates dilemmas faced by the researcher and reflection on methodology and its dimensions which helped the researcher to navigate through teachers' lives to study the educational policy changes.

Introduction

The paper draws from the methodology of the doctoral research study conducted in Delhi, India to understand changes in educational policy and its impact on the teachers' work lives. The objectives of the research study are to examine current policy and the structural regimes within which teachers' practices are regulated. It attempts to understand teachers' interpretation of curricular and policy changes, and how the state's policy is impacting the school teachers' understanding of their role as professionals that is, how they perceive their work and lives. The participants of the study were primary school teachers of Municipal Corporation of Delhi of Shahadra south east zone. In order to fulfil the objectives of the study, the relevant documents related to policy changes like notices, circulars, and life history method were used to understand teachers' perspective.

The focus of this paper is to draw insights from the methodology of the research study that is, life history method. In the first few sections, the paper explains the life history method, and later sketches out the process of data collection using this method.

Life History Method For Examining The Impact Of Policy On Teachers

A multi-layered—national, state, district and school—examination was necessary to understand how policy changes were experienced by teachers. Goodson (2008) in his book, investigated teachers' lives and work and strongly recommended a deeper study of their lives. He described how teachers' lives were subject to various degrees of closure because they take place in one of the most historically circumscribed social spaces.

Schools are institutions regulated by various policies, guidelines and rule prescribing pedagogic interventions and accountability, as well as large-scale assessments (Goodson, 2008, p. 49) and various other aspects. Teachers also go through systematic and invasive socialisation during their education, pre-service as well as in-service training. According to Goodson, the post-modern way of understanding the teachers' selves that were free-floating and multiple, was subject to change and is constantly in flux, ignoring the "circumscribed spaces" and "socialized trajectories" of teachers' lives (ibid). Strategies for self-formation, therefore, take

place in juxtaposition with institutionalised and socialised schooling practices.

What is Life History Method?

It is a qualitative method to study the lives of social actors embedded in a particular social context. Sociologists not only admire it because of its relevance to study the lives of people and social relations, but it has become much more significant in the current wave of neoliberalism in today's life. Life history is a narrative research in which participants express their opinions, perceptions, and the critical events and stories of their lives. It is like an ongoing project, where social history and social geography of situations play a large role in terms of the participants' location and collaborations with others to contextualize and weave an inter textual commentary (Goodson, 2008, p. 55).

Why Life History Method?

It is well-known for bringing forth the voices of the participants, which would otherwise have remained absent, because it places people and phenomena at its centre. Life history is more than a life story because the aim of the method is to understand the patterns of social relations, interactions, and constructs in which the lives of humans/actors are embedded (Goodson, 2008, p. 54). Life history contextualizes, politicizes and pushes the question whether private issues are also public matters (Goodson 2008, p. 54). The participants raise issues which they consider as important, and the conversations are lengthy narrations in which they can speak their minds, locating themselves in a time and space chosen by them.

In the study, the teachers narrated episodes concerning their colleagues, inspectors, the school head, career choices, the significant people in their lives, students, and the parents of their students while they discuss the changes and how they locate themselves in a particular time and context. To study the changes in policy and their impact on the profession and its practice, it is necessary to study the teachers' lives in

relation to policy changes and educational reforms. According to Goodson and Sikes (2001), issues are seen as important in the life history method because (i) individuals have different views about their lives (such as their professional self or the child/parent self); (ii) there is an interactive relationship between perceptions and experiences of life, and historical and social contexts and events; (iii) life histories provide evidence of how individuals negotiate their identities, experiences and made sense of the roles (and rules) in social worlds in which they live.

In the context of studying policy changes from the teachers' perspective, three dimensions are significant:

1. Individuals have different views about their lives (such as the professional self or the child/parent self)

In the study, individual teachers had different views and experiences of their personal and professional selves because every teacher's life is embedded in a specific context (such as family and the institution they are part of) though there was common sense knowledge about their work, and the practice of teaching. Each teacher held a different view based on their ethics and principles, and different beliefs which guided their work.

2. There is an interactive relationship between perceptions and life experiences, and historical and social contexts and events.

Here, the teachers' perceptions and experience of the policy changes have an interactive relationship with the historical and social contexts of their profession. Their socialising process follows a trajectory that is influenced by unique historical and social roots. For example, the importance of textbooks and the examination system, which was established in the colonial times, are crucial to the lives of the teachers. This has implications on the teachers' understanding of changes in the curriculum and assessment practices. Their professional status oscillates between that of a lower rung government employee and an authoritative image of a



'guru', which is how teachers are perceived in the Indian culture. In the Indian context, there was an interactive relationship between experiences of life, and the historical and social context and episodes of teachers' life reflects how it operates in practice.

