

DEMOCRACY AND SCHOOLING IN CALIFORNIA

HISTORICAL STUDIES IN EDUCATION

Edited by William J. Reese and John L. Rury

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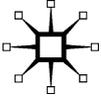
By Kathleen Weiler

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CALIFORNIA

The Legacy of Helen Heffernan and
Corinne Seeds

Kathleen Weiler

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FOREWORD

Over the last century, American historians embraced a variety of intellectual, political, and ideological frameworks as they reconstructed the past. Over a century ago, several prominent “progressive historians” argued that history was a story of progress, as citizens challenged corporate power and advanced age-old demands for democracy and representative government. After World War II, several “consensus historians” rejected this view and claimed that Americans, even those who fought each other in the Civil War, shared basic assumptions about the nature of American society yet disagreed about the best way to realize their most cherished ideals. By the 1960s, a younger generation of scholars, shaped by the civil rights and antiwar movements, revived the idea that conflict was the engine of history but rejected most of the other assumptions of the progressive school. Since then, various approaches to historical writing—social history, psychohistory, the new “cultural” history, gay and lesbian studies, postmodernism in many expressions—have further broadened our perspectives on the past. Most importantly, feminist scholarship helped transform the liberal arts and humanistic disciplines.

Biography is one of the oldest genres of historical writing. It retains its resilience and appeal because it has a unique capacity to make the past palpable. It moves us past abstractions and generalizations; it allows us to live vicariously through the flesh-and-blood struggles of women and men who, like all of us, find themselves in historical situations not of their making. Biographies show that despite all the forces that shaped the past and present and place limits on freedom, individuals make choices, large and small, that frame their lives and those of their contemporaries.

Kathleen Weiler’s *Democracy and Schooling in California* demonstrates the enduring value of biography in her remarkable, critical study of two fascinating women—Helen Heffernan and Corinne Seeds. She embeds their lives in the wider contexts of their times, deepening our appreciation of their world, their passions, and their professional and personal ties, which intertwined and were often inseparable. Advancing the cause of child-centered education, Heffernan and Seeds helped make California an incubator of progressive ideals, ever evolving after the 1920s, as they confronted male privilege and reactionary enemies.

Weiler’s history addresses some of the most vexing questions that have bedeviled scholars studying the history of progressive education. Exactly how did child-centered ideals shape state-level policy and teacher training?

How did child-centered ideals change over time? What obstacles stood in the way of their implementation in schools?

Theoretically sophisticated and based on impressive archival sources, Weiler's *Democracy and Schooling in California* demonstrates the great power of biography and case studies in reorienting our understanding of the past. It charts a new course in the historiography of progressivism.

WILLIAM J. REESE AND JOHN L. RURY

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A project such as this one could never have been completed without the love and support of family and friends. I especially want to thank Jane and Richard Such, M'K Veloz, and Dan and Louise Weiler for providing me friendship, not to mention lodging and good meals, on my frequent research trips to California. My family has been my greatest support and inspiration. This book is dedicated to them: Sarah Weiler, Emma Weiler, Corey Steinman, Anna Steinman, Justin Weiler, Abby Steinman, and Helen Steinman, and most of all to my husband and partner, Peter, who has stood by me, provided intellectual companionship, critical insight, and love throughout these years.

INTRODUCTION

California schools now rank toward the bottom of educational achievement as measured by standardized tests, graduation rates, and spending per pupil. But California schools were not always in crisis. In the 1930s and 1940s they were considered among the nation's best and provided a model for school systems across the nation. California education in those years was led by two exceptional women, Helen Heffernan, chief of Rural and Elementary Education for the state between 1926 and 1965, and Corinne Seeds, the director of the University Elementary School at UCLA between 1925 and 1957. Heffernan and Seeds were at the center of a wide network of women educators in California for almost forty years and were key figures in what was probably the most concerted attempt to put the ideals of Deweyan progressive education into practice in a state-wide system of public education in the United States.

Helen Heffernan and Corinne Seeds championed a child-centered pedagogy and were committed to a conception of education for democratic citizenship. They held summer institutes for teachers, spoke frequently at conferences and local meetings, and encouraged teachers to envision themselves and their work as both challenging and socially meaningful. Their careers in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s encompassed dramatic and key events in the history of U. S. education. Although their close friends were primarily women and they had been early supporters of women's right to suffrage, they did not publicly define themselves in terms of women's issues, but rather in terms of broader conceptions of citizenship and equal rights. They never deviated from their conviction that their vision of progressive education was essential to a strong democracy in the United States.

This book is organized around their intertwined lives. But my intent here is not to document every action or thought of these two individual women or to present them as isolated and autonomous agents shaping events. Rather, I have attempted to follow C. Wright Mill's call "to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society."¹ It has become commonplace to assert that histories are constructed, not uncovered, and that historians employ both analysis and narrative techniques in their labors. Analysis is based on the categories the historian (sometimes self-consciously, sometimes not) has chosen to employ to interpret the jumble of archival evidence. Historical biographies, like novels, are written as narratives with beginnings, causes, effects, and endings; thus, the "story" in history. There

are always multiple story lines around which biographical narratives can be organized.

