



# Rethinking the History of American Education

Edited by  
William J. Reese  
and John L. Rury



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## DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is dedicated to Carl F. Kaestle, an exceptionally distinguished historian of American education. Conceived in conjunction with his announced plans for retirement, it also marks an apt moment for reflection on the growth and development of his chosen field, which he entered just as it was embracing a decidedly radical and contentious revisionist turn. Carl's early work reflected his concern with such emerging revisionist themes as social and economic inequality, the role of elites in developing school systems, the functions of bureaucracy, and the impact of ideology on education reform. Carl also had strong professional ties to an earlier and somewhat less controversial phase of revisionism in educational history, having studied first with Lawrence Cremin at Teachers College, Columbia University, before moving to Harvard to complete his graduate training with Bernard Bailyn. Unlike his mentors and some of the more radical revisionists, however, he dedicated most of his career to studying schools or closely related subjects such as reading and literacy or educational policy. Carl taught the history of education for over three decades, at several different institutions. His professional life thus spanned a period during which educational history experienced some dramatic changes, as the wheels of historical interpretation turned the field in new directions.

As former students we feel a special debt to our mentor. Along with the other contributors whose work we commissioned, we view this volume as a tribute to Carl's career and scholarly contributions. But this is not a traditional *festschrift*. It does not focus exclusively or even principally upon Carl Kaestle's work. Rather, it was conceived as a means to think broadly about the state of the field as it emerged over the last few decades. Such a sweeping and challenging task required the cooperation of numerous colleagues and friends, and we were fortunate to enlist a remarkable roster of historians in

this enterprise. All of the contributors are friends of Carl; many were his students, others his colleagues. Most have had an affiliation of one sort or another with the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where Carl spent most of his career and trained most of his graduate students. Without question, the range of topics and perspectives found in this volume reflects the field's expansiveness and the diversity of interests that Carl nurtured over the course of his career.

We are grateful to our many colleagues who contributed essays to the book. They wanted to honor Carl, of course, but a broader goal was to provide the next generation of historians of education and other interested readers with a sense of how the field has grown and developed. A number of other people also helped bring this book to publication. Our thanks go to the anonymous reviewers who provided useful suggestions for strengthening the volume. In addition, the staff at Palgrave Macmillan has been a constant source of assistance and encouragement, along with the editors at Scribe Editorial. Most of all, however, we acknowledge especially the critical role of our editor at Palgrave, Amanda Johnson Moon, who has been unflagging in her interest and support for this project from the outset. It is one thing to have an idea, yet another to turn it into a book. Although she left Palgrave just before the book went into production, Amanda's efforts helped in no small measure to make this possible, and for that we are very thankful.

W. J. R. and J. L. R.

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## CHAPTER 1



### INTRODUCTION: AN EVOLVING AND EXPANDING FIELD OF STUDY

*William J. Reese and John L. Rury*

The history of education is an old and venerable field, whose origins as an area of scholarly interest date to at least the early nineteenth century. Like other specialized historical domains, it has experienced interpretive debates and changing schools of thought on a range of issues.<sup>1</sup> The history of American education underwent a major upheaval during the 1960s and 1970s, when a number of scholars challenged long standing views regarding the role of schools in society. While historians had traditionally viewed schools as engines of social and economic development, and as reliable sources of social mobility for every generation of Americans, the so-called revisionist scholars—particularly the “radical” revisionists—argued that the schools reinforced existing patterns of discrimination and inequality. Historically, the schools had delimited and not enhanced opportunity for most children, especially the poor and racial minorities. Not surprisingly, this vividly revisionist interpretation of American educational history proved quite controversial, attracting considerable attention to the field. Not every scholar in the history of education was a revisionist, of course, and every generation, as the saying goes, seems destined to write its own history, which certainly happened in the years that followed the heyday of radical revisionism

in the early 1970s. Since then, educational historians have generated a new body of scholarship, often asking new questions about the past in the light of present-day concerns. *Rethinking the History of American Education* offers original essays that highlight post-revisionist trends, examining research and writing across the large field of historical scholarship on education.

