New Times, New Questions

KATHLEEN A. MAHONEY

In reflecting on the recent history of education conference sponsored by the Spencer Foundation and, more broadly, the history of education as a field, Rubén Donato and Marvin Lazerson’s analysis (this issue) evolves from and into a set of politically constructed questions. For historians of education, is political relevance achieved at the expense of academic respectability? Should educational historians involve themselves in discussions of policy, and if so, how? And who should write educational history when the subjects of inquiry are people of color?

As Donato and Lazerson note, the roots of these questions and many of the tensions felt by scholars in the field are traceable to the 1960s and early 1970s. Perhaps better described as a transitional era than a golden age, the regnant historical consensus about schools collapsed under the weight of liberal, sometimes strident, critique. Once portrayed as the great engines of democracy and levers of social uplift, the schools quickly devolved into mechanisms of social reproduction and sites of economic oppression. A Whiggish, over-celebratory approach to the history of education was suddenly displaced by what would, in turn, be rather quickly dismissed as ideologically driven and relentlessly pessimistic.

The historical work of the old school and the revisionist critique that followed both failed to address the complexities of American education. Schools and school systems are products of complex historical evolution. As the nation’s preeminent social and civic institutions, schools sit at the crosscurrents of American life, where they are pulled by competing interests, shaped by contradictory impulses, and used for disparate ends. As the country’s primary civic institutions, all the ironies, paradoxes, and tensions inherent in our nation’s democratic processes and social realities map onto our schools with vigor. As such, schools have been and will continue to be contested terrain (and thus grist for potentially interesting historical inquiry). At their very best they can be laboratories of democracy. And given the constraints under which they operate, we should be exceedingly grateful when they work well—which they do often. We should be deeply disturbed when they do not—which is tragically too often the case.

Noticeably absent during the conference discussion and in much of the literature on the history of education (at least to this Canadian-educated U.S. citizen) is attention to international trends or context. To the degree that historians of American education have heeded international factors, they have focused most often on immigration where the historiographic one-way road seems to lead with great regularity to Ellis Island (and a few other points of entry). Historians of higher education occasionally turn their eyes abroad, acknowledging some of America’s international debts, for example, its use of the English collegiate and German research models in constructing modern, American higher education, and 18th- and 19th-century American scholars’ reliance on Scottish commonsense philosophy. At this point in time, this delimited scope seems parochial; it certainly stands in contradistinction to the flurry of recent scholarship on people of color within the United States that has greatly enriched our understanding of the history of education. Disinterest in international trends, Eastern and Western, and lack of familiarity with other educational systems only diminishes our understanding of the field.

In the 1960s and early 1970s revisionist historians adopted an institutional approach to American education and schools, portraying them as bureaucratic, rationalistic, instrumental means to less-than-noble ends. More recently, historians have turned a critical, albeit somewhat more sympathetic eye toward the modern mindset that intellectually grounded that system. Grasping the fruits of the Reform in one hand and the Enlightenment in the other, educational reformers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries sanctified science, utility, objectivity, and in time the concept of value-free inquiry—all in the name of modern progress. While this modern mindset greased the wheels of scientific progress and provided intellectual impetus for more bureaucratic, rationalistic approaches to school management, it ultimately and ironically proved inhospitable to some of the loftier concerns that led educational reformers to embrace it in the first place. The capacious, modern intellectual project eventually contracted. Upholding the notion of pure science realized through value-free inquiry, the academy pushed questions central to the human project of meaning-making aside while the professoriate abjured its traditional, long-held responsibility for the moral formation of students. In The Making of the Modern University, Julie A. Reuben (1996) sets forth the issue cogently. In pursuit of truth defined and obtained scientifically, the modern university lost its ability to grapple with moral issues: “...universities no longer have a basis from which to judge moral claims.” In its absence, “contemporary debates about what college students learn seem to be reduced to ‘politics’” (Reuben, p. 269).

