

THE STRUGGLE FOR THE
AMERICAN
CURRICULUM

1893–1958
THIRD EDITION

HERBERT M. KLIEBARD

RoutledgeFalmer
NEW YORK AND LONDON

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To Bernice,
of Blessed Memory

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PREFACE

TO THE THIRD EDITION

UNDER THE BEST OF CIRCUMSTANCES, THE PUBLICATION OF A NEW EDITION of a book offers the author an opportunity not only to make a few modifications and editorial changes but to address issues of some consequence. The first edition of *The Struggle for the American Curriculum* appeared in 1986, and, although I have been gratified by the reception the book received, I have had lots of time to reflect on what improvements could be made.

Writing history, of course, is never simply a matter of setting down facts and events in some kind of chronological order. It inevitably entails interpretation. For the second edition, then, I tried to make explicit the theoretical framework behind *Struggle* that led to my interpretations. When the second edition was published in 1995, I decided to address certain concerns in an Afterword. It took the form of a historiographic essay dealing with issues that lay behind my undertaking to write the book in the first place, alluding to where my interpretations were derived from other sources and how my depiction of this era differs from that of other historians who cover roughly the same ground chronologically. That Afterword is reprinted in this volume.

Every now and then, someone urges me to bring this book up to date, that is, to go beyond 1958 when the book ends. That would be a massive undertaking, however, and I never really considered it for a third edition. Such a project would require another volume. There was also a particular reason I decided to end my account in 1958. The interest group framework I used to shape my interpretations in the period from 1893 to 1958 underwent something of a sea change with the passage of the National Defense Education Act of 1958. Not only was the whole discourse about the curriculum radically altered, but the entry of the federal government onto

the scene of battle on such a massive scale changed the dynamics of how the curriculum was shaped and instituted. Any interpretation of the post-1958 era in education would require a serious consideration of how the curriculum in general and the interest groups in particular responded to the new influx of federal dollars along with the accompanying controls that such funding entails. Fortunately, some historians are beginning to deal with the issues that arose from those federal interventions. I am particularly impressed with John L. Rudolph's (2002) *Scientists in the Classroom: The Cold War Reconstruction of American Science Education*. William J. Reese's (in press) *America's Public Schools: Continuity and Change Since the Early Nineteenth Century* in the latter chapters also deals with the post-1958 period in a particularly informed and perceptive way.

In the end, therefore, I decided to address issues of another sort for the third edition of *Struggle*. As indicated in the original edition, I have come to believe that the reform efforts of three of the four interest groups were directed largely at unseating (or greatly modifying) the subject organization of the curriculum, and much remained to be said about both the efforts to dethrone school subjects and the way in which the school subjects themselves responded to such pressures. This was particularly true following the publication of the five volumes of the Eight-Year Study in 1942. The Eight-Year Study, after all, was initiated by leaders of the Progressive Education Association largely because they fervently believed that the secondary school curriculum continued to be dominated by college-entrance requirements, and they designed that massive experiment to demonstrate that alternatives to the traditional academic curriculum could be developed without fear that it would result in inadequate preparation for the rigors of college study.

Accordingly, I decided to write two new chapters for the third edition. In the new Chapter 9, I deal with the renewed drive in the 1940s to redirect the organization of the curriculum away from the traditional subjects of study and particularly with the concerted efforts by many curriculum reformers to organize the curriculum around needs. These endeavors eventually acquired the label "core curriculum," but a variety of different practices, which I tried my best to untangle, were subsumed under that name.

In the second of the new chapters, Chapter 10, I review the ways in which the traditional subjects were actually affected by this drive into the

late 1950s. This entails a subject-by-subject review of the ways in which individual subjects responded not only to the deliberate efforts to unseat them but to the massive influx of new students over the course of the twentieth century.

These two chapters, both centering on the role and function of school subjects, necessarily deal to a much greater extent with the secondary-school curriculum than with the elementary-school curriculum. While reformers of various stripes were able to implement some of their ideas in elementary schools, their efforts met with much less success at the secondary-school level, as the leaders of the Eight-Year Study fully recognized. It is for this reason that the period of the 1940s and 1950s was an era when the main arena of contestation in terms of curriculum reform became the suitability and effectiveness of traditional schools subjects in the secondary-school curriculum.

