

Education
in St. Maarten
from 1954 to 2000

Education in St. Maarten from 1954 to 2000:

An Oral History Account

By

Milton George

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



Education in St. Maarten from 1954 to 2000: An Oral History Account

By Milton George

This book first published 2016

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2016 by Milton George

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-8892-3

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-8892-9

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One.....	1
General Introduction	
Chapter Two.....	21
Contextual Framework	
Chapter Three.....	33
St. Martin	
Chapter Four.....	47
Educational Policy between 1816 and 1954	
Chapter Five.....	63
Telling the Stories: Who, When and Why?	
Chapter Six.....	84
The Language Discussion: The Difficulties with Bi-lingual Education	
Chapter Seven.....	108
Curriculum and Teaching Materials	
Chapter Eight.....	128
Variables of Schooling	
Chapter Nine.....	160
Final Remarks	
Bibliography.....	163
Questions and Responses of the Questionnaire.....	182
Endnotes.....	196

CHAPTER ONE

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Objectives

This research has two main objectives. First, we will chart the development of primary education in St. Maarten between 1954 and 2000. At this moment, there is no single complete documented source of information about the history of education in St. Maarten. Most material being produced strongly relies on the works of history writers like Hartog and Person 22¹, which are of a general nature and do not deal with contemporary developments. Neither did they necessarily concentrate on understanding post-colonial historical developments or recording oral history. Second, we will tap into the experience of the protagonists of St. Maarten's national and Catholic primary education systems between 1954 and 2000, by listening to their stories.

Furthermore, given the importance and role of schooling in the socialization and nation-building processes, we also indirectly aim to contribute to that process in St. Maarten (a place which I called home for many years).

Questions

To reach our goal, we looked for answers to the following questions:

How was education established on the island? Who brought it there? Who designed it? Who administered it? What models were followed and what educational currents influenced its development? What was the role of schooling in the making of St. Maarten?

What was the Dutch colonial policy in education? What were the key factors that shaped the development of primary education in St. Maarten between 1954-2000? Who were the main actors that set the course of these developments? What were their motives?

How did the people involved in primary education perceive the process? Who benefited from the development that took place and who did

not? What is the general perception about the legacy of the options made in primary education during 1954—2000?

Motivation

The preparatory research was conducted at a time when the statutory entity of the Netherlands Antilles, of which St. Maarten was a part, was being dismantled.

Constitutional change called for a redefinition and reconstruction of the community's identity, which some understand as *nationhood*. Since schools are the primordial networks where the community seeks to articulate its story while its younger members are socialized, questions will always arise about education, its goals, and its role in nation building (George, 2006). It is in this light that this study intends to fill the gap in the centralized information about education in St. Maarten between 1954—2000 and to contribute to the on-going discussion about education on the half of the island which has been influenced by the Netherlands, by documenting and reconstructing part of the island's educational history. The periodization we use begins with the signing of the 'Statute' in 1954.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

History Writing and Oral History

Introduction

This chapter investigates some basic ideas that have been formulated in the historical study of education.

Given that this is a project concerning the writing of history, we must start by dealing with some basic questions about the nature of our enterprise; specifically, with the concept of history and history writing as such.

History

History can refer to different things for different people. In pre-modern academic circles, the concept of history mostly referred to the view that history was a discipline of recording the facts of events which had taken place over the course of time and within a given space. People were often unaware that the record of past events usually came with interpretations about the presumed intentional links between them, such as causal relationships and/or correlations.

However, although history was seen as a collection of annals and chronicles, post-colonial and post-modern thinkers highlighted the subjective dimension of any and all narrative about the past. For people like Arthur Warwick, history is not only described or recorded, but also invented.

History is about finding things out, and solving problems, rather than about spinning narratives or telling stories. History is a human activity carried out by an organized corps of fallible human beings, acting, however, in accordance with strict methods and principles, empowered to make choices in the language they use (as between the precise and the imprecise, for example), that ‘corps of fallible human beings’ being known as historians.²

This detective-like enterprise is capable of producing knowledge thanks to its systematic evidence-gathering method:

(...) history is the bodies of knowledge about the past produced by historians applying the rigorous methods of professional history, and deploying secondary sources in the analysis and interpretation of primary sources.³

This means that for Warwick,

(...) there is a vital distinction between ‘history’ and ‘the past’. For him, it is certainly unacceptable to use the word ‘history’ to signify some *a priori*, unsubstantiated conception along the lines of ‘the material process by which the past itself becomes the present and, indeed, the future, unfolding in a series of stages (or epochs or periods), according to some pattern or meaning, involving conflicts or accommodations in the exercise of power’.⁴

Thus, he continues:

Historians do not ‘construct’ or ‘reconstruct’ the past. It is knowledge (open to discussion and debate as all knowledge is) about the past that historians produce.⁵

The birth of history is often a collective enterprise, through which a group produces a given knowledge of things that happened in the past.

For some, these bodies of knowledge are constructs of the mind: history is imagined. According to Porter:

Most definitions of history begin with some term like inquire, ode of thought, or knowledge, which asserts the primacy of something pre-linguistic, apart from language entirely. The fact that the only history we

know anything about is an artifact of words is ignored, sunk beneath serious discussion as though that fact were too obvious and insignificant to deserve attention.⁶

The fact that knowledge of history is imagined does not render it superfluous. The opposite is true.