Shaped by the scholarly interests and professional needs of two vast domains of knowledge—education and history—the history of education has never been a single entity, its practitioners housed in schools or departments of education, as well as in history departments. Long a staple of teacher training programs, taught in normal schools and education departments of universities since the nineteenth century, it became a legitimate subfield of American history over the course of the twentieth century. This process proceeded unevenly, in fits and starts. Not until the postwar era, however, did historians of education become especially concerned about their standing within the larger historical profession. The year 1960 was a pivotal time, as Bernard Bailyn published his slender but groundbreaking monograph on colonial education, *Education in the Forming of American Society*. A young Harvard history professor at the time, Bailyn both offered a stinging critique of the field, and provided a clear demonstration of how to make it more interesting and relevant to the study of American history.<sup>2</sup>

The publication of Bailyn's book is generally acknowledged as marking the beginning of "revisionism" in the history of American education. He called upon the field to view education more expansively, going beyond schooling to study informal processes of acculturation and social development, and to examine such broadly educative institutions as the family, churches, and the popular press. The impact was immediate, as other historians soon answered the call for change. The most influential of these was Lawrence Cremin at Teachers College, Columbia University, who argued that the history of education should embrace the totality of social and cultural factors that affect the course of human development.<sup>3</sup> A widely acclaimed historian himself, Cremin used the Greek term *paideia* to denote the vast array of influences that affect human learning in modern society. His three-volume history of American education, published over an eighteen-year period, attempted to capture the richness and variety of educative impulses in the nation's history.<sup>4</sup> While monumental in scale and generally well received by historians

and educators alike (the second volume won a Pulitzer Prize), Cremin's work also demonstrated the great challenges inherent in Bailyn's charge to conceive of education in such broad terms. If education was thought to include all of the variegated factors that affect human development, should historians abandon their traditional emphasis, the study of schools? Was it possible or desirable to study all the forces that "educate"? What were the boundaries to the field, and how did one distinguish between educative and non-educative influences in society?

Bailyn and Cremin, of course, represented just one strand of revisionism in the history of American education. The other major development that marked a new direction was the appearance of the historians explicitly labeled "revisionist" in the latter 1960s and the 1970s. Those often described as the "radical" revisionists appeared at a time when schools were still seen as an important adjunct of social reform and human progress, as witnessed in the creation of federal programs—such as Elementary and Secondary Education Act (E.S.E.A.) and Head Start—during Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" initiative, but also as a source of human distress and despair, as documented in best selling tales of the contemporary "urban school crisis." This new expression of historical revisionism in educational studies was initiated in 1968, a volatile moment in modern politics, when Michael B. Katz published *The Irony of Early School Reform*. This wave of revisionism crested five years later in a provocative collection of essays by Clarence Karier, Paul Violas, and Joel Spring—*Roots of Crisis*.<sup>5</sup> The interpretive thread that linked these works was a stark reversal of the dominant themes of progress and enlightened expansion that had characterized the school histories critiqued by Bailyn and Cremin.

Katz and the other revisionist educational historians argued that the public schools were not heralds of freedom and democracy, but had served as instruments of ideological domination and economic exploitation. They emphasized the influence of social and economic elites in the formation of educational policies, underscored the racist and ethnocentric biases of curricula and educational testing, and argued that schools had usually reinforced class inequities and social injustice. Although their conclusions were not universally accepted, and their scholarship became the subject of considerable controversy, the general message was widely influential. Numerous contemporary studies also emphasized themes of social control and

inequality, while avoiding some of the revisionists' interpretive flourishes.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the issues raised by radical writers have remained an important element of research and writing in the field.

Obviously, this brand of revisionism and corresponding line of argumentation was quite different from the interpretive tone suggested by Bailyn and Cremin in the early 1960s. Rather than expanding the definition of education to include agencies outside of the schools, these revisionists turned attention toward the many unspoken purposes of schools and other institutions, and understanding how they were affected by larger social and historical forces. In this respect their critique was very much in line with "radical" theoretical perspectives in the sociology of education—even if they were cited inconsistently—and with the "new left" viewpoint then becoming widely influential among many young historians. It reflected a general proclivity to question the motivations of social and political elites and the institutions they controlled, derived in large part from the well-publicized experiences of the recent civil rights movement and student protest era. This historical context accounted for revisionism's origins outside of the field's mainstream traditions, and it explains much of its appeal. It was in step with the times, including the broader interests of activists who wanted to improve schools for disadvantaged children, and historians who sought a more "usable past."<sup>7</sup>

