

ROUTLEDGE

FOUNDATIONS AND FUTURES OF EDUCATION

The Struggle for the History of Education

GARY McCULLOCH

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The Struggle for the History of Education

The history of education is a contested field of study, and has represented a site of struggle for the past century of its development. It is highly relevant to an understanding of broader issues in history, education and society, and yet has often been regarded as being merely peripheral rather than central to them.

Over the years the history of education has passed through a number of approaches, more recently engaging with different areas such as curriculum, teaching and gender, although often losing sight of a common cause. In this book Gary McCulloch contextualizes the struggle for educational history, explaining and making suggestions for the future on a number of topics, including:

- finding a set of common causes for the field as a whole;
- engaging more effectively with social sciences and humanities while maintaining historical integrity;
- forming a rationale of missions and goals for the field;
- defining the overall content of the subject, its priorities and agendas;
- reassessing the relevance of educational history to current educational and social issues.

Throughout this book the origins of unresolved debates and tensions about the nature of the field of history of education are discussed and key examples are analysed to present a new view of future development.

The Struggle for the History of Education demonstrates the key changes and continuities in the field and its relationship with education, history and the social sciences over the past century. It also reveals how the history of education can build on an enhanced sense of its own past, and the common and integrating mission that makes it distinctive, interesting and important for a wide range of scholars from different backgrounds.

Gary McCulloch is the inaugural Brian Simon Professor of the History of Education at the Institute of Education, University of London, UK.

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Gary McCulloch

1 Introduction

History, education and the social sciences

The educational past might appear to be rather intellectual or academic, as opposed to being engaged in the battlefields of history where real blood is spilled. It might seem sedate when compared with the revolutionary struggles of the past. It could come across as being less inspiring than the great struggles for liberation, social justice and democracy. And yet the history of education is all about struggle. Education has been at the heart of all of the key struggles of modern times in different parts of the world. It has been a rallying call for social progress, change and equality, and has been fundamental to social class struggles, struggles for democracy, and the fight for social justice. Education has also been uppermost in personal success and failure, in triumph and defeat, and such struggles too have their history. We may pause to recall our own struggles with schools, teachers and examinations, or with learning in general at school, at university, or in everyday life, and then we can recognize that education is indeed a struggle, and always has been.

The study of the history of education is also a site of struggle. It is an exciting and intellectually challenging field of study that is highly relevant to an understanding of broader issues in history, education and society at large. At the same time, it is subject to often fierce debates and underlying uncertainties about its identity and its future direction as a field. It is riven by fissures and beset with insecurities. As Richard Aldrich has observed, it is, always has been, and always will be, a contested and changing terrain (Aldrich 2000, p. 63). There is a fundamental struggle for the history of education that has developed over time, raising fundamental issues about the nature of the field, where it belongs and where it is going, and its contribution to our understanding of education and the wider society. It is this continuing struggle with which this book is primarily concerned.

At stake in this struggle is the future of the field itself. Growing concerns have been expressed that the history of education faces terminal decline as a field unless it can articulate a clear vision of its role. Marc Depaepe, in his presidential address to the International Standing Conference for the History of Education (ISCHE) in Barcelona in 1992, went so far as to ask whether the history of education was worthwhile and relevant to the concerns of today: 'Does the history of education have any meaning at all? What is the relevance of the history of education to daily life, and who is still concerned with it today? And, ultimately, who will read our works?' (Depaepe 1993, p. 1). A decade later, Roy Lowe, in his presidential address to the History of

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Education Society in Britain in 2002, again openly raised the question of whether the history of education was ‘central’ or ‘peripheral’, and even whether the history of education was really needed at all. Lowe was convinced that it remains central: ‘Just as a society which is ignorant of its history is doomed to repeat its mistakes, so an education system which ignores its past is unlikely to achieve its own best future’ (Lowe 2002, p. 503). He also observed that it was crucial to pursue a debate about what is and should be central to the history of education as a discipline:

Historians of education risk being seen as yesterday’s people in every sense of the word. . . . Our best chances of long-term survival and recognition lie in an identification of what has made us and our kind significant in the past and in aspiring to sustain that challenging role into the twenty-first century.

(Lowe 2002, pp. 503–04)

This book is intended as a constructive contribution to such a debate, and seeks to identify what is special and significant about the history of education in the twenty-first century world.

