

2-20-2015

Time for a New Revisionism

Charles Tesconi

American University, tesconi@american.edu

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/eduhist>

 Part of the [Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Indigenous Studies Commons](#), [Oral History Commons](#), [Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Tesconi, Charles. "Time for a New Revisionism." *Education's Histories* 2 (February 20, 2015). <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/eduhist/vol2/iss1/1>

This Multilogue is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Education's Histories by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mail.lib.umt.edu.



Education's Histories

methodological grist for the
history of education

Notes

¹ Donald Warren, “Waging War on Education: American Indian Versions,” *Education’s Histories* (January 29, 2015). <http://www.educationshistories.org/waging-war-education-american-indian-versions/>.

² *Ibid.*

Time for a New Revisionism

Charles Tesconi

Don Warren offers several purposes (I counted 6) of “Waging War on Education: American Indian Versions.”¹ They are interrelated, some interdependent, and are served in sections of this essay, which, taken together, amounts to a theoretical framework for a methodological approach to doing educational history. A new historiography is necessary, we learn, in order to exit what Don calls a methodological *cul-de-sac* inherited from Bailyn and Cremin. They mistakenly constructed histories through definitions of education that locked them into cramped and culturally arrogant methods. Their definitions narrowed their educational embrace to the intentional and deliberate. Their approaches are limited and limiting as well. Warren’s eschews *a priori* definitions and invokes a trans-disciplinary methodology shorn of cultural myopia and open to sources once thought antithetical to convention. Warren cites several publications to illuminate his envisioned methodology. These exemplars pay little to no attention to formal educational institutions and educational processes. In fact, most of the authors of these works did not set out to do educational history as such. According to Warren, however, all of them “treat education as the fraught process of cultural formation.”²

Charles Tesconi is Professor Emeritus at American University where he served as Dean of the School of Education from 1989-2000. He was Dean of the College of Education and Social Services and Professor of Education at the University of Vermont (1978-1989), served on the faculties of Ithaca College, University of Illinois, Chicago, and has been a Visiting Professor at the Ohio State University. He is the author, coauthor, and coeditor of six books and numerous articles emphasizing the relation between socioeconomic background and educational opportunity. His last book, *Good Schools* (Hampton Press), examined the local policy environments of public schools unusually successful with economically poor students. Tesconi has served on the editorial boards of major social and educational journals, and has held appointive and elective office in professional and scholarly associations, including service as the elected President of the American Educational Studies Association. Charles Tesconi can be reached at tesconi@american.edu.

Those familiar with Warren's work, certainly his students, will see that "Waging War" has a long gestation period. He has been working, re-working, and advancing his proposal for a revised methodology for some time. I know this. I have known Warren for close to 50 years. He is my friend. And in this spirit of full disclosure, let me note what will be soon apparent. I am not an historian. Thus I accept Warren's views of the works of Bailyn and Cremin and leave analysis to those who know better. I choose this approach because of my limitations and my belief that the methodological legacy Warren attributes to Bailyn and Cremin is incidental to the major contribution of this essay.

Until the 1960s, much if not most work in the history of education in the United States was occupied with the place, function, and prospects of schools and schooling in America. Like institutional history generally, educational histories were disdained by academic historians. Much the same can be said of the philosophy and sociology of education. Educational studies were not represented in the departments that housed the parent disciplines. Looking back, it is tempting to conclude that the subject of such studies, education, as well as works representative of them were both discredited and marginalized.

³ Bernard Bailyn, *Education in the Forming of American Society; Needs and Opportunity for Study* (New York: Vintage Books, 1960).

Bernard Bailyn's *Education in the Forming of American Society* was expected to change things.³ Although he too was dismissive of the body of work in history of education, he did not dismiss, directly or otherwise, the study of education. His criticisms and insights welcomed a broader approach to the study of history of education; indeed, for the study of education generally. This opportunity came through an assertion, which, in retrospect, seems full of common sense, even ordinary. Echoing Emile Durkheim's observation that education is the preservation of culture inherited from times past, Bailyn avowed that education is the transmission of culture across generations. If so, and if culture is the sum total of learned behavior patterns, values, beliefs, mores, knowledge claims and all other products of human work and thought, then the study of education must necessarily address all the ways and means through which culture is transmitted. Yes!