In writing these two new chapters, I was also trying to redress in this edition what was an inadvertent imbalance in the book. Although the period covered is still from 1893 to 1958, the first and second editions are tilted to the earlier part of that period. By devoting the two new chapters principally to the 1940s and 1950s, I was hoping not only to address a formidable challenge to the venerable subject curriculum, but to achieve a better chronological symmetry.

I have been at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for a long time and have been blessed with friends and colleagues who have been of inestimable help to me in concrete terms, such as reading a chapter or two, but also in the course of informal office visits and even hallway chit-chat. In past editions of *Struggle*, I have sought to enumerate at least some of the people who have offered such support, but I am reluctant to add new names because I will almost inevitably omit some who have been of special help. Although my gratitude to the people I mentioned in the earlier acknowledgments has, if anything, been reinforced, I cannot resist letting this opportunity go by without special mention of the students I have taught over the years and how their eagerness and intellectual curiosity have never failed to inspire me. Thanks to you all.

My debt to my family is profound. My children, Diane and Ken, and their spouses, Mark and Judy, as well as my grandchildren, Marissa, David, and Brianna have been a continual source of solace and joy.

There is one specific and immediate debt I need to acknowledge. The editor I have worked with on this project, Catherine Bernard of Routledge, has been a delight to communicate with, not only knowledgeable and supremely competent, but unfailingly cooperative and understanding as well.

Herbert M. Kliebard

University of Wisconsin-Madison

January 2004

PREFACE

TO THE SECOND EDITION

I WAS REALLY UNPREPARED FOR THE WARM RECEPTION THAT GREETED THE first edition of this book from students, colleagues, and even critics. If nothing else, then, I can take this occasion to express my appreciation to those people who took the trouble to express their support.

In considering the question of a second edition, I gave serious thought to what might merit such an undertaking. For one thing, the publication of a second edition could afford me an opportunity to address implied or explicit criticisms that have been directed toward the book, but I felt that merely replying to the criticisms that have been voiced hardly warranted a new edition. Another option that was proposed to me from more than one source was to add a chapter or so that would go beyond the 1958 ending point of the first edition. I seriously considered this option but concluded ultimately that accomplishing that would really require a sequel rather than a second edition.

In the end, I decided that the most reasonable and perhaps most appropriate option would be to set forth an explicit theoretical framework for the book, and this now appears as the Afterword to this second edition. I assumed when I was first writing *Struggle* that the theoretical framework I had in mind would somehow emerge from the narrative, and it was therefore not really necessary to lay it out in very explicit terms. It is difficult for me to reconstruct entirely what my thinking was at the time, but that choice may have been influenced by some uneasiness or perhaps lack of confidence as to how that theoretical framework would stand up. In any case, since the publication of the first edition in 1986, I think I was able to sharpen my theoretical focus particularly through exposure to a rich literature in symbolic action and status politics.

My decision now to plunge into that theoretical jungle was influenced, for example, by my reading of the epilogue that Joseph R. Gusfield (1986) wrote for the second edition of his widely acclaimed, *Symbolic Crusade: Status Politics and the American Temperance Movement*. Written 22 years after the publication of the first edition, that epilogue is to me a model of its kind, reflecting not only on the substance of the book but casting new light on the way a symbolic politics framework enriches his interpretations—not rejecting the earlier interpretations but imbuing them with new insights. I cannot hope to duplicate Gusfield's feat, but, in more ways than one, it served as a model for what I aspired to accomplish.

My own afterword pursues two lines of inquiry: First, it traces a series of interpretations of what is commonly called the progressive era in education in an attempt to sort out which aspects of those interpretations influenced the writing of *Struggle* and which were rejected on the way to arriving at my own framework. Most conspicuously, I draw on the work of historians such as Peter Filene and Daniel Rodgers in order to cast doubt on the very existence of a progressive education movement. This, I hope, serves to explain why the focus in *Struggle* is not on anything even vaguely resembling a unified progressive education but on the four interest groups that constitute the structure of the book. These interest groups, it should be emphasized, do not add up to one movement. They exist side by side, each with its own agenda. While it is true that two or more of these interest groups will occasionally form a temporary coalition around a particular reform, their platforms in the struggle for the American curriculum are not simply dissimilar or even contradictory; they are, more often than not, antagonistic.