History is a necessity. Individuals, communities, societies could scarcely exist if all knowledge of the past was wiped out. As memory is to the individual, so history is to the community or society.⁷

We, therefore, agree with Arthur Marwick:

Without history, we shall not begin to understand the problems of the present and will be without the basic knowledge essential for grappling intelligently with the future.⁸

This elucidating dimension of history posits that there is no present without the past. The present moment is based on the knowledge of what happened in the past, just as the future will be based on the experiences of the present situation. Events which happened in the past have become a part of history, but they are presented, translated and constructed in various ways. Therefore, people can contextualize, look at history from different perspectives, arrays of background knowledge, or philosophical understandings, and give different meanings to the same set of events. A particular event has different meanings in different contexts, and these meanings themselves are not static. The overview that people use to look at the historical values, the norms of understanding past behavior, differ from generation to generation, from time to time, and from society to society.

In other words, history also involves presenting the past for the future as part of history by means of stories. History is the way people remember and reconstruct past events and their interconnections.

Philosophically speaking, events that make up human life have meaning because they are understood and explained as being part of unfolding stories. However, since the past is passed, in and of itself, it is silent. It is human beings who knit together the traces of the past into a tapestry of stories, placing individual events within general frameworks and suggesting causes, effects, and correlations. In contrast with Warwick, history writing always remains storytelling. Or, as Michel De Certeau put it,

(...) history is not an epistemological criticism. It remains always a narrative. History tells of its own work and, simultaneously, of the work which can be read in a past time.⁹

History is, therefore, always written or told from the present perspective of the writer(s) or teller(s). Indeed, as Depaepe observed:

We are indeed condemned to write and to continue to rewrite history from the present. This, of course, does not imply legitimating systematically distorting it in function of an ideologically fixed position. It does mean that we have the task of constantly searching for the underlying motives and the socio-historical definition of our work.¹⁰

Consequently, history is something that we do. We tell stories and write histories, and those stories and histories tell us who we are. This identity we have (and create) is also part of our own history. Premdas in his article on Caribbean identity states that:

Often this identity is formed in contradistinction to the claims of other groups to a similar sense of uniqueness, so that in a real sense identity formation is a relational and comparative phenomenon locked into 'we-they' antipathies which may be mildly benign or overtly hostile.¹¹

Furthermore, Upton gives an example on history and national identity:

There cannot be a nation without a national history. History tells the nations what kind of people they are, what sort of policies they must pursue if the nation is to survive, and it delivers graphic warnings about nations which fail to read the lessons of history aright, which lose sight of their national destiny and perish as a consequence. For a nation, the knowledge of its history is held to be a matter of life and death.¹²

However, each description of 'what history is or is supposed to be' depends on the historian behind the story. White explains this further:

It is difficult to get an objective history of a scholarly discipline, because if the historian is himself a practitioner of it, he is likely to be a devotee of one or another of its sects and hence biased; and if he is not a practitioner, he is unlikely to have the expertise necessary to distinguish between the significant and the insignificant events of the field's development.¹³

The hermeneutical process of self-understanding comes full circle. Whichever way history is understood, it has to do with past events and the purpose for which these events are used and explained. According to Noël Carroll:

A historical narrative is not a *transparent* representation or copy of a sequence of past events. Narration irreducibly entails selecting the events to be included in its exposition as well as filling in links that are not available in the evidential record. The historian does not find or discover her narrative; she constructs it.¹⁴

Different peoples tell and retell their past in a myriad of ways. Communities which have prized the spoken word have used oral narrations as the channel of their historical consciousness. Others communities, giving priority to the written word, have favored written documents and sources.

It is of paramount importance to bear in mind that the writers of history as well as story-tellers select whatever and whomever they consider worth remembering. When attempting to write the history of education of this or that country, one always runs the risk of giving a false impression that historians always have access to how all things actually were; they do not. Consequently,

(the) historical discourse does not follow the real; but rather, it only signifies it, endlessly reiterating that it *happened*, but without having this assertion be anything other than the obvious underside of all historical narrative.¹⁵

As such, history cannot escape being perspectival. Nancy F. Partner also maintains this position as she argues that:

All accounts tell things and what is told is contained in the telling. Further, all accounts of things are of 'things past.' In an important and primary, not secondary, sense, history is contained in the category of all made 'accounts of,' all stories, and cannot exempt itself because of claims made about the actuality of things outside the text. Those claims simply make history a special class of accounts. The central conventions which govern all narrative – the organization of time, the distinction between contingent and significant sequence, alias story – unite history and fiction profoundly and permanently.¹⁶

This means that there is not merely one story to be told or history to be written, but many. Hayden White insists that:

In order to write the history of any given scholarly discipline or even of a science, one must be prepared to ask questions *about* it of a sort that do not have to be asked in the practice *of* it.¹⁷

Moreover,

Histories gain part of their explanatory effect by their success in making stories out of *mere* chronicles; and stories in turn are made out of chronicles by an operation called ‘emplotment’.¹⁸

Thus, since whatever we write or tell depends on our vantage point, it is necessary that history writers provide others with the appropriate tools to enable them to assess and critique the writer’s story. There is a need for a transparent methodology.

