

Public Memories and Private Meanings: Representing the “Happy Childhood” Narrative in Oral Histories of Adolescence and Schooling in Australia, 1930s-1950s

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Drawing on an historical study of adolescence and education in Australia in the mid-decades of the twentieth century, this paper explores narratives of schooling from the standpoint of pupils who attended school in the 1930s and 1950s. First, we consider a common theme that has emerged in our interviews, which we describe as the “happy childhood” or “happy schooldays” narrative, and outline some fruitful ways of understanding the cultural and subjective significance of this construction of schooling and growing up. We argue that these seemingly generic narratives offer insight into how the present is experienced and constructed, not only how past educational experiences are remembered. In doing so, we explore the work of memory and nostalgia in accounts of the self as a student, and propose a rethinking of nostalgia as more than romantic sentiment and as more than a simple story of social decline. Nostalgia, we argue, is pivotal to how participants construct a critique of their present and navigate the shifting relationship between past and present. Second, we offer some preliminary methodological observations on the challenges in undertaking and interpreting oral histories in educational research, noting some practical and conceptual dimensions, including the effect of researcher memory and desire on the interpretation of school-day narratives.

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Oral history has played an important role in bringing into view the experiences and stories of groups silenced, ignored or misrepresented by formal institutional histories. While this has been a well-documented and arguably well-worn theme in accounts of oral history's own genealogy, it nevertheless remains a salient rationale and impetus. This is particularly so in the case of history of education, where a pronounced focus on administrative, system or school level historical studies has, until recently, meant that the perspectives of "ordinary" teachers and students have often been over-looked in favour of accounts of leaders, key figures and drivers of change.² While institutional histories and studies that foreground influential educational actors are clearly important, so too are histories that illuminate the more ordinary and mundane aspects of schooling. Oral history offers a way of understanding those experiential aspects of school life and the kinds of shared experiences of education in the past that might not be readily available in documentary records, such as aspects of being a student. At the same time, conducting oral histories of schooling shares many of the interpretive challenges encountered by oral history practice more generally, including the tension between self and public representation, the dynamics of the interview itself, the role of memory and nostalgia, and the playing out of the past-present relationship in interview narratives.³ In the following discussion, such methodological and conceptual issues are understood as enriching, not undermining of the analysis of school-day narratives and memories.

Drawing on an historical study of adolescence and education in Australia in the mid-decades of the twentieth century, this paper explores narratives of schooling from the standpoint of pupils who attended school in the 1930s and 1950s.⁴ Two main areas of discussion are developed. First, we consider a common theme that has

² Derrick Armstrong, "Historical Voices: Philosophical Idealism and the Methodology of 'Voice' in the History of Education," *History of Education* 32, no. 2 (2003): 201-217; Jack Dougherty, "From Anecdote to Analysis: Oral Interviews and New Scholarship in Educational History," *The Journal of American History* 86, no. 2 (1999): 712-723; Richard J. Altenbaugh, "Introduction," in *The Teacher's Voice: A Social History of Teaching in Twentieth-Century America* (London: Farmer Press, 1992), 1-5.

³ Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds. *The Oral History Reader*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2006).

⁴ The project on which this article draws is a genealogical study of schooling and adolescence in Australia during the middle decades of the twentieth century, "Educating the Australian Adolescent: An Historical study of Curriculum, Counselling and Citizenship, 1930s - 1970s." The research is funded by an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant 2009-11; and Katie Wright is the recipient of an Australian Research Council Postdoctoral Fellowship (DP0987299). The principal researchers are Julie McLeod and Katie Wright, with research assistance from Sari Braithwaite, Sophie Rudolph and Amy McKernan. For further information, see the project website: www.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/ea

emerged in our interviews, which we describe as the “happy childhood” or “happy schooldays” narrative, and outline some fruitful ways of understanding the cultural and subjective (individual) significance of this construction of schooling and growing up. In particular, we see these seemingly generic narratives as offering insight into how the present is experienced and constructed, not only how past educational experiences are remembered. In doing so, we explore the work of memory and nostalgia in accounts of the self as a student, and argue for a rethinking of nostalgia as more than romantic sentiment and as more than a simple story of social decline. Nostalgia, we argue, is pivotal to how participants construct a critique of their present and navigate the shifting relationship between past and present. Second, we offer some preliminary methodological observations on the challenges in undertaking and interpreting oral histories in educational research, noting some practical and conceptual dimensions, including the effect of researcher memory and desire on the interpretation of school-day narratives.

