

Preface

This book attempts to delineate the roots of a self-conscious field of educational change that grew up in – and grew out of – the turbulent political, social, economic and cultural life of the post-World War II years. Its authors, who provided many of the seminal writings that helped to create and shape the field, examine their work from current perspectives.

The issues they raise allow us to see the connections between the recent history of education in general, and the field of educational change in particular. (Individual abstracts for each chapter have been omitted so as not to distract the reader from seeing these contributions as integrated parts of the development of the field as a whole.)

In the 50s and 60s these scholars represented a broad spectrum of innovative thought and action shifting the focus of research in education and school improvement to studying – and interacting with – schools as organizations and cultures. They wanted to find out, for example: how people learn in groups; or how the world of school affects the world of classrooms; or how policies do or do not make their way from federal, state and district into schools and classrooms.

These new questions gave rise to new research methodologies which in turn gave rise to new questions such as: What differing perspectives do school people hold and how does that define what schools are like? And what effects does the school context have on innovative ideas? The questions grew in complexity as did the ways of studying them. Several authors show how multiple research methods became important to understanding problems concerned with the integration of policy and practice, particularly as related to innovation and change in schools (See Lortie, Miles, McLaughlin, Smith, this volume).

The range of issues that they deal with – from the effects of the GI Bill to the effects of school environment on student learning, from the political realities of educational policy to the social realities of teachers – are explored and revisited. These issues, leading to controversial themes involving change, school and community, continue to nourish the field and its many branches, as we will see in the succeeding three sections of this Handbook.

Since 1945 broad social forces – the post-war economic expansion, the Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement – and unprecedented scientific and technological change – from space exploration to the rise of the computer age – have affected educational research, theory and practice. Coming from government policies such as the “War on Poverty” and the GI Bill, and influential reports and movements such as “The National at Risk” and “The Effective Schools movement”, we have struggled to understand the successes and failures of the past, while trying to reach fuller understandings of the problems and possibilities for educational change and comprehensive school reform in the future.

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The field of educational change, as it has come to be known, owes its origins to the authors represented in this book, who with their vision, knowledge and hard work created the roots from which new knowledge would grow. As Matthew Miles put it:

*People forget that roots exist. But from sturdy roots
flow a here-and-now trunk, main branches, leaves,
flowers and fruit . . . effective school change efforts
today need a conceptual base in work that's gone
before.*

Miles, p. 37 (this volume)

Ann Lieberman