Furthermore, history and historiography are not identical. While the former is about telling a story about the past or letting the past tell some of its stories, the latter has to do with the history of writing history. In other words,

(...) Intellectuals who use the word ‘history’ to signify ‘the past’ then have to introduce the word ‘historiography’ to signify the writings of historians. But if one makes the firm distinction, then that word is not needed, since what historians write *is* history.¹⁹

Thus, historiography separates its present time from the past, but everywhere it repeats the initial act of division.²⁰ Historiography is often used to cover the history of historical knowledge and interpretation surrounding non-written accounts of the past and the broader issues of methodology. There is a firm line between literature and history in its essence. Herbert Butterfield says:

What concerns us, therefore, is not just ‘the History of Historiography,’ the mere story of the development of a branch of literature, but the unfolding of a whole great aspect of human experience. We need to know how man came to acquire a concept of ‘the past.’ This concept of the past, man’s consciousness of history, a feeling for history and a sense of the past.²¹

Researchers usually focus on the written products of historical thinking, but with constant reference to the larger sphere of social memory and the way in which knowledge of the past has changed over time, there is a growing awareness that “written history” is not the final word, so to speak. The social recognition and status of historians changes in subject matter and source materials. Michel De Certeau, therefore, states that:

The situation of the historiographer makes study of the real appear in two quite different positions within the scientific process: the real insofar as it is the *known* (what the historian studies, understands, or “bring to life” from a past society), and the real insofar as it is entangled within the scientific operations (the present society, to which the historians’

problematic, their procedures, modes of comprehension, and finally a practice of meaning are referable).²²

This also holds true for the philosophies and assumptions of historians, and the ever-changing relationship between historical interpretation and contemporary social and political contexts.²³ Thus:

The word ‘historiography’, accordingly, can be reserved for the specialist study of the writings of historians (*not* the content of these writings) that is to say, the history of history.²⁴

Methodology must, therefore, respond to the technical concerns of historians and the theoretical frameworks which they employ to interpret and communicate their findings. The technical concerns relate to the means by which historians identify and access historical evidence; the means they use to interrogate these data and the tools applied to analyze them.²⁵ Consequently, we must acknowledge, as Marwick put it, that:

‘History’ embraces: the writings of historians; the research activities which lie behind these writings; the teaching and learning of both methods, on the one side, and ideas and information, on the other; the communication of historical knowledge by various means; all the activities associated with the learning outcomes inherent in the discipline of history.²⁶

Thus, “history is the ‘privilege’ that must be remembered so that one shall not oneself be forgotten. In its own midst it places the people, who stretch from a past to a future.”²⁷ Hence, “one type of history ponders what is comprehensible and what the conditions of understanding are; the other claims to reencounter lived experience, exhumed by virtue of a knowledge of the past”.²⁸

The growing awareness of the narrative dimension of history — understood both as a collective and subjective endeavor — has been enhanced by post-colonial history writing, which, therefore, deserves its own treatment.

Postcolonial historical writing

According to Dipesh Chakrabarty,

(...) the academic discourse of history – that is, the ‘history’ produced in universities – is concerned with ‘Europe’ and Eurocentricity remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, the point of reference from which East and West are divided. ‘Indian,’ ‘Chinese,’ ‘Kenyan,’ and other

histories are continually being related to European history and history-writing.²⁹

The Euro-centric thrust of history-writing in the previous centuries, which is attacked by authors like Chakrabarty, is very present in post-colonial thought. Nevertheless, there are also writers who warn against taking the prefix 'post' as a reflection of reality. Jeannie Suk underlines that the postcolonial era does not necessarily represent a break with the past.

The term's disavowal by some and its justification by others work to establish continuity in the face of the term's implied discontinuity. In the debates over whether 'postcolonial' describes the present or a state not yet achieved, includes or excludes the past, and portrays the interplay between past, present, and future points us to a paradox. The anticolonial process of getting beyond colonialism that is crucial to some definitions of postcoloniality implies a progress: the resistance to colonialism as moving beyond it.³⁰

It would, therefore, be misleading to think that the colonial structures have been abolished. This would ignore the continuing world-wide neo-colonial inequality. Seen from this angle,

(...) there may in fact be nothing 'post' about postcolonial.³¹

People from former colonies often complain that the persistence of a colonial substratum in the world economic and political order is also reflected in history writing. For example, whenever European and North American scholars impose their academic criteria on others, this would constitute a form of academic neo-colonialism. This western normativity has been described as part of the heritage of the 'modern' educational project³² ('which was far from emancipatory'³³). However, as Brereton indicated, the end of the colonial period did not usher in the end of biased accounts.