The stories we were told by interviewees about their school experiences evoked events and motifs that resonated beyond particular schools or locations: the power of certain teachers, the longing for simpler times. Simultaneously, these recollections conveyed something of the detail of a particular school and school system, which in turn pointed to trends in school organization, such as forms of discipline or assessment, or the impact of influential waves of international educational expertise on school reforms and curriculum. Such multi-layered narratives contain many points of reference as well as idiosyncratic detail and drawing out both is a benefit of oral history and biographical research. However, it was often the more generic, almost mythical accounts of school days that were most intriguing for us and are the main focus of this discussion.

Organizing Interviews and the Shape of Memories

To contextualise the production of the narratives elicited in our interviews, we offer some preliminary comments about our approach and methodology. In designing the larger study on which this article draws, we decided to combine oral history interviews with conventional documentary and archival sources in order to gain different standpoints and perspectives and also to understand the work of memory in *and* about education. In addition, we wanted to digitally archive the oral history interviews so that they would be available for future researchers and, we hoped, would also form the beginning of an important source for the history of Australian education. In recent years, there has been a notable decline in the formal study of history of education in Australia,⁵ and we wanted to contribute to moves to reinvigorate this field of study by building up archives of oral histories of schooling.

⁵ Craig Campbell and Geoffrey Sherrington, “The History of Education: The Possibility of Survival,” *Change: Transformations in Education* 5, no. 1 (2002): 46-64.

In employing oral history as a key component of our project design, our hope was twofold: that the oral histories would stand alone both as important historical sources, not only for our project but also for others in the future, and that they would supplement, enrich and even complicate our analysis of the documentary sources that we were also drawing upon. The intention was to bring into view the recollections and experiences of former students, as well as people from different parts of Australia with diverse backgrounds and experiences of schooling who held professional roles in Australian education. Our oral history interviews presented some particular challenges that arose from the breadth of the project. In contrast to many educational oral histories that focus on one era, one school, or one community, or the perspectives of one group, our project took a “bigger picture” view of education over half a century, accessing a range of people associated with education, from students to senior administrators, across the nation. The shared experience of the project is schooling, but in a variety of spatial and temporal dimensions.

To date, we have conducted close to fifty interviews with a broad range of educational actors: students, teachers, policy and curriculum personnel, school counsellors and guidance officers. Through the interviews, we have captured memories of events and experiences that shed light on various aspects of citizenship in the making and the role of schools in that process, both through the curriculum and through formal and informal student support structures, like guidance and counselling. Read alongside curriculum policy documents, administrative records and reports, our interviews illuminate the role that formal education has historically played in the shaping of future citizens, through the various practices and rituals of schools, from assemblies and singing the national anthem, to curriculum areas such as civics and social studies.

In preparing for the oral history interviews, we discussed the potential benefits and disadvantages of sending prompt questions to participants prior to the interviews. On the one hand, we were concerned about the difficulty participants might encounter when trying to recall experiences of many years past. For the cohort schooled in the 1930s, this involved recollections of childhood and adolescence of more than seventy years ago. We were acutely aware that even those we were interviewing about their professional roles in education would have to reach back up to fifty years. Consequently, providing some prompts prior to the interview offered the potential of enhancing the memory work required of interviewees, and perhaps ease the anxiety that some clearly felt about what they would remember, and what they had to offer the research. Yet we were also concerned that in giving participants a list of questions prior to the interview, we might set up a frame for a particular narrative form, and a given tone, eliciting the kind of narrative they thought we wanted to hear.

We finally decided in favour of sending interviewees a list of sample questions. Two factors influenced this decision. First, our interest in using the interviews to enrich other sources meant that we hoped to elicit recollections of schooling that might inform our knowledge of how schooling was organized and designed to shape young people in ways not necessarily recorded in the documentary record, things like school assemblies, corporal punishment, gender segregations, and so on. This necessitated an approach that would access episodic memory – that is provide recollection of specific experiences and events. As Philip Gardner describes this process, “to liberate memory in ways that enable it to speak more directly to those forms of evidence that historians have traditionally sought in the documentary record.”⁶ Gardner further notes that this approach is “informed by those older and more traditional notions of narrative” in contrast to “the more recent ‘turn’ to narrativity in which ... questions of meaning and identity become paramount.”⁷ This more traditional approach to oral history requires what Gardner refers to as narrative disruption, or the attempt to redirect the interview from an emphasis on “the construction and rehearsal of narrative identity towards the recollection of isolated or overlooked aspects of memory.”⁸

In the first instance, we were wanting to elicit something akin to what Gardner describes, to prompt and guide recollections about specific aspects of school experience, and to capture some of the details of the daily life of school which might offer glimpses into practices that could assist us to read the documentary sources in new ways. Our approach has thus been broadly that of working within a “reconstructive mode.”⁹ Yet, we were also interested in questions of identity formation – student identities, schooling identities, and professional identities – and aware that even as we asked the “what happened” questions, respondents’ narratives would inevitably be shaped by, and help shape, their sense of self in the present and their investment in their own biographical story. Such insights have been part of the turn to memory in oral history studies, and the accompanying attention to how stories about the past are intricately caught up in the telling and making of one’s own biographical journey.¹⁰ The issue here for us is less whether memories are true and false, partial or comprehensive, but what the selective recalling and telling of them suggests about things that mattered culturally and subjectively, at the time of the event and in the time/s of the (re)telling. While on one level it matters whether

⁶ Philip Gardner, “Oral History in Education: Teacher’s Memory and Teachers’ History,” *History of Education* 32, no. 2 (March 2003): 183.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 184.

