

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-38149-9 - An Educational War on Poverty: American and British Policy-making
1960-1980

Harold Silver and Pamela Silver

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1 Introduction: A Proper Complexity

Poverty was ‘rediscovered’ and became a serious issue in public debate and policy in Britain in the late 1950s and in the United States in the early 1960s. In both countries after the Second World War there was a popular and strongly held view, by governments as well as by political and social scientists, that poverty had either disappeared or had survived in ‘pockets’ or in highly specific cases which would be eliminated either by an expansive, affluent society or, in the British case, by careful ‘welfare state’ planning. In the late 1950s, British social administration researchers, largely associated with Richard Titmuss, began to thrust their rediscovery of poverty into public consciousness, as did a number of American writers in the period of the Kennedy administration in 1961–3 on the basis of investigations mainly of Appalachia and the urban ghettos. Taking different forms and with different emphases, there was also mounting concern with the concept of inequality, related in the United States primarily to race and civil rights, and in Britain to social class, the latter increasingly centred from the 1950s on divisions and inequalities in secondary education.

Varying amounts of attention and different solutions were applied to poverty and inequality in the two countries, but both concepts re-entered public debate as signals that the optimistic economic and social forecasts of the late 1940s and 1950s had not yet been fulfilled. The criteria by which poverty had been measured, and had been assumed to have been severely diminished, began to be challenged. Strategies began to be evolved in the United States, especially from the end of the 1950s, for dealing with concentrations of poverty – often meaning, but not articulated as such, areas of racial tension – in the inner city, where the magnitude and intractability of the problems created by mass internal migration began to be realized. By the beginning of the 1960s the Ford Foundation was funding its ‘Great Cities – Gray Areas’ programme, to which the problems of ‘in-migration’ and ‘in-migration transient pupils in depressed areas’ of major cities were considered to be central and which appear regularly in the Foundation’s records of the period.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-38149-9 - An Educational War on Poverty: American and British Policy-making
1960-1980

Harold Silver and Pamela Silver

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 An educational war on poverty

The mechanization of American agriculture had impacts on population movement and distribution before, during and after the Second World War, in ways and to an extent which had no parallels in British concerns. Immigration in the late 1950s and 1960s was, however, to prove such a parallel, though without the same sense of urgency and permanence in its effects until the late 1960s and 1970s. From the early 1960s the American pressures for social and political change were responded to with experimental educational solutions. The Kennedy administration attempted unsuccessfully to promote comprehensive federal legislation for educational improvement, but poverty and disadvantage were not features of the legislative efforts and were only beginning to assume a central place in federal policy and planning when Kennedy was assassinated. The Johnson administration transformed federal involvement in education and social action in 1964 and 1965, under the slogans of a War on Poverty and the Great Society. The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 produced Head Start, launched the following year. In 1965 the Elementary and Secondary Education Act secured the approval of Congress, and Title I of the Act was explicitly designed to combat poverty through the schools. An enormous range of developments, projects and programmes, followed under these and other auspices, including foundations, further legislation and state enactments. Follow Through, from 1967, was initially intended to sustain the Head Start, preschool momentum into the schools. Compensatory education entered the official vocabulary, with California in 1963 passing the first state law – the McAtteer Act – ‘specifically providing for compensatory education programs to aid culturally disadvantaged children’ (A: McAtteer, 1963, 48). Controversy appeared and intensified around concepts such as deprivation and disadvantage – cultural, linguistic, social, psychological, educational and economic.

The second half of the 1960s in the United States witnessed intense interest and investment in, hopes and campaigns for, evaluation of and disappointment in, mainly preschool and early childhood education and a variety of related measures designed to ‘combat poverty’. From the creation of federal task forces and departments to local community action, the target and the processes closely linked education – especially early childhood education – to the war on poverty. Investigation and action were shaped accordingly and a formidable volume of experience and descriptive, analytical and campaigning literature was accumulated. The federal government was involved as never before, not only in funding, but in commissioning research, promoting discussion, disseminating material and issuing guidelines. The whole of this agenda of discussion was fundamentally different from the interests in education

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-38149-9 - An Educational War on Poverty: American and British Policy-making
1960-1980

Harold Silver and Pamela Silver

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction : a proper complexity 3

that had been dominant in the 1950s, when the focus had been on attempts to expand and modernize the system in response to demographic pressures, shortages and inadequacies, and international events. Education in the United States had become increasingly central to political and social policy, and its role in overcoming poverty and disadvantage a matter of increasing public interest and debate. What has been called ‘the American public’s love affair with education’, by that point more than a century old (A: Aaron, 1978, 65), had become something quite different in its formulations from what it had been a decade earlier.

