

Toward a Cooperative Paradigm for the History of Women's Education in the United States: An Overview

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Abstract

Historical research on women's education in the United States has shifted from focusing on policy initiatives to internal dynamics of schools and classrooms. The additive nature of the new writings of women's education causes concern that it has been increasingly challenging to write women's education in a way unfettered by the established, sometimes ideologically dominated, paradigm of historical research. In response to this claim, I examined and evaluated historical writings on women's education in three historical periods in the United States: the antebellum era from the 1780s to the 1860s, the progressive era from 1860s to 1920s and the era of World Wars and Cold War from the 1920s to 1980s. I argue that most of the "additive" works in the history of women's education are based on an integrative understanding and examination of socio-economic forces that shaped the landscape of education for all. The agency of women in higher education, as reflected in these historical studies, has gradually transformed the history of women's education. An innovative research paradigm that synthesizes the divided, sometimes contradictory, historical scholarship is needed to better reveal the history of women's education.

Keywords

Women's Education, Historical Paradigm, Educational History, Historiography

1. Introduction

While diversity is emerging as America's "manifest destiny", power struggles have become deeply woven into the tapestry of the national narrative on educational equality and justice (Takaki, 1993). Numerous historical works on gender,

ethnicity and education in the U.S. have evaluated the power dynamics between the dominant and the marginal, as well as the tensions between ideologies and practices. Similar to the themes of inequality and oppression that saturate the history and historiography of minority education, the studies of the education of women are mostly situated in a framework that places women and men in dichotomized tracks. Tetreault summarized five theoretical stages and models for the studies of women's educational history as from "a male-defined history", to "compensatory history", to "contribution history", to "histories that focus on then oppressive framework in which women lived", and finally to "histories with a female consciousness" (Tetreault, 1985). These five stages prove that the power dynamics of gender roles permeate the historical works on women's education, and drive the studies of women's education from male-centered to female consciousness. Different from Tetreault's theory, Donato and Lazerson pointed out that the historical study of women in education has shifted from focusing policy initiatives to internal dynamics of schools and classrooms, and that the additive nature of the historiography of women's education has failed to revise the history of education broadly (Donato & Kazerson, 2000).

In response to Donato and Lazerson's claim, I evaluated historical works on women's education against a broad socio-economic background in three different historical periods in the United States. The three periods range from antebellum era "1780s-1860s", progressive era "1860s-1920s" to the era of World Wars and Cold Wars "1920s-1980s". I argue that most of the "additive" works in the history of women's education are based on an integrative understanding and examination of socio-economic forces that have shaped the landscape of women's education. The representation and emphasis of women's agency in these historical works have modified the history of education. A further transformation of this field requires a change of research paradigm that is possible only when the power structures in both scholarship and social institutions are less divided and contradictory.

2. History and Historiography of Women's Education: 1780s-1860s

2.1. Socio-Economic Background of Education from the 1780s to the 1860s

In the early republic and the common school era, the goals of schooling in the United States were to train intelligent citizens with protestant moralities. According to Kaestle (1983), the three ideologies that shaped the reformers' beliefs are republicanism, Protestantism and capitalism. American republicanism stresses the importance of self-sacrifice and subordination in citizens who were "intelligent and free but subordinated themselves to the common good as articulated by virtuous leaders (Kaestle, 1983)". Protestant ideology emphasized the moral training of the individual who can "be shaped to maintain the values and leadership of cultivated, native, Protestant Americans (Nash, 2005)". Both republi-

canism and Protestantism were closely intertwined with the emerging capital expansion in the 19th century. The antebellum era witnessed a gradual transformation of production mode from family-centered shops to factories. Industrialization created excess produce and excess market value. At the same time, the first wave of new-coming immigrants posed new challenges to social order. Mass public schooling was needed to educate citizens and to maintain social order. Industrial advancement also brought to the fore the immanent interest and ideological conflicts between the North and the South (Reese, 2005). On the one hand, traditional landlords from Southern states were afraid of the intellectual and moral development of laborers. On the other hand, the capitalist expansion in the North required the training of citizens that were able to not only fill the labor market but also maintained the hierarchical economic order. Aside from the differences between the North and the South, the “equal opportunity” theme that common school reformers advocated was oriented mainly to white males. With the capitalism ideology in mind, Kaestle (1983) also claimed that the educational emphasis for all schoolchildren, including the white, was not occupational mobility but morality, especially for poor and working class students. Therefore, the missions of public education during the common school era were to consolidate the republic social and racial order as well as ensure the progress of capitalist economy.