⁹ Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 286.

¹⁰ Julie McLeod and Rachel Thomson, *Researching Social Change: Qualitative Approaches* (London: Sage, 2009).

participants tell us stories that can be confirmed or contradicted by other forms of historical evidence, this is not the main point of the analysis. Rather, our focus was on what was remembered and how that memory was recounted and woven into a story about schooling and about the self. As the work of Luisa Passerini, among others, has shown, asking people to talk about what they remember takes us into the realm of intra- and inter psychodynamic processes.¹¹ This is so even when as researchers we think we might simply want to uncover the different experiences and events in the past. We return to the matter of researchers' expectations below.

In terms of educational oral histories and probing people's memories of having been students, we are asking them to return to a very particular type of identity that is formed at a crucial stage of life and is typically central to (self)understandings of growing up. In this way, the experience of schooling for the overwhelming majority of people is inextricably tied to youthful experiences and complex processes of identity formation.¹² Most of us can recall and tell stories about having been a student, and the rituals and hierarchies of school classrooms and playgrounds often remain powerful memories. On the one hand, then, the notion of student identities has a kind of commonsense and universal register as an identity that is widely experienced and familiar. On the other hand, the story one tells about having been a student taps into a profound sense of who we are individually, and how we were formed and shaped as young people, in close relation with peers, friends and family, and in the emotionally-charged institutional yet intimate space of school. Our approach was thus shaped by both a concern with memories of school in an "objective" or verifiable sense – for example, what subjects were offered, how the classroom was organized, and so on – as well as subjective experiences and memory constructions of having been a student.¹³

Before discussing some of the emerging themes, it is helpful to say something about how we conducted the oral history interviews. Although our main research focus was on secondary education, we would typically commence by asking respondents to provide some early biographical details before discussing primary [elementary] school, then high school and beyond. The questions were generally open-ended and aimed to be inviting, with the first part of the interview following something of a life story/life history format. Respondents engaged with this format

¹¹ Luisa Passerini, *Memory and Utopia: The Primacy of Intersubjectivity* (London: Equinox, 2007).

¹² Steven Brint, *Schools and Societies*, 2nd ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006). Julie McLeod and Lyn Yates, *Making Modern Lives: Subjectivity, Schooling and Social Change* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006).

¹³ For the present analysis, we have not included our interviews with teachers about their own experiences of schooling. Given their life-long immersion in schools and professional interest in educational matters, it is perhaps not surprising that their narratives generally include "happy" memories of school, along with reflections on the teachers who they admired and recall being influential to their own decision to enter the teaching profession.

by the retelling of what seemed to be often-recounted details of their early lives: where they were born, where they grew up, those narrative paths which, as Gardner suggests, “may be easily marked out and can be followed assuredly.”¹⁴

As the discussion moved on to school, we asked what they remembered in particular. This type of questioning led to recollections of school routines, physical spaces, school subjects and, of course, teachers. Although most appeared to have little difficulty describing their memories of school days, others reminded us of the difficulty of moving from a familiar narrative path to the recall of particular episodes or elaborations that had seldom been considered. Now seventy, Ron responded when asked what he remembered about primary school: “You’re going back a bit,” and later when asked what he remembered about one teacher that he had praised as particularly good, “He was just a good teacher, you enjoyed learning. Geez going back a bit though isn’t it?”

How people remember their past, the things that stand out, what is recalled and when, are all clearly shaped by many types of influences.¹⁵ As Paula Hamilton observes, the ways in which people relate to the past appears “so arbitrary, fashioned by a complex range of factors operating as much in the past as the present.” Reflecting on her own interviews, she writes: “What people remembered depended on who they had talked with, what television or film they’d seen.”¹⁶ Many of the stories people told us were elicited in response to the question: “Can you tell us about your strongest memories of primary/secondary school?” This was also included in the list of sample questions they received prior to their interview. The narrative subsequently offered was one in which our participants’ memory work therefore had a further temporal dimension: the time (days or weeks) in which they prepared for the interview and revisited their memories and stories prior to the actual interview. This undoubtedly shaped their expectations of the exchange, and the sorts of responses they were generating even before we spoke to them. Some brought along notes they had made, while others told us that they were prompted to dig out old diaries and other artefacts that allowed them better access to those memories.