As Donato and Lazerson point out, the political tumult of the 1960s and early 1970s fueled the “golden age” of the history of education. The excitement surrounding and interest

KATHLEEN A. MAHONEY is an assistant professor of education at Boston College, School of Education, 221 Campion Hall, Chestnut Hill, MA 02467. She specializes in the history of education, as well as religion and higher education.
in revisionist accounts of American education derived from synergy: Quite simply, the revisionists were asking the right questions at the right time. Today, the right questions might be the moral and religious questions. The postmodern academy evidences growing disenchantment with the fruits of the modern mindset and increasing dissatisfaction with the notion of value-free inquiry and the banality of relativism. Concretely, this dissatisfaction has taken a turn, giving rise to revitalized interest in civic and character education, as well as the phenomena of service-learning and ethics courses in professional schools.

Historians interested in the vicissitudes of religion in the academy were some of the first and most notable on the intellectual scene to assess the modern mindset and its educational legacy (e.g., Marsden, 1994), setting off what historian Linda Eisenmann describes as a “minor explosion” of recent works about religion and higher education (Eisenmann, 1999, p. 295). Religion itself, once written off as an early casualty consumed by the acids of modernity, displayed remarkable staying power in the 20th century, entering the 21st with notable vitality. Around the world, “religious traditions . . . refuse[] to accept the marginal and privatized role” theories of modernity and secularization “reserved for them,” writes sociologist José Casanova (1994, p. 5). For better or worse, religion continues to make its presence felt in the American public square—as our recent national election campaigns so ably illustrate. It also makes itself felt throughout American education, in discussions about vouchers, trends in home schooling, and legal cases regarding student-led prayer. Combined, interest in religion and the ubiquity of spirituality arguably constitute one of the more remarkable trends in higher education during the 1990s.

Historians’ propensity to examine education and frame their own work in political terms is both natural and understandable. Schools are, after all, critically important civic entities indispensable in a republic. But political analyses, whether contemporary or historical, completely disengaged from broader moral, ethical, and transcendent questions and frameworks are rendered vulnerable to reductionism, where schooling can become “too political” on the one hand, or “merely political” on the other. The ancient Greeks knew this: Education in civil society is at its best when it engages the provocative and even inspiring concepts of virtue, truth, and beauty.

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__Reflections on Histories of U.S. Education__

DAVID TYACK

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Historians enjoy proving that golden ages weren’t so golden after all. But if you “bring together a cross-generational group of American historians of education to talk about their field,” Rubén Donato and Marvin Lazerson observe (this issue), “the conversation is likely to turn to the ‘golden age’ of the 1960s and 1970s.” That was indeed a heady time, when new historical interpretations clashed with old, social movements energized scholarship, and rebels challenged all kinds of institutions. For liberal historians of education of the 1950s who had endured the miasma of McCarthyism and the tedium of the received wisdom in the field, the 1960s were at least a brassy if not a golden era.

I’m not interested here in threshing over controversies about the 1960s but want to ask why there have been, from time to time, periods when new historical accounts of education excite attention and challenge dominant ideas and practices. What’s new—and golden—can differ wildly. Sometimes it may be a neglected topic like women educational leaders; or a different evaluation of a subject like I.Q. testing; or a new way of explaining events, as in theories of social capital. All of these can put the world of education in new perspective.

Ellwood P. Cubberley’s famous textbook on the history of schooling in the U.S. represented one kind of golden age. It aligned brilliantly with the professional aspirations of his generation of school leaders, sketching an evolutionary view of progress in public education and an agenda for reform. No wonder it sold over 100,000 copies and became the standard version of the educational past.

But the virtues of the text for educators—its relentless focus on schools and on improving educational practice—became vices in the eyes of Bernard Bailyn and Lawrence A. Cremin. Their agenda was to broaden the scope of history of education until it became the study of the transmission of culture across the generations—that is, an integral and
honored part of cultural history. A number of historians engaged in this rich, new cultural history believed that history of education was entering a scholarly golden age. For a time the Ford Foundation supported this interpretation of the educational past.

But in the 1960s and 1970s neither Cubberley’s view of progress nor Bailyn and Cremin’s vision of education as cultural history satisfied a new generation of radical scholars and activists. Influenced by the rediscovery of poverty and inequality, caught up in social movements like civil rights and feminism, they pilloried many familiar notions. They argued that schools perpetuated inequities; that written history ignored most of humanity; and that liberation or revolution, not socialization, should be the goal of education. On the horizon a new world beckoned, if history of education could illuminate the lives of the downtrodden and mobilize activists by raising their consciousness of injustice.

