

The History of American Education: Two Viewpoints

The history of education in the United States has been written about in two ways: as a mechanism for social mobility, a way of reaching the “American Dream” of prosperity and equality for all, and as a instrument of repression, visiting the social inequities of the current generation onto the next. The revisionist camp of American educational history posits that the traditional view of American education as a tool for the advancement of the poor is flawed; education is instead a tool of the elite that maintains the social order. The anti-revisionists refute this pessimistic view, although they concede that many past educational practices have had negative results. They disagree, however, with the revisionist idea that the American educational system was created and promulgated with malice aforethought, designed to promote the idea of social mobility while in actuality retarding it. This paper will explore the origins of each viewpoint, using Michael Katz’s and Maris Vinovskis’ differing treatments of the vote for closure of the Beverly High School in 1860 as case studies.

Prior to the publication of Michael Katz’s The Irony of Early School Reform in 1968, the view of American educational history was that which was set forth by luminaries such as Ellwood Cubberley and Horace Mann. In the preface to his book Public Education in the United States, Cubberley advocates that pre-service teachers be required to learn recent American educational history so that they will be able

To be familiar with recent development, to be able to view present-day educational problems in the light of their historical evolution and their political and social bearings, and to see the educational service in its proper setting as a great national institution evolved by democracy to help it solve its many perplexing problems. . .¹

¹ Ellwood P. Cubberley, *Public Education in the United States A Study and Interpretation of American Educational History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1919), p. x.

In his quest to establish the common schools, Horace Mann also advocated this view, believing that education had the potential to demolish distinctions between groups of people, and would enable the creation of more wealth, advancing the poor while allowing the wealthy to retain their wealth.² The view of education, therefore, was of an institution that would provide the means for economic advancement.

In 1968, however, Michael Katz published The Irony of Early School Reform, which had a very different view of the purposes of American education. Katz analyzed the events leading up to the vote to abolish the Beverly High School in Beverly, Massachusetts in 1860. He determined that support for the continuance of the high school came from those in prestigious occupations and the wealthy, whereas opposition came from the working class, leading him to reject Cubberley's and Mann's view of education as a humanitarian institution.³ Instead, Katz found that the upper and middle classes supported the high school because it was an institution most useful to those classes as well as a mechanism for avoiding the problems of industrialization experienced in other societies.⁴ The working class, on the other hand, Katz said, were unenthusiastic about the social and economic changes occurring around them, and voted against the high school as a proxy for such industrialism.⁵ Katz concluded, therefore, that the myth of the origins of American public education as Horace Mann's great equalizer was just that: a myth.

² Lawrence A. Cremin, *The Republic and the School: Horace Mann on the Education of Free Men* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1957), p 89.

³ Michael B. Katz, *The Irony of Early School Reform* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), p. 22.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

In 1985, Maris Vinovskis challenged this revisionist view of American public education in his book The Origins of Public High Schools, in which he reanalyzed Katz's data on the Beverly High School but came to different conclusions. Vinovskis used multivariate statistics that enabled him to control for the impact of other factors on the relationships he was analyzing, as opposed to Katz's cross-tabulations which did not enable him to discern the confounding variables. Furthermore, Vinovskis' approach to his analysis differs from that of Katz. Whereas Katz tends to speak in absolutes, Vinovskis is much more willing to concede that he cannot always make definite conclusions from the data. For example, in a section where he notes that Massachusetts natives were more likely to be against the school than those born outside of its borders, Vinovskis states that "There is no ready or obvious explanation for this pattern of voting behavior."⁶ Moreover, Vinovskis points out that Katz draw many of his conclusions from the voting patterns of the citizens of Beverly, but that only 25.6% of eligible voters actually voted, and that the less affluent were less likely to have voted at all (13.8% of non-property holders voted as opposed to 32.8% of property holders), making it difficult to generalize to even the population of Beverly, much less that of the United States.⁷

Vinovskis' results differ from Katz's. For example, although he corroborates Katz's finding of a relationship between wealth and vote, Vinovskis gives the caveat that ". . . the relationship was by no means perfect since three out of every ten individuals whose total personal and real estate property was valued at more than \$5,000 opposed the high school."⁸ Ultimately, however, it is not Katz's treatment of the Beverly High

⁶ Maris A. Vinovskis, *The Origins of Public High Schools* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p. 89.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 95

School vote that Vinovskis finds important. Rather, Vinovskis notes that the import of Katz's study lies in its utility to the revisionists who have "relied heavily upon the fight over the Beverly High School to demonstrate the efforts of capitalists to impose educational reforms upon unwilling workers."⁹

Where does Vinovskis' revision of the revisionist viewpoint leave us? We now have two views of the history of American education, both of which hold some truth but neither of which hold the entirety. But perhaps the most important legacy of the disagreement between Katz and Vinovskis, and the larger conflict between revisionists and anti-revisionists, lies in the idea that our original viewpoint may not be the most accurate. The willingness to challenge established viewpoints by analyzing and reanalyzing data, and the refusal to take previous knowledge for granted, will ultimately leave us with a broader, richer understanding of our history.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 109.