Consequently, in analysing the interviews it is clear that they can be read in multiple ways. The first and most obvious speaks to the “what” of the organization of education, supplementing and enriching documentary sources and further illuminating the organization of schooling across Australia during the mid-twentieth century. But the interviews offer much more, and for the present discussion we focus on the insights they have provided into some shared values and memories of generations of Australian school students. Of particular interest to us is how the past is remembered to make sense of the present: both schooling and young people in the

¹⁴ Gardner, “Oral History in Education,” 177.

¹⁵ McLeod and Thomson, *Researching Social Change*.

¹⁶ Paula Hamilton, “The Oral Historian as Memrist,” *The Oral History Review* 32, no. 1 (2005): 17.

present, and the interviewees themselves in the present. As Caroline Eick has recently observed, “When oral historians stir up memories of school experiences, they stir up worlds of identities in the making. They also stir up present-day integrated meanings of school and the educational system, meanings that simultaneously interlace, buttress, and challenge memories.”¹⁷ One of the striking themes in our interviews with a range of people about their youth and their schooling experiences was the narrative of the “happy childhood” or “happy schooldays.” Building on this, we explore the ways in which these understandings about the past are drawn upon and juxtaposed to critique the present.

The Happy Childhood Narrative and the Past-Present Relationship

We turn now to some of the themes that have emerged from our research thus far which go beyond the kind of “what happened” story, and throw light on attitudes to schooling and views of social life in the past and in the present. Early in the research, one of the themes that struck us was the way in which memories of childhood and school were typically framed in a kind of shorthand way as very good or very happy times, what we are calling the happy childhood or happy schooldays narrative. It is not that we were expecting tales of woe; rather, it was simply that many of the narratives contrasted so sharply with our own historical understandings of the times in which our respondents were growing up: the poverty and associated hardship of the depression, the social dislocation of the interwar years and the Second World War, and for Indigenous students in the 1930s and onwards, forced child removal, increased state intervention and social policies which reflected prevailing attitudes of Aboriginal children as uneducable.

Our intention is not to call into question the accuracy of respondents’ accounts of their emotional experiences of youth and school, as we could do in relation to memories of curriculum content that can be examined and compared against the documentary records of that time, such as educational policies, textbooks or teaching manuals. Rather, our interest lies in what this pervasive narrative might tell us about the sensibilities of a generation of Australian men and women born during the early to mid-twentieth century. We are also interested in the ways that such framing of various aspects of social life at the time of their childhood and adolescence illuminates the complex relationship between the past and the present in educational memory and in particular critiques about the present. In what follows, then, we explore the happy childhood narrative and some associated themes that arose during interviews with people who were born between 1915 and 1945, and whose schooling experiences collectively span the period from the 1920s to the 1950s.

¹⁷ Caroline Eick, “Oral Histories of Education and the Relevance of Theory: Claiming New Spaces in a Post-Revisionist Era,” *History of Education Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (2011): 159.

Not surprisingly, students' recollections of teachers feature prominently in our oral histories. However, we first turn to reflections on childhood and schooling as a very happy time. It is important to note that we did not directly ask people whether they had a "happy childhood," but in reflecting on their earlier years, it was common for them to begin or end a series of recollections with such statements. Mavis, aged ninety and now living in a town close to where she grew up, on an Aboriginal Reserve on a small river island, begins her story by saying:

I had a loving mother and a wonderful father who taught us right from wrong ... mum had ten children, six boys and four girls, so there was a big family of us but we all loved each other, got on very, very well together, brothers all looked after us all their sisters and helped each other and everything ... it was very, very happy days of my life, wonderful days.

In describing her childhood, Mavis does not avoid discussion of the suffering in her community in the face of an increasingly intrusive approach to the management of Indigenous people, particularly the removal and institutionalization of children.¹⁸ In her case, the construction of a very happy childhood, a loving family and a strong community sits alongside the major disruptions experienced by others on the island. She speaks of boys being sent away to homes and to work on farms and children removed in cases of suspected neglect. Still, when reflecting on her childhood she says: "When I think about it now though it was very happy days, we were very, very happy." And she makes a similar statement in relation to school: "But they were lovely days my school days, very, very nice."

Mavis offers a complex and nuanced account of her youth, one that acknowledges difficulties but in the final analysis is remembered extremely fondly. Our interview with Norm, who started school in 1939, is illustrative of a somewhat different rendering of a similar narrative form. Norm grew up in a regional country town and much of his story involves his recollection of family and social life, as well as school experiences and peer relationships during wartime and in the years that followed. At the beginning of the interview, he says: "the thing I can remember most about the growing up, of course it was very difficult times." Although he acknowledges this early, it is a sentiment that is largely absent in the remainder of the interview, surfacing only very occasionally in relation to some of the stories he tells. One such story involved a teacher who Norm describes as "a nice fellow."