Postcolonial states typically struggle to create a 'universalist' historical narrative, a single linear story which captures the 'whole' past of the new nation, presumably the intention of the Florida legislator with respect to the history of the not-so-new nation they belong to. The historical narratives often produced by ethnic groups or local/regional communities may be seen as a threat to this single narrative. Generally the kind of narrative produced before and after independence by former colonies centers on heroic anticolonial struggles, culminating in the attainment of formal nationhood, and usually ignoring or obfuscating internal divisions, whether of ethnicity, region, class, or gender.³⁴

However warranted the post-colonial mistrust may be, there is a need to overcome an overly rancorous type of postcolonial studies. Paraphrasing Hooper, we could say that once the differences between the colonial and post-colonial discourses have been aired —not effaced—, the latter can be made less contentious.³⁵ Post-colonialism thus becomes more tolerant of methodological differences. Slemon draws further upon this conclusion:

If the field of post-colonial critical studies resembles a geographical terrain upon which discordant methodologies scramble agonistically for purchase, it also remains the one institutional location upon which the idea of anti-colonialist human agency can trouble the monologic droning of Western self-reference, and can insert within that drone-note the babble of cultural alterity I like the noisy discordance of post-colonial differences, and I welcome its clarity.³⁶

Since neutrality is hardly possible, it is essential that we ask ourselves what elements of the European analytical criteria³⁷ can and must be adapted to one's reality when trying to re-tell the story of St. Maarten's history of education. In the postcolonial discourse, we are often simultaneously collaborators and opponents, victims and accomplices.³⁸ The core of the post-colonial critique of colonial history writing must also be brought to bear on post-colonial historical explorations themselves. It would be unscholarly to merely replace the colonial story, with its Euro-centric bias, with new stories bearing their own ethnic or class- or gender-based biases. Such an endeavor would betray the ultimate goal of academic research in the field of history writing, namely, the proposal of defensible descriptive and explanatory narratives.

Academic acceptability will, therefore, be vouchsafed by a work's transparency and the degree to which scholars can justify their method. This will require that historians reveal the ways in which their data were collected (including whose voice it represents), pieced together and interpreted. Methodological questions are, therefore, not redundant. On the contrary, they take on paramount importance. Since this research is based primarily on the account of our interviewees, we shall now turn to the issue of the relationship between written and oral history (or histories).

Written and oral histories

The duality between written and oral histories has important implications for the writing of Caribbean history. Whereas the written form has been

understood as European, modern, and urban, the oral form has often been associated with African, folklore, and rural areas.

Both the written and the oral traditions are well developed and used in the Caribbean. Nevertheless, even though the written tradition (i.e. the evidence/documentation theory based on written documents) can be arguably described as having to date ignored the lives and institutions of most average people, the oral modality has not been granted its due importance. Written documentation has often been taken as the exclusive source of true knowledge of the past. However, since most of the early written documentation was under the control or supervision of the colonial masters, the written tradition of the Caribbean may very well be seen as colonial —as history from above or from the outside.

Caribbean history was consequently, more often than not, written from the perspective of outsiders, or at least from the perspective of people who had problems identifying completely with their Caribbean geo-social surroundings. The colonized peoples had their views, but these were generally not written down, but handed down or conveyed through stories, poems, songs and dances. We can also understand their history in terms of negro spirituals, representing the narratives of the black renaissance; calypso songs, for example the music of Harry Belafonte in Trinidad³⁹; or the traditional songs of the Surinamese Winti⁴⁰ religion.⁴¹ There was an oral history — a history from below or from the inside.

The role of oral history in historical writing

History is not a closed book. It is continuously re-written and re-interpreted, just like our individual or collective memory.⁴² In that process of interpretation and re-interpretation, there is a place for oral history.

Oral history refers to the historian's search for, and tapping into, the spoken word as a source of relevant information for historical reconstruction. This may include culturally-sanctioned oral traditions, more or less rehearsed interviews, and printed compilations of stories told about the past. Everyone has a story to tell. Each story is a piece of the broader stories, which have been lived inside and out. For, indeed, the memories of our lives are organized into stories.

Although the concept of oral history is relatively new, the methodology is ancient. The tradition of storytelling has always existed. In ancient Greece, interviews were employed to find out what had happened during a particular event. Herodotus, seen by many as one of the first historians, engaged in writing down oral history. Furthermore, the writers

of the medieval chronicles often relied on stories they had heard from oral sources.⁴³

Oral history is still more than merely quoting oral sources. It constitutes:

(...) the systematic collection of living people's testimony about their own experiences. Oral history is not folklore, gossip, hearsay, or rumour. Oral historians attempt to verify their findings, analyze them and place them in an accurate historical context. Oral historians are also concerned with storage of their findings for use by later scholars.⁴⁴

This especially applies to interviews, since the informants are given the chance to recount their lives or to speak about special events. There is even mention of 'remembering-activism,' when groups demand that their stories be heard.⁴⁵ Researchers will seek to dig deeper into their interviewees' past, for instance, by asking them to elaborate on aspects of their recollections or to explore different corners of their memories.⁴⁶

Interviewing people need not necessarily be linked to an event. The capture of known life-stories is common. It involves interviewing elderly people about their lives. These interviews often provide an interesting insight into the past, into a way of life that no longer exists.

According to Bleyen & Van Molle,⁴⁷ oral history can be understood in four differing ways. Firstly, it can be seen as an activity. It is telling the past and listening to people's memories. It represents a certain coming to life again, a living history. Secondly, it can refer to the product of the telling of and listening to stories about the past. In this sense, it gives rise to oral sources, which can give certain — albeit never direct — access to the past. Thirdly, oral history can be the result of a research process using interviews. This constitutes written history based on the *stories* from the past. Lastly, it can refer to a research method which seeks to find answers to historical questions or case studies.

