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Is It Time for Another Historiographical Revolution?

Milton Gaither

As I read through the fascinating ruminations of Drs. Albisetti, Finkelstein, Thelin, and Urban, it seemed to me that two basic points emerge, one conceptual and one methodological. Conceptually, Albisetti, Finkelstein, and Urban are asking historians of education to move away from national frames of reference to either a global, transcontinental purview (Albisetti and Finkelstein) or a small, local one (Urban). The two alternatives become complementary as we read on, however, for many examples given of such globalism are actually case studies on a small scale—the lives of single individuals in Finkelstein's case, and of single institutions in Albisetti's. Similarly, Urban's localism becomes the starting point for comparative history between one location (Alabama) and another (Georgia), which in turn expands into regional comparisons (the American South and other parts of the country) and institutional ones (Catholic and public systems). The portmanteau "globalocal," or the commonplace "think globally, act locally" seem to capture this conceptual recommendation nicely.

The key methodological recommendation to emerge from these texts in my view is the call for increased data collection, especially quantitative data. This theme is most powerfully expressed in Thelin's Cliometric dream to create massive datasets that do for the history of American higher education what HEGIS has been doing since the 1970s. Urban would love to do the same for the demographics and life courses of American teachers. Finkelstein's longstanding emphasis on the oral history of teachers—"collecting stories, stockpiling memories, creating archives, and accumulating information"—is inspired by the same concern. Albisetti goes out of his way to recommend a solitary quantitative study published back in 1988.

In what follows I would like to make two comments about these two points. I will begin with the methodological and conclude with the conceptual. In both cases, my comments grow out of a recent experience I had writing an in-house history of education textbook for an online curriculum provider. My dissertation director Ed McClellan once said that he believed every graduate student in whatever field should write a

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textbook in that field before beginning the traditional doctoral dissertation. Having now done so, I concur. Trying to write a synthetic history of education in what is now the United States from colonial times to the present required me to stretch far beyond my own competencies, to refresh myself on literature I had not consulted in years, and to read deeply in fields to which I had never before attended. It revealed several places where the current historiography is woefully deficient or even nonexistent. Finally, it led me to a sense of profound dissatisfaction with what I had produced because of its lack of conceptual coherence. What follows will make all of this clear. Please note that my comments here assume the history of *American* Education as the frame of reference.

Plugging Knowledge Gaps

All four authors point to the importance of amassing good evidence for our work, and they all suggest places where more evidence and more work is needed, be it local studies of teachers, budgetary, and student enrollment patterns in nineteenth and early twentieth century institutions of higher education, or preserving living voices before time silences them forever.

I would like to take this basic insight and expand it by looking at three gaps in the American literature. The first and most outrageous gap, given that we are historians, is the gap that covers the periods between the first North American settlements by humans and the late nineteenth century. For quantitative illustration of the astonishing presentism of current educational historiography, consider the following graphs, both compiled and created for me by my remarkable undergraduate work-study students Kristen Chen and Kathy Balmer. Figure 1 catalogs every article with an American setting published in the *History of Education Quarterly* between the years 2000 and 2011 by time period. Figure 2 does the same for books reviewed in the *Quarterly* during those years. In both cases you see the overwhelming dominance of the twentieth century in our collective work.

The reality is actually even worse than the graphs make it appear, for many of the books that appear under the seventeenth-early nineteenth century headings only include cursory, summative discussions of those periods based on older research. Why this myopia? Perhaps, as Professor Thelin's comments suggest, the reason for this "dominance of the foreground" is that we simply do not have easily accessible evidence for so much of the past.[1] As I was trying to write my textbook I kept wondering to myself where all the fresh work was on the colonial, early

[1]Santayana used the phrase to critique Dewey's metaphysical naturalism. I think it serves equally well as a critique of our own astigmatic attention to the recent past. See

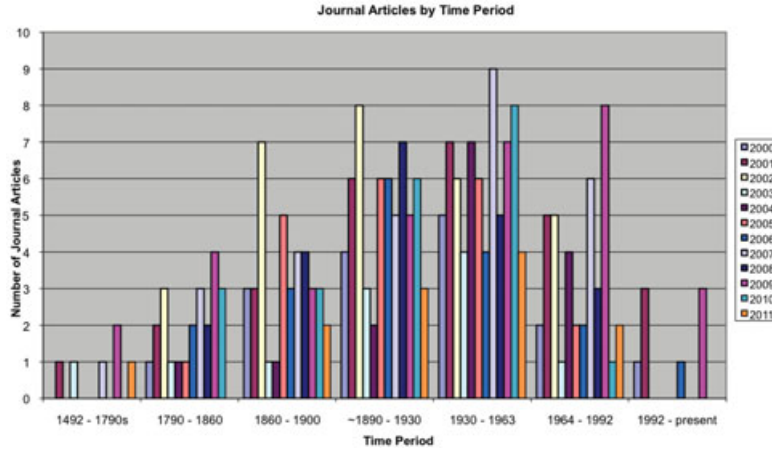


Figure 1. Journal articles by time period.