I have addressed several overlapping historical questions in my telling of the lives and times of Helen Heffernan and Corinne Seeds. Perhaps most prominent is the feminist perspective that takes gender as central. Framing the lives of two women progressive educators around the fact that they were women and highlighting male power in the world in which they moved challenge conventional histories of the progressive education movement in which gender has largely been ignored as a category of analysis. A second goal of this narrative is to tie the personal to the political by making the relationship between Seeds and Heffernan central to their politics. Heffernan and Seeds, like a number of other single women educators in the first half of the twentieth century, had an intense romantic relationship and moved within a network of other women educators in same-sex partnerships. This women's world before the years of gay liberation is only now being explored by historians. Jacqueline Hall has asked: "How does the need for love, relatedness, erotic pleasure—which often leaves so little trace in the historical record—color and reflect ideas and political commitments? How do romantic, spiritual, and political quests entwine? And what do the answers to these questions tell us about where our stories of identity should begin and end?"² In the lives of Heffernan and Seeds, the relational and the political were deeply intertwined.

Another concern here is around race, focusing on the shifts in Heffernan's and Seeds's understanding of racial issues, their blindness to the privileges they enjoyed because of their whiteness, the fatal weaknesses in their claims of building democracy when they failed to engage racism, and their gradual coming to consciousness of racial injustice. Like other white liberal educators of their generation, Heffernan and Seeds had ignored racism in their early careers. It was only with the rise of Nazism in the 1930s, the awareness of American racism in the politics of the Second World War, and the growth of the African American civil rights movement that they began to address race and racism in the schools.

Finally, this study contributes to the history of progressive education in the United States, both by detailing the development of education in California in these years and by looking at the underlying political struggles that shaped the rise and fall of progressive education nationally. The history of education in California before the 1960s is not well known, but it provides a window into broader political developments—the struggle between liberals and conservatives; the continuing power of race and racism; the role of women as school and community leaders; the impact of the demographic and economic changes of the Depression, Second World War, and Cold War; and the ways different groups mobilized around both calls for democracy and claims of patriotism to attempt to shape educational policy. The story of Heffernan and Seeds illuminates the rise of the Right and the contest over ideas of citizenship, knowledge, and control of the public schools. In California, progressive education came to be opposed by a shifting conservative coalition that

included traditionalists seeking to transmit what they saw as the valuable heritage of the past, those who sought clearer lines of authority in schools, with a set curriculum and stricter classroom discipline, as well as anti-Communist groups who were suspicious of what they saw as socialistic or Communist tendencies in public education. In a Gramscian sense, this history documents the struggles among different groups to construct and assert hegemony and to define whose interests education should serve.

FEMINIST HISTORY

Helen Heffernan and Corinne Seeds were part of that generation of women educators whose political ideas were shaped by the progressive movements of the years before 1920. Historians have analyzed the role of white, native-born women in a number of progressive reform arenas—in the settlement house movement, the women’s club movement, government agencies such as the Children’s Bureau, and, of course, the suffrage movement. Women reformers of this period tended to focus on the needs of women and children, thus in some sense remaining safely within the domestic sphere even when they were publicly working for social change. In her study of women and social reform, Robyn Muncy calls this a “female dominion” of child welfare policy and reform.³ Until recently, however, women’s leadership in education has been comparatively overlooked. But women were active in the development of the progressive education movement as leaders of private schools and held significant positions as principals and superintendents in public school systems in the first half of the twentieth century. In the West, in particular, education offered opportunities for women.

Corinne Seeds and Helen Heffernan made the journey from their working-class families to powerful positions in California education. Both class and gender are central to understanding their histories. Unlike the better-known women social reformers, Seeds and Heffernan did not come from privileged upper-class backgrounds, nor were they connected to Eastern elites. Heffernan and Seeds grew up in the West, in a relatively fluid social world for young women. Their own identities were shaped by the representations of strong women in their childhood and youth. As successful and influential educators, they are representative of the politically committed single professional woman in the period between the first and second waves of the women’s movement, years in which the possibilities and representations of strong independent women were being eroded. Although they came of age during the most militant period of the women’s suffrage movement and showed an acute sensitivity to male privilege in their private correspondence, like many other professional women of their generation, they presented their public selves and their educational ideas without using the language or critique of feminism, even though they lived primarily in a woman-defined world. There was a sharp division between their professional and personal lives, which were powerfully shaped by their gender, and the educational philosophy and methods they expounded, in which gender was largely absent.

Neither Corinne Seeds nor Helen Heffernan married, and their friendship became a romantic relationship in the years between 1939 and 1947. Although Heffernan subsequently took a new partner, Afton Nance, with whom she later shared a household, the friendship and professional partnership between Heffernan and Seeds lasted until Seeds's death in 1969. The significant number of women educators and social reformers from the late 19th century through the 1940s whose primary relationships were with other women has been documented in numerous histories.⁴ Teaching in particular provided a protected space for the development of lesbian relationships and identities because of the legacy of the married women teachers' bar. Until the Second World War, women teachers were not only expected to be single, in many places they would lose their positions if they married. Moreover, even though teachers' salaries were low, teaching did provide an income that allowed single women to support themselves outside of heterosexual marriage.