Received like an epiphany, Bailyn's criticisms and insights were expected to change things. But taking full advantage of new possibilities has proven difficult. With few exceptions, it seems,

post-Bailyn (and Cremin) work in educational history has not produced a transformational shift; as Warren would want it and as Bailyn's insights invite. As Warren sees it, those who do history of education have, for the most part, retreated to familiar methods and terrain.

Some things obviously changed. Bailyn, and his staunch interpreter and defender Cremin, implanted, as Warren put it, a cultural orientation that put teaching and learning center stage in a boundless theatre. Some historians of education worked hard to distance themselves from the limitations of their craft so decried by Bailyn, who, by the way, was voicing what academic historians had been muttering for years about work in the history of education, as their academic counterparts in philosophy, sociology, and psychology had about educational studies linked to their disciplines. More people from different academic disciplines engaged educational studies. A functionalist and largely positive history of education was challenged by critical and radical conflict perspectives. An institution long regarded as a source of opportunity and social justice was portrayed as otherwise. Public education seemed to be at the center of public moral discourse.

Warren was among those who saw hope in these developments and in revisionist histories and related changes to educational studies. He summarized some of these changes and their implications for public policy in 1978:

Comparative and interdisciplinary approaches provide concepts and resources for assessing educational development in the United States. There is also a discernible trend away from survey history in favor of basic research and focused case study. A wealth of new literature has appeared that utilizes new sources and techniques, employs fresh critical perspectives, and in turn generates new research questions. ...More significant, however, are advances in sophistication and subtlety by which complex educational phenomena are analyzed and explained.⁴

⁴ Donald Warren, "A Past for the Present: History, Education, and Public Policy," *Educational Theory* 28, no. 4 (October 1978): 263.

Surely some of the change and hope evoked is owing to the work of Bailyn and Cremin. How much I leave to historians.

Warren agrees with Bailyn's (and Cremin's) notion of education as cultural transmission and the kind of educational history work it invites; up to a point, that is. Bailyn and Cremin failed to adopt a methodology that education as cultural transmission demands—one bereft of definitional gatekeeping and the cultural favoritism and blinders it elicits. In short, works by Bailyn and Cremin do not attend to the logical and ethical obligations their pronouncements invite.

American Indian Histories as Models of Education History

Warren discusses cultural continuity among American Indians and works about them as a means to illuminate many of his points about the methodology he indicts. He sees education as the best if not only explanation to account for cultural continuity and adaptation to change evident among American Indians, and, I would add, among ethnic groups as well. The persistence of culture, at least in some major aspects, reflects an investment of effort, time, energy, and other resources to transmit the received culture; especially so with cultures, such as those of American Indians and other Indigenous peoples, so long under attack. An educational lens provides access and explanatory possibilities to and for these phenomena respectively.

In seeking to account for the unrealized promise of broad and deep enduring methodological and subject changes in the doing of educational history, evident in the retreat he has partly documented, Warren reminds readers that Bailyn generated fears among professed historians of education, given his hope that his criticisms and insights would divorce “the present interpretation of education in American history . . . [from] its separateness as a branch of history, its detachment from the mainstream of historical research, writing, and teaching.”⁵ Education history was “a distinct tributary,” traceable to a marriage of convenience with professional teacher and other school professional preparation at the turn of the twentieth century.⁶ Bailyn wanted and anticipated education historians would be working within academic departments of history, free of professionalizing roles in their traditional homes. The divorce didn't happen. History departments

⁵ Warren, “[Waging War](#).”

⁶ Ibid.

were not inclined to pursue educational matters. Educational history remains the pursuit of educationists, and according to Warren's findings, retains its parochial focus.

Bailyn's was not a new way of seeing education, as the above reference to Durkheim attests, and as Warren observes here and elsewhere; it was acknowledged by Bailyn and Cremin as well.⁷ There was, too, George Spindler's invitation as early as 1954 to anthropologists to study education. Their perspectives and methods, as he and Louise Spindler subsequently demonstrated, revealed rich investigative possibilities. So, too, with works by Theodore Brameld: *Cultural Foundations of Education: An Interdisciplinary Exploration and The Remaking of a Culture*.⁸ Brameld wrote of the debt he owed to John Dewey's works, especially *Reconstruction in Philosophy* as pointing the way towards the importance of these cultural approaches to the study of education in the U.S.⁹ Indeed, one cannot come away from Dewey's admonition in "My Pedagogic Creed" without reflecting possibilities that inhere in a broad conception of the education. He put it this way:

I believe that all education proceeds by the participation of the individual in the social consciousness of the race. This process begins unconsciously almost at birth, and is continually shaping the individual's powers, saturating his consciousness, forming his habits, training his ideas, and arousing his feelings and emotions. Through this unconscious education the individual gradually comes to share in the intellectual and moral resources which humanity has succeeded in getting together. He becomes an inheritor of the funded capital of civilization. *The most formal and technical education in the world cannot safely depart from this general process.*¹⁰ (Italics added.)

