

**Leaders in the Historical Study of American
Education**

LEADERS IN EDUCATIONAL STUDIES

Volume 3

Series Editor:

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Scope:

Leaders in Educational Studies provides a comprehensive account of the transformation of educational knowledge since 1960, based on rich, first-person accounts of the process by its acknowledged leaders.

The series provides unique insights into the formation of the knowledge base in education, as well as a birds-eye view of contemporary educational scholarship.

The initial volume, *Leaders in Philosophy of Education: Intellectual Self Portraits*, contains personal essays by 24 leading philosophers of education from North America and the United Kingdom. The second volume, *Leaders in Curriculum Studies: Intellectual Self-Portraits*, contains similar essays by 18 leading curriculum scholars. The current volume on historians of American education contains essays by 25 leaders in this field. Volumes on other fields of educational scholarship are now being prepared.

Until the 1950s school teachers were trained for the most part in normal schools or teacher training colleges. The instructors were drawn from the teacher corps; they were not professional scholars. Those offering classes in so-called 'foundational disciplines' in education were not trained in these disciplines. Educational scholarship was generally weak and cut off from contemporary work in the so-called 'parent' disciplines. Professors relied on textbooks featuring out-of-date, dumbed-down knowledge.

In the late 1950s plans were made to bring a higher level of professionalism to school teaching. In the United States, the remaining normal schools initially became state colleges, and eventually state universities. In the United Kingdom, the training colleges were initially brought under the supervision of university institutes; eventually teaching was transformed into an all-graduate profession.

Commentators on both sides of the Atlantic argued that if education was to become a proper field of university study educational scholarship itself would have to be transformed. Scholars were recruited into educational studies from social sciences and humanities disciplines to contribute to teacher education and to train a new generation of educational scholars in contemporary research methods.

Under their influence the knowledge base for education has been completely transformed. In addition to major accomplishments in philosophy, history, sociology and economics of education, interdisciplinary work in educational studies has flourished. The series documents this transformation.

**LEADERS IN THE HISTORICAL STUDY OF
AMERICAN EDUCATION**

Edited by

Wayne J. Urban

The University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, USA



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Cover photo of Lawrence Cremin, pioneer in the field of history of American education and president of Teachers College, Columbia University, courtesy of Teachers College.

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PREFACE

The aim of the LEADERS IN EDUCATIONAL STUDIES series is to document the rise of educational scholarship in the years after 1960, a period of astonishing growth and accomplishment, as seen through the eyes of its leading practitioners.

A few words about the build up to this period are in order. Before the mid-twentieth century school teaching, especially at the primary level, was as much a trade as a profession. Schoolteachers were trained primarily in normal schools or teachers colleges, only rarely in universities. But in the 1940s American normal schools were converted into teachers colleges, and in the 1960s these were converted into state universities. At the same time school teaching was being transformed into an all-graduate profession in both the United Kingdom and Canada. For the first time, school teachers required a proper university education.

Something had to be done, then, about what was widely regarded as the deplorable state of educational scholarship. James Conant, in his final years as president at Harvard in the early 1950s, envisioned a new kind of university-based school of education, drawing scholars from mainstream academic disciplines such as history, sociology psychology and philosophy, to teach prospective teachers, conduct educational research, and train future educational scholars. One of the first two professors hired to fulfill this vision was Israel Scheffler, a young philosopher of science and language who had earned a Ph.D. in philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania. Scheffler joined Harvard's education faculty in 1952. The other was Bernard Bailyn, who joined the Harvard faculty in 1953 after earning his Ph. D. there, and who re-energized the study of American educational history with the publication of *Education in the Forming of American Society: Needs and Opportunities for Study* (University of North Carolina Press, 1960). Many of the most important works of scholarship in these fields since that time have been created in the spaces carved out by these pioneering leaders. The series has been exceptionally fortunate that Scheffler has provided the foreword to the volume on philosophy of education, and that Bernard Bailyn has written the foreword to the present volume.

