https://doi.org/10.1111/hoeq.12014 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Things I Should Have or Could Have Accomplished

Wayne J. Urban

I want to divide this essay into two sections, one indicating things I might have added to a few earlier works, and a second indicating a project or two that I did not do but would like to have done.

First, I will discuss the incomplete projects. I have done a lot of work on teacher organizations and have long cherished that work. Unfortunately, it has depended on the availability of documents, as is the case in doing any kind of history. The net result is that I have devoted a significant amount of time to the National Education Association (NEA), a group which has preserved its documentary heritage, a collection that I have used in two books and a number of articles.[1]

Yet many of the most interesting stories about teachers and their associations come from the state and local level. I have published an article on teachers and their unions in Florida, where 35,000 teachers walked out of their classrooms in February 1968. I also wrote a chapter on the beginnings of teacher unionism in Atlanta, Georgia, and chapters on early unionism in Chicago and New York.[2] All of these works, like my NEA work, depended on the availability of sources. In Florida, a colleague and I surveyed the published statements of Florida teacher leaders and their opponents, mainly state politicians and business leaders, and we interviewed numerous actors in the walkout shortly after it had happened. In the case of the Atlanta teachers, one of my

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Wayne J. Urban is Professor of Education and Associate Director of the Education Policy Center at the University of Alabama, where he has worked since 2006. He is the author, most recently, of *More than Science and Sputnik: The National Defense Education Act of 1958* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010); co-author, with Jennings Wagoner, of *American Education: A History*, the 5th edition of which will be published in the fall of 2013 by Routledge; and editor of *Leaders in the Historical Study of American Education* (Amsterdam/New York: Sense Publishers, 2011).

[1] Wayne J. Urban, *More than the Facts: The Research Division of the National Education Association, 1922–1997* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998) and *Urban, Gender, Race and the National Education Association: Exceptionalism and Its Limitations* (New York/London: Routledge Falmer, 2000).

[2] Urban, "The Effects of Ideology and Power on a Teacher Walkout: Florida, 1968," *Journal of Collective Negotiations in the Public Sector* 3 (Fall 1973): 133–47 and Urban, *Why Teachers Organized* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1982); chapters 2, 3, and 4 on Atlanta, Chicago, and New York, respectively.

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graduate students at Georgia State University alerted me to a collection of documents relating to the birth of the Atlanta Public School Teachers Association that I found kept in a closet by the principal of a local high school and former officer of the association.

State and local research have a special appeal for me, nurtured by a sensibility I have developed for subjects close to home working in the American South for over four decades.[3] Yet I have not managed to extend my earlier work in state and local history, especially as relates to teacher organizations. Recently, I had the occasion to review a book on the Florida teacher walkout, written by an NEA official who worked in the state during the walkout itself. I found the book to be interesting and enlightening, to be not the book I would have written about the walkout, and to be an invitation for further work on the subject, by doctoral students and/or by postdissertation scholars. For reasons having to do with logistics as much as anything, I doubt that I will contribute to this literature. But I also regret that lack of contribution.[4]

My wish to extend my work on the Atlanta teachers' association was partially fulfilled by one of my doctoral students, Joe Newman, who completed a fine dissertation on the topic.[5] Joe never published that work, though I am convinced it is an excellent piece of research. Joe is now retired, and I am getting there, so it is doubtful that this study will see the light of day. That is a pity. Local teacher and association studies, like the recent work of John Lyons on Chicago,[6] are worthwhile efforts. They are valuable dissertation studies that can result in publication when they are completed.

Another consistent strain in my work, at least in the last two decades, is biography. In 1992, I published a biography of a noted African-American historian of education and educational administrator, Horace Mann Bond.[7] The contours of the relationship between a white scholar and a black subject were noted by one or more commentators on my Bond work, and so I followed up with an essay to explore the dimensions of that relationship.[8] Also, in the biography,

[3] Urban, "History of Education: A Southern Exposure," *History of Education Quarterly* 21 (Summer 1981): 131–45.