To understand the nature of these issues and trends, and to assess the prospects for addressing them effectively, it is necessary to consider them historically. It is true for historians, no less than for others, that to look towards the future we must see where we have come from. Part of Lowe’s broader argument is that historians of education should develop a familiarity with the development of the field and to build on its past through discussion of what is now largely forgotten earlier work (Lowe 2002, p. 501). This in turn entails a discussion of what the American historian Sol Cohen described as the history of the history of education. In a major essay on this subject, published in the *Harvard Educational Review* in 1976, Cohen made the important point that such an approach should not simply be about filling in a missing chapter in the history of education as a field of study, or discussing the uses of history in schools of education, but should rather aim to ‘restore the broken links between our generation and our predecessors, to fill in certain gaps in our memory’ (Cohen 1976, p. 303). Examining this historiography of the ways in which the history of education has been thought about, written and presented is far from being a narrowly academic exercise. The shifting patterns of our academic labours affect status, resources, identities, careers and lives. More profoundly still, they reflect developments in the social memories of institutions, systems and societies as they change over time, and affect the ways in which these larger structures develop into the future.

I have been committed to developing historical approaches to understanding society and the world around us ever since I can remember. Throughout my academic career I have been committed to promoting the cause of the history of education, in part to deepen our understanding of history but also and no less urgently to address the nature of education, to comprehend it better and also to help to improve it. It has often been argued that there is a tension between these historical and educational objectives, but I have always found them to be not only exciting and stimulating in their own right, but mutually enriching. I am happy to subscribe to the view of the British social historian Asa Briggs that the study of the history of education is best considered as part of the wider study of the history of society, social history broadly

interpreted with the politics, the economics and, it is necessary to add, the religion put in (Briggs 1972, p. 5). Yet I would insist with no less force on the educational as well as the historical value of the history of education.

William Richardson has proposed that a dichotomy has developed in the history of education between two cultures consisting of historians on the one hand and educationists on the other. On this view, the field of education, based on applied knowledge, professional concerns and current issues, has been distinct from the discipline of history, which has concerned itself solely with the academic study of the past (Richardson 1999). Such distinctions are real, and, for example, I well recall being interviewed for a senior position (in a university education department) and being asked whether I considered myself to be a ‘renegade historian’ – a question that was not, I thought, intended altogether kindly. Yet they should not be understood to hold rigidly and in all cases. Both ‘education’ and ‘history’ are contested and contingent categories, and more broadly the social sciences have also contributed a great deal to the study of the history of education over the years. Joan Simon, who was herself a formidable protagonist in historiographical debates (see, for example, Simon, J. 2007), acknowledged that historians and specialists in education had different interests, but argued that they could learn from each other (Simon, J. 1977, p. 71). She contended indeed that in some ways those working in education departments have an advantage over historians who are specialists in particular aspects of society or specific periods by recognizing that the educational process ‘lies at the heart of the matter’. In her view, education might even be regarded as ‘the core of history’, on the basis that ‘social achievements are stored in an external, exoteric form and must be mastered by each generation’ (ibid.). Moreover, Richard Aldrich has observed that all historians of education have a duty both to history and to education, although the relative strengths of these commitments may vary according to the circumstances of audience and location (Aldrich 2003, p. 134). Harold Silver is another British historian of education who has reflected thoughtfully on the nature of the history of education, and comments that ‘The history of education is in fact multiple histories, because education is itself no simple and homogeneous concept or category, and because its history can be explored in relation to almost endless variables’ (Silver 1983, p. 4).

In the search for an understanding of how to reconcile education with history we can learn much from the French sociologist and professor of pedagogy Emile Durkheim, who began his famous lectures to an audience of future teachers on the formation and development of secondary education in France over a century ago. It was Durkheim who said so eloquently that it is only by carefully studying the past that we can come to anticipate the future and to understand the present, and so the history of education provides the soundest basis for the study of educational theory. History could also help us to understand the organization of education and to illuminate the educational ideals which the organization was designed to achieve, while in broader terms it helped us to understand humanity itself and the aspirations of individuals and groups. As he explained,

only history can penetrate under the surface of the present educational system; only history can analyse it; only history can show us of what elements it is formed,

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on what conditions each of them depends, how they are interrelated; only history, in a word, can bring us to the long chain of causes and effects of which it is the result.

(Durkheim 1956, p. 153)

It was for these reasons above all, according to Durkheim, that we should carry out historical research into the manner in which educational configurations have progressively come to cluster together, to combine and to form organic relationships (Durkheim 1977, pp. 10, 11, 15; see also Lukes 1973).

