

## Researching emotion and affect in the history of education

Noah W. Sobe\*

*Cultural and Educational Policy Studies, Loyola University, Chicago, USA*

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This exploratory paper was prepared for a symposium held at the 2011 ISCHE conference in which participants were asked to envision future challenges in the historiography of education, to predict where the field was moving, and to imagine what innovations and new interests would arise in the subsequent 30 years. While the paper is playfully written from the vantage point of 30 years in the future and pretends to offer a retrospective review of what happened in the field over that period, its primary purpose is to seriously suggest a number of ways that historians of education might engage with the history of emotion and affect in their work. The first section of the paper describes the consolidation of the history of emotions as a field of historical study and discusses the importance of a ‘governmentality’ approach. It is then suggested in the second section that historians of education increasingly drew on the concept of ‘affect’ and developed ‘affective histories’ of education that both built upon and departed from earlier histories of emotions. The third section of the paper discusses some of the ways in which historians of education incorporated into their work insights from neuroscience into consciousness and choice-making as well as an increased awareness of the object-mediated body.

**Keywords:** historiography; emotions; affect theory; embodiment; governmentality

The purpose of this exploratory paper is to suggest a number of ways that historians of education might engage with the history of emotion and affect in their work. The premise of the paper is that the history of emotions has cohered as a legitimate historical subject, one that historians of education are increasingly drawing upon. However, in this ‘future historiography’ piece I am playfully writing from the perspective of 30 years in the future and pretend to be looking back and offering a retrospective overview of history of education scholarship as it developed in the decades of the 2010s, 2020s and 2030s. I begin by discussing the attention to emotional regulation that dominated the field for most of the twentieth century and even carried over into Foucauldian-influenced ‘governmentality’ approaches when emotions were addressed as a topic in the history of education. In the second section of the paper I suggest that historians of education increasingly drew on the concept of ‘affect’ and developed ‘affective histories’ of education that both built upon and departed from earlier histories of emotions. And, finally, the third section of the paper discusses some of the ways in which historians of education incorporated into their work insights from neuroscience into consciousness and choice-making as well as an increased awareness of the object-mediated body.

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\*Email: [nsobe@luc.edu](mailto:nsobe@luc.edu)

## Hydraulics and regulation: history of education scholarship on emotions through the 2010s

At the turn of the twenty-first century it had been solidly established across many historical subspecialties that human emotions have contours that vary with time and place and that emotions have played a significant role in social change (and social stasis) over time. Quite influential in history of education scholarship was Norbert Elias's 1939 *The Civilizing Process*,<sup>1</sup> which told the story of social processes and cultural patterns that produce increasing emotional restraint as a key dimension of modernity. As Barbara Rosenwein pointed out in her pivotal 2002 historiographic essay 'Worrying about Emotions in History', for much of the twentieth century a 'hydraulic' conceptualisation of emotions as liquids and pressures that 'build up' and must be accommodated had dominated the ways that historians discussed emotions.<sup>2</sup> This approach (present in Elias, Freud, G.S. Hall and pervasive in the field of 'psychohistory') began to be challenged in the last two decades of the twentieth century as scholars emphasised the socially constructed nature of emotions. In fact, grappling with the significance of emotional comportment was not just the purview of academics. Rather, this linked up with a wide range of contemporary phenomena such as the broad circulation of the insights advanced in Arlie Hochschild's groundbreaking 1983 *The Managed Heart: The Commercialization of Human Feeling*;<sup>3</sup> notions<sup>4</sup> of 'anger management' as treated in popular culture; as well as the increased traction that 'Social and Emotional Learning' as an explicit desideratum of schooling gained in educational policy and practice. Emotional behaviour was a widely discussed topic and studies such as Megan Boler's 1999 *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* devoted considerable attention to the emotional projects that educational institutions had been involved with for decades. Nonetheless, even as new conceptualisations of emotions moved to the fore, the theme of emotional regulation gained force as historians increasingly came to view emotional regimes not as negative and repressive but as productive (in Foucauldian terms).

By the beginning of the 2010s historians of education, like their colleagues in other areas, had begun to examine emotions as 'overlearned habits' possessing a neuro-chemical expression, which, over the long term, could be manipulated, learned and unlearned just like other social and cultural practices.<sup>5</sup> This meant, for example, that scholars could analyse phenomena such as 'Victorian sentimentalism', 'national patriotism' or 'Slavic love' and examine different 'emotional regimes' – seeing the school both as a site where these emotional habits were produced and as a site where they played out.<sup>6</sup> This turn to focusing on the social and cognitive

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<sup>1</sup>Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations* (orig. 1939; Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

<sup>2</sup>Barbara Rosenwein, 'Worrying about Emotions in History', *American Historical Review* 107, no. 3 (2002): 821–45.