[4] Urban, review of Don Cameron, "Educational Conflict in the Sunshine State: The Story of the 1968 Statewide Teacher Walkout in Florida," *History of Education Quarterly* 50 (August 2010): 396–98.

[5] Joseph W. Newman, "A History of the Atlanta Public School Teachers' Association, Local 89 of the American Federation of Teachers, 1919–1956" (PhD dissertation, Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia, 1978).

[6] John F. Lyons, *Teachers and Reform: Chicago Public Education, 1918–1970* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

[7] Urban, *Black Scholar: Horace Mann Bond, 1904–1972* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1992).

[8] Urban, "Black Scholar, White Biographer," in *Writing Educational Biography: Explorations in Qualitative Research*, ed C. Kridel (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 103–11.

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I made much of Bond's scholarly accomplishment and administrative difficulties. That theme related to my own conflicts over scholarship and administration at that point in my career. Mixing autobiography with biography, as I did in my commentary on my Bond study, made both genres more attractive to me as a scholar. I followed up autobiographically with a piece on my early life and education, published in 1996, and have recently produced a piece on my scholarly life, published in a larger volume of autobiographical essays by several historians of American education, and a discussion of the intersection of biography and autobiography in my work.[9]

The point of this discussion is that I would like to do a full autobiography but likely will not do one. That decision is based on at least two factors. First, autobiography, like biography but more so, raises a raft of literary dimensions and issues with which I am not conversant and, more importantly, uncomfortable. Writing about doing history is much more difficult than doing history for me and contemplating one's own life and evolution at the same time one writes about it raises an aesthetic dimension that I am unprepared to deal with. Furthermore, an autobiography seems a task to be undertaken by people much better known than I. Put more colloquially, who the hell am I to write an autobiography? I actually came up with a tentative answer to this question by thinking about my own prospective autobiography as representative of what can happen to a descendant of the southern and eastern European immigrant generation that came to the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. For me, an autobiography is a postretirement project, if it ever occurs, not something to which I would devote the last years of a scholarly career. It will have to occur after completion of what I now project as my final major project, a biography of James Bryant Conant, president of Harvard University from 1933 to 1953, and noted commentator on the American high school.

Now I would like to turn to other projects I would like to have done, but have never truly attempted, even on a small scale. I want to mention first that I have always had a respect for those in history of education who do quantitative work. They are adept at quantification, but also feel a need, justifiably I think, to explain what they are doing to the rest of us who are naïve quantitatively. Michael Katz, John Rury, and Maris Vinovskis come to mind as accomplished educational historians who have used quantitative methods in their work. My own foray into quantification would have involved some aspect of teachers,

[9]Urban, "Wayne's World: Growing Up in Cleveland, Ohio, 1942–1963," *Educational Studies* 26 (Winter 1995): 301–20; Urban, "A View from the Provinces," in *Leaders in the Historical Study of American Education*, ed. Urban (Amsterdam/New York: Sense Publishers, 2011); Urban, "Autobiography and Biographical Research in Higher Education," in *The History of U. S. Higher Education: Methods for Understanding the Past*, ed. Marybeth Gasman (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), 30–43.

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trying to produce a demographic work on teachers that allowed for shifts over time in their background and simultaneously accounted for the continuities and discontinuities in their work lives. I even found some documents that would have facilitated such an analysis of Atlanta teachers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, personnel directories identifying all the teachers by name, school where they worked, and particular position held.

The National Education Association, as is often the case, suggested how to do a quantitative study of teachers by virtue of its publication of *The Status of the American School Teacher*, beginning in 1957 and ending with the 2007 volume. There is a lot of basic data in these eleven reports that a sophisticated quantitative historian could use to construct a revealing portrait of American schoolteachers that would be an enormous contribution to the literature. The relatively easy availability of the published issues of the *Status* reports can facilitate such a study. Also, the recent acquisition of the NEA papers by the George Washington University Archives can make available at least some of the information on which the publications were based.