2.2. Historiography and History of Women’s Education during Antebellum Era

The years between 1790s and 1860s witnessed considerable advancement in women’s schooling. Protestantism and the ideology of republican motherhood combined to create a favorable context for women to receive an education. Historical studies on this period of women’s education share several emphases: female agencies and activism, identity struggle and evolvement, institutional progress and school curriculum. They tend to attribute the advancement of women education to the rapid socio-economic development of the time.

Scott (1979) in “The Ever-widening Circle” provides a thick description of female seminaries and early female reformers. He credits female seminaries, academies and major female educators of this period for planting the seed of feminist movement in the progressive era. Kerber’s work follows the male-female dichotomy, regarding females before the Civil War as passive receivers of gender distinction ideology (Kerber, 1980). The first comprehensive revisionist work on women in education is Solomon’s *In the Company of Educated Women* that came out in 1985. In the description of women’s education in the early republic, Solomon focuses on the ways that changing expectations for women’s roles had influenced women’s educational opportunities and experiences (Solomon, 1985). She expounds on the dilemma of the first group of educated women who managed to attend or graduate from academic studies. She examines the identity struggles of educated women in schools and in marriages. Solomon delineates

how accessing education in academic institutions and seminaries provided women with some autonomy in marriage when they were able to gain independence in life through teaching career. This rich explanation of women's autonomy and struggles is carried out around the notion of "separate spheres" against a broad assessment of the republican ideology. Building on Solomon's scholarship of women's identity development, Hoffman argues that three intertwined social changes: urbanization, industrialization and immigration waves had pushed teaching to become a woman profession (Hoffman, 2003). The republican ideology is not the sole force for expanding education for women. Market economy had transformed how the "separate spheres" narrative shaped women's identity.

Complementary to Hoffman's studies on social foundations of teacher becoming a female profession, Nash revisits "separate spheres", arguing that "assumptions regarding women's work as wives and mothers didn't result in curricular ideals very different from those held for men (Nash, 2005)". Women who received education in the antebellum era had a longing for intellectual growth and received similar liberal art education to their male counterparts. Although gender differences were vague in school curriculum in the early republic, social class, political and racial differences were obvious since almost all students in schools were from white middle-upper class, and females were not expected to have much desire for political or legal equality. Antebellum seminaries and academies, which were built on the ideology of Protestantism and republicanism, were employed to consolidate class formation and racial political order in the society. Compared to Scott, Soloman and Hoffman's emphasis on female seminaries and female reformers' ideologies, Nash added to the scholarship class effect on women's education in an increasingly capitalist society.

Different from previous scholars' general description of women education in the antebellum era, Tolley focuses on the science education for both males and females in *The Science Education of American Girls* (Tolley, 2003). Her study shows that women and men alike played active roles in shaping science education of females in the early 20th century. Tolley portrays women as active agents in their educational destiny. The attitude and policy made by earlier generations of female educators greatly influenced female's progress in science education. Tolley's work provides a relatively integrated perspective to look at education for women by comparing and combining experiences from both genders.

Among the rich literature on education for women in the early republic, very few historical works look at the intertwined effect of gender and race discrimination on education. It is partly due to the fact that the education of minorities was rare, scattered and unorganized in the early republic. Moss (2009)'s book *Schooling Citizens* is an important piece to fill in this gap. Distinct from other books that focus on educational experiences, purposes of education and institutional policies, the book is a compilation of struggles and resistances. The central objective of the work is to make sense of wide-spread, often violent, white oppo-

sition to African American education that erupted in northern and southern communities in the early 1830s. According to Moss, the universal education that privileged citizenship instead of equality inadvertently reinforced efforts to deny black people's access to public schooling. *Schooling Citizens* is important in several senses. Primarily, it breaks the image of African American as passive, silent receiver of white arrangements in antebellum era. Against the backdrop of white hostility, African Americans exercised various activism and collected effort to gain literacy education. Secondly, it unveils the double oppression of race and gender on black females in the early republic (ibid., p.109 & p.169). Corresponding to Kaestle's three ideologies, Moss argued that race should be the fourth one (ibid., p.9).

