

# The city and education in four nations

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## Introduction: problematics and domains: thinking internationally about urban education

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*Ronald K. Goodenow*

Cumulatively, the essays in *The city and education in four nations* address a set of needs which have not been considered adequately by historical or comparative educational literature. The book is intended to be read in terms of its inherent value to students of schooling in cities and to those who would wish to see a more cosmopolitan literature on education. Although most of the individual essays dwell on national scholarly trends and traditions, several of them address the international transfer of ideas on cities, policies and historical research, and how, when viewed comparatively, they affected schooling. This requires attention to problematic and domain issues associated with theory, practice and the venues in which historians work.

A foremost problematic revealed in the volume is the relationship between research and practice, one that points to a need to strengthen the theory base upon which historians write. Without a good theoretical foundation, historical inquiry in education can, and often has been, driven normatively by the imperatives of developing and reforming public schooling or fostering social change. As Kaestle notes in his chapter, 'Even if we put the committed Marxists, modernisers, Annalists, Weberians and Parsonians all together (an interesting thought), they are not numerous.' There is, he suggests of historians, 'little in their training, their favourite historical writing, or in their intellectual instincts that inclines them to the sustained use of theory'. Kaestle also writes that unfortunately the exceptions to this rule tend either to be theory-bound, lost in grand world views that give a reductionist character to their work, or mired in overt attempts to be eclectic. While this book is not exactly a call to his own 'middle-ground position', it does put the issue of theory in the foreground, where it belongs.

Theoretical, and other problems noted in *The city and education in four nations*, require attention to the relationship between how schooling in cities has evolved and how historians of 'urban education' and related topics have studied it in the United States, Great Britain, Australia and Canada. As a relatively new aspect of the modern historiography of education the debate

is characterised not only by a weak theoretical foundation, but by ambiguous differences over perspective which overshadow agreement over what Angus describes in his chapter as ‘the bases on which valid and cumulative generalisation can be built’. The ‘field of study’ is one which is still seeking common definitions and consensus about basic issues, including, as many of the essays in this book attest, the nature of the boundaries within which scholarship takes place, the relationship between scholarship and policy and whether such terms as ‘urban’ are appropriate ones.

This condition has several causes. The relationship between urban educational history and mainstream social history is not always well defined. One intellectual problem – and I will elaborate on others below – is stated here by Reeder, who identifies a critical boundary issue when he writes that, ‘As more social historians located their studies in towns and cities, the ambiguity of what constituted the field increased and a great variety of studies, many with a society-wide context, were welcomed as contributing grist to the urban historical mill.’

The problem situation is exacerbated to some degree by constraints which transcend those of boundary or theory. Many educational historians work in schools of education, where scholarly and professional objectives must be balanced upon constantly shifting ground. All too often, educational historians are isolated, physically and intellectually, from their more ‘academic’ counterparts, many of whom but infrequently interact with the city, its populations and the many policy dilemmas inherent in modern urban education.

Professional status and perspective, of course, raise a problem that nags at many educational historians: relations between scholarship and practice. As Reeder also suggests,

The problems of inner city schooling gave rise from the 1960s to a plethora of sociological and educational publications, and these concerns may have influenced almost imperceptibly a renewed interest in the history of mass schooling, but there was no attempt self-consciously to develop an historical perspective on the contemporary debate. Urban educational policies were formulated ‘without any adequate awareness of past endeavours to solve problems which may have been exacerbated or may have assumed new dimensions in our own times’. The historians of education are not alone responsible for this neglect of history; it is also the case that urban educational study and debate was conducted in such a way as virtually to exclude them.

If striking a balance between theory, practice and the problems inherent in urban education is a difficult one, integrating them is a delicate proposition, for as Coulby warns in his chapter, ‘an exclusively historical approach to urban education may be perceived as a retreat from politics, indeed from policy. Historical approaches may be seen to permit urban

educationists the leeway of distancing themselves from the struggles of the present.’

Coulby’s essay is a reminder that the sands of theory and practice are shifting ones, best understood in the national domain. Accordingly, Cohen and Reese note in their contribution that national tradition affects matters of emphasis profoundly. Debates about scholarship in the USA, they write, are likely to be framed around questions about the nature and role of public schooling, which occupies a special place in American life. In this context, argument about ‘urbanisation’ or even the relationship between schools and cities pales by comparison. Each nation, as the essays presented here demonstrate, has its broad historiographical traditions and it is incumbent that they be recognised as affecting any relationship between history and practice, theory and practice and a wide range of research interests. Beyond this, they and their scholarly traditions exist in an international domain.