The romantic relationship between Seeds and Heffernan created a strong political alliance that furthered their common educational goals. Individually and in their collaborative work Seeds and Heffernan tied classroom methods and the content of the curriculum to wider political issues. Following Dewey, they saw a challenging and critical education available to all children as central to democracy in an advanced industrial society. As their personal relationship deepened, Heffernan and Seeds supported each other in their continuing successes, but they also faced criticism and opposition, both individually and collectively. As powerful, older, unmarried women, they raised the suspicions of more conservative men, and, in a time of officially sanctioned homophobia, their personal relationship was hidden from the outside world.

The national leaders of the progressive education movement were all men who concerned themselves with broad questions of politics and the economy. Although the male leaders of the movement called for the transformation of teaching, they had few interactions with actual classroom teachers, the great majority of whom were women. Instead, they saw themselves as the intellectual vanguard of an educational revolution. Progressive women educators and school leaders, who tended to be identified with early childhood and elementary education, were excluded from leadership positions. This split along gender lines was not remarked upon at the time, and later historians have tended to accept this division, focusing on the male leaders and ignoring the work of women progressives or seeing their work as a continuation of the depoliticized child-centered educators of the 1920s. But Helen Heffernan and Corinne Seeds do not fit this pattern. While they each continued to work with elementary education, they were hardly uninterested in politics. Neither of them framed their work in the discourse of nurturance or maternalism, but consistently presented their educational goals in the language of Deweyan democracy. And they both were well aware of the political nature of education and the need to form alliances and mobilize support for their programs.

THE RISE AND FALL OF PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION

The careers of Helen Heffernan and Corinne Seeds offer a case study of progressive education at the local level. Heffernan and Seeds proclaimed themselves progressive educators seeking to put into practice the ideas of John Dewey and William Heard Kilpatrick—in Seeds’s case in a single demonstration school, in Heffernan’s, in the elementary schools of an entire state. It is generally agreed that the progressive education movement in the United States was at its height in the period between the two world wars. What exactly is meant by progressive education and how to evaluate it, however, has been a point of dispute from the founding of the Progressive Education Association in 1919. Dewey himself acknowledged that there was no single entity called “progressive education.”⁵

The most influential study of progressive education is Lawrence Cremin’s *The Transformation of the School*, still the standard history of the movement. Cremin proposed that although there was no single definition of progressive education, he saw three strands as encompassing the movement: the administrative progressives, influenced by the psychological behaviorism of Edward Thorndike, who argued for institutional and bureaucratic reform; the child-centered progressives, influenced by the work of G. Stanley Hall and the child study movement, who emphasized the importance of the development of the individual child but who, according to Cremin, lacked a clear social or political vision; and the democratic progressives associated with Dewey and in the 1930s the more politically radical social reconstructionists, who demanded that the schools build a new social order.⁶ By the 1940s, “progressive education” had come to imply both a pedagogical approach centering on the interests of the child and a political stance associated with liberalism.

The collapse of the progressive education movement in the 1950s has been presented in most historical accounts as the result of internal weaknesses. In *The Transformation of the School*, for example, Cremin claimed that progressive education collapsed because “it failed to keep pace with the continuing transformation of American society.”⁷ Other historians have pointed to the disjuncture between the collective vision of progressive educators and the individualism and competitive nature of a capitalist society. In his analysis of the collapse of the progressive education movement, Arthur Zilversmit has pointed out that “the ideals of progressive education were anomalous in a society that stressed competition more than cooperation and that placed an inordinate value on economic success, valuing it as an honorable reward for effort.”⁸ And then there was the tension between the goal of social transformation held by progressive or liberal teachers and the resistance to change on the part of conservative communities and school boards as well as corporate and political elites.

While the weaknesses of the life adjustment movement of the 1940s and the lack of structure of the more extreme “open” private schools have been well documented, an emphasis solely on these issues ignores the political

nature of the fall of progressive education. What is left out of these analyses is the impact of the concerted ideological and political attack on the schools by the anti-Communist Right. Although Cremin included a brief discussion of the postwar right-wing attacks on the schools in *The Transformation of the School*, he failed to identify these attacks as one of the major causes of the collapse of the progressive education movement. Studies of progressive education following Cremin have tended to overlook the significance of the role of organized right-wing groups and conservative elected officials in undermining confidence in the schools. But in the 1940s, politicians, working in concert with organizations such as the American Legion and the Sons of the American Revolution, brought the weight of the government itself against progressive education and used the machinery of the state—in particular investigating committees—to shape common-sense understandings of what was going on in the schools. This was certainly the case in California, where both the Tenney Committee and the Dilworth Committee on Education tied progressive education to subversion. When viewed in the light of recent studies of the rise of conservative and radical-right social movements in post-World War II society, the struggles over education of the 1940s and 1950s appear as part of a wider contest over political power and meaning. From this perspective, the Right appears as much more active and significant in swaying public opinion and mobilizing popular discontent with progressive education than has been recognized.

The impact of the Cold War on the progressive education movement is only now being examined in any detail. Historians have explored the social anxieties