This volume brings together 26 personal essays, with a Foreword and an Afterword, all by established historians of American education. The authors detail their early life experiences, first encounters with history and history of education, periods of serious study and early professional work, emergence as leaders, development of mature work, and reflections on the current challenges and opportunities in the field.

Previous volumes in the series have featured leaders in philosophy of education and curriculum studies. Those volumes brought together essays by leaders from North America and from the United Kingdom in roughly equal numbers. Early discussions with the editor of this book, Wayne J. Urban, convinced me that such a plan was not practicable for history of education. Philosophy and curriculum studies have generated broad interchanges across the Atlantic. Not surprisingly,

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historians of education have by contrast attended largely to developments in their own national societies and educational systems. Consequently, we decided to limit this volume to historians of American education, and to plan a future volume of intellectual self-portraits by leading historians in the United Kingdom and Europe.

A final word: since 1960 the history of education has established itself as an important and vibrant branch of scholarship. Continued success, however, is not guaranteed. Since the 1980s neo-liberal state regimes in North America and the UK have inserted themselves aggressively and directly into both the schools and teacher education programs. Under such watchwords as “excellence” and “academic achievement” they have sought to transform conventional teaching practices into those that merely result in measurable improvements on standardized tests. They have disparaged the intellectual contributions for education of scholars in humanities disciplines. State bureaucrats now demand that such “useless” studies be replaced with something more “practical” – although by this they do not mean something that will enhance the practice of teaching, but rather something that will transform it in accord with state demands. Serious inquiry in the disciplines of the humanities is not likely to contribute to that demand. Far from recruiting leading humanities scholars, as Conant and other university leaders did in the 1960s, today’s university leaders are failing to replace those that are now retiring, and in many cases closing the programs that train such scholars. Let me express the hope that the works of contributors to these volumes will shine like beacons, lighting the way for future education scholars in what may be less favorable times ahead.

Leonard Waks
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General Editor

BERNARD BAILYN

FOREWORD

Group biographies are always interesting. Individual peculiarities, gossipy tales, failures and successes, beginnings and endings, seen in comparison with others, tend to grip one's mind. But grouped memoirs, revealing and obscuring, subjective and objective, anecdotal and narrative, are especially fascinating, and none that I have seen are as fascinating as the brief memoirs in this volume by leaders in the field of the history of education. In part the fascination lies in the incidental, unexpected details in the lives of these distinguished scholars that suddenly appear: Jurgen Herbst as a teen age recruit to Hitler's Wehrmacht, Carl Kaestle as a collegiate singer (The Whiffenpoofs), Maris Vinovskis as a mayoral campaign manager, Ronald Butchart as a sixth grade herring catcher, Michael Katz as an encyclopedia salesman, Patricia Graham sacked twice as a teacher en route to the Deanship of Harvard's Graduate School of Education and the Presidency of the Spencer Foundation. In greater part the fascination is the result of the writers' frankness, perspicuity, and literary skill in exploring the main passages in their intellectual and professional careers. And beyond all the personal details a major fascination lies in finding in these memoirs a vivid demonstration of education as a social process, the conceptual origins and early development of innovative scholarship, and the emergence of a segment of the American professoriate. But what is most striking for me is a paradox that seems to lie at the heart of these life stories.

None of these leading historians of education aspired to work in that field; some had never heard of it until well along in their professional lives, and many moved in "zigzag trajectories" (Larry Cuban) in and out of the field as their work developed in other areas, but dipping back into the field when it seemed propitious. And they are aware of this paradox. "Never," Harvey Kantor writes with a note of surprise, "when I was in high school and college [did it occur] to me that I would become a historian of education." Diane Ravitch's retrospective surprise is even broader: "It never occurred to me that I might one day be a professor, an academic, a historian of education." "An Accidental Historian," Michael Katz calls his memoir, "Serendipity in the Making of a Career." The careers of the others illustrate the paradox again and again. There were no luminous goals, no alluring models to catch one's interest. The memoirists approached what became their life's work from angles and with interests unique to themselves. And indeed it could hardly have been otherwise given the variety of backgrounds from which these scholars emerged.

