

Gary McCulloch

The Struggle for the History of Education

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Gary McCulloch's *The Struggle for the History of Education* maps out the nature of the field and seeks to highlight the sites of struggle. He opens his monograph by suggesting that the history of education might seem sedate to the outsider but is actually all about struggle. He suggests that the field, like the object of study, is in continual flux. Education is, as he states, a site for social progress, change and equality, struggles for democracy and the fight for social justice. He argues for a clearly articulated vision for the field, and the book is one effort in that direction. McCulloch also underlines the need both to learn from colleagues in faculties of education and teach these colleagues about historical ways of thinking about education. Central to McCulloch's opening argument is the idea that history of education is a site of struggle because it lies at the crossroads of three areas of study: history, education and the social sciences.

In the first chapter, McCulloch sets out the idea of the history of education as the struggle for social progress. He speaks to the historiography and the contributions of earlier scholars such as Leopold von Ranke and the "scientific" approach to historical writing. As McCulloch characterizes this, it is the "Acts and Facts" approach to history. McCulloch also reviews the transition from Ellwood Cubberly's progressivist approach to US history of education to Bernard Bailyn's critique, to Lawrence Cremin's critique, to the Marxist analyses of Michael Katz. McCulloch documents a similar intellectual pattern in the United Kingdom and in New Zealand.

McCulloch's chapter on the struggle for educational reform and the useable past is particularly engaging. One of the critiques that McCulloch makes of contemporary educational policy is that of historical amnesia, with governments often reinventing the proverbial wheel. He also argues that "the role of the history of education in the struggle for educational reform has been contested and denied not only by policy makers, but also by a number of historians of education who prefer to avoid giving excessive attention to the present" (69). Yet McCulloch notes the value of history

in policy making, quoting US historian of education and former president of the History of Education Society, Donald Warren: "Supplementing empirical data with qualitative assessments, history can bring to policy research the humanizing resources available to memory, ideas, values and traditions that join with grander economic, social and political developments in shaping educational policies and determining their effects on people" (60).

In McCulloch's chapter on the struggle for methodology and theory, he sets out the position of Jurgen Herbst, an American historian of education. Herbst argued in 1999 that as a field History of Education had run out of new creative energy, with the old mantra of "class, race and gender" simply being repeated over and over. Yet McCulloch suggests that historians of education are benefiting from a critical examination of their craft. Indeed he draws attention to Richard Evans' 1997 work, *In Defense of History*, which speaks to the question of relativism and historical causation. Such work, McCulloch argues, challenges educational historians to participate in conversations on theory and to in particular grapple with the postmodern critique. The engagement must also be extended however to include possibilities such as counterfactuals, in the manner of Niall Ferguson's 1997 work, *Virtual History* and McCulloch's own work in this area. Towards the end of the chapter, McCulloch argues that the various un-discussed lacunae of the history of education are being looked at through a broadening of the documentary evidence used in the writing of history. New avenues of investigation include "oral history, visual history, sensory history and materiality in history" (79).

In his final substantive chapter, entitled "The Struggle for the Future," McCulloch states that the case can be made that the field is prospering. At the same time there has been an ongoing decline in the institutional base of the history of education in faculties of education. McCulloch here speaks to the withdrawal of history of education and other disciplines such as psychology, philosophy and sociology from pre-service teacher education programs. The paradox of being less secure in pre-service teacher education programs, but more intellectually rigorous and more research-focused remains one that historians of education need to grapple with. Moreover, the rise of the "educational research" paradigm, he argues, appears "explicitly unsympathetic to history" (110). His response to this is that "historians of education for their part need to make clear to their colleagues in other areas of educational research that the work is also about asking questions, searching for evidence, and monitoring and evaluating outcomes, and that it [history of education] provides an especially helpful strategy for doing so" (110).

In all, McCulloch provides a good analysis of the field. The theme of struggle is very appropriate. The book is particularly strong in outlining the diversity, broad nature and nodes of conflict, within the field. It also makes an excellent case for the future health of the history of education. I think where the book could be improved is to move beyond the "anglosphere" or even to different parts of the "anglosphere." There is scant mention of Canadian contributions to the field, and virtually nothing beyond the British, American, Australian, and New Zealand context. Contemporary news is full of the rise of Chinese and Indian academic institutions, whither the

history of education in these two important academic constituencies? This however is a minor quibble. Generally speaking, the work is a must read for new and senior historians of education alike and particularly educational researchers wanting to know more about developments in this exciting field.