A product of its era, which shaped its rhetoric, passions, and scholarly commitments, the revisionist moment in the historiography of American education faded into the past by the early 1980s. By 1978, controversy had erupted with the publication of Diane Ravitch's book, *The Revisionists Revised*, which accused several of the more prominent revisionist authors of shoddy scholarship and of ignoring the many positive contributions of schools in American history.<sup>8</sup> The uproar was, however, relatively brief, as historians also became interested in a new set of issues that energized the field. As early as 1974, David B. Tyack had published *The One Best System*, an influential study of the history of urban schools that seemed to many a more balanced appraisal of the past; it was critical of the failure of schools to live up to their egalitarian promise, but did not condemn schools as harshly as some other historians had, seeing teachers, for example, in a more sympathetic light than many radical revisionists. The publication of David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot's study of school leaders—*Managers of Virtue* (1982)—also illuminated new

trends. Notably, it demonstrated that historians could help explain issues and problems of management and control that had long bedeviled the nation's schools, especially in larger cities. In addition, Carl F. Kaestle's *Pillars of the Republic* (1983) offered a balanced and nuanced account of the common school era, summarizing the best scholarship of previous decades, while drawing upon his own extensive research on the early development of nineteenth-century school systems. In these various works, questions of ideology and social inequality were central concerns. But these scholars did not claim that schools were inherently or fundamentally oppressive institutions, an apparent message in some of the more controversial revisionist accounts.<sup>9</sup>

By the 1980s, a younger generation of scholars, shaped by the revisionists as well as by their critics, labored to make their own contributions to understanding the educational past. A range of studies, drawing upon different approaches to the past, ensured that the field remained eclectic. Social history would lose its appeal before the decade ended, but it proved exhilarating for numerous scholars, wherever they stood on the issues raised by the moderate or radical revisionists. Some scholars embraced the study of the history of childhood and adolescence, and Herbert M. Kliebard wrote a landmark interpretation of the history of competing ideas that shaped the American curriculum.<sup>10</sup> As students of Carl Kaestle, our own work reflected the continuing evolution of the field. Rory and other historians of education studied the interconnections between education, gender, and the labor market.<sup>11</sup> In 1986, Reese examined the effects of voluntary associations and citizen activists in urban school reform in the early twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> Eschewing the wide-ranging topical interests of Bailyn and Cremin, or the ideological stance of the more radical revisionists that followed, many scholars continued to study schools as a way to understand their social functions in the past and influence upon youth.

A remarkable series of award-winning studies appeared in the 1980s and early 1990s, also touching upon some of the themes that revisionists had highlighted, but going well beyond them as well. The first was David Hogan's study of class differences and educational development in Chicago in the early twentieth century—*Class and Reform*—followed by James Anderson's epic account of race and schooling, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935*. David Labaree's analysis of school organization and educational credentials

in late nineteenth-century Philadelphia—*The Making of an American High School*—appeared in 1988, and Tyack and Hansot's study of gender in education—*Learning Together*—was published in 1990. A few years later, the arrival of Jeffrey Mirel's monumental study of the Detroit Public Schools, *The Rise and Fall of an Urban School System*, marked a decided shift in emphasis within the field. Schools were no longer depicted as sources of exploitation.<sup>13</sup> Like others in the field, Mirel saw these institutions as sites of conflict over a range of issues—matters of interest to a variety of groups in American society. In the language of the day, the schools were part of a "contested terrain."