In Britain in the early 1960s no such link between education and poverty was established. The widespread preoccupation (rarely passionate enough to be called a love affair) with education was in terms of access to equitable secondary and higher education structures – notably the political battle over the comprehensive school. The sociologists’ concern with poverty contained little or no important reference to education – their target was weaknesses in the welfare state, and the needs, for example, of the elderly. Educationists, on the other hand, were not explicitly concerned with poverty. Questions of poverty as a phenomenon and an issue surfaced to some minor degree in the work of inequality, more strongly in the Newsom committee’s report on *Half Our Future* in 1963, and most significantly in the Plowden committee, which was appointed in that year and reported on *Children and their Primary Schools* in 1967, after the American poverty concerns had become international currency. The central Plowden recommendation for the creation of Educational Priority Areas was the first real parallel in Britain to the American research and policy emphases, and the EPA decisions and projects which followed drew at least partly (as did the Plowden committee itself) on American experience. Community action, inner-city and other projects in the late 1960s and 1970s, together with the various projects which also aimed at compensatory (or what the EPA national project preferred to call ‘complementary’) education, gave the appearance of formulating, after a time lag of half a decade or more, British versions of established American practices.

It is those sequences of events, or more particularly the assumptions and motivation which informed them, that form the basic structure of this book and of the questions embedded in it. One of its starting points was to try to understand the eruption of poverty as a major policy target in the United States around 1964, the flurry of new educational departures at its core, and the speed and scale at which academic, political and popular debate took shape – including bibliographies, readers and directories of projects (for example, A: Gordon and

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-38149-9 - An Educational War on Poverty: American and British Policy-making
1960-1980

Harold Silver and Pamela Silver

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 An educational war on poverty

Wilkerson, 1966). In the American case there was the excitement and its aftermath to be understood. In the British case there were important differences in the issues addressed in the early 1960s, but the echoes of the American experience in the Plowden report and the EPA and other policies and projects at the end of the 1960s raised interesting questions. It is important to emphasize, however, that this is neither two parallel and separate studies nor a comparative study. It is an exercise in recent history which attempts to trace and interpret a number of related events and similar purposes, and their connections. As a comparative study it would need to probe in far greater depth the structural, political, cultural and other respective, underlying explanations of the events, in an effort to establish comparative meanings of a strictly defined kind. It is comparative, in fact, only in that the parallel and sometimes related British and American concerns with education, poverty and disadvantage address the same or similar issues, and illuminate each other. While the focus of the book moves at different points from country to country, it is hoped that the connectedness of the patterns of events remains, and becomes increasingly, clear. There are chapters in each of the sections of the book which are intended to reinforce these historical and analytical emphases.

What the sequences in both countries illustrate most directly are the problems of analysing the nature and purposes of educational and social reform. The processes of the 1960s raised questions about strategies and the motivations of participants, intentions and expectations, ideological positions and changing vocabularies, in ways similar to earlier developments around popular or radical educational movements, and other periods of pronounced social change and reform responses. The fact that the developments of the 1960s were recent, had left continuing structural, political and educational legacies, were controversial, and were in some respects being abandoned or superseded, made it all the more necessary to rescue them from the dogmatic myths already accumulating around them. These were complex developments and the purpose of the study was to try to restore to them some of their proper complexity.

The target of the research underlying this study was, therefore, the sources of intentions to use education in various ways to overcome poverty, to break the 'cycle of disadvantage', to compensate for environmental deficiencies, to discriminate positively in favour of those most in need. One important element in this analysis proved to be the range of formative participants – private foundation and government, psychologist and sociologist, politician, administrator and teacher, journalist and community activist. The study of sources of educational and social policy therefore included those aspects of the recent history

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-38149-9 - An Educational War on Poverty: American and British Policy-making
1960-1980