3. Life histories provide evidence of how individuals negotiate their identities, and how their experiences made sense of the roles (and rules) in their social worlds.

Each teacher in this study held a certain set of beliefs about being a teacher and the practice of teaching. The narratives reveal how these beliefs were formed, as well as how the teachers negotiated their beliefs in their daily lives. They also provide insights on how the teachers negotiate older identities at their workplaces, developing newer expectations of their work. This provides scope for tracing the exact changes that the teachers brought into their practice, and an understanding of what it means to be a teacher.

In the life history method, teachers narrate their stories as personal accounts. However, these stories would be located in the theories of context, and as social constructs which allow me, the researcher, to locate and interrogate the social world in which these stories are embedded.

Process of Data Collection

Introduction and Rapport building

The introductory meeting with the teachers was held at a school. Out of seven teachers, five agreed to speak at their homes or outside school. The timing for the meetings depended on the teacher's availability. One headmaster and a teacher wanted the conversations to take place at the school itself. A teacher (Manish) wanted to be interviewed during school hours because DIET trainees were taking his classes. The researcher insisted that the meeting be held after school and outside. Finally, the teacher agreed to be interviewed in a park and, later, invited the researcher to visit his home too. However, despite the researcher's efforts, the headmaster insisted that her interview be conducted in her office at school only.

The researcher would travel with the teachers to their homes (with their permission) which helped her to understand how a teacher reached school. It also gave the researcher an opportunity to break the ice and start an informal conversation. Initially, the discussions would be about their schooling, childhood and their family lives. This helped to build a comfortable environment for longer interactions as well as to understand each person's biographical context.

Recording of talks and conversations

Face-to-face conversations were conducted for collecting data. Informal conversations were also part of the methodology of study. All interviews and conversations were recorded in Hindi using a voice recorder. The conversations did not follow a set sequence. The flow was based on the issues that emerged from the long conversations and the topics that the teachers considered important. The teachers talked about their early career changes, trajectories of their work lives and contemporary issues.

The conversations covered the teachers' schooling, recruitment to their jobs, the enactment of the Right to Education Act and policies, the distribution of Mid-day Meals¹ at school, and other matters which impacted their teaching practice. They also spoke about the involvement of parents, salaries, leave and promotion policies, their colleagues and headmaster/mistress, the school inspectors, curriculum-related areas like assessment, textbooks, and other academic and para-academic work that they were required to perform. Also included in the teachers' narratives were the admission policies, election duty, the types of para-academic work, leave rules, work that women and men do, life episodes and experiences, feelings and opinions on various dimensions of their lives.

Focused attention and patient listening were key to gathering data and information.

1. Mid- day meals are provided by the state during break time of a day in public schools.

They also helped the researcher probe deeper for more meaningful information. Probing was a crucial aspect of the interviews. In many places clarification to answers were requested using words and phrases like “*matlab*”(meaning), “what do you mean by this”, “please explain it further”, “please elaborate”, “how”, “why”, “pardon”, “do you mean to say this”, “please clarify”, etc. These expressions helped to carry the conversations further and go deeper into the meanings and beliefs of participants.

Movements

The life history method provides ample scope for understanding movements from past episodes and how teachers operate in the present as well as in making internal connections between the different fields or contexts in which they live. Episodic conversations with the teachers revealed beliefs about their practice and evidence of practical knowledge. This gave the researcher insights on how the teachers’ professional and personal lives were not two distinct areas. For example, the teachers explained how they adopted some of the practices they had learnt from their teachers. The teachers also described how their expectations as parents impacted their practice. One teacher’s satisfaction with their profession inspired their children to become teachers.

These movements were insightful. Although they deviated from the focus of conversations, a careful and attentive listening helped the researcher in sustaining the discussion.

Another strategy was to keep a paper and pencil ready for writing questions or clarifications and making a note of cues that would be used for further probing after completion of the present argument or narration.

During interactions, the participants opened up, sharing views, perceptions and experiences. This researcher became a familiar figure with the families of the participants also. There were also discussions on personal matters, especially on issues

and problems that seemed to affect them at that time.

During the later stages, teachers gained a better understanding of the method of this research and its purpose, because of which they equally participated in deciding the flow. Often, the participant themselves would assert a point, mentioning ‘*yeh zaroor likhna*’ (you should write [about] this [in your thesis])

Teachers’ Views On Approach / Method Of Research Study

The approach to research was a new experience for teachers, especially about the time taken. Often, they had to sit through prolonged sessions. They had expected to have about three sessions of interviews.