<sup>3</sup>Arlie Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: The Commercialization of Human Feelings* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983).

<sup>4</sup>Megan Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>5</sup>William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>6</sup>Noah W. Sobe, 'Slavic Emotion and Vernacular Cosmopolitanism: Yugoslav Travels to Czechoslovakia in the 1920s and 1930s', in *Turizm: The Russian and East European Tourist under Capitalism and Socialism*, ed. Anne E. Gorsuch and Diane P. Koenker (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 82–96.

nature of human emotional life joined a broad-based scholarly effort to dismantle the age-old tradition of attempting to distinguish between ‘reason’ and ‘emotion’.<sup>7</sup>

The decade of the 2010s saw a great flourishing of history of education scholarship on emotions. One significant area where this manifested itself was in the new depth that scholars brought to our understandings of how schools work to inculcate national affiliations and patriotic loyalty. Rather than the textbook and curricular analyses of earlier years, which described the ‘official’ national narratives and analysed how ‘citizens’ and ‘others’ were discursively constructed, historians increasingly examined the emotional plane and, borrowing from Raymond Williams, the ‘structures of feeling’ that were expressed both in the intentional instructional activities of educational institutions and in non-curricular activities such as student government, student clubs, and competitive academic and athletic teams. Quite notably, this scholarship also required that historians move outside the school and examine how what happens in educational institutions around the construction of feelings of national affection and belonging must be understood in connection with public ceremonies, parades, monuments, radio and television and other public venues where emotional education projects were actualised.

A history of emotions framework also allowed some scholars to show how educational institutions might be involved in multiple allegiance-building projects – where transnational cosmopolitan affections and loyalties might comfortably exist alongside national and ethnic projects. This approach allowed historians of education to transcend the simple dichotomy of imposed-from-above versus resisted/reworked-from-below and instead to bring to light how the same actors could be involved in multiple overlapping and contradictory emotional projects. Apropos of this, it is worth noting that the scholarly tendency to recognise both the incommensurability and the irreducibility of multiplicity of social and cultural projects to a single prevailing logic had become a mainstay in the social sciences and the humanities by the late 2010s. It also reflected a broad trend in educational research evident from the beginning of the twenty-first century which was to examine schools not merely as contested sites of social reproduction but as sites of contesting cultural productions.

A second area that benefited greatly from the increased scrutiny given to emotional comportment was the history of teaching and teachers’ work. The 2010s saw a flourishing of scholarship on the history of teacher–student relationships and the patterns of emotional comportment that structured these relations. Particularly noteworthy was the extremely generative re-evaluation of missionary teaching in colonial contexts. Drawing in part from the reconceptualisation of colonial encounters prompted by works like Ann Laura Stoler’s 2002 *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*,<sup>8</sup> historians of education examined the emotional registers that framed missionary teachers’ work and shed light on the complex algorithms that allowed educators to weave together affection for indigenous cultural patterns/behaviours with self-privileging disdain for the same.

By the late 2010s new methods were being developed to excavate regnant emotional regimes in different aspects of schooling at various points in educational

<sup>7</sup>See, e.g., John Cooper, *Reason and Emotion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998) and also Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>8</sup>Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2002).

history. At the same time, the history of emotions scholarship also began to focus on ‘actual’ emotional experiences and not simply the normative injunctions that prescribed emotional comportment. Studies were conducted of ‘school anxiety’, focusing on how the emotional experience of ‘anxiety’ takes shape at the fulcrum of particular cultural configurations where the school-going child is situated betwixt and between pedagogic practices and societal expectations for what schooling is to accomplish, as well as ‘family strategies’<sup>9</sup> and parenting paradigms. In step with this, the emotional life of parents garnered increasing attention both within the history of childhood literature and in the history of education scholarship that centred on schoolchildren’s emotional experiences.

In sum, the history of emotions scholarship of the 2010s can be largely characterised in Foucauldian terms as ‘governmentality studies’ literature that directed attention to the rules that regulated conduct. Questions of regulation and the *production* of desired forms of emotional comportment dominated even when scholars sought to get a firmer grip on exactly how these emotional regimes were experienced, resisted and co-constructed by ‘participants’ such as teachers, students, children, adults, librarians, school nurses, coaches and ever-growing numbers of educational ‘paraprofessionals’. However, a major shift in the field was beginning to appear on the horizon. Spurred by the Neo-Spinozism movement that swept across global academe in the late 2010s, and like their colleagues in other historical subspecialties, historians of education working on the history of emotions began to situate their emotions within a broader history of *affect*.