Harold Silver and Pamela Silver

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction : a proper complexity 5

of academic disciplines, their status and stage of development, research interests and directions, which fed into the debates, experiments and policy formulations, and were welcomed or met with resistance and challenge. Of importance was the adoption, rejection and evolution of changing interpretations of the timing, nature and effectiveness of compensatory intervention in early childhood, the role of preschool, school and parent, the focus on solutions through areas and community action, or through family and school and the identification of individual children in need or at risk. The research therefore led to an analysis of considerable documentation in both countries, but especially in the United States where the published and unpublished sources available were vast. The research also led to the widely diverse constituencies of participants implied by the outline of complex inputs and purposes. Some of the people interviewed ran the danger of defending past positions or present commitments, and discussions with many of the past participants often pointed to the need to disentangle meanings from different levels of operation and perception. The Americans interviewed, for example, ranged from a former Republican Senator and (at the time of interview) state governor, through lawyers and academics, to state and federal administrators and classroom teachers. The British included Her Majesty's Inspectors, project leaders, professors and adult educators.

The research therefore had to contend with problems associated with investigating recent events, with problems of oral history, with uncertainties about access to and the availability of documentary sources and about the use to which they might be put, the different British and American official approaches to confidentiality and the freedom of information, and the difficulties of entering a wide area of research, parts of which had been of considerable interest to sociologists, economists, political scientists and evaluators. Some of the American consultants and participants in the processes under investigation had been identified early in the work but for various reasons were no longer accessible by the time interviews were planned. In general, however, the problem with archival and documentary sources, as well as information from people, became one of coping with the volume of material. The research in Britain was on a narrower front, and given the constraints – though fortunately also the ambiguities – of the Official Secrets Act and the thirty year rule, there were possibly more obstacles than were met in the United States. In both countries, however, there was remarkable openness in response to enquiries and sustained questioning.

There was available, therefore, a considerable range of published material, readily accessible reports and records, less publicly accessible documentary material such as minutes, memoranda and correspondence,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-38149-9 - An Educational War on Poverty: American and British Policy-making
1960-1980

Harold Silver and Pamela Silver

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 An educational war on poverty

taped interviews, and the outcomes of postal enquiries and consultations. This evidence was rarely ‘complete’, in the sense that it did not satisfy the researchers’ need for data, and it was not a ‘sample’ as understood by social scientists. Interviews were restricted by geographical and other constraints. It was rarely possible to be systematic in conducting what some sociologists and evaluators define as ‘triangulation’, but an effort was made to pursue further evidence to reinforce, test or balance opinions about specific events, especially where these related to important judgments that had to be made. For example, since much of the content of and commentary on the educational legislation of the War on Poverty might be described as ‘liberal-democratic’ or radical in tone, it was important to interview at least one of the key Republican actors in the events. A second and different example was the attempt to discuss the same questions about specific aspects of the British experience with researchers, academics, HMI and members of official committees. Kirst and Jung have suggested the importance of this approach in policy analysis, exploring ‘congressional intent’ not just via statutes but by triangulation with Senate and House hearings and special reports (A: Kirst and Jung, 1980, 25–6). In approaching, under the conditions of difficulty over British official records, an analysis of the Plowden committee, for example, the exploration of points of interest at the intersection of different perceptions is more elusive but if anything more important. The Plowden committee represented such a crucial juncture in the processes being studied that it was paid particular attention, and the narrative, analysis and judgments were built on published and unpublished commentaries, primary sources and interviews with people who were involved in or with the committee.

Not all the events and judgments in this project were put to such a test but, where possible, the accounts have been the product of detailed textual scrutiny of published, archival and privately held material, together with extensive interviews around the salient issues. There was no area of investigation where it was felt that the resources were inadequate for research purposes.

Particularly elusive in all of this investigation has been the changing, often rapidly changing, vocabulary, and much of the analysis in this book is concerned with the implications of the shifting emphasis on and versions of deprivation and disadvantage, and the variety of other terminologies that have come and gone across these decades. Of obvious interest was the concept of a ‘war on poverty’ itself. When President Johnson declared unconditional war on poverty in 1964 the theme became an immediate element of everyday political vocabulary. Sargent Shriver, at the time director of the Peace Corps and shortly to become director of the first outcome of the war on poverty – the Office of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-38149-9 - An Educational War on Poverty: American and British Policy-making
1960-1980

Harold Silver and Pamela Silver

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction: a proper complexity 7

Economic Opportunity – began his statement to the House Committee on the War on Poverty Program:

I might start off by saying the objective of this program is an all-out war on poverty. We believe that this is a program which, if effectively and intelligently carried forward, will eliminate grinding poverty in the United States.