The liberal democracies included here share much in terms of dominant modes of educational, economic and political ideas and practices, many of which have been transferred between them. They have all partaken in a great twentieth-century phenomenon: the wholesale institutionalisation, systematisation and transfer of mass education. There has been a persistent belief everywhere that schooling is essential to good citizenship, that it rescues nations from economic malaise, and that it serves as creator of ‘progress’ and ‘reform’. Indeed, virtually all nations, regardless of political ideology, share these beliefs. Finkelstein writes in this book, ‘The popularisation of schooling, is, by definition, an aspect of modernisation processes all over the world. It has proved to be an irresistible, and apparently irreversible, invention of social and political planners throughout the world.’

Though, as Finkelstein also suggests, the ‘relationship of cities or urban settings to all of this is not at all clearly joined’, this explosion of mass education has been accompanied by the notion that the consequences of urbanisation may be controlled by educational means. Reinforced by stereotypes which arose around nineteenth-century industrial cities as well as by modern social science, it has become an axiom, particularly among the middle classes in the Western industrialised nations, that cities are cauldrons of immigrants and displaced rural dwellers especially prone to alienation, rootlessness and, as often as not, the more sinful enticements of materialism. Here is a setting of opportunity, fear, conflict and individual and group survival strategies, crowding and movement. It is a domain in which, as Finkelstein writes, myths arise easily about schooling as panacea to cure many social ills. This condition of mass education, as well as underlying beliefs about cities and their dwellers, is a concern of many

contributors to *The city and education in four nations*. As several of them suggest, theories on urbanisation are linked inexorably to others on 'urbanisation' and 'development', some of which are embedded in a widely diffused Western social science that has often legitimated dominant and sometimes exploitive patterns of social and economic relations in industrialised and non-industrialised nations – a prime area for new research.

There is, then, a complex set of issues surrounding the evolution of constructions and associated terminologies for defining 'urban' or 'urban education' internationally. There is a need for scholarship on how policy has developed in nations which, if they do share much in the way of political ideology, class structure and economic production, also have significant cultural differences and patterns of intergroup relations. Bureaucracy, centralisation and professionalism seem to be important features of all modern educational systems, as well as the subjects of much scholarly discussion, and their relation to social control and stratification has been elaborated upon by revisionists, as noted by Cohen and Reese in this book. Their relative significance and consequences in various national systems have not, however, received analysis adequate to determine the degree to which they are affected by or are responses to such things as the degree of racial or ethnic pluralism in the population, religious diversity, tradition and loci of political and educational control. Very little thought has been given to the subtle issues of individual choice and consciousness noted by Finkelstein and Marsden in their contributions. The role of social science over and against social and political pressures needs attention.

If historiographic tradition, in the United States at least, has emphasised the extent to which there has been social consensus on the goals and purposes of schooling, and radicals have recently brought to light many of the class and other conflicts which defy and deny consensus, there is another side of the coin yet to be explored comparatively. This is the fluidity and transformational character of the urban experience – as opposed to its many dislocations – as it has affected the family, the neighbourhood and those new aggregates of identification and meaning which may arise only in urban circumstances. Indeed, the significance of these oversights is not to be underestimated, for in Marsden's words, 'Much of the misunderstanding which has permeated academic debates about social class and school provision has resulted from the failure to take account of the disjunction between the official intent and not so much the aggregate response as the tangible individual family and group adjustments at the grass-roots.' As Heward's research on Birmingham reminds us, moreover, the choices made across the lifespan and the degree to which people have had to choose between formal education and other things of importance, including the

maintenance of the family or obtaining work, have received far too little attention in the literature – an issue of growing significance as educators address increasingly the needs of the ‘non-traditional’ adult learner.

Most scholars of educational history are aware of the relationship between social demography, geography, aspiration and the evolution of educational practice and policy. The United States, for example, has historically been ‘a nation on the move’. From its very beginnings, as Bailyn, Cremin and many other scholars have documented, immigration and the perpetual internal movement of Americans have influenced deeply the character of all the nation’s informal and formal educational agencies, including the family, the church, the neighbourhood and the school and university. There is a literature which argues the need for demographic understanding to affect contemporary education policy.<sup>1</sup> The migration of blacks to the North since the Civil War and the outmigration of urban dwellers to the suburbs in the years after the Second World War have had a profound impact on American life. In the 1970s and 1980s migration to the ‘Sun Belt’ and the immigration of people from Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America have had significant political and economic consequences.