¹⁸ Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*, Commissioner: Ronald Wilson (Sydney: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

However, if a child were tapping his or her pencil on the table, then “he used to go mad, and I mean mad, he used to go right off.” Norm later discovered that he was a returned soldier, a tail gunner in a Wellington bomber and that the sound of a tapping pen stirred memories of the war, at which time “he just used to go crazy.”

Norm’s story is largely framed through the telling of anecdotes in relation to teachers, classroom experiences, or interactions with peers and his family. While most are told in a jocular fashion, many of the stories were somewhat jarring to our contemporary sensibilities. This is particularly the case with his stories of teachers and discipline and corporal punishment:

We had one teacher that you would say was ... don’t say violent but physical ... As it turned out he was a very clever man, and he’s a nice bloke ... but he wouldn’t take any nonsense. If you played up with him he would come up and he would get a ruler and he’d give you a good whack on the back of the legs. Of course it was only short pants in those days. You’d get a good whack on the back of the legs if he wasn’t happy with you. But he was a nice bloke.

Of another teacher he said:

He had a piece of vinyl flooring about an inch and a half wide and about I suppose two foot long, and that’s what he used for a strap. And he would only strap you from the front, if you were unlucky enough to get the strap you had to put your hand out and the strap would come right up your arm when he hit you ... he got a reputation for being nasty with it.

Norm’s memories of his female teachers are not dissimilar. He recounts an incident involving a female teacher who, having overheard a boy swearing, grated some Velvet soap into a dish, added water and “made him put it in his mouth and swill it around” in front of the class. Another involved the punishment of his entire science class after a boy opened a gas valve:

So she made all of us stand up, she got out a strap and she went right around the whole class, give us all a cut with a strap, everyone got a strap. She went back and she said now own up, and she gave us a talking to and we still wouldn’t own up. So she said right, stand up, so she went around the second time ... but then again she turned out to be a good teacher too, she was a good sport.

As the remarks above suggest, far from being critical of those teachers, he is fulsome in his praise of them, and in summation says: “I’ve never had a crook teacher ... No we had good teachers.” He sums up his secondary schooling experiences as “good times ... really good.” This kind of reflection was offered by many of our interviewees. Alan, an Indigenous man who attended a two-room government rural primary school in the early 1950s, offered this description of his schooling: “Oh it was good. ... we loved school up there.” A similar comment was made by Brian, who attended a metropolitan Catholic primary school in the 1930s, and then a Catholic boys technical college in the early 1940s. When asked what he thought was the most important thing about school in the era in which he was growing up, he responded: “How bloody good it [was].”

In addition to the proclamation of good or happy times, what sharpened our attention to the very positive view respondents expressed of the past were the ways in which they typically contrasted the time of their youth with the present of today. Mavis, for example, describes how in primary school she would knit socks to send to soldiers during wartime:

I knitted socks with the Army khaki wool when I was going to school to help ... we used to do a lot of things like that to help the war effort, you know, years ago ... I don’t know, the kids sort of done things like that not like these kids nowadays they wouldn’t do it to help you, they wouldn’t do anything like that to help the war effort, be too much trouble.

In contrasting the past and the present, Mavis focuses here on issues of character and social expectation. For others, the broader social and economic context formed the backdrop of their reflection. Kay, who grew up in an inner city suburb of Melbourne, expressed concern not about declining standards, but the difficulties faced by young people today. In relation to seeking employment in the early 1950s, she commented: “I could choose whatever job I wanted ... things were different. It’s hard to image in today’s climate ... it’s very hard ... I think we were very fortunate.” Following this comment, she reiterates her view that young people growing up in the 1950s “were very fortunate” and elaborates by saying:

Yes we were. And even as far as, you know, meeting people, you just went to dances and met people, there was no ... there were no nightclubs and there wasn’t a lot of going to hotels or that. [It] was a different era ... things were different. ... When we get together with our friends, you know, we always talk “oh we had the best time” [laughs].