Second, I tried to cast my interpretation of those interest groups in the context of status politics much as Gusfield did with the temperance movement. In that way, I sought to address a nagging question that I am sure arose in many readers' minds. In an era when social history rules the day, it is perfectly natural to wonder whether the reforms that leaders of the various interest groups advanced actually made their way into schools and classrooms. Although I tried to address that question here and there in *Struggle*, that issue admittedly does not form the centerpiece of the book. Without that emphasis, there is always the danger that a particular account will degenerate into (gasp!) intellectual history or so some people believe. As I try to indicate in the Afterword, much useful historical research in recent years has addressed that very question of implementation, but

although I readily acknowledge that such research is valuable, it is not exactly the way I chose to address the issue. Instead, I sought to show that, apart from the instrumental question of what actually gets taught in schools as a result of the efforts of educational leaders, there is another equally important way in which those actions may be framed, and it is here that Gusfield's (as well as, for example, Murray Edelman's) theoretical formulations were particularly useful. In the context of status politics, conflicts revolve around the question of whose cherished beliefs shall be sanctioned, officially or otherwise. The struggle I tried to depict, in other words, is primarily a symbolic one over whose most fundamental beliefs shall occupy center stage in a continuing drama. In that drama, protagonists representing competing values and beliefs vie for public validation and approbation on the national stage. To say that the struggle is symbolic or dramaturgical in nature is not to detract from its significance. For one thing, it should never be assumed that given acts are either strictly symbolic or practical. For the most part, they are both, but it is the symbolic significance of those acts that is the more easily overlooked. This is particularly unfortunate since it is the symbolic side of these actions that has most to do with cultural and social dominance and all that that entails.

Finally, I must express once again my gratitude to the many people who directly or indirectly influenced my interpretations of the events depicted in this book. Echoing Gusfield's concern in his acknowledgments, I am acutely conscious of the fact that "no author can recall everyone from whom he has borrowed unfootnoted thoughts" (p. viii). I did the best I could in my acknowledgments to the first edition. For this second edition, I particularly wish to acknowledge the assistance of Jack Dougherty and David Levine in helping me to create a greatly expanded index. If I left anyone out then or now, I am truly sorry.

November 1993

PREFACE

TO THE FIRST EDITION

IN A RECENT REVIEW OF TWO HISTORICAL STUDIES IN EDUCATION, CARL Kaestle (1984), commenting on one of them, remarked that it “moves beyond the two competing models of interpretation that have shaped debates for the past fifteen years.” He went on to describe these two competing schools of thought as to the course of education in the United States:

School systems exemplify democratic evolution, said the traditionalists. No, responded the radical revisionists, school systems illustrate the bureaucratic imposition of social control on the working class. Recently, some historians have emphasized that public school systems are the result of contests between conflicting class and interest groups.

Although I did not chance on the review until I had substantially completed this book, I realized that Kaestle expressed in that last school of thought almost precisely what I had been attempting. I had been actively following the development of the competing schools of thought in the twentieth century and invariably came away with the feeling that they were both faulty. They were both right as well, but simply saying that the main thrust of American education in the twentieth century lay between the two was hardly persuasive. What I sought was a way of expressing the nature of the forces that eventually determined the result of the conflict.

Actually, I had seriously entertained the idea of writing a history of the modern curriculum in the United States for several years and had published perhaps a couple of dozen articles on the subject. I think I can reconstruct pretty accurately what prompted my initial interest in this subject. First, I was bothered by the imbalance in historical studies in education. A great deal of attention has been lavished on the question of who went

to school but relatively little on the question of what happened once all those children and youth walked inside the schoolhouse doors. In a sense, reluctance to tackle that kind of question is understandable; it would be a formidable task to try to answer it in the contemporary context. Trying to address that question, even in the recent past, means drawing interpretations from grossly incomplete evidence. Regrettably, it often means making inferences from the statements of leading figures in the education world rather than from classroom documents and reports of participants.