The writing down of oral history falls under the aspect of qualitative research. It is mostly about case studies. Instead of working with statistics, such recording deals with discourse, which is usually found in stories. Given that interpretation is typical of qualitative research, it is also part and parcel of oral history and interviews. Oral history is both a cross-over methodology and an interdisciplinary endeavor.⁴⁸

The usefulness of oral history

Oral sources of information are sought not only to fill in the lacunae in written sources, but also to arrive at knowledge which would otherwise not be available. Information may or may not be available due to the state of written sources or their nature. Thompson believes that the method of transposing oral history into the written word could change the way that history is written, since history-writing would then be more in touch with society. In other words, it would contain research that is focused on more socially and locally relevant issues.

The information gathered will, of course, be more than written records can supply; for instance, it will include the mood behind the events and not just their fixed records. Oral history allows researchers to learn about the perspectives of individuals who might not otherwise appear in the historical records. This gives a voice to those whose voice was left out or simply not heard by official history writers.

In the context of this research, the desired information cannot be expected to be found in the official archives. Official sources would not provide researchers with information about the thoughts and feelings of teachers and students while they were in, for example, a math lesson of a particular (colonial) teacher. For a writer of educational history, who wants to present the unofficial story of the colonial classroom practice, oral interviews of people whose stories never made it into the written archives can open up new vistas.⁴⁹ Nowadays, technology has made it possible for researchers to record their interviews; this has expanded the definition of recorded sources.

Once researchers who are engaged in the contemporary recording of oral history publish the results of their work, this oral history enters the stage of history writing and, thus, also of historiography. Said otherwise, although the recording of oral history always concerns the more recent past, since the informants should be alive to be able to tell their story,⁵⁰ the use of recorded voices ushers oral history into the broader process of history-writing.

Oral history becomes the systematic collection of living people's testimonies and encompasses the relationship between official history, which is transcribed in books, and individual memories.⁵¹ The stories about the experiences of common people and their everyday memories are historically important. When someone does not collect and preserve those memories, clearly, at some point the individuals will no longer be alive to tell their stories and their traces will disappear forever. The role of oral

history is to particularly safeguard those types of stories, because they are valuable treasures of the community.⁵² Oral history can also help to trace how the historical consciousness of a society is formed and develops. This is as important for researchers as it is for anyone else who uses interviews and storytelling for professional purposes.⁵³

Recording oral history (e.g. by means of interviews) is not a problem-free enterprise. Some scholars, like Michael Frisch, have criticized the over-evaluation of oral history as ‘Anti-History.’ In his view,

oral historical evidence because of its immediacy and emotional resonance can at times be viewed as something almost beyond interpretation or accountability, as a direct window on the feelings and (...) on the meaning of past experience.⁵⁴

This caveat is reinforced by the fact that, depending on one’s perspective at the time, people seem to remember different aspects of the past. One cannot detach the oral representation of the *past* from the relationship of narrator and audience from which it arose.⁵⁵

History writers using oral sources must therefore never relinquish the onus of critical analysis. They will need to assess the reliability of the narrator and of their narration. At this point, researchers must resort to triangulation as a mechanism to limit the arbitrariness and the possible biases that could be contained in their informant(s)’ accounts. According to Karin Barber:

To grasp their historical intent we need to view representation of pastness as literature; to grasp their literature mode we need to view them as part of social action; to grasp their role as social action we need to see their historical intent.⁵⁶

Therefore, it will be necessary not only to interview someone who possesses relevant knowledge, but also to interview more than one person. Furthermore, the ideal interviewees would be people who represent different angles of the story. For an accurate oral historical account, the interviewee must have lived through the event in question, or during the period of time being studied, and must be able to recall details and easily recount other memories.

Researchers of oral history face the question of how to choose the best subjects to interview. History offers meaning to people and that is why historical accounts are still given today. The voice of the past matters to the present, but whose voice—or voices—are to be heard?⁵⁷ On whose authority is the interviewees’ (re-) construction of the past based? For

whom is it intended? Which one of the voices heard conveys the voice of the past, especially when we consider that human actions inhabit the world of meaning, not of physics? The human past is a semantic reality and, as such, has many voices and senses.

All of the above raises the issue of objectivity, but also of subjectivity. In the case of oral history, the most subjective accounts could be understood as an objective source if and when we are interested in a person's feelings, their evaluation or reflection on past events. However, despite the subjectivity involved in every re-telling of the past, interviews will often include factual components, which will presuppose a certain degree of objectivity.