Across the interviews, past-present comparisons ranged from parenting (“I think the parents are to blame for a lot of things that happen these days”: Norm); dress (“boys today are ‘scruffs’ ... but when I went to school ... you were expected to dress properly”: Ron); to law and order (“there was no trouble then”: Alan), and of course, teachers. Joan, who went to school in the 1920s and 1930s, repeatedly praised the quality of her teachers, commenting at one point in our interview: “The teachers were absolutely outstanding, they were always well dressed, always polite.” Later she said: “looking back they were superb.” Joan went on to contrast the teaching staff of her school years with those she encountered when she sent her own children to the same high school: “The outlook was changed and the attitude of teachers had changed too ... there wasn’t the caring of the students that they used to have.” A similar sentiment was expressed by Brian:

... from what I can gather today, you know, I think, I think school teachers were a different breed in those days. All the years I went to school, the three schools I went to, all the teachers were dedicated people, they really worked hard at their job and, you know, worried about you, and they were a different sort of people really, they were.

The caring attitude that Joan and Brian describe was often accompanied by praise for teachers’ commitment, as well as a deep respect for their authority. This sentiment is strikingly evident in Norm’s account of classroom discipline, as in most of our interviews, particularly with men. Anecdotes of “the cuts,” “the strap” or being given “six of the best” were peppered throughout many interviews. Yet such stories were not accompanied by condemnation or criticism. On the contrary, they were conveyed as a routine part of school life, with strict discipline seen as a necessary quality of good educators. Of the Christian Brothers teaching at his primary school, Brian comments: “Oh yeah, they were pretty good on corporal punishment but ... they were dedicated blokes, they really were.” He recounts a particularly memorable incident in which one Brother punished every student, upon learning that many of the English class had not learned a piece of poetry:

He said right, single file, you lot stay there, single file the rest of you, right. And there were 48 kids in this class. He went and got his strap and he took it off his coat and laid it across ... and he gave us six on each hand, the whole lot of kids, 45 kids I reckon he belted, right. And then he said now next time I give you something to learn you’ll learn it won’t you. And by gee not only us but the whole school [laughs].

Alan, who was born several years after Norm and Brian and experienced schooling in a different part of Australia, expresses a similar type of sentiment as he describes the Head Master at his first school: “He was fair, strict but fair, didn’t care who you was, you played up, bang you were gone. But that’s why I said it was a good school, that’s why.”

For Alan, discussion of school discipline and recollections of childhood events prompted reflection on social order in the present. He relayed the story of his brother being sent to a boys’ home for twelve months for what he describes as a fairly minor misdemeanour that took place at the local swimming pool. His description of this event left no doubt that he acknowledged the severity of the twelve-month “sentence,” as he repeats “twelve months” seven times within the space of a few minutes. Yet he also says, “tell you what, he never got into trouble again.” This train of thought then lead him to reflect on law and order during his youth, and in the present:

They were hard then, the police. If you sitting around town they’d charge you with loitering, anything. Walk up and punch you, they’d just hit you.

To see if you’d react?

You didn’t give cheek or nothing. Yeah they’d drive you. They’d walk around town. Now they’re too frightened to walk around, you see three or four of them driving around in a police car.

So you know you said that at school then there wasn’t any trouble at the high school...

No, there was no trouble.

So in the town though, when you said the police were hard, really tough, were they tough on all kids or do you think they were ... did you say they were tougher on Aboriginal kids more than...?

No they were hard on everyone.

Alan then describes how the police are now routinely called to the local high school, “six and seven times a week” and he concludes by saying: “We didn’t have liaison officers at school then, nothing, wasn’t needed.” Alan’s reflections point to some of the complex inter-relationships between memories of schooling and constructions of the past in response to perceptions and experiences in the present. In his narrative,

the ordered world of his youth is contrasted with the social disorder of the present. This past-present comparison is a theme that manifests across many of our interviews. In the remainder of this paper, we discuss how we are working with these themes to explore how we might usefully interpret what on first reading appears to be simply a romanticization of the past.

Memories of schooling and the past in the present

How, then, might we interpret narratives of a happy childhood and the sorts of comparisons our respondents are making between the past and the present? Raphael Samuel argues that “memory is historically conditioned, changing colour and shape according to the emergencies of the moment.” The dynamism of memory means, according to Samuel, that “it is progressively altered from generation to generation ... stamped with the ruling passions of the time.”¹⁹ In using oral history together with archival research, we had hoped and expected to develop a rich account of various aspects of Australian educational history, one informed by the perspectives of different educational actors, from education experts through to former pupils. What was less expected, however, was that our respondents’ reflections would speak as much about their attitudes to the present as to the past. Memory reflects, as Maxine Stevenson argues, “a past that is remembered in the present context, a context that will be influential in determining how that past will be remembered. It will dim some memories and highlight others.”²⁰ Yet it is not only that some things are remembered while others are forgotten; it is also the ways in which memory is shaped by present concerns. Indeed as Paula Hamilton argues: “To struggle with the past is also to pose questions of the present—what the past means in the present.”²¹

In response to these matters, we want to comment briefly on three methodological and interpretive issues raised by our oral history interviews and to indicate some areas for further exploration: the social production of the happy schooldays narrative; nostalgia as a form of critique of the present; and the role and effect of researcher expectations and desires.

