Book Reviews


This study of the Gary plan is both a piece of local history and an exploration of the general character of educational change in the early twentieth century. It focuses on the most celebrated educational reform of the Progressive Era and studies the impact of that reform both in Gary, Indiana, where the plan originated, and in other places where in varying degrees its influence was also felt.

The Gary plan combined the elements of many other progressive educational reforms with its own distinctive platoon system, a scheme designed to ensure well-rounded training and efficient use of facilities by dividing students into groups that would alternately use the school’s playgrounds, workshops, and classrooms. As did other progressive school reforms, the plan placed a heavy emphasis on supervised play, industrial training, and close interaction between school and community. Heavily promoted by its creator, Gary Superintendent of Schools William A. Wirt, and supported by such luminaries as John Dewey and Randolph Bourne, the Gary plan spread rapidly; by 1930 more than two hundred cities had adopted the system for some or all of their schools.

Ronald D. Cohen and Raymond A. Mohl see in this extraordinary appeal of the Gary plan an example of the paradox of progressive education: the Gary reform drew its support from remarkably disparate political sources. The authors explore this paradox by examining the views of the plan’s two primary promoters, the conservative Wirt and the social-democratic Alice Barrows, who managed to work together in the common cause for more than two decades. The portrayals of Wirt and Barrows are revealing, but Cohen and Mohl neither resolve the paradox of progressive education nor explain its roots; they succeed only in providing one more example of the common tendency of progressive reform to draw upon different, even contradictory, political impulses. Consequently, this is the least satisfactory part of the book.

The authors do better when they attempt to measure the impact of the reform on educational practice. They give special attention to the controversy surrounding the plan in New York City and in Gary itself, and they discover that reformers rarely won more than partial victories. In New York, in fact, school
authorities were forced to abandon the plan altogether in the face of opposition from a polyglot of forces ranging from Jewish socialists to Tammany politicians.

In Gary the story was more complex. Wirt and his followers made substantial gains; yet, their child-saving, Americanizing schemes encountered significant opposition. Many immigrants, for example, resisted the homogenizing effects of reform either by sending their children to parochial schools or by supplementing public-school classes with daily sessions of folk-schooling. Blacks, too, refused to accept their prescribed place in the reform system; they both fought formal segregation and subverted its aims by using their separate classrooms to teach racial pride. What emerged in Gary was something less than the all-encompassing, socializing education that reformers had sought; in the end educational change was not the simple reflection of reform goals but rather a product of the interplay of a variety of interests.

Cohen's and Mohl's recognition of the limits of reform makes their study a substantial advance over much of the historical literature on progressive education. Unlike many of their predecessors these authors refuse to see educational change through the eyes of reformers alone; instead, they provide a much richer, more complex, and more believable account.

This volume is an important study of education in the early twentieth century, especially for what it tells about the course of reform in Gary. It is not, to be sure, without problems. Perhaps because of the dual authorship, the book is sometimes disjointed and uneven. The sections that deal with progressive educational thought, for example, add little to what is already known. Such weaknesses, however, are minor problems when measured against the strengths of the book. On the whole the authors have done their work extremely well; their research is impressive and their interpretations convincing. In many respects they have produced a model piece of local educational history.

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