Although Moss unravels the nuanced connections between racism, citizenship and education, she forgot to include the general impact of whites' attitudes toward black education on common school movement as a whole. As Reese (2005) points out, common schooling wasn't a universal and national agreement. It was largely a Yankee ideal. The fear of government intrusion in existing social arrangement from Southern whites caused resistance to common school policies, which affected not only African Americans, but also poor Whites. Therefore, Moss's work is a very strong, important addition to the scholarships on antebellum education, but it is weak in bringing about an integrated understanding and focuses too much on the dichotomy of power struggles in education.

This group of literature on women's education in the republic all ties very closely to the ideological back-ground of the time. Although the historians above-mentioned all have different focuses in their narratives and interpretations, their works are not merely additive. Their scholarships are integrative in the sense that they synthesize different socio-political and economical perspectives other than building on each other's works. If we have to say that something is missing, race, cultural and geographical differences are not very visible in these works.

3. History and Historiography of Education of Women: Progressive Era

3.1. Socio-Economic Background of Education during 1860s-1920s

The United States in progressive era witnessed a rapid transformation of society. With increasing expansion of capitalism, urbanization, coming of new immigrants, and the continuous industrialization, social problems kept popping up to challenge educational and political leaders. If school reformers in the early republic aimed to train republican citizens and maintain social hierarchy, educational reformers in the progressive era cared more about social control and labor training, i.e., how to solve the social issues caused by rapid capital expansion. In the face of various social problems, schools were expected to, as Reese concludes, "firm up the social order, teach group norms, and maintain high standards, while identifying and promoting the needs, interests, and potential of each indi-

vidual (Reese, 2005)".

Public schools in the progressive era featured administrative progressivism and industrial education. Social progress such as efficiency movement in industry had impacted educational development. Influenced by the prevalent Taylorization movement in industries, administrative progressives soon developed a parallel corporate model in education (Tyack, 1974). Through employing the model of corporate board in schools, schools functioned as quasi-public corporations. Since school boards were composed mostly of business people and professional men, the chief support for progressive education came mainly from the upper class. As Charles Eliots analyzed, there were four layers of social classes that kept the society functioning: a thin upper one which consisted of managers and leaders of intellects, skilled workers who were adept in technologies for production, commercial class and a thick working class who assumed the manual work of the society (Tyack, 1974: 129). The administrative progressives who were composed of the thin upper class therefore were less concerned the interest of immigrants and minorities.

The differentiation of schooling patterns placed African Americans and immigrants in industrial and manual training. The newcomers and minorities were subjected to the social control ideology by reformers rather than receiving social justice through education. In response to this social efficiency ideology and differentiation tracks of education, missionaries and black religious philanthropists in the South made liberal and academic education rather than manual training the aims of the curriculum (Anderson, 1988: 238-250). Reformers were divided by either promoting the role of education as social justice and democracy, or emphasizing business efficiency and scientific management (Reese, 2005: 122).

3.2. Historiography and History of Women's Education

Historical works on women's education during progressive era emphasize the themes of women's agency for accessing higher education, institutional changes, women's college experiences, and purpose and function of schooling. Having access to higher education was generally acknowledged to provide power and agency for women in the feminist movement.

Gordon, Horowitz and Hevel together present a picture of the life experiences of young women, usually white women from middle-upper class, at prestigious universities and co-educational campuses during the progressive era (Gordon, 1990; Horowitz, 1988; Hevel, 2014). Focusing on normal schools, Ogren expounds on the college experiences of females in Normal schools who were from less prestigious backgrounds (Ogren, 1995, 2005). The comparison of these two groups of scholarship shows how different institutions were able to cultivate women power and shape women's social life differently. In normal schools, women seemed to exercise greater freedom to interact with men and carry out various and rigorous academic and social activities. Gender differences were not as visible as in prestigious institutions. The curriculum in normal schools reflects

the impact of progressive ideology.

In late 19th century, women mainly studied liberal arts courses and after 1908 women also had the option of studying home economics. Perkins and Breaux's analysis of African American women's educational motivation and experiences offers a view at the minority female's educational situation (Perkins, 1993; Breaux, 2010). In the narrative of both Perkins and Breaux, race is an ingrained fabric in the education for African American women. The philosophy of race lift placed burden on black women whose obligation of receiving an education was to aid the race.