Social Production of the “Happy Schooldays” Narrative

Much has been written about the social production of memory, most influentially from the traditions of memory studies associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies.²² While it is beyond the scope of this paper to

¹⁹ Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory, Vol 1: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 1994), x.

²⁰ Maxine Stephenson, “Timeless Projects: Remembering and Voice in the History of Education,” *History of Education Review* 37, no. 2 (2008): 8.

²¹ Hamilton, “The Oral Historian as Memorist,” 13.

²² Popular Memory Group, “Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method,” in *Making History: Studies in*

examine the twists and turns in memory studies, it is important to observe here how individual memories of schooling ineluctably form in relation to powerful cultural narratives of schooling as “the best of days,” the days of innocence and simple times. These representations of schooling are given widespread expression in popular culture, in films, television dramas and in literature, illustrating how personal and cultural narratives are mutually constituted. We found that such personal narratives are more likely to take shape with greater distance from school, and are less common among those recently graduated from school. For older people, the invitation to look back on their school days is also an invitation to look back on their younger selves. For many, the accounts are mediated by the experiences of others, in particular their children or grandchildren; in this respect individual school-day memories are also inter-subjective. Moreover, schooling is both a common and an individual experience, and education itself, as a field of practice, as a social site, and as a process, is framed by these cultural narratives of schooling as promising the “the best of times”. As such, the happy schooldays narrative offers a powerful contrast to widespread perceptions about difficulties and challenges facing schools in the present and to an associated sense of social dis-order.

Nostalgia and Critique

Interpreting past-present comparisons of schooling and social life in which the present is viewed less favourably than the past underlines the importance of grappling with the workings of nostalgia.²³ As Barbara Shircliffe has noted, nostalgia has typically been understood as undermining the integrity of historical data, rendering it an “unreliable” source. Yet she argues that rather than diminishing oral history, the study of nostalgia can enhance our understanding of the use of “historical consciousness to make sense of and comment on the present.” Shircliffe’s study of black high schools closed during desegregation revealed “that many former students and educators from both urban and rural areas have fond memories of growing up and going to school despite the economic and social marginalization and exploitation imposed by segregation.”²⁴ In understanding the function of nostalgia in her study, Shircliffe argues that “former students and teachers are not claiming African Americans benefited from school segregation, but rather, they are pointing to the ironic legacy of desegregation and the tension between community control and integration.”²⁵ It is in this way, according to Shircliffe, that the “yearning for

History-Writing and Politics, ed. R. Johnson, G. McLennan, B. Schwarz & D. Sutton, (London: Hutchison in association with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies University of Birmingham, 1982), 205-52.

²³ Barbara Shircliffe, “‘We Got the Best of That World’: A Case for the Study of Nostalgia in the Oral History of School Segregation,” *The Oral History Review* 28, no. 2 (2001): 59-84.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

something past that is no longer recoverable—allows historians to explore how individuals invest past experiences with meaning and use historical memory as a starting point for social commentary.”²⁶

In many of our interviews, memories do indeed provide the backdrop and impetus for social critique; past and present are juxtaposed as the past is operationalized as a palpable counterpoint to pressing contemporary concerns. In narratives of social decline, nostalgic reflections offer an insight into anxieties about the present. In our interviews, this emerged in relation to educational standards, law and order, and social mores involving forms of public behaviour and self-presentation. As Shircliffe showed and we similarly found, nostalgia can provide the basis for a powerful critique of the present and point to the complex emotional investments in constructing a personal and cultural narrative that eschews powerlessness, particularly in the face of social hardship.

Not all of the interviews we conducted are open to interpretation as nostalgic narratives, with many of our respondents providing critical and negative commentary of various aspects of their schooling and childhoods. This was the case even when concluding with an overall positive assessment. Yet, as we have discussed, the happy school days story was a recurring theme across the majority of interviews. We argue that it is one that offers valuable insights into the dispositions and identity strategies of this generation of Australians who were educated across the mid-decades of the twentieth century. A general belief in the importance of being fair, the significance of social order, keeping up good appearances and a clear sense of defined social roles frequently accompanied accounts of schooling as “the best of days.” In addition to rethinking nostalgia as a form of social critique, there are other possible ways of understanding the dynamics of “happy childhood” stories and how this narrative form may have served a particular function in our interviews. It could also be seen as an expression of participants not wanting to reveal too much about themselves, of reiterating a familiar, if heart-felt story. As Ron said: “If you ask anything too intimate I won’t answer.” Or perhaps it reflects something of the sensibilities of a generation that is commonly characterised as placing a higher value on stoicism and privacy, with a different sense of what is appropriate in terms of self-disclosure and less comfortable with a more confessional interview mode. Hence the happy school days narrative offers a ready-made formulation for capturing the complex experience and memory of growing up and of bringing those memories into the present.