Relatively few historians of education in the United States have, however, taken into consideration the character of population clusters and when, where, why, how and by whom education policy decisions have been affected by them. This is a great unknown in the historiography. The problem, particularly as it concerns the city, is not unique to the literature of educational history. As stated by Dublin in a recent *Journal of American History* essay, altogether too much research has been narrowly focused and uncomparative. He writes that historical research regarding the nineteenth-century decline of America’s rural population and the growth of its cities had ‘been limited by the conceptual framework within which it has been carried out’. The rural and urban halves of the process of transformation have rarely been brought together and the problem is particularly evident among scholars of social and geographical mobility who have studied urban population movements and occupational change but who have almost invariably restricted their research to a single community, be it rural or urban. Within that context, generalisations about social mobility, in turn, have been limited to persistent residents in a given community. On occasion, the characteristics of migrants are compared with those of persisters, but rarely is there any analysis of the previous or subsequent experiences of migrants beyond the boundaries of the community under study.<sup>2</sup>

Other scholarship, namely that of one of this volume’s editors, has helped set the stage for understanding these issues. Over a decade ago, in 1977, Marsden wrote that ‘a “geography of education” is still in its

infancy, and an “historical geography of education” hardly yet conceived. Similarly, the geographical component has been neglected by historians of education.<sup>3</sup>

Shortly after these comments were made, several historians, including Marsden, contributed to Reeder’s very useful volume, *Urban Education in the Nineteenth Century*. Homage to the Chicago School of ecological studies, which has dominated much study of the city throughout this century, was given. But *Urban Education in the Nineteenth Century* was also to argue for a more sophisticated approach. The various essays linked structural, hierarchical, cultural and other phenomena and did so in a manner alert to relations between city and town. A case for comparative studies of various kinds was demonstrated and sensitivity to location, space and geography was a feature of several essays. Reeder, the volume’s editor, wrote modestly that ‘These are early days yet for pronouncing on the range of approaches or judging the priorities for research, whether they should be the development of urban school systems, or the content and processes of urban schooling, or the study of social perceptions and school–community links.’<sup>4</sup> This said, Reeder’s book stands as an excellent example of how social and cultural history is informed by social demography. What Katznelson in 1981 described as ‘power networks, sets of solitary institutions, distinctive social groupings, psychic territories, loci or primary interactions, symbolic units, territories, market places, and “natural habitats” among other things’, have, then, proved to be of increased attraction to historians.<sup>5</sup> The United States, Canada, Australia and, increasingly, Britain are nations of highly mobile immigrants and so they need to be explored by historians of the city in international context.

The contributors to this book were not asked to address issues of comparison and educational transfer between nations specifically. That is, they were not requested to write ‘comparative’ studies or dwell on the transfer internationally of ideas on education, historical research and cities. What emerges, however, from many of the following essays is a requirement that core questions for comparative historical study be identified and that cross-national influences be taken into consideration appropriately.

A problem which blocks such study, as pointed out by several authors, has been a failure in the United States and other nations to develop a ‘comparative’ history capable of comprehending the enormous diversity of cities, regions and cultures *within* individual nations. ‘The deliberate use of comparison in urban educational history’, Angus writes in this book, ‘remains rare.’ Though some historians, including Kaestle, who contributes to this volume, have broken important ground in the application of comparative methodology (in both domestic American and international set-

tings), it may be argued that the main problem persists: much of what is known about urban education is derived from studies conducted in too few cities on too few segments of the population. The overall situation is not helped by the degree to which there are national traditions of comparative study which vary considerably. As Coulby argues in his essay, the condition of comparative education has kept it from becoming serious about schooling in cities. In some nations, the field of comparative education is wracked by debate on methodology, emphasis and whether historical analysis has any role to play. This, of course, limits its influence on historical inquiry substantially and serves to isolate historians from comparative insights on historical development and policy. We do not have, in Angus' terminology, a historiography that is necessarily 'cumulative', one that offers a steadily increasing knowledge, in his words, 'about the social systems of cities'.