There is another study I would like to do but probably will not be able to complete. This study would deal with teachers and their associations in the states where I have worked for most of my career. Since coming to the University of Alabama in 2006, and familiarizing myself with the workings of the Alabama Education Association (AEA), I have become fascinated at how different its recent history is compared to the evolution of the Georgia teachers association, the Georgia Association of Educators (GAE). Briefly, the AEA has been a formidable presence on the Alabama political stage, without having any collective bargaining rights, while the GAE was superseded by an avowedly antiunion group, the Professional Association of Georgia Educators (PAGE), in another noncollective bargaining state. One obvious explanation for the difference in the trajectories of the two groups is that AEA has been led by the same two people for the last thirty-five years, the leaders of the white and the black teacher associations respectively, which merged with the racially segregated state affiliates in several southern states under the impetus of the National Education Association in the late 1960s and early 1970s.[10] Such longevity is remarkable in any group, and even more remarkable in a teachers association.[11] Study of these two groups would accompany my earlier work on the Florida teacher walkout and

[10]I dealt with these mergers in a chapter in *Race, Gender and the National Education Association*.

[11]Alas, since this was written, both AEA leaders have retired and the state has been taken over by Republicans who seem bent on taming the teachers' association and have taken some successful steps along that path.

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create a case study of teachers' associational impulse in three adjacent southern states, with three distinctly different recent histories. Florida, where the teachers' association desegregated relatively easily in the mid-1960s, suffered a wrenching defeat in the 1968 walkout, but emerged with a statewide teachers union, affiliated with both the NEA and the American Federation of Teachers at different times and having collective bargaining for most of the period since the walkout. In Georgia, desegregation took significantly longer and yielded a merged association that never enrolled the white teachers with the same success that it did the black teachers, and, arguably, thus set the stage for the lack of success which it has endured since then. In Alabama, where desegregation took the longest time, it yielded an association that achieved a racial solution that allowed it to become a major player in state politics and a relatively effective protector of teachers' interests up to the present day. Comparing and contrasting these experiences, and thereby assessing my own somewhat glib account of them, would surely be a task worthy of accomplishment by an educational historian intent on making a career in the South, or anywhere else for that matter.

Other studies that I would like to undertake relate to various aspects of my own life and career. I attended public and parochial schools in Cleveland, Ohio, between 1947 and 1959. I would like to know more about the individual schools that I attended and how they fit within the larger configuration of public and private education in that city in that period. Catholic education was in large part working class education in Cleveland in those years, and I would like to understand how the Catholic schools I attended, and the larger Catholic school bureaucracy within which they functioned, consciously considered that role and/or how they acted unconsciously in regard to it. Public schools, on the other hand, including the one I attended, confronted a similar class configuration, but one with distinctly different (I think) ethnic dimensions. Testing my thoughts of difference, along with other social aspects of public schooling and Catholic schooling, would be of great interest to me. Such a study might, but might not, modify my current view of Catholic schools as just another set of private schools that skim off the social and intellectual cream of public school enrollments, much to the detriment of public schooling.

Having said that, I want to mention a different, and less positive, view of public schools that has emerged for me recently. In my work on the Educational Policies Commission, a blue ribbon group established by the NEA in the 1930s that worked to support public education for the three decades of its existence, I noted that there was a distinct antipathy to Catholic education within the group. I do not know this for sure, but there is no internal evidence that a Catholic ever served on this group, though Jewish and African Americans did so (though not

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in large numbers). As a reader of manuscripts submitted to the *History of Education Quarterly* for the last several years, I have been intrigued by two manuscripts that illustrated clear anti-Catholicism within the ranks of public school supporters. While neither of these manuscripts has been published yet, the research behind their conclusions is significant. An interpretation, or perhaps a reinterpretation, of Catholics and public schools in the twentieth century is important, I think, both historiographically and in terms of contemporary education policy. I regret that I am not the likely party to do it.

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