On the other hand, it is not inconceivable, to say the least, that certain major statements on key subjects reflected what was actually going on. Throughout my writing of this volume, I tried to treat those documents, usually issued by major leaders in education or by national committees, not as influencing the course of events, but as artifacts of a period from which one might be able to reconstruct what was actually happening in the teaching of school subjects. Apart from the question of whether any of the ideas presented were worthwhile (and in a few cases I think they were), those statements represented for me a kind of weather vane by which one could gauge which way the curriculum winds were blowing. One important rule of thumb I tried to follow in this matter, however, was to assume from the outset that statements were invariably far more ambitious and grandiose than one could possibly expect in practice. For example, most statements issuing from the leaders of the activity movement argued for their version of the curriculum as the major part or even the whole of what children would study in school. We all know that that did not happen except in the case of isolated experimental schools. But this does not mean that the impact of the activity movement was not felt in school practice. To the extent that those ideas were incorporated in the public schools generally, they tended to appear within the existing framework of the curriculum. Something like the activity curriculum, in other words, became visible within the context, say, of social studies or English. The subject organization of the curriculum, by and large, persisted, but within that framework there were internal changes reflecting the influence of the major reform movements. In some cases, this may have led certain historians to underestimate the impact of curriculum reform in the twentieth century. The labels that we give to the school subjects do not tell the whole story since those labels do not nearly reflect the diversity that actually exists in terms of curriculum practice.

Second, I was frankly puzzled by what was meant by the innumerable references I had seen to progressive education. The more I studied this the more it seemed to me that the term encompassed such a broad range, not just of

different, but of contradictory, ideas on education as to be meaningless. In the end, I came to believe that the term was not only vacuous but mischievous. It was not just the word “progressive” that I thought was inappropriate but the implication that something deserving a single name existed and that something could be identified and defined if we only tried. My initial puzzlement turned to skepticism, my skepticism to indignation and finally to bemusement. As I hope readers of this book will discover, I came to the conclusion that there was not one but several reform movements in education during the twentieth century each with a distinct agenda for action. Delineating the main ideological positions of the various interest groups and the way they balanced as well as contradicted one another became my main task. In other words, I felt that the evolution of the modern American curriculum could be interpreted in terms of the interplay among the predominant interest groups that saw in the course of study the vehicle for the expression of their ideas and the accomplishment of their purposes.

The main actors in this story, then, are the leaders of the various interest groups, but their ideas must be seen against the backdrop of the hard realities, not only of school practice and the bureaucratic structure of schooling in this country, but the political and social conditions of the time. All of this cannot be given equal weight, of course, and center stage is given over to the battle among competing ideas about the curriculum of American schools. In making this decision, I was hoping that, if nothing else, the book would serve to clarify those ideas and their implications and thereby help identify and explicate the curricular options that we have inherited from our professional forebears.

One issue that presented itself almost immediately was how to treat the towering figure of John Dewey. Although I had been a student of Dewey’s work for almost all my professional life I found myself puzzled as to where he belonged in the context of the interest groups I had identified. I decide in the end that he did not belong in any of them and that he should appear in the book as somehow hovering over the struggle rather than as belonging to any particular side. I suppose I should also confess to using Dewey’s voice in some of the chapters as a way of commenting myself on how the battle was proceeding.

Before undertaking a major work, my dear friend and colleague, the late Edward A. Krug, liked to write an essay covering the major themes just to see if it would all hang together. I decided to try that this time. Once it was completed, however, it occurred to me that the essay might serve both as a first chapter and as a way of foreshadowing later developments in the story.

Therefore, Chapter 1 of the present volume is both a beginning chapter and an introduction (or at least I intended it as such). It begins at the beginning (for my purposes the 1890s), but it also touches on themes and developments that are treated much more elaborately in subsequent chapters. All four of the central interest groups along with some of their major leaders and certain of their key ideas, for example, are introduced in Chapter 1, but a fuller treatment of the ways in which their ideas functioned to affect the evolution of the curriculum in American schools is presented in later chapters.

Another problem that continually presented itself in the organization of this volume was that so many things were happening at once. In my attempt to deal with that, I decided against attempting a strict chronological rendering of the story. Thus, in the 1920s, scientific curriculum-making was at its zenith, but the movement that supported the activity curriculum was also rising to the fore. Rather than trying to tell both stories at once, I thought it best first to tell one story and then the other, hoping thereby to be reasonably coherent in telling each of them. That approach, however, was not without its cost, since I found it necessary to backtrack constantly into time periods that had already been treated in order to pick up another thread.