For Warren, limitations that inhered in works by Bailyn and Cremin account in very large part for the return to established ways he sees and bemoans. They violate what is implicit in Bailyn's admonition and explicit in Cremin's interpretation of him; namely, that the study of, interpretation of, and explanation of history demands empathic understanding. Do not be ethnocentric. Yet, they were taking western European culture as their model.

⁷ Donald Warren, "History of Education in a Future Tense," in *Handbook of Research in the Social Foundations of Education*, ed. Steven Tozer, Bernardo P. Gallegos, and Annette M. Henry (New York: Routledge, 2011), 41–60.

⁸ Theodore Brameld, *Cultural Foundations of Education: An Interdisciplinary Exploration* (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1957); Theodore Brameld, *The Remaking of a Culture: Life and Education in Puerto Rico* (New York: Harper, 1959).

⁹ John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/40089/40089-h/40089-h.htm>.

¹⁰ John Dewey, "My Pedagogic Creed," *The School Journal* LIV, no. 3 (January 16, 1897): 77–80. Retrieved from <http://dewey.pragmatism.org/creed.htm>.

Warren sees methodology as the major vehicle through which historians of education can make contributions to their field and, importantly, I think, to the study of history generally. The very nature of the educational requires the trans-disciplinary and diverse source methodology Warren advances. These two attributes are among several others (I counted 10) shared by the publications Warren recommends as models, none by a professed educational historian. The attributes that are most significant among the others do not presume a progressive or functionalist arc to education history. And, significantly, these works are not burdened by *a priori* definitions of education; indeed, most if not all of the authors did not set out to do a study of the educational. Warren, nonetheless, sees these works as studies in educational history. He points out in quoting Fenton that if attended to with “sharp eyes and ears” they are revealed as “deeply nuanced reconsiderations of educational processes.”¹¹ Consequently, they move education and education history into new areas.

¹¹ Warren, “Waging War.”

Through inferences drawn from the exemplars he cites, Warren concludes that

education history’s intrinsic and most inviting contributions begin as research methods. Hypothetically, any topic can be approached, and reach important destinations, if the approach itself is driven by accumulating evidence of when, where, and by what means *individuals and groups have learned, for good or ill.*¹² (Italics added.)

¹² *Ibid.*

It is “learning,” whatever its outcome, “for good or ill” as Warren writes, that marks what is educational. This strikes me as definitional, at odds with what I understand Warren thinks about such matters; although it is more open-ended, perhaps problematically so, and not as commanding and normative as the definitions of Bailyn and Cremin.

Warren contends that definitional approaches are at once confined and limiting, as exemplified in the Bailyn definition and the even more elaborate restrictive Cremin definitional. Both elicit ways of seeing the past through the present. They lead to seeing markers of attainment along the way to the known, and they open the door to an institutional lens and functionalist conclusions.

Warren wants room left for the serendipitous, accidental, experiential, and informal, or in Dewey's terms, unconscious learning. Here, Warren makes explicit what is tacit in the work of Richard Storr whose work Warren has been taken with for some time and cites in support of his case: Bailyn and Cremin bequeathed an "inadequate, even crippling, research design. Knowing education's appearance in advance, they could confidently locate it in trolling the past."¹³

¹³ Ibid.

What I see as Warren's definition of education, stated explicitly as "learning for good or ill" is a bare bones one but with a broad embrace. On the other hand, his accounting for his claim about slavery as an educational institution suggests a conception of education that is rather specific in some ways. Consider this:

The most pervasive, embedded, and effective agent of education in the U.S. during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was slavery. As an institution, *it taught Americans how to see and measure their world and their own worth. It functioned as the lodestar of their moral compass, slanted public and scholarly rhetoric, and molded, unremarkably, the conceptual foundations of literacy, religion and theology, commerce, science, technological advance, and art.* It was literally, although not ideally, the American common school. It received direct and indirect public subsidies and political ratification. Slavery's educative force encompassed the nation, shaping discourse, policy, territorial, state, and federal constitutions and laws, and accepted common sense.¹⁴ (Italics added.)