There was a considerable amount of appreciation by the teachers for the method. This was mainly because the teachers felt that that they were being given importance, which was rarely their experience. In fact, as the teachers mentioned, no one had ever shown much interest in knowing about their professional practice and experiences. From one perspective, this was also a reflection of their isolated lives as workers and the hierarchies that are present in their profession.

The participants also shared their opinion that the life history method helped them reflect on their views and perspectives more deeply than they had before. The experience was a meaningful journey for them as they could talk about their lives and professional practice in a comprehensive manner. Teachers said that it was also an insightful journey for them because they could talk about their practice and profession in a more comprehensive manner than before. They could also reflect on the ‘why’ of their practice and why they thought in a particular manner, what kind of strategies they adopted, what were their beliefs about good students, the head master and teachers, etc.

The teachers also said they got to know about policies which they were not aware of



earlier. For example, they were not aware of the rules of assured career promotion and other employment-related rules till these were pointed out to them by the researcher.

A few teachers even expected that the thesis, after its publication, would make the government more aware of their work lives and bring in changes that will address the realities in their schools. One teacher, who had many ideas of bringing in systemic changes in the education system, hoped that this study would help in making her voice heard at the ministry level. However, it was repeatedly stressed that this work was only a doctoral study and that they should not entertain hopes and expectations of change.

The Researcher's Dilemma

Certain situations posed a dilemma, especially during the times that the researcher was asked questions related to her personal life. During the data gathering stage, the researcher got married, which became a matter of interest for many teachers. The researcher was asked about how she felt, her relationship with her in-laws, her husband, etc. Since the teachers had shared details about their lives, there was the expectation that the researcher would willingly share information about herself too. The researcher was constantly confronted with the dilemma—how much to share and when.

Even while they were talking about issues related to their practice, and professional matters, initially, the participants would look at the researcher for cues so as to seek her opinion. It was a challenge to maintain a neutral position (as expected of a researcher) in the face and not respond to the several *'don't you think'* and *'what do you think'* queries that were directed at her.

Reflections On The Life History Method

This research study used the life history method to examine the impact of policy changes in teachers' work life. The teachers

who were part of the study talked about their experiences of the ongoing work life and earlier life stories. This helped the researcher in tracing the impact of changes on their professional identity and work. The method helped to study the current context as well as the past episodes from which teachers' beliefs were formed. It helped immensely in reconstructing historical aspects of teachers' work life in which their identity was rooted and how it was affected or unaffected in the ongoing situations through their biographical accounts. Here the focus was to understand how teachers constructed the meaning of policy changes. According to Ball and Goodson (1986), the stories of teachers' work lives construed meaning and self-representation. Secondly, as mentioned above, this method allowed the movements in different operating discourses while conducting open-ended interviews. This methodology helped in tracing changes in teachers' work life and their 'voice' as an actor moving in the discourses of the past and present. Further one could capture how the larger contexts or the structural changes operated in teachers' life and how they, as an agent, interpret and implement these changes through their practice.

Casey (1995) writes: "Biography falls in the broad genre of narrative research which 'confirms the arrival of post-paradigmatic age'—an age that actively sponsors the voices of teachers, teacher educators and students; voices that have long been absent from education research and policy." (p. 235)

The major contribution of the methodology was to enable capturing the temporal aspect of teachers' life from stories of their initial careers to the current work life, teachers' own schooling experiences to teachers as parents. It further gave scope to study changes of the particular period when the teachers' work got intensified. Keltechermans (1993) has noted that the temporal dimension is one of the core strengths of the biographical approach and study of career stories. Using this method, he studied professional development of teachers by analysing the narrative data culminated

in reconstruction of the professional self and subjective education theory. He states: "Teachers' actual thinking and acting constitutes one moment, a fragment in a continuous process assigning meaning to the perceived and experienced reality. Professional environment thus also includes a temporal dimension. The biographical perspectives conceive of context in a special and temporal sense." (p. 444)

The different aspect of teachers' identity also got highlighted such as the teachers' relationship with their supervisors, teachers as pedagogues, and teachers as government employees. In this way, the life history method gave the scope of understanding changes in different arenas of teachers' work life. One

could also navigate through the linkages between these arenas of work life. Sriprakash (2011) in her research article examined the teacher's work story and efficacy of reforms in the state of Karnataka in India. Through teachers' work stories, she unpacked tension between demands posed by the reform processes and teachers' social status. She could reflect upon multiple shifting positions other than through teachers' narratives. She could bring out how the child-centered ideals got negotiated in teacher and authority relationship, bureaucratic regulations and teacher's social status in labour market. Hence, with this methodology, one was able to understand teachers' location in the historical, cultural and institutional context

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