My basic argument, taking my cue from Durkheim, is that the key dynamics of the struggle for the history of education arise chiefly from its strategic location in relation to three broad areas of study: education, history and the social sciences. All of these areas themselves represent a wide and diverse range of values, approaches and interests, and each is contested and changing. Nevertheless, they each tend to express distinctive and divergent priorities in general terms. The field of education is interested in education itself, and especially with the organized provision of schools and other educational institutions for different groups of pupils and students. The discipline of history is principally concerned with the nature of changes and continuities over historical time, and itself has a strong historical connection with the broader study of the humanities, including philosophy, which are interested in the human quest for improvement. Lastly, the social sciences such as sociology, psychology and economics address a range of domains in our wider societies, and try to understand these more fully and critically in empirical and theoretical terms.

Each of these areas has a legitimate interest in the history of education. At the same time, it might be said that each embodies a different notion of what the history of education involves and of why it might be important because of its own set of priorities. From the point of view of education, the history of education needs to help to explain the problems and opportunities of education, and where possible to help to improve and develop it further. In terms of history, the potential contribution of the history of education is first and foremost to help to understand our historical past. As social science, the history of education may furnish telling examples of wider social issues. Yet there is, distinct from these separate notions of the history of education, also an inclusive vision, and a grand tradition. The history of education can seek to reach across these diverse constituencies to stake a claim in all three, education, history and the social sciences, and to build on its strengths across them. These areas of study may in other words generate a common and integrated mission for the history of education rather than divergent and competing paths or frameworks. One may acknowledge that the position of the history of education, besides being strategic in relation to these wider fields, can often be uncomfortable and insecure. For example, Donato and Lazerson, reviewing the discussions held at a special conference of historians of education in the US sponsored by the Spencer Foundation in March 2000, reflected that 'Social scientists place a high value on research design; educational historians often wonder what that means' (Donato and Lazerson 2000, p. 4). Moreover, they added,

Institutional location, disciplinary training, professional aspirations, and personal dispositions create conflicting obligations for the educational historian. As historians, we see ourselves adding to an existing body of historical knowledge. The questions we ask are rooted in the historiography of our discipline. In contrast, our connections to educational researchers and professionals lead us in another direction, to view the past in contemporary terms, finding historical questions in today's conflicts and framing the answers in terms that make sense to present-minded colleagues. In choosing one end of the spectrum, we risk neglect and rejection by the other, and are often seen as antiquarians irrelevant to the burning educational issues of our time or as 'presentists' with little appreciation of the uniqueness of the past.

(Donato and Lazerson 2000, p. 4)

For all that, the history of education has the potential to contribute to education, history and the social sciences alike, and to be equally at home with educators, historians and social scientists. Nor is this simply potential; it also has a strong track record of doing so, and of being this.

The history of education is fundamentally a form of history, and the challenges facing the field have much in common with those of its parent discipline, but its particular location and constituency have commonly presented it with specific and often more far-reaching dilemmas for the future. For example, in the late 1980s, the leading British historian David Cannadine discussed how a 'Golden Age' of writing in British history had come to an end as a result of contemporary pressures, and noted that 'At all levels of the profession, the picture is one of gloom, despondency and alarm' (Cannadine 1987, p. 180). Indeed, he warned, British history possessed 'many of the characteristics of a declining industry':

Overseas and domestic markets have been lost and are being lost to rival competitors; among those who manufacture the product, morale is low, recruitment is dwindling and innovation is failing; expenditure on research and development is inadequate and often incorrectly directed; too many goods of very high quality and great technical competence are being produced which are quite unsaleable in a mass market; and there are growing demands for government intervention to rescue this lame and languishing duck.

(Cannadine 1987, pp. 185–86)

Cannadine urged for good measure that

whether we know it or not, like it or not, or will even admit it or not, we professional historians exist to sell a product, and if we are to survive, our product must compete successfully in the market-place of consumer demand, and in the pecking order for government funding.

(Cannadine 1987, p. 190)

This all seems apt advice in relation to history in general but is especially apposite when considering the history of education. The history of education shared in these

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basic difficulties facing history in England in the late 1980s, but experienced even more acute problems as Conservative legislation effectively froze it out of the teacher training curriculum and history became less securely based in educational research. How should historians of education sell their 'product', and 'compete successfully', in the still less forgiving environment of the early twenty-first century?

At a more intellectual level, history in general faced a new challenge in the 1990s from postmodernist critiques of historical scholarship that posed difficult questions about established research methods and claims to knowledge. One response from leading historians was to seek a new accommodation between rival camps. Richard Evans, for example, pleaded for 'a little intellectual tolerance', while warning 'any one particular orientation against the arrogant assumption that its own methods and procedures are necessarily better than those of its rivals' (Evans 1997, p. 182). A decade on, Cannadine emphasized a similar message, as he called for historians to reduce the tendency for debate to be 'dogmatically polarised' into 'extreme and entrenched adversarial positions', to 'emancipate themselves from the spurious thralldom of dichotomized modes of thinking', and to seek to explore 'the gradations, continuums and common ground where most of the best history writing has in practice always been found' (Cannadine 2008, pp. 32–33). Similar issues arise for the history of education, itself a specialist area that has often found itself divided into rival camps and further compartmentalized into a range of interests competing for attention.