### **The affective turn in the history of education**

The ‘affective turn’ in academic scholarship had been heralded (and willed into being)<sup>10</sup> in cultural studies circles since the late 1990s, but it was only several decades later that a broader effect was felt across the humanities and in historical scholarship in particular. A central point in this approach is that affect does not reduce to emotion. To speak of the ‘affective’ maps a wider terrain and one that is concerned with the body in ways that the ‘emotional’ does not fully capture. To think in terms of affect is to focus on how human bodies are affected and how they affect others. In fact, affects may be seen as generating emotions in that they engender culturally identifiable (/identified) states of feeling. In the 2020s Affect Theory was taken up differently by different disciplines and below I will discuss what dimensions were emphasised by historians of education.<sup>11</sup> First, however, it will be useful to briefly examine some of the early cultural studies writings on this topic.

Brian Massumi, one of the key early Affect Theory scholars, proposed that the concept of emotion be treated as one of the ways that humans qualified the *intensity* of affective experience. In this account, the identification of emotion entailed the

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<sup>9</sup>For more on this, see the treatment in Jeroen Dekker, *Educational Ambitions in History: Childhood and Education in an Expanding Educational Space from the 17th to the 20th Century* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2010).

<sup>10</sup>See the critical discussion of the positioning affect theory as ‘the way forward’ in Clair Hemmings, ‘Invoking Affect: Cultural Theory & the Ontological Turn’, *Cultural Studies* 19, no. 5 (2005): 548–67.

<sup>11</sup>For a useful discussion, see Andrew Murphie, ‘Affect – a basic summary of approaches’ (30 January 2010), <http://www.andrewmurphie.org/blog/?p=93>

construction of a narrative designed to ‘fit the requirements of continuity and linear causality’.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, scholars using the concept of affect in these early years tended to see continuity and causality as problematic, ambiguous and indeed highly suspect propositions. For Massumi and others, the study of the affective dimensions of human experience invited a broader optic, one that begins with ‘the messiness of the experienced, the unfolding of bodies into worlds ... the drama of contingency, [and] how we are touched by what we are near’.<sup>13</sup>

For another of the key early theorists, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, author of the 2003 *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*,<sup>14</sup> the affective turn was a valuable response to the over-privileging of the epistemological in much of academic scholarship of the time. In the words of Clair Hemmings, a professor at the Gender Institute of the London School of Economics, for Sedgwick, ‘a relentless attention to the structures of truth and knowledge obscure[d] our experience of these structures’. Instead, Sedgwick ‘advocate[d] a reparative return to the ontological and intersubjective’.<sup>15</sup>

In the words of Patricia Clough, editor of the influential 2007 volume *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, for most scholars of the first decade of the twenty-first century, affect generally referred to:

- bodily capacities to affect and be affected, or
- the augmentation or diminution of a body’s capacity to act, to engage, and to connect.<sup>16</sup>

One sees in this definition the heritage of Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) whose work on *the power to affect and be affected*, especially as it was read and elaborated upon by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995), became essential reading for graduate students in history departments across the globe.

In my estimation, historians of education writing on the history of emotions in the 2020s were drawn to the concept of affect because it advanced their ability to understand education in the past in three key ways. First, although the concept of affect problematised the concept of causality, it did not disregard it. In Michael Hardt’s words, ‘affects simultaneously belong to both sides in the causal relationship’.<sup>17</sup> In this vein we can point to studies of British colonial education in places like the Straits Settlements where studies of the ethnic affiliations/affects of all involved (from the European population, to Malays, to diasporic Chinese, and Tamil Indians) circulated as simultaneously both outcome and cause of the various educational provisions created over the period 1826–1946. A similarly complex view of causality and the shifting configurations that enhance and attenuate human beings’

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<sup>12</sup>Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 29.

<sup>13</sup>Sara Ahmed, ‘Happy Objects’, in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 29–51.

<sup>14</sup>Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>15</sup>Hemmings, ‘Invoking Affect’, 553.

<sup>16</sup>Patricia Clough, ‘Introduction’, in *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, ed. Patricia Clough (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 2.

<sup>17</sup>Michael Hardt, ‘Foreword’, in *The Affective Turn*, ed. Clough, ix.

abilities to act also inspired groundbreaking advances in the history of educational administration.

Second, the affective turn appealed to the interest among historians of education in seeing modes of being, cultural practices and social institutions not after they have formed, but in seeing them in formation.<sup>18</sup> In contrast to the ‘threshold approach’ which allowed the historian to identify heterogeneous elements that have cohered only once a moment of visibility had been crossed, affective histories tended to focus on things as they come into being – even in instances when a definite ‘form’ or ‘logic’ was never fully achieved. In stark contrast to earlier scholars who interrogated post-Second World War suburbanisation in the US as a demographic *fait accompli* that produced its own reaction in the form of youth alienation, historians increasingly came to treat this as an evolving transitive process that involved children, adolescents and adults forming the imaginative territory that became, by the mid-1970s, ‘the suburban American school’ – or rather simply ‘the American school’, since this entity formed the particular kind of imagined *affective community* that other schools (most glaringly, ‘the urban school’) increasingly became measured against.