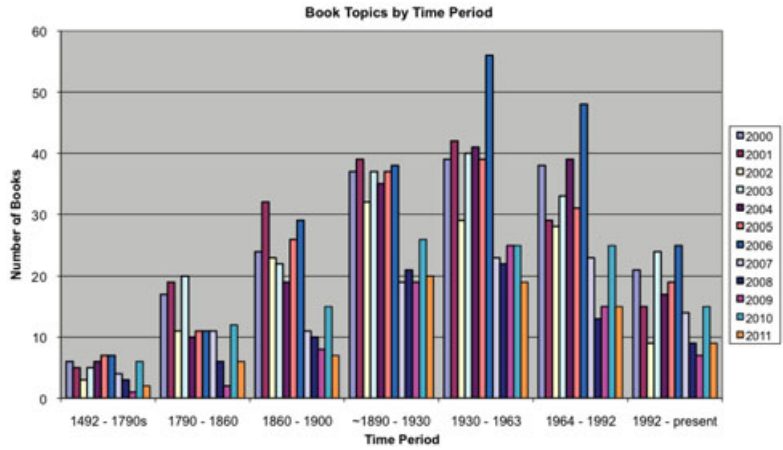


Figure 2. Book reviews by time period.

national, and common school eras. My editors at first wanted no secondary source cited that was published before 2000. I had to tell them that if I limited myself to sources published since 2000 there would be almost nothing I could say about anything prior to the progressive era. In general, the further back in history one looks the less recent educational historiography there is to read. Precontact Native American history, most egregiously, does not seem to exist for us at all. Not a

George Santayana, "Dewey's Naturalistic Metaphysics," *Journal of Philosophy* 22 (1925): 678.

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single article or book on the topic appeared in the *HEQ* over the past eleven years, which is why I did not include the years prior to 1492 as a category in my graphs above.

A second gap that I found frustrating when I was writing my textbook was the history of private education, especially of non-Catholic private schools. There is very little recent work on the history of elite independent schools or of the wide range of religious schools that have been extant since the eighteenth century—Protestant, Jewish, Adventist, Mormon, and so on. My textbook included a chapter on such schools, much of which was based unfortunately on in-house histories of single institutions by denominational historians, former teachers, and the like. I was able to find exactly two comprehensive book-length treatments of independent schools, one published in 1970 and the other in 1996.[2] Given the national impact of schools like Phillips Exeter, Choate, and Groton, one would think they would be of more interest to educational historians. Again, the sheer difficulty of obtaining hard data about such institutions may be partially responsible, but these are challenges that need to be met.

Finally, I had a lot of trouble telling the educational stories of post-1930 American immigrants who were not Mexican. Latino/an educational historiography has in recent years enjoyed a bountiful harvest, but almost all of that excellent work has been on the Mexican-American experience. Asian-American educational history likewise has had some stellar moments, but the historiography there remains episodic and far from comprehensive. Of the three holes I mention, this one probably holds out the greatest potential for eventually being filled as our discipline is blessed by an ever wider range of graduate student voices whose life stories and/or scholarly interests will likely push their scholarship in this direction.

Auguring the Revolution?

I would like to turn now to the conceptual concern I raised earlier. For me the most exciting moment reading through these four essays happened as I read through footnotes one and two of Dr. Finkelstein's paper. I do not exaggerate: as I read through her litanies of sources my heart began pounding and I grew flushed. Why? Because for a brief

[2]James McLachan, *American Boarding Schools: A Historical Study* (New York: Scribner, 1970). Arthur G. Powell, *Lessons from Privilege: The American Prep School Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996). Powell's book, it should be noted, is concerned mostly with the recent history of independent schools, using their example to recommend policy changes in public education.

moment, the heavens opened and I experienced a beatific vision of the future of American educational historiography.