They came from almost every corner of the nation and from a great variety of sub-cultures. They came from the South Bronx and from fishing towns in the far

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Northwest; from recently built suburbs in the Midwest; from upstate New York and downstate California, and often, with striking frequency, they came from immigrant families – children and grandchildren of emigrants from all over Europe who had settled in places as different as Flatbush and Houston. Two were immigrants themselves, one from Wolfenbüttel, Germany, the other from Riga, Latvia, both of whom, remarkably, resettled first, via utterly different routes, in Nebraska. And their initial schooling was as different as their family origins. Several found the schools they attended miserable. “I did not like school,” Graham writes, “I found the schoolwork dull and the ambience dispiriting and isolating” – and “high school was even worse.” Many saw their schools as irrelevant to the world around them, and that irrelevance proved to be a spur to their ambitions. But others, a few, attended elite schools and enjoyed them. And the post secondary school career lines were equally unique. If plotted on a geographical/academic grid they would appear not as lines converging into patterns but as a criss-crossing tangle of complex routes through the vast, unstructured multiplicity of America’s collegiate institutions. There were no privileged, designated, assured routes of access.

Yet despite the great variety of personal backgrounds, schooling and collegiate experiences, these 26 scholars ended in the same broad field of the history of education to which all have made major contributions. Somewhere in the course of their collegiate education or shortly thereafter they came to see the unique importance of the field and within it the possibility of personal achievement. In some cases the moment is recorded. “Education history,” Vinovskis writes, “had been just another fascinating but small academic issue for me, now it became one of my two or three major intellectual pursuits.” For some that recognition seems to have become obvious by the sheer impulses of scholarship and intellection, but in most cases a teacher, a colleague, or a friend pointed the way. “Why don’t you go into the history of education?” Theodore Sizer suddenly asked Katz: “‘History gives you great flexibility. People seem to like to hire historians as administrators.’ I took his advice.” And one of the most interesting aspects of these memoirs is how the career lines have intersected within this small group, how intra-generational contacts proved creative, how one memoirist became an inspiration, a guide, ultimately a collaborator with others: so Carl Kaestle with Maris Vinovskis, Vinovskis with Diane Ravitch, Roger Geiger with Hugh Hawkins, Mary Ann Dzuback with Ellen Lagemann. And at the center of these many interactive careers stands the remarkable figure of Lawrence Cremin at Teachers College.

He seems to be everywhere, ubiquitous, in these personal accounts. One finds it difficult to believe--it is astonishing--that Cremin could have had that many course assistants whose careers he inspired, could have given wise counsel to that many unsure aspirants, could have been involved in that many collaborative projects, and could have maneuvered that many appointments throughout the nation’s sprawling educational system. But so it appears from these memoirs, as does the influence and inspiration of David Tyack at Stanford. His style and influence, it seems, were different from Cremin’s – more personal, more intimate, more open and sharing,

but he was equally inspiring and influential in his teaching, in his mentorship, and in the model he provided in his teaching and scholarship.

However inspired by immediate colleagues and friends or by key figures like Cremin and Tyack, these writers tell of a discovery, at some point, of the pivotal, unique position that the history of education holds in the world of historical scholarship, education, and public policy. “Being a historian of education,” Diane Ravitch writes, “provides an excellent starting point to interpret and reflect on all kinds of debates [and] to explain how the past informs our decisions and discussions.” “Without realizing it,” Katz explains, “I had written about the links between past and present, that I was using history to interpret contemporary educational reforms.” The field was found to be boundless: “defined as the study of culture and its transmission through time,” Ellen Lagemann writes, “the history of education can open for study an almost limitless range of topics and can help one move through many different positions in academe and outside.”

These are no isolated scholars, entirely removed from the current concerns of society. There are different emphases - some have been more deeply involved in history as such, others’ concerns have been more broadly political or administrative. But all share a devotion to the belief that history is a key to understanding where we are in the vital field of education, and how one might best think about the policies that account for the shaping of minds and the transmission of culture in the great swirl of American life.

And there is something more. These memoirs – short, insightful, candid, and lucid – are themselves important documents in the history of education and scholarship. The authors’ careers are part of the story they tell.