In addition to collegial experiences, Hoffman's *Woman's "True" Profession* reveals female power and agency as teachers during progressive era (Hoffman, 2003). She divides the time for teacher agency into two periods: feminization that goes through the 1880s in which teachers could have great autonomy; and bureaucratization that goes through the 1920s during which female teachers were more subject to the control of male-dominated bureaucratic system Dzuback (2003), focuses on specific group of female educators in higher education in "Gender and the Politics of Knowledge". Her analysis of the strategy that women used to reshape gendered power relations in colleges provides valuable reference and insight towards female autonomy and agency during and after the bureaucratization era. Although different in perspectives and emphases, Hoffman's analysis of teacher autonomy in feminization era and Dzuback's exploration of female agency in higher education in bureaucratization era are to some degree complementary. College-educated women had exercised agency and power in their teaching careers rather than being passive receivers. Different from Hoffman and Dzuback, Solomon's analysis of women's education focuses on woman's demands for education and the oppositions they confronted (Solomon, 1985). She didn't jump out of the male-female dichotomy to frame women's education as an essential, integrated part of education.

4. Education of Women during World Wars and Cold War

4.1. Socio-Economic Background of Education: 1920s-1980s

Following the progressive era was the Great Depression, two World Wars and the Cold War era. Public education after the progressive era was sophisticated by both national and international forces. Domestic socio-economic events such as civil right movements and international cold war ideology ran together to shape the missions of schools. The incessant competition with communist countries raised the concerns about education of American young people. Public education was deemed as one of the major crises by politicians due to cold war ideologies, and educational leaders responded to the crisis by calling for a life adjustment education (Hartman, 2008). The life adjustment movement was supposed to reach the ends of "relevance, instrumentalism, social order and patriotism." Educators expected to provide all American youths educations that were relevant to their future development, and life adjusters favored an educational sys-

tem that can tailor the young to fit the prosperous post-war economy. Schools sought to adjust the poor to the middle class values, provided young people citizenship training, and instilled in the young with a sense of patriotism and the cold war ideology. The life adjust movement replicated some elements of progressive education such as vocational training and social efficiency, while it overlooked the concerns for students' intellectual growth and was anti-intellectual in essence (Reese, 2005). The launch of the Sputnik by Soviet Union in 1957 struck a blow to life adjusters, and post-war critics regarded the lowering academic standard of schools as a dangerous threat to the nation's security.

The cold war ideology also helped to shape the desegregation struggle of public schools because of the country's international image and the potential utility of black children. In the desegregation movement, high schools stood at the center stage to solve the most pressing and difficult concerns of the United States at that time: creating a dependable workforce, instilling loyalty to free enterprise, giving more attention to college preparation, and fighting for racial justice to include previously excluded pupils. The desegregation movement changed the landscape of public schools. The reform was complicated because of the diversity of students. Schools in this period again struggled between democracy and efficiency, equality and meritocracy, inclusion and exclusion.

4.2. Historiography and History of Women's Education

The studies of women's education after WWII focus on the relations between cold war ideology and women's identity, women's college experiences and feminist movement. Eisenmann in *Higher Education for Women in Postwar America: 1945-1965* explains four categories that emerged to guide women's behaviors after the WWII: "patriotic duty, economic participation, cultural role, and psychological needs (Eisenmann, 2006)." Through exploring postwar advocates' emphasis on individual choices rather than collective action of educated women, Eisenmann examines the nature of this advocacy and its relationship to the expectations for women in the postwar era. Complementary to Eisenmann's analysis of postwar ideology on women's education, Faehmel's *College Women in the Nuclear Age* focuses on educated women's response and reaction to these ideologies and advocacies (Faehmel, 2011). Faehmel reveals how women actively constructed their identity and what exactly they saw in the decisions they made within the larger context of social culture. Faehmel's analysis of educated women's interaction with the dominant postwar ideologies provides an interpretation of why post-WWII women who at one point looked forward to postgraduate career shifted their course to marriage and family.

Aside from analyzing the interplay of women's activism and social ideology, historical works also revisit the role of women's activism in women's access to higher education. Manekin challenges the body of literature that focuses on pioneering leadership and self-conscious activism as the cause of wider educational access (Manekin, 2010). She argues that such opportunities were a by-product of

primarily other considerations such as solving the institution's immediate needs of maintaining financial viability or winning prestige. In complementary to Manekin's analysis of institutional needs, Miller-Bernal and Poulson focus on the challenges women faced and the strategies they used to overcome after they were enrolled in previously male institutions (Miller-Bernal & Poulson, 2004). This work is more about financial and cultural challenges for women in co-educational institutions rather than gendered power struggles.