The accusation of absolute subjectivity that was leveled against oral history is neither totally fair nor objective. When speaking of 'oral history', the word 'subjectivity' does not suggest that it is only concerned about a personally colored story that, therefore, has little value. Rather, it is about a personal view, which gives us new insights into how someone lived during a certain age and provides meaningful insights into that age as well. Additionally, historians have been using very personal sources for a very long time in order to better understand the mood or sentiment of a period; for example, personal documents such as diaries, autobiographies and photographs are common source material.⁵⁸

Each source is of course in some way subjective and only represents the views of an individual or a limited number of persons on a specific historical topic. The only thing that the historian needs to demonstrate is the reliability of the source. Interviews are always the result of an interaction between an interviewer and an interviewee, between two subjectivities, each with their own perspective.⁵⁹

Nonetheless, dates and places are both objective and relative. Time and place depend on the measures used: a fixed point of reference must be agreed upon. Time is divided horizontally into periods and eras, and 'hung' on key events which operate as partitions and as interpreters of the meaning of each period.⁶⁰ Events are of themselves neither dated nor mapped. They have an existence in themselves, which sometimes escapes us. We understand them and assign them their place according to our human frame of mind. By agreeing on conventional measuring systems, we can assess whether the information provided by the interviewees is only true for them, or if that information is also true for others living through the same sequence of events.

The research question will determine whether a researcher who employs oral sources must zoom in on the more subjective content (true

for him/her) or whether he/she ought to navigate between the subjective lines and go in search of the more objective details that may emerge out of the accounts (true for him/her and true for others).

History writing is based on the interpretation of data. This is particularly true when oral sources are used. Not only do history writers interpret what they hear, their oral informants do this as well. The role of memory in the act of looking back and the re-telling of the past can never be stressed enough.⁶¹ The telling of a story preserves the teller from oblivion.⁶² The tale itself creates a special time, 'a time outside time'.⁶³ In order to narrate, the narrators need to connect with their own memories and with those of their audiences.

The narrators, their audiences and the history writers will also have to tap into the structure of the narration. The past that the narrators reconstruct must continually be reconstructed. Oral accounts are, therefore, not merely an exercise of providing information, but also an interpretive task done by people, who have their own personal agendas and interests.⁶⁴

History writers using oral sources will, therefore, have to ask these questions: Were the various interviewees differently situated in relationship to the events under discussion? Might they have different agendas or perspectives, leading them to tell different versions of the same story? Might intervening events — for example, ideological shifts between the time of the events under discussion and the time of the interview, or subsequent popular cultural accounts of these events — have influenced later memories?⁶⁵

In short, researchers embarking on oral history projects ought to bear in mind that the variables of perspective and interpretation which are involved in oral accounts (both in the informants' telling and the historians' later use of the information), must be considered when using oral history. Nonetheless, oral history still has a corrective and complementary role to play in historical reconstruction. For instance, when Caribbean history or histories were solely based upon primary and/or secondary written sources, the context within which the events under study took place might have been misrepresented. Some important segments of the past might be ignored, whilst others would be given more attention than they actually deserved or be considered more representative than they actually were.

Used critically and methodically, oral sources can carry the countless voiceless protagonists of our local and regional histories. These histories are part of the cultural heritage of a community, upon which UNESCO has

increasingly been focusing its attention.⁶⁶ Consequently, one can suggest that oral history is an adequate means to allow individuals to revisit their past, explore the cultural identity of their group or nation, and enhance respect for cultural diversity both inside and outside their own communities. Recording oral history or histories could, therefore, function as a tool to be employed not only by academic researchers, but also by high school and college students.⁶⁷

For the historian, oral history is not an aim in itself but a tool. Historians allow personal stories to become historical records and to answer questions about the past. By doing so, they enrich the existing knowledge of the past by acknowledging the voice of people, who would otherwise have been muted by approaches concentrated exclusively on documentary evidence.⁶⁸ One of the strategies – perhaps the primary one — to tap into stories and record oral history is through personal interviews.

Methodology of interviews

Interviews allow the information obtained from written and printed sources to be nuanced, looked at differently, or even corrected. In cases where these sources do not allow critiquing hypotheses from other angles than those documented, interviews fill in the lacunae by providing new information and facilitating alternative perspectives. Interviews can actually become the main source for historical research.⁶⁹

Judith Moyer elaborates on the sequence needed for the recording of oral history by means of interviews. She provides a list for the researcher, and explains how to ask questions (selecting, listening, verifying, comparing and relating)⁷⁰ and prepare field notes as well as giving other useful information.⁷¹ Much of it comes down to ‘doing the right thing and ‘minding your manners’.

You do not go to somebody’s house armed with questions and shoot your questions at the inhabitants like a machine gun, but rather engage in a conversation. Oral history is thus all about interpretation and action, not technique. On the other hand, interpretation and narrative do not take over.⁷²

Writing the history of education

This project is not about history writing in general, but more specifically about the history of (primary) education in St. Maarten, and draws

especially on the unwritten stories of those involved. When the “history of education” becomes the focus, the phenomena and processes of education and schooling are studied in their historical dimension. While the methodology used is the scientific discipline of “history writing”, the contents of the research are fairly diverse and relate to the diverse fields of education (e.g. formal and informal education, school realities, innovation processes, youth care, institutions for handicapped learners, history of educational sciences, etc.). In most cases, the research focus is limited to the understanding of the evolution of the educational mentality and practice. Strictly speaking, it is not the task of educational history writers to use history as a platform for the creation of new pedagogical theories, since their competency is in writing *history*. How the history of education should be written is, therefore, a still much-debated question. Depaepé’s suggestion on how it should *not* be written might be an easier approach:

Our message is that historians of education ought to think of themselves as historians, and not as servants of any particular pedagogical practice, theory, or idea; that they would best avoid the pitfalls of ahistorical utilitarianism as well as of the legitimizing and/or mythologizing of belief in a particular pedagogical system, in which the history of the specialist field is so rich.⁷³

Notwithstanding the above, the history of education can still indirectly influence and critique research being conducted in other educational areas. Educational research is often multidisciplinary, as Depaepé observes:

[...] there is not, nor will there ever be, one single true conception on the history of education, so that we shall probably have to learn to live with methodological pluralism.⁷⁴

For instance, studies in educational history can help explain and inspire changes by situating them alongside the process of social development, showing that societies are in continual interaction. Social phenomena are not absolute; they always remain relative to numerous variables.