¹⁴ Ibid.

The emphasized sentences strike me as defining attributes of what Warren would consider worthy of that which is educational, even the heavily, outcome freighted "educative." Are the characteristics Warren invokes not definitional? Warren doesn't mention that Cremin saw slavery as "miseducative." He may have thought it unnecessary.¹⁵ After all, to say that slavery or any institution or process is miseducative is not to deny that they are educative. "Miseducative" suggests, among other things, that something is wrong with the outcomes attributable to some experience or process, that those outcomes are worthy of negative sanctions.

¹⁵ Lawrence A. Cremin, *Traditions of American Education*, 1st ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

Warren’s choice to ignore this word in the context of his discussion of slavery may be a tacit acknowledgment that “miseducative” is not helpful (although he uses it in a question—“are some cultures more educative than others?”—and with respect to educative histories). Importantly, “educative” invites moral and cultural judgments—something Warren wants to avoid. Simply because we may disapprove of something learned does not deny its origins in the educational. We should get rid of the word.

The contexts and ways through which any societal culture is transmitted are broad and varied. If Warren’s stated conception of education (learning for good or ill) is necessary to accepting his envisioned methodology, it commits to an acknowledgement that the educational domain embraces, among other processes, conditioning, training, indoctrinating, lying, and propagandizing.¹⁶ Different societies employ these means as they induct oncoming generations and other newcomers into their societies and culture. To acknowledge these as taking place under the rubric of “education” invites challenges to the moral freight embedded in “education,” “educational,” and “educative.” I think, therefore, Warren’s case will be advanced and rendered more acceptable to those who might be put-off by “learning for good or ill” by making a more expansive explanation of his conception of education. Such an explanation would help to account for what I see as a contradiction between his “learning for good or ill” and his claims about the educational functions of slavery. Those claims create another question for me. Is it the case that what is educational or educative can only be so determined after-the-fact, after outcomes have been effected? If so, doesn’t this invite the “teleology in reverse,” believing is seeing fallacy that draws Warren’s and Storr’s approbation?

I also think Warren would strengthen his case by distinguishing meanings and implications associated with cultural transmission and cultural formation. He and Bailyn use them interchangeably. While dictionary definitions may also treat them synonymously, it strikes me that they deserve more nuanced treatment in the context of Warren’s argument.

It seems to me that the kind of histories of education that Warren’s framework evokes takes a very special skill set and both a broad and deeply funded knowledge base. There are comparatively few

¹⁶ Thomas F. Green, *The Activities of Teaching* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1971).

who possess such talents and the inclination to invest the time to develop them and, in turn, invest them in a study that employs them. This may very well be the case with academics, particularly those in search for tenured positions. So, I think Warren could help his case by addressing this concern.

Finally, Warren's theoretical framework stands on its own, independent of Bailyn and Cremin. This is not to suggest their work is not deserving of the criticism Warren directs at their work, but to observe that his methodology needs no foils. The methodological dead end left by Bailyn and Cremin may account for the retreat Warren finds wanting. But there are other explanations: the non-responsiveness of history departments to Bailyn's invitation; the continuing professionalizing functions of the study of educational history in school professional training programs; the reward protocols in schools of education and other departments of history that serve to discourage the kind of trans-disciplinary work Warren promotes. In any event, it is the theoretical framework proposed that needs more attention.

Warren attempts a great deal in a relatively short treatise. His ideas are worthy of expanded treatment, a book-length manuscript. The need as I see it for the clarification and further explanation suggested above and the intrinsic worthiness of his theoretical framework and proposed methodology deserve it. Don's theoretical framework has implications for educational studies generally. It reinforces and extends inquiry in anthropology of education, sociology of education, and philosophy of education.



Education's Histories would like to thank Charles Tesconi for his careful review of Donald Warren's essay, "Waging War on Education: American Indian Versions" and for allowing us to publish his review in our experimental multilogue format.



Interested in writing with us?

Please send a brief description of your ideas to educationshistories@gmail.com. We accept submissions on a rolling basis. All articles and essays are part of the open peer review process. Visit www.educationshistories.org/submissions/ for more information.

www.educationshistories.org • educationshistories@gmail.com

Adrea Lawrence & Sara Clark, co-curators

Education's Histories

methodological grist for
the history of education