America now had a greater understanding of ‘the complex causes of poverty’ and what was now needed was to put resources and knowledge to work ‘in an all-out attack on poverty in which every sector of our society will join’ (A: US Congress, House, OEA, Part 1, 20). The metaphor of war required the conviction of victory, and when the House Committee on Education and Labor reported in June of 1964 on its consideration of the Economic Opportunity Bill it began:

The United States is the first major nation in history which can look forward to victory over poverty. Our wealth, our income, our technical know-how, and our productive capacity put this goal within our grasp. (A: US Congress, House, Report, 1964, 1)

The scale of what was envisaged was perhaps new in 1964 but this was not the first announcement of a war on poverty. John F. Kennedy is described as having ‘coined the phrase’ when candidate for the presidency in August 1960, in a speech in New York marking the fifteenth anniversary of the signing of the Social Security Act. ‘The opening battle, Kennedy had remarked, against suffering and deprivation had been won in the 1930’s; but the war against poverty and degradation was not yet over’ (A: LBJ Lib, OEO Admin History [1969], 8).

Francis Keppel, Commissioner of Education, and often central to the discussion in this book, in an address entitled ‘Poverty – the only war we seek’ in March 1965, drew his title from a book published in 1945 by Arthur Goodfriend, a book published, Keppel underlined, before America discovered Appalachia and automation (A: LBJ lib, Federal Records, Keppel addresses, 3 March 1965). The American war found earlier and earlier antecedents, in the pre-war policies of Hoover and Roosevelt for example. In Britain, Harold Wilson published an article in 1959 entitled ‘The war on poverty’. Looking ahead to the election of a Labour government he responded to a challenge to commit the Labour Party to action against poverty and, although he did not use the term ‘war’ in the article itself, his analysis of the socialist approach to inequality spills over into the terminology of a ‘fight against poverty’ (B: Wilson, 1959, 413–15). There are other progenitors of the idea, if not the vocabulary, and British and American combatants in the war have referred back to the statements and policies of Lloyd George, Lord Beveridge and Richard Titmuss.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-38149-9 - An Educational War on Poverty: American and British Policy-making
1960-1980

Harold Silver and Pamela Silver

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 An educational war on poverty

If the notion of victory in such a war subsequently seemed to have raised expectations too high, and to have been based on tenuous evidence, it is important to remember the various sources of confidence which underlay especially the American conviction. In exploring these sources it will also be important to remember the extent of the shock waves that rolled through the American investigations, the literature, the administration, the politicians and the public at large in the early 1960s at the discovery of the depth and persistence of poverty. The stakes were suddenly high, the resources apparently available, and the necessary strategies beginning to emerge. The British response to the evidence on poverty was less dramatic and less widely disseminated. How education came to be a central feature of the answer to poverty is therefore a major issue, part of the response to questions such as ‘what war?’, ‘whose war?’, ‘why *war*?’. In policy terms the distance in the United States from Appalachian white poverty and the black ghettos and civil rights movement to education is a short step. Reform, response, renewal, modernization, change – whatever the vocabulary of explanation there were resemblances between the American preoccupations and those of the British also constantly establishing new fronts – at different levels of education, in school, preschool and post-secondary education, community development programmes, urban aid, inner city schemes of various kinds, an emphasis on expanded opportunities and new parameters of welfare and social policy. Reform of one kind or another returned to a central position in social science debates. With the discoveries and rediscoveries of poverty, class, educational and social disadvantage, powerlessness, and a range of conceptual machineries to explain and overcome them, reform – liberal or radical – was never far from the surface of public discussion. The easy assumptions of the post-war drift towards affluence and ‘the end of ideology’ having evaporated, the 1960s saw the emergence of a concern with strategies, relating to apparently old and intractable problems in a period of changing contexts and determinants – what to do about poverty and inequality in a landscape which now contained automation and the cold war, continued internal migration (in the United States) and immigration (in Britain), and the new political assertiveness of various constituencies. New strategies meant new conflicts, particularly over the boundaries of reform and revolution, of radical reform and social control, of change and of accommodation to the status quo.