Progress has its discontinuities as well as its continuities. Education belongs to the realm of cultural phenomena over a long duration of time. History writers also find themselves within cultural processes that color their analysis – for instance, imposing present concerns and preoccupations upon the past. Even when opposing paradigms can be used to explain change, development — also in the discipline of the history of education — still presupposes a continuum. “This continuum presents itself as a richly checkered process of intersecting outcomes”.⁷⁵

After analyzing the history of education in St. Maarten, it appears that the pattern of pillarization (*verzuiling*)⁷⁶, which has been a feature of Dutch culture and society throughout the first part of the 20th century, has also become a part of St. Maarten's educational praxis. Besides the *pillarization* of education, the Netherlands Antilles has adapted an educational system mirrored on the Dutch system.⁷⁷ By forcing an alien response to foreign variables upon St. Maarten, the colonizers alienated the St. Maarteners from themselves and their most immediate insular reality. This strategy was not unique to the Dutch colonizers; such a process has usually gone hand-in-hand with colonialism. The Belgians applied something similar in Congo, where it was said that:

(To) the degree that institutionalized educational practice was a factor of power and social control, education seemed (...) to lead to 'keeping down' rather than 'raising up'.⁷⁸

This research project intends to recover the voice of the local population involved in education (administration, personnel, students, and parents) of St. Maarten. Its purpose is historical; it does not directly aim to produce a *critique* of the Dutch Antillean colonial education. The primary aim is to chart the developments in primary education in St. Maarten, especially from the point of the view of the local school population.

Provisional remarks

The conceptual framework that we have presented tells us that it is neither easy nor simple to write about the history of education. This is because the history of education is much broader than the history of mere "schooling". Furthermore, educational history should not be studied in isolation from other cultural and social movements. Education helps to transmit culture and the values of that culture from one generation to another. This means that the history of education studies the entire process of social development.

Writing about the history of education in St. Maarten challenged us to look into the methodology of oral history and at different authors, who discuss the complexities of writing about the history of education and the use of oral history. Based on our research, we know that there are still many questions which need to be answered.

We will use this theoretical framework to better understand the context of our research topic in the next chapter. In this context, we will elaborate more on St. Maarten and look at how the educational system was shaped and developed on the Dutch half of the island. Furthermore, we will try to get a clearer idea of how local politics influenced the changes in education.

CHAPTER TWO

CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Caribbean

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to present the main elements that have shaped the political contours of St. Maarten during the period leading up to the signing of the Charter for of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1954 and afterwards.

St. Maarten: Caribbean and Dutch

The context within which education in St. Maarten must be envisaged is threefold: its position within the Netherlands Antilles (also called Dutch Antilles), the Kingdom of the Netherlands, and the Caribbean. We shall first deal with the Caribbean.

Defining the Caribbean

The identity of the region, as the way in which its individuals, peoples and cultures define and (re-)present themselves, is analyzed within a number of co-ordinates. Authors as well as ordinary people use a number of criteria in order to demarcate the contours of the Caribbean.⁷⁹ Braudel drew attention to two important coordinates for history writing: the geographical and the temporal. In his view, these coordinates reflect the essential matrix within which individuals, peoples and cultures come into being and interact. In other words, human history entails a radical relationship between humans and their geography within time.⁸⁰

One way to set boundaries around our research is to define that research according to a certain geographical criterion. Even though in the English-speaking world, St. Maarten is commonly referred to as an island located in the 'West Indies'; in this research, we will speak of the Caribbean Basin. This change in terminology reflects a shift of perspective. The 'West Indies' still refers to Europe as the in-between point separating the East Indies from the West Indies. The term defines the socio-geographical reality of the Caribbean region in terms of its conquerors.

Those who take geography as the measuring stick for determining what 'Caribbean' means will focus on insularity. In this case, the Caribbean encompasses all 23 islands situated between the tip of the Florida Peninsula and the northern coast of South America.⁸¹

Nevertheless, this exclusively geographical criterion presents some inner weaknesses. As Braudel insightfully indicates, the geographical coordinate ought not to be seen as separate from the temporal one; they exist as part of the entire human lived experience. To better understand the Caribbean, we must therefore look at the interactions that have affected the region in the past and the aspirations of its protagonists for the future. The Caribbean is far more than a cluster of islands in the Caribbean Sea.

Because of the different models of conquest and colonial partition, there has not always been much regional contact between the insular Caribbean societies. They have kept in touch with the so-called motherlands rather than with each other. Language and political systems have divided the region and created parallel identities which are in turn identifiable by their official languages, such as Spanish, French, English (British/American) and Dutch. The Hispanic islands of Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Republic of Santo Domingo, for instance, present a very real double identity, being both Caribbean and Latin-American.⁸² Consequently, the fact that Cuba and St. Maarten are geographically nearby does not mean that Cuba has directly affected St. Maarten more than the Netherlands; neither has St. Maarten influenced Cuba more than the USA.