Third, affect theory attracted the interest of historians of education because it also embraced and enhanced the study of the singular, the everyday, the ephemeral and the unexpected. This is to say that beyond providing new ways for historians to think about social processes and cultural formations, affect theory furnished tools for writing about particular moments of being. For example, historians were able to examine the statement from parent to child: ‘I just want you be happy.’<sup>19</sup> Not only did this research expose the specifics of the historical, social and cultural frames of reference in which it ‘makes sense’ for a parent to enunciate this statement, it also discussed what an affective statement of this sort can in turn affect. For example, it can serve as justification and enactment of a ‘concerted cultivation’ parenting model. It can embed heteronormative social expectations. It can both limit and expand a child’s range of choices. And, it can programme educational pathways. And, by analysing the ways that happiness has actually been practised and by not allowing the diversity of human experiences with normative structures to become obscured, this research succeeded in truly making the affective turn an ontological turn in history of education scholarship.

History of education scholarship from the 2020s and early 2030s successfully excavated numerous past moments of being. Researchers examined the affective qualities of the use of wooden versus plastic didactic devices; studies explored children’s attentiveness and boredom in schools; and scholars examined the affective dimensions of school routines like hallway queuing and hand raising.

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<sup>18</sup>See the discussion in Lone Bertelson and Andrew Murphie, ‘An Ethics of Everyday Infinities and Powers: Félix Guattari on Affect and the Refrain’, in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Gregg and Seigworth, 138–60.

<sup>19</sup>Sara Ahmed’s insightful reading of the 2002 film *Bend it Like Beckham*, which details the experiences of a migrant Indian Sikh family living in London, also explores this phenomenon through an examination of how suffering and happiness become key frames by which the family patriarch attempts to map out his daughters’ futures. See Ahmed, ‘Happy Objects’.

### Bringing the body back in

Tying all of the above together was a foregrounding of the body as site of affect. By the late 2020s it was widely accepted that the body was not only seen when effects of power made it visible. Similarly, the body was no longer exclusively understood as an organism/self/subject with solid walls. In moving from ‘effective histories’ of the emotions (i.e. histories-of-the-present and genealogies of governmentality such as those advanced by Michel Foucault and Mitchell Dean) to ‘affective histories’ historians began to shed light on the disjunctive and episodic nature of human *being*.<sup>20</sup> In this regard, the field of the history of education is considered a trendsetter within the history profession. Yet, the somatic focus of work dealing with affect ultimately led, in the early 2030s, to new shifts in how historians of education grappled with the domain they had formerly contained within the descriptor ‘emotion’. As *the body* became more central to historical inquiry, historians increasingly interacted with other academic fields that also examined the body and the human being.

Over the period 2010–2040 the fields of cognitive neuroscience and psychology made remarkable advances in understanding the workings of the human brain. What we learned about the similarities and differences in how the brain relates to its own body and how it relates to the outside world, together with our understanding of how humans make choices, eventually came to have a profound impact on historical scholarship generally. These and other developments in the fields of digital prosthetics, psychopharmacology and medical tissue growth led to what was referred to in the early 2030s – in rather apocalyptic terms! – as the ‘Post-Human Humanities Crisis’.

For historians of education working on the history of emotion and affect, the most relevant of these developments were the new understandings of human consciousness that began to emerge. This deep re-evaluation of human thought, sensory perception and awareness of choice-making lent itself to profound re-examinations of human actorhood and agency in the history of education. From the vantage point of the early 2040s, I am pleased to report that the study of emotions and affect is more vibrant than ever. The task now falls to a new generation of scholars to develop the new data-mining techniques to advance our understandings of how human beings have learned from and with one another, how we have affected and been affected by one another, and how our bodies have unfolded into the worlds that we form and are formed by.

### Notes on contributor

Noah W. Sobe is Associate Professor of Cultural and Educational Policy Studies at Loyola University Chicago where he researches and teaches in the areas of history of education and comparative and international education. His work examines the transnational circulation of educational policies and practices.

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<sup>20</sup>For one of the early instances of the development of affective history, see Athena Athanasiou, Pothiti Hantzaroula and Kostas Yannakopoulos, ‘Towards a New Epistemology: The “Affective Turn”’, in *Historein: A Review of the Past and Other Stories* 8 (2008): 1–14, <http://www.nnet.gr/historein/historeinfiles/histvolumes/hist08/historein8-intro.pdf>. Particularly salient is their remark that ‘a component of special importance to critical theory’s turn to affect is the commitment to theorising the performative interpellation of the subject in ways that exceed the naïve binarism of voluntarism and determinism: the subject is both formative and forming; it both embraces and resists the norms that subject it’ (p. 14).