From the standpoint of scholarship and narration, these works represented a high standard. Each won the American Educational Research Association's biannual book award, and to a great extent dealt with questions that transcended the concerns of the immediate field. In addition to being well written and carefully researched, these books tackled issues big enough to engage a wide range of other scholars concerned with education. They were emblematic of a new turn in the history of American education as a disciplinary sub-field. Studies published in the decades following the revisionist era dealt with gender and race, including studies focused both on elementary and secondary schools, and colleges and universities. They also stimulated new lines of research that shed light on hitherto neglected areas of study. In the years following publication of *The Education of Blacks in the South*, for instance, new research focused on African American schooling.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, a wave of studies focused on the education of American Indians also came into view, exemplified by David Adams' award winning book, *Education for Extinction*.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, the publication of *Learning Together* marked the appearance of a range of studies focusing on the history of women's education in the United States, a line of research that has continued to grow up to the present.<sup>16</sup>

The revisionist themes of injustice and exploitation remained important in this broad body of work, but they also were linked to accounts of opportunity and growth. At the same time that schools contributed to inequity, they became sources of hope, enabling those who had suffered oppression to begin realizing their goals and aspirations. This was a new narrative frame of analysis for the history of American education, transcending both the institutionalist-progressive standpoint of the generation that Bailyn had critiqued, and

the class dominion and social control perspective of the radical revisionists. It was an interpretive viewpoint that placed processes of change at the center of historical treatments of educational issues. In addition, it spoke to the wide variety of interests that shaped the evolution of schools and allied educational institutions in American history. In short, it represented a new maturity in the field, a willingness to embrace the complexity of education as a social and political process of change, entailing struggle but also growth and the hope of progress. In doing this, it may also have pointed to a new role for the historian in helping to interpret the many contributions of education to the development of American society, as we know it today, as well as a new appreciation for the problems of the present.<sup>17</sup>

### SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

The essays in this book cover a range of topics in the history of American education, but they only begin to represent the range of questions and scholarly points of view that comprise the field. Like most other domains of historical research and writing, the history of education is continually evolving. Trends in the parent discipline of history inevitably shape the field. Moreover, it is an especially dynamic academic specialty because of its close links to the professional study of education, and such related and controversial questions as educational reform, inequality, and social justice. As suggested earlier, the contributors to this volume have examined a number of traditional subfields within the history of American education. Some of these have been defined by period, such as "the colonial period" or "the age of the common school," while others deal with a particular type of educational institution (for instance, higher education), the education of a particular group (such as women), or a facet of educational practice (as in curriculum history). Most have long been acknowledged as important subfields within the broader community of educational historians, even if some have developed in large part in the past several decades. As such, they have well developed bodies of literature, and the task of summarizing them and identifying critical themes that have emerged since the revisionist era is hardly an easy one. The contribution of the essays collected here, in that case, is one of bringing readers up to date with



the literature in each of these sub-specialties, from the end of the revisionist era, roughly the latter 1970s, to the present.

The first of these chapters (Chapter 2) is by Gerald Moran and Maris Vinovskis, and deals with the early development of education in the United States. The authors analyze recent studies of the extent and nature of colonial literacy, as well as the roles of parents and schools in fostering it. They revisit the contentious debates in the late 1960s and 1970s over the spread of antebellum common schools and private elementary schools in light of additional studies in the past twenty-five years. They also assess recent investigations of the rise and development of antebellum public high schools and academies. A wave of new research has carried the field well beyond the controversies of the revisionist period regarding the character of school reform, and has focused attention on such issues as the growth of literacy, African American education, and female schooling. Beyond this, there is the question of education and economic development: just how much did the growth of schooling contribute to the expanding economy during the nineteenth century?

The next chapter (Chapter 3) is a contribution from Jacqueline Jones, who examines the development of black schooling during the Reconstruction era. Other historians of schooling in the Reconstruction South cite the founding of the Savannah Education Association (SEA) as evidence of black people's desire to create and maintain schools within their own communities. Community leaders organized the SEA in January 1865, barely two weeks after General William Tecumseh Sherman made his triumphal entry into the Georgia city. Before too long, Northerners of various stripes—military officials, agents of the Freedmen's Bureau, and missionaries affiliated with the American Missionary Association (AMA)—were expressing dismay over the fact that the black-run SEA seemed determined to hire its own teachers and control its own schools, free of outside influence. In this essay, Jones explores the association's antebellum antecedents, the causes of its downfall within a year and a half, and its lingering legacy, especially among African-American preachers in Savannah. The SEA was a piece of a larger story about Savannah blacks' quest for education and freedom in their schools, churches, social organizations, and family lives, and the roles of white teachers in fostering education. In presenting this intriguing case study, Jones highlights a critical new thread in the history of