Perspectives on the recent past change rapidly. The central analytical difficulty of approaching those interconnections has been the profound changes in public policy, popular attention and academic concern while the research has been taking place. The initial work on this study was

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-38149-9 - An Educational War on Poverty: American and British Policy-making
1960-1980

Harold Silver and Pamela Silver

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction: a proper complexity 9

done mainly in the period 1980–3 and, of course, the questions to which answers were necessary and important changed significantly across that period and in the following years when further work was done and the analysis was taking shape. What began as a history of a highly significant thread in twentieth-century educational and social policy internationally, seemed to some people to have become, by the second half of the 1980s, an obituary. It is true that there is scepticism at many levels about the processes and the purposes discussed here, although there has been a resurgence of American concern and policy-making for disadvantaged children in the late 1980s. It would be wrong, however, to pretend that all the questions asked, assumptions made, strategies adopted, policies recommended and directions in which they pointed need to be ‘rescued’ in the same forms, and will re-emerge in similar shapes. It would also be wrong and foolish, however, to imagine that the changed economic and political frameworks and priorities of the 1970s and 1980s have wiped clean the page earlier filled with so much animation. The issues and the targets have not gone away. Many of the activities, structures and dynamics generated still continue. The controversies still simmer. The roles of government, public agencies, private finance and people, in relation to education and participation in educational processes, while differently contoured, remain to be argued over. The relationship between education and other social and economic policies is still a subject for debate. There is no pendulum or cyclical theory of history to sustain this discussion, but issues as sharp and as persistent as these are bound to find their way to centre-stage. It is therefore important to remember, to reanalyse, to build on, more than a quarter of a century of intention and effort of very particular kinds.

One of the historical components of this study is therefore the unrelenting question of what governs historical attention. The emergence of historical interest in either long-term processes (what some historians have identified as the ‘longue durée’) or the specifics of major events or newly dominant ideologies or ‘mentalities’, is itself a matter for historical analysis. Poverty, reform, school and society, are not new phenomena or new to scholarship. The questions that surround and inhabit them are familiar to sociologists, other social scientists, policy analysts and political scientists. The direction of historical interest in these issues may relate both to their identification and definition by other social scientists and to the emphases of government or popular political or social processes. ‘Before poverty became a public issue in the mid-1960s’, it has been pointed out, ‘American historians had almost totally ignored the subject’ (A: Gelfand, 1981, 146). And although many of the ingredients of poverty and of policies related to it are encountered

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-38149-9 - An Educational War on Poverty: American and British Policy-making
1960-1980

Harold Silver and Pamela Silver

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 An educational war on poverty

in previous historical work, it is true that the American historian had not accepted poverty as an organizing concept for research until its new political profile was established in the 1960s. In both Britain and the United States, for similar reasons, historical interest in women and racial and ethnic minorities was not widely visible until the same period. Aspects of the history of education can be identified in the same way. Historians have until recently been concerned with the history of institutions, of administrative structure, of legislation. It was pointed out in Britain in 1968 that 'so far, there does not seem to have been any major work of social history devoted to the historical aspects of home-school relations in this country' (B: Sharrock, 1968, 188), and again it is true that the home, the parent, the community, and to some considerable extent also the children, had until the 1960s been hidden from the history of educational processes. In the latter case, the lack of such a home-school history is considered 'unfortunate since the insights [such a history] could afford might aid a clearer view of the best way ahead'. It is not obvious that historical analysis offers such immediately useful illumination, but there is no reason why historical attention should not be devoted to recent as well as longer-term or longer-distance continuities and changes.

Many of the questions addressed here are in fact similar to those encountered in discussion and controversy around the creation of the Sunday schools in the late eighteenth century, the motivation of nineteenth-century reformers of various kinds, the contribution of a Horace Mann or a Kay-Shuttleworth to educational policy and philosophy, the creation of a child-centred psychology, a 'progressive' curriculum, or a 'ladder' to secondary education. The details of the relationship between individual action, mass movement or opinion, and total context, change considerably across these periods, but the problems of analysing the relationship remain. Who defines the issues and the policy answers is as much a concern of historical analysis of the anti-poverty pressures and intentions of the 1960s as it is of the establishment of compulsory education in both countries in the late nineteenth century or earlier approaches to mass schooling or factory legislation. Around issues as salient as those involved in poverty and its related dimensions of experience and action there can be no justification for historians *not* becoming involved.

Whatever the difficulties of recent perspectives, the difficulties of using oral evidence, the problem of the historian's own involvement as actor or spectator, the strategies of historical analysis are applicable to recent versions of change and reform and their attendant assumptions and vocabularies.