Researcher Expectations

As researchers, we also struggle with navigating the relationships between memory, past and present; our questions and our interests are indeed animated by concerns

²⁶ Shircliffe, ““We Got the Best of That World,”” 62.

about the present, and by wanting to gain a sense of historical perspective and difference on those. The questions we ask, the themes that command our attention, are ones that emerge out of our own histories and contemporary circumstances. While much work in the field of memory studies has focused on the role of memory in the construction of interviewee narratives, we have been struck by how memories of our own schooling, and our understanding of schooling in the present, infuses how we conduct research and how we respond – analytically and emotionally – to the stories and memories of the people we are interviewing. We have found discussions of corporal punishment, for example, compelling both in terms of how it is often remembered – if not fondly, then uncritically – and how respondents’ views, mediated by past experience, contrast so sharply with education policy and social attitudes in the present, including our own. In some respects it did not surprise us that many of our respondents, particularly the men, valued the place of corporal punishment in the school setting. This was justified to us in terms of fairness of treatment and in taking a longer view of the benefits of stern punishment that was seen as ultimately being a positive force for character formation. Yet it has been in the telling of such stories that some of the differences between schooling in the past and in the present are illuminated. In Australia, any form of physical punishment or contact is prohibited in schools today, represented as physical abuse, and any violations of this by teachers, or other public figures, is widely condemned. We inevitably hear stories about physical punishment from the perspective of this contemporary context. But on second listening we can see how such a contrast reflects many social changes, including changes in the role and public perception of the domain of the teacher, shifts in understanding what authoritative conduct is and how order and good conduct are to be achieved.

While stories of discipline and punishment were often furnished as colourful anecdotes, a larger proportion of the narratives reflect the more mundane and routine aspects of school life and in some ways these are more difficult to interpret than stories that invoke something of a visceral response. Themes such as the happiness of earlier times, the simplicity of school life, the superior quality of education and teachers, run counter to more familiar cultural narratives of past educational deprivation and the advantages enjoyed by students in the present. This includes perceptions of better facilities, increased opportunity and more highly qualified teachers. In light of our own knowledge about the poverty and hardship which we presumed these former pupils might have encountered, we were expecting a critique of those earlier times. Instead, what our interviewees offered was a critique of the present, framed against their own memories and the evocation of growing up and being a school student.

Conclusion

We began doing oral histories to complement and enrich our archival research, and to bring other voices into the picture. Our interviews have offered some valuable insights into the concrete and shared experiences of the institutional practices of schools, and how schooling was organized in earlier times. This has been helpful in filling in the gaps of our own knowledge of schooling in the mid-twentieth century. Some of the practices we heard about were not been documented in a time before the proliferation of policies to cover every aspect of schooling, like school leaving age, certification, and curriculum. We have also found the oral history interviews to be helpful in showing how stories of schooling are constructed, and how as a universal experience, one's own memories of school are shaped in relation to views about the present. In the process of doing these interviews, we have thus become more attuned to the productive role of nostalgia and cultural memory of schooling, which we have come to understand as providing a powerful narrative of childhood and schooling as "the best of times." As well as offering alternative perspectives on schooling from the standpoint of students, oral histories offer valuable insights into generational cultural sensibilities and broader methodological and interpretive issues, including how telling the story about one's own schooling amplifies the complexities in navigating the relationship between past and present.

Recent developments in oral history, such as attention to memory and the past-present relationship, have "transformed scholarship in the History of Education."²⁷ As Stevenson has argued: "The shift in focus from the notion of memory as an expression of truth, and oral testimony as a form of evidence, to an emphasis on process, motivation and meaning has provided new questions for oral historians and new understandings of the significance of the cultural context in which memories have been created and remembering occurs."²⁸ Such insights have informed our design and interpretation of the interviews. Returning to the themes raised in our introductory remarks, we have suggested that oral histories provide valuable counterpoints to some preoccupations in the study of education. In particular, we have explored how working with personal narratives and memories of schooling offers important ways to understand the cultural meanings and effects of education, ones that complicate and enrich documentary or institutionally-focused approaches to educational history. Further, oral histories of schooling, in bringing into the foreground the dynamic relation between memory of the past and present circumstances, are important in fostering historical and comparative perspectives on current educational dilemmas, such as teacher and school fairness, discipline and

²⁷ Stephenson, "Timeless Projects," 3.

²⁸ Ibid., 13.

definitions of being a good teacher. Finally, memories and oral histories of being a student illuminate how important schooling itself is in cultural and subjective constructions of the past and the present.