The 65-year span that is covered in the book encompasses a period of intense activity in curriculum matters—actually when curriculum reform emerged from somewhat tentative beginnings to become a national preoccupation. The seed-bed for the period of intense interest in the curriculum was the 1890s with the Report of the Committee of Ten, published in 1893, being the single most significant event. But it was also the decade when the main lines of curriculum change were being drawn up and recognizable features of the various interest groups that were to do battle over the curriculum were becoming visible. Over the course of that period, each of the interest groups won its victories, but there were no unconditional surrenders or overwhelming triumphs. It is this ambiguous outcome of the struggle that accounts for much of the diversity in interpretation that has surrounded the course of American education in the twentieth century. The book ends with the passage of the National Defense Education Act of 1958, a massive entry by the federal government into curriculum matters that dramatically changed the political balance and the nature of the interplay among the protagonists in the struggle. The way in which the curriculum of American schools was determined was never quite the same after that.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

OF THE CONSCIOUS AND CONSPICUOUS DEBTS THAT I OWE IN THE WRITING of this book, I should start with one that is over twenty years old. When I was a graduate student, very few people identified with the curriculum field exhibited any interest in history. The mood was one of “sweeping away the cobwebs of the past” as the basis for a total reconstruction of the course of study. Arno Bellack, my graduate advisor, was very much an exception. He not only encouraged my historical interests but possessed an astonishing knowledge of the roots of the American curriculum. His incredible insights into a wide variety of areas, even snatches of actual conversation, recur to me to this day. Over the years, Arno has continued to be not only my friend but also my most important sounding board.

When I arrived at the University of Wisconsin, it was my great good fortune that there was a space shortage. (The School of Education was undergoing growing pains.) As a result, I was plunked into Edward Krug’s basement office. I was, therefore, in daily interaction with a man whose sheer brilliance was, at that time, evident only to a happy few. Out of the corner of my eye, I was privileged to watch his monumental *Shaping of the American High School* in the making. It isn’t often these days that one has the opportunity to learn a craft while sitting, literally, at the elbow of a master. Beyond the brilliance of his mind, Ed Krug’s kindness is legendary, and I shall always be thankful to him for his readiness to provide gentle but astute criticism of my youthful endeavors and, of course, for his encouragement.

I am also deeply grateful to a great number of people for their assistance in the preparation of this manuscript. For their invaluable help in locating source documents, I would like to express

my thanks to Dianne Bowcock, JoAnn Brown, Hsiao Chin-Hsieh, Sharon Keller, and George Stanic. Maria Dalupan deserves special commendation for her skill and dedication in accomplishing the tedious task of checking the accuracy of the numerous references, tracking down gaps that appeared in my original manuscript, and reviewing the final draft for errors.

Actual preparation of the final draft required assistance from more people than I can possibly acknowledge here. I owe special thanks to Joanne Foss and Sally Lanz for faithfully correcting the many errors that appeared in my original drafts. Other members of the office staff in both the Department of Curriculum and Instruction and the Department of Educational Policy Studies stood ready at short notice to provide whatever assistance I needed. Donna Schleicher supervised the preparation of the manuscript with her usual aplomb and good humor, thereby helping to preserve what sanity I had left. Colleagues such as Michael Apple, Carl Kaestle, and Gary Wehlage stood by in times of trial and offered support and encouragement.

I am grateful to the Graduate School of the University of Wisconsin, Madison for granting me a semester's research leave, which permitted me to do the bulk of the research required to undertake the writing of this book. Research support from the John Dewey Society is also warmly appreciated.

The task of including a set of photographic plates turned out to be a much more formidable one than I ever imagined. For their assistance in obtaining some of the photographs that appear here, I would like to express my appreciation to Louisa Brown, Morris Library, Southern Illinois University; Stuart Campbell, Robert Hutchins Goddard Library, Clark University; Kenneth C. Cramer, Dartmouth College Library; Ruth Jones, University Archives, The Ohio State University Library; Robin McElheny, University Archives, Harvard University Library; David M. Ment, Special Collections, Milbank Memorial Library, Teachers College, Columbia University; Warren E. Phillips, President, Dunwoodie Industrial Institute; Richard L. Popp, University of Chicago Library; and Myrna Williamson, State Historical Library of Wisconsin. Professor Craig Kridel of the University of South Carolina was especially helpful in providing me with leads in locating certain of the photographs that were included.

An abridged version of the first chapter was published earlier in *Education Researcher*. Short segments of the manuscript were incorporated in articles I wrote for the 1984 and 1985 Yearbooks of the National Society for the Study of Education and the *Journal of Early Adolescence*.