In general, higher educated women after the WWII in the United States were widely believed to be influenced by political ideologies of the time. They were required to embrace the humble role of housewives, to step aside from "male jobs" and to use their education to keep their husbands committed to the development of the society. Many female undergraduates were struggling between receiving education and living up to the feminine role. Some even gave up their education after getting married or went back to domestic life after graduation. Interestingly, their senior counterparts a decade earlier were called upon by politicians to enter workforce to support national security needs in wartime. The historical works reexamine the changing educational situations of women and the dilemmas they faced. One similarity across these historical studies is that women with higher education were not merely the by-product of wartime ideologies. They had their own concerns and considerations while chose to return back to family life after graduation. Although the activism they exercised was different from their predecessors who fought for public representation in the suffragist movement in the early 1920s, they still had the autonomy to choose the life they prefer. The historiography in this sense provides, in addition to "additive" narratives, an alternative perspective to look at women's life and decision in the post WWII era.

5. Conclusion

Schools have historically and empirically been designed to solve social problems. The goals of education in the last two hundred years have always been aligned with broad mission of the states. Public education is more often than not being steered by a political entity that usually represents the interest and ideology of the ruling class who have the power to define social good and social problems. This can be seen from Moss's analysis of common schooling for citizenship and the exclusion of certain groups from this map. This role of states in schools has determined that educational scholars and historians can only examine the different aspects of the educational problems and histories while it's difficult to transform broader understandings of the history of education in the United States. If the ultimate goal of education is the perfection of humanity, subjecting individuals to the aims of state institutions makes it difficult to achieve this end. Instead, it is easy to create an education dominated by the interests of certain groups who share same political ideals. Dewey asserts that education needs to free "individual capacity in a progressive growth directed to social aims", not the

vice versa (Dewey, 1916).

However, it seems extremely challenging to change this role of states in schools since public schools are an essential part of government institutions. Within this framework, is there any way that we can make a breakthrough in the history of education?

In the history of education, binary perspectives are often used, i.e. power versus control; winner versus loser; man versus woman; white versus minority; center versus otherness; and states versus schools. These binary perspectives view American society as composed of various independent, competitive and sometimes opponent groups. As Bailey & Graves (2019) summarize, the diverse approaches reflect “varying conceptions of gender, attention to diversity among women and men, degrees of theoretical engagement and transparency, and methodological expressions.” Yet despite the increasing gendered scholarship in dimension and texture, its potential for the field remains unrealized (Bailey & Graves, 2019). Looking at the history of education from a binary perspective does not really germinate productive and conducive understandings of education and direct the ongoing history of education toward a better future in which people of different interests are able to form shared grounds in educational development.

To further transform the research paradigm, more attention should be focused on the commonalities, the shared humanistic values that weave through all the different educational experiences and outcomes. American education is not defined by the education of whites, minorities, women, or any single group. It is the education of Americans, regardless of gender, race and ethnicity. Historians too often than not ascribe the educational failure of a certain group to the suppression from another group, or to the existing social and economic order while deconstructing the connections and common interests. The direct consequence of this negligence is: power struggles can never reach a balance since the connections that could bridge differences and bring about progress are ignored. Due to the lack of common interests, or the studies of common interests in the history of education, educational equality seems to be a pursuit that is hard to obtain. Adding historical fact is important, more important is to know how facts have brought about further changes, or exercised broader sociological power by connecting to other facts.

Recent scholarship by historians of gender and feminism has started to seek alternatives to binaries of inquiry, showing new academic horizons for educational historians, particularly historians of women’s education, to expand the current research and disciplinary boundary. For example, Allender & Spencer (2021)’s newly edited volume “*Femininity*” and the History of Women’s Education: *Shifting the Frame* includes works that situate the analysis of femininity in a diverse range of historical contexts in which personal stories and collective narratives are merged. This collected volume shows that transnational and interdisciplinary enquiry is significant in the pursuit of a new research paradigm,

offering valuable reference to the histories of women's education.

Taking into account all these considerations, I believe that conflicts can be solved only when historical analysis and horizon are extended to embrace a broader common ground that stands the shared values and interests of conflicting parties. Gender equity in education can be achieved if more emphasis could be laid on commonalities when educators, policy makers and scholars attempt to bridge the educational gap.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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