One could find other mini golden ages, whether shaped by aspirations of educational reform, or driven by powerful new historical explanations, or responding to social and economic tumult, or all of these mixed together. Indeed, the history of education has been most lively when it has avoided isolation and sought dialogue with educators, general historians, activists, and policymakers. At such times, history of education has probably had the most influence on policy. This was not the kind of clout that comes from being at some (mythical?) table where the elite decide the fate of education, but from altering the way people viewed the past and future character of schooling.

Policy

Do historians have anything to contribute to educational policy? Many people think not, including some educational historians who fear that “presentism” will corrupt the disinterestedness of the scholar. That may be, but there is a problem: Everybody uses some kind of history, if only personal memory, in making sense of the world. The question is not whether to use history in policymaking but whether that history is going to be as accurate and supple as possible. Historians surely do not have policy genes. They do have some special knowledge, however, that might prove useful. In educational reform, for example, there is a whole storehouse of experiments to explore for a sense of what works and does not and why. Luckily, it is cheap to learn.

If history can be valuable in policy deliberation, policy can also serve historians of education. They are mostly located in institutions that prepare teachers and administrators. Arguably, the most lasting and pervasive policy influence historians of education can have is not on political leaders but on the people we teach and on professionals who have committed themselves to careers in education. Policy discussions can provide common topics of deliberation for people of diverse educational specialties and occupations.

Many of these professionals feel that they have lost a sense of common purpose and are hungry for historical knowledge that speaks to their concerns. In recent years historians of education have reached policymakers and practitioners in a variety of ways. The chief state school officers have included historical seminars in summer meetings; Education Week this past year published historical essays each month that they gathered in a book called Lessons of a Century; two television documentaries on history of education are now about to be shown on PBS; and historians of education write for a wide variety of professional journals and magazines of public affairs.

As contributors to the dialogue on policy, historians do not need to be wet blankets who assure the world that policies have been tried and found wanting. And certainly they should not be cheerleaders drawing happy-faced precedents for the latest reform. Like philosophers who find puzzling layers of meaning in the ordinary, or anthropologists who make the familiar strange, historians often do their best service to policy by helping people redefine both problems and solutions. Diversity flowers when people learn to think otherwise.

Diversity and Synthesis

In recent decades historians of education, like those in other fields of history, have mapped much new terrain, in particular expanding what we know about the education of women and of people of color. These historical explorers often found their way blocked by an undergrowth of racist and sexist assumptions and unconscious bias in prior studies of these groups (when they were studied at all). Before they could proceed with their own inquiries they often needed to clear away these misconceptions. That partly accomplished, they could turn to the task of revealing the experiences and stories of the groups themselves, writing a Black-centered history, for example. They went beyond seeing downcast groups simply as contributors or victims and focused on people who actively shaped their own lives, even under dire constraints.

The work of the historians of the education of women and of people of color is only part of a rich set of recent monographs and articles in the social, political, and intellectual history of American education. Some studies have continued to focus on institutional history; others have looked at education outside schools. One of the appeals of history of education to its scholars is that it gives a life-long fishing license to study almost any topic.

But this very diversity has raised a question: Is there a central story to tell? Is there just a pile of well-made bricks but not an archway? This question, of course, has arisen in the many other fields within history. Is the discipline so fragmented by specialization that it no longer has coherence? Cubberley had a “master narrative” that I for one surely would not want to see restored. I think, however, that history of education needs to build on its heritage as much as it needs novelty, to seek synthesis as much as knowledge rooted in the particular.

Recognizing that there are many routes to synthesis, let me suggest two. One is to build comparison into our work, as suggested by Donato and Lazerson. When they speak of comparative study, people usually mean cross-national comparisons, but comparing nations is only one strategy. One can also compare the experience of different ethnic groups, females and males, schools and churches, region and region. Comparison encourages a broad perspective. Another path to synthesis is to keep before our eyes as we teach and write those perennial but never settled issues that arise from public schooling in a pluralistic society, the politics of diversity, and the search for common ground.

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