The problems with the insularity criterion are, first, that it either overlooks or underestimates the cultural coordinates and, second, it omits countries that have shared a common genesis and socio-historical development. Such a criterion would be comparable to the thought-patterns at work in European colonization and partition of Africa, which in most cases was oblivious to the original pre-colonial social configuration. That is why we are not interested in the Caribbean topography alone, but in the socio-geographical contours of 'the Caribbean,' the human habitat, not the bare geography.

The socio-geographical criterion pays attention to a combination of factors. On the one hand, there is, indeed, the geographical factor: the physical point of reference remains the Caribbean Sea, yet it is no longer limited to the islands. On the other hand, there are the socio-historical factors, which include realities such as the colonization process, the socio-political institutions of colonialism, the socio-economic structures and the actual configuration of Caribbean society.

From the application of geographical and social criteria, there emerges a major geographic division of the islands between the Greater and the Lesser Antilles. The Caribbean is then expanded to include countries that are located on the Central and South American mainland, such as Guyana (ex-British Guyana), Suriname (ex-Dutch Guyana), Cayenne (current French Guyana), Panama, Venezuela, Colombia, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, Belize and Mexico.⁸³ Premdas' working paper contributes to this discussion and finds that:

The truth, however, is that the Caribbean even as a geographical expression is a very imprecise place that is difficult to define. Some analysts include Florida, the Yucatan, Nicaragua, Columbia, and Venezuela, while others exclude them altogether. It is not only an imaginary region but one that is arbitrarily appointed to its designation. It will be difficult to pinpoint precisely where this Caribbean place is, for no country carries the name Caribbean either separately or in hyphenated form.⁸⁴

Needless to say, the language barriers and the costs of transportation make contact between the various areas of the region difficult.

The relevance of language – more precisely, differences of language – has been accurately highlighted by Rex Nettleford, according to whom:

...the Caribbean on this basis [speaking of tongues] seems a Tower of Babel. And so it is, being the crossroads of languages, which are the languages of former colonisers and conquerors providing *linguae francae* for the thirty or more millions of souls, who now congregate in that crossroads and are seeking to give common expression to the common soil of history and existential reality that they share.⁸⁵

A comprehensive description of the socio-geography of the Caribbean is hard to find. This is, in fact, a real obstacle one comes up against even when intending to buy a travel guide. History and geography have become intertwined. The colonial past has divided the physical space of the Caribbean into cultural spaces that wheel around a common language (i.e. Spanish, English, French, and Dutch), legal traditions and acquired social codes. There was even a Danish and Latvian Caribbean, at least at one time and for some years.

Caribbean societies are not obvious realities. They can truly be described as international creations that began as the result of European expansion in the 15th century, one of the precursors to today's globalization. Consequently, the societies living in the Caribbean basin are not uniform. They are rather a collection of small nations, colonies and

territories struggling to forge their own economic and political identities. They all have an astonishingly diverse cultural life in common and possess a remarkable and often tragic history.⁸⁶ Schwab sums it all up by saying that:

[The Caribbean represents] a wonderful analogy for a history and culture produced by startling combinations. Begin with two remarkable primitive Indian societies, add the influence of the 16th-century gold-seeking Spaniards and their European rivals: the French, English, Dutch, even the knight of Malta; add pirates, religious and political refugees, and a huge African slave culture, then stir in Hindus, Jews, and Rastafarians and you have the dizzying recipe that makes up these islands.⁸⁷

This whole mixture owes its existence to a series of historical factors that one must explore separately in order to understand some of the mechanisms that have forged the identity of each individual Caribbean society. Since the object of our study is St. Maarten's primary education, we shall now focus on one part of the larger Caribbean basin, namely, the Dutch Antilles (to which St. Maarten belongs) and Aruba.

The Dutch Antilles and Aruba

The Dutch Antilles

The Kingdom of the Netherlands consists of three territorial entities: one on the European mainland, namely, the Netherlands; and two in the Caribbean basin, i.e. Aruba and the Netherlands Antilles.⁸⁸ This tripartite union comprises one kingdom that is then divided into three countries.

The country of the Netherlands Antilles is comprised of five island territories: Curaçao, Bonaire, St. Maarten, Saba and Sint Eustatius (or "Statia"). Geographically, the Netherlands Antilles are subdivided into two groups: the Leeward Islands (Curaçao and Bonaire, about 50 km north of Venezuela) and the Windward Islands (Saba, Sint Eustatius and St. Maarten, some 160 km east of Puerto Rico). Miami is about 2.5 hours by plane from Curaçao, the largest and the most dominant island within the island group. The capital is Willemstad.

The Windward Islands area of the Netherlands Antilles is 960 km², with a coastline of 364 km. The climate is tropical (12 degrees from the equator), but cooled by Northeast trade winds. The average temperature is 27°C. Rains fall from October to February, mostly at night. The landscape is generally hilly with a volcanic interior. The highest point is 862m at