As the essays in this volume reveal, scholars are paying more attention to schooling in cities. When seen in national context, however, the pattern of response has varied. Britain, for example, has only recently developed sophisticated scholarly cognisance of the urban educational condition, and this is largely as the result of the crises which have afflicted cities which themselves have undergone cycles of post-war prosperity and decline. Policy-making mechanisms and the uses of social science vary differently in America and Britain. Yet, as Reeder and Coulby point out here, the British have occasionally turned to the USA for ideas as they struggle with many of the racial and other problems American social scientists began to address well before the Second World War. In America, it is believed, links between scholarship and the addressing of social problems seem natural and progressive. Unfortunately, this borrowing has been highly fragmented, with much work on urban education being entirely devoid of historical context.

Elsewhere, it is possible to argue that Canada and perhaps Australia have suffered from a slightly more 'dependent' condition. As Sutherland and Barman contend, as early as the 1950s new scholarship on the dominant impact of cities in Canadian life suggested that 'Canada's very small number of cities were, in turn, vassals of such external metropolitan centres as London, New York and San Francisco.' There has been a paradoxical reaction to this dependence – brought about in part, as they note, by the influence of radical American social historians of education and their students who turned to Canadian topics. But whatever its ideological content, scholars in Canada, Australia and other nations have tried to develop perspectives to counter the influence of the United States and Britain, nations which have had greater intellectual and institutional capital and which, until recently, dominated graduate training, publishing and the funding of research. While some of these may take the form of enhanced national or domestic outlooks, there can be little doubt that those

represented in *The city and education in four nations* are also cognisant of the need to develop a far more international and comparative approach to the enterprise and to use it as a means of reexamining old assumptions and methods.

Unfortunately, however, historians of education in cities must do their work in something of a vacuum, for scholars in the field have neither addressed issues of comparative methodology nor developed a sophisticated perspective on the transfer of ideas as part of an overall pattern of international scholarly relations.<sup>6</sup> Modes for transferring scholarship and policy on urban education and history have not been a major subject for study even in those countries (e.g., the United States) where a new generation of scholarship on the history or urban schooling has served to inspire considerable debate and methodologically sophisticated inquiry. Even radical proponents of 'the new urban social history' critical of mainstream modes of historical analysis – and prone to locate it within the context of international monopoly capitalism – have generally neglected to develop a comparative perspective or comment upon appropriate comparative methodologies even though their influence, as in the case of the American Michael B. Katz's work in Canada, has been powerful. In this regard, the transfer of influences between nations, and the outcomes of transfer, need far more work.

The reader of this volume will see, then, that domain issues are paradigmatic and that several writers are perplexed by the normative character of how urban education and its historiography have evolved over and against national traditions and competing modes of interpretation, including those, which as Sutherland and Barman point out, may be tipping the balance against 'urban' and 'urbanisation' as modes of classification. This, as Davey and Wimshurst suggest here, is not out of confusion about the nature of urban history, but is instead a reflection of the degree to which the sub-disciplinary boundaries of social history are changing.

*The city and education in four nations* should be read, therefore, not as a definitive statement on the state of research in the United States, Britain, Australia and Canada, though the information presented should be helpful in this regard. Nor does it seek closure. It is intended primarily as a volume which questions boundaries – between theory and practice, between categories and definitions, between fields of study and between nations – so as to encourage the location of work on schooling in cities in a more cosmopolitan context.

## NOTES

- 1 See, especially, Bernard Bailyn, *Education in the Forming of American Society* (New York: Vintage Press, 1960); Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education: The Colonial Experience, 1607–1783* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970); and

- Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education: The National Experience, 1783–1876* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980). For a useful argument which looks at contemporary urban demography and education policy, see Sheldon Marcus and Thomas A. Mulkeen, 'The new urban demography: implications for the schools', *Education and Urban Society*, Vol. 16 (1984), 395–6.
- 2 Thomas Dublin, 'Rural–urban migrants in industrial New England: the case of Lynn, Massachusetts, in the mid-nineteenth century', *Journal of American History*, Vol. 73 (December 1986), 623.
  - 3 W. E. Marsden, 'Historical geography and the history of education', *History of Education*, Vol. 6, No. 6 (1977), 21.
  - 4 David A. Reeder (ed.), *Urban Education in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1978), 10.
  - 5 Ira Katznelson, *City Trenches, Urban Politics and the Patterning of Class in the United States* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 196. See also Ira Katznelson and Margaret Weir, *Schooling for All: Class, Race, and the Decline of the Democratic Ideal* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).
  - 6 For further elaboration upon the author's perspective on educational transfer issues, see Ronald K. Goodenow, 'The progressive educator and the third world: a first look at John Dewey', *History of Education*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (1990), 23–40.