Some of the previous work that has explored these problems has emanated from North America, and especially from the US, although it is important to recognize the assessments of the field produced in many different countries around the world (for example, useful overviews by Leon 1985 for UNESCO, and Petersen 1992 in Australia). A pivotal debate took place in the US in the 1960s following the publication of Bernard Bailyn's short but influential work *Education in the Forming of American Society* (Bailyn 1960). 'Revisionist' scholarship in the field that sought to engage with broader social and cultural dimensions of education in American history was soon followed by 'radical revisionist' work that adopted Marxist perspectives rooted in social class (see e.g. Katz 1968, 1987). In the 1970s the radical revisionists began to come under criticism themselves for alleged ideological bias (for example, Ravitch 1978), and by the following decade a more pluralist 'post-revisionist' approach or rather set of approaches had begun to develop. Reese and Rury have recently highlighted key trends in this post-revisionist scholarship (Reese and Rury 2008a), arguing also that the history of education remains 'an evolving and expanding field of study' (Reese and Rury 2008b). They conclude that 'Like most other fields of research and scholarship, the history of American education is undergoing continual change and renewal' (Reese and Rury 2008c, p. 284).

Since the 1990s, debate has also concerned the implications of postmodernism for the history of education. Sol Cohen identified what he described as a new 'cultural history' of education that would cross disciplinary boundaries and engage with the 'linguistic turn' in the production of historical knowledge and understanding (Cohen 1999; see also, for example, Cohen and Depaepe 1996). Such concerns have persisted over the past decade, with Popkewitz, Franklin and Pereyra for instance emphasizing 'how ideas construct, shape, coordinate, and constitute social practices through which

individuals “reason” about their participation and identity’ (Popkewitz *et al.* 2001, p. x). Their methodological approaches, as they affirm, ‘aim at dissolving the boundaries between what has previously been viewed as distinct – discourses and reality, text and the world – divisions that are residues of modernity’, and seek to produce ‘a history of the present that dissolves the textual, real, cultural/social distinctions’ (*ibid.*, p. 4).

In terms of its subject-matter, the history of education has often been defined narrowly as being about the historical development of modern systems of schooling, or a little less narrowly as concerning formal educational institutions for children and young people. Such a definition in itself encompasses many challenging issues. Yet the history of education may be taken also to be about informal processes of education and learning throughout life and society; even, as Bailyn proposed, ‘the entire process by which a culture transmits itself across the generations’ (Bailyn 1960, p. ix). On this broader view, the institutions of schooling developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries might appear to be of less significance than the many different institutions that have had an educational role in past times such as the family and the church (see also McCulloch 2005a). The nature of childhood, the family, adolescence and parenthood all have significant potential for the history of education, as key work by Aries on childhood (Aries 1960) and Stone on the family (Stone 1977; see also, for example, Pollock 1990) helped to establish. The social and historical characteristics of literacy have been much debated in relation to educational processes (see, for example, Vincent 2000; Lindmark *et al.* 2008). The history of general intellectual and technological changes is also very closely related to the history of education (see, for example, Burke 2000; Briggs and Burke 2002).

This book therefore sets out and examines a range of approaches to the study of the history of education relating to these broader fields of knowledge. With this in view, it addresses national and international debates with a range of examples drawn from relevant literature in and around the field. It tries also to develop my own understanding and professional experience of these problems in a new way. It builds on my early work produced in New Zealand over 20 years ago, when I was concerned that needs and opportunities for the field that had already been identified in the US and Europe were failing to be recognized sufficiently widely in the Antipodes (McCulloch 1986a, 1987). It was evident to me then that such issues are played out in very different ways and with distinct timings, processes and outcomes in particular national and cultural contexts around the world. It is certainly possible to identify broadly international trends and contours over the past half century, but I recognize fully that these may look very different from place to place, and that others will wish to contribute to a fuller understanding of the international field on the basis of their own experiences in other local and cultural contexts.

This book also seeks to move forward from my more recent inquiries in methodology and historiography. These too sought to build bridges between different groups. *Historical Research in Educational Settings* (McCulloch and Richardson 2000) set out to provide a broad introduction to research in the area, with a general emphasis on Anglo-American literature supported by British case studies, but also with a wider international and comparative dimension across the English-speaking world.