Back in the late 1950s many, especially younger, historians of American education were bored with their field. For as long as anyone could remember, the history of education had been the story of the gradual and inexorable advance of civilization through several stages to its present exalted state, an advance best illustrated in national educational systems. World War II, however, had thrown this optimism into question, and younger historians of education by the 1950s were chafing against the old educationist metanarrative. When Bernard Bailyn's critique of this metanarrative came along in 1960 it fell on them like a revelation.[3]

Over the next thirty years, as we all know, the history of American education experienced several waves of revisionism that challenged the whiggish metanarrative of the progressive educator historians on nearly every front imaginable. By the 1990s the revolutions had run their course and a general peace had settled on the land. Since then American educational historiography has grown in complexity, in contextual richness, and especially in the diversity of its cast of characters. But truly pathbreaking work, work of the sort that makes one's heart beat fast and one's temperature rise, is exceedingly rare. If I might appropriate Thomas Kuhn's famous analysis, it seems as though Bailyn's work and the revisionist impulse it unleashed shifted the paradigm away from progressivism to contextual complexity, and complexity has since become our "normal science." Educational historians today do the honorable but not particularly challenging job of filling in the gaps (like those I noted above and others noted by several of our authors) in our complex educational history like they are so many predictable answers to a crossword puzzle.[4]

But Finkelstein's two footnotes suggest the potential for another revolution. In an earlier work I noted that there were two unfortunate consequences to the loss of the progressive metanarrative that had guided our discipline from the nineteenth century up to the 1950s. The first was the transcontinental perspective. Pre-Bailyn educational historiography, from Henry Barnard to Thomas Woody, had been transcontinental to a fault. Nearly every educational historian of those years understood American educational institutions to be situated in a broad global context. This was only the case, however, because all of them believed schools to be embodiments of a society's place in the

[3] For details, see Milton Gaither, *American Educational History Revisited: A Critique of Progress* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003), 144–49, 154–55.

[4] Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 35–42.

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evolution of civilization. When that metanarrative was overturned, so was the commitment of American educational historians to internationalism. That Bailyn was the initiator of the revolution here is deeply ironic, for he has long been one of our best historians at reading early American history as a trans-Atlantic story.

The second thing that was lost was metanarrative itself. Though false and, to our sensibilities today, morally reprehensible due to its racism, sexism, and hubris, the metanarrative of the rise and triumph of government schooling as illustrative of the rise and spread of civilization did provide a coherent synthesis. We have not had one of those for a long time, which makes it difficult to write a textbook history of American education. Finkelstein's footnotes were so exciting to me because they seemed to point the way to a possible future educational historiography that does not, as Maxine Seller complained in 1991, "treat the nation as though its boundaries were impenetrable walls." Finkelstein suggests the possibility of a new synthesis grounded in "networks of human interaction, transcultural encounters, forms of global connection, and dispersed sites of cultural teaching and learning."[5]

What might that new metanarrative look like? I wonder if, for example, a new educational history of early America might, as my textbook did not but Alan Taylor's influential synthesis *American Colonies* did, begin with the migrations of people groups to this continent some 15,000 years ago?[6] I wonder if it might, like Bailyn himself urges in his thoughtful meditation *Atlantic History*, understand the history of early America as of a piece with the peoples of Europe and Africa who arrived here whether willingly or unwillingly.[7] A new metanarrative might, in short, tell the history of American education as the history of people groups interacting in the geographic space now called the United States. It would describe how these groups have created various institutions to pass on their beliefs and knowledge to their children and/or to resist the efforts of other groups to do the same. One could see how this approach could grow with the nation, as more people groups arrive and more Americans leave to spread Americanism around the world. By the end of Finkelstein's footnote two I was outlining the grand synthesis in my head and growing dizzy with the prospects.

But the reality is that this would be very hard to do. Transcontinentalism could prove to be just another few spaces in the crossword puzzle that a few specialists on missionary teachers or comparative higher

[5]Maxine Seller, "Boundaries, Bridges, and the History of Education," *History of Education Quarterly* 31 (Summer 1991): 197.

[6]Alan Taylor, *American Colonies* (New York: Viking, 2001).

[7]Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Concept and Contours* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

education write about, adding to the overall complexity of our field but not really giving it a coherent master narrative around which a textbook history could be written. Furthermore, it would require much work. Finkelstein mentions partnerships with historians from other countries as well as knowledge of ethnohistory, anthropology, and postcolonial theory. Albisetti, who knows better than almost any other member of our guild, describes the necessity of linguistic familiarity not only with German, French, and Italian but with Spanish and Dutch. And that is just to read the scholarship. To do the actual historical spadework at least some of us are going to need to know the languages of the various people groups who have arrived on these shores over the past 15,000 years.

All of that is simply to echo Finkelstein's observation that a transcontinental "masternarrative will be decades in the making." But to my mind it is a project worth taking on collectively. I might not live to see it, but my hope would be that one day someone (or a group of someones) will publish a replacement to Lawrence Cremin's august but unsatisfying three volume synthesis, this time with a narrative core built around the transcontinental migrations of peoples to this part of North America and the results of those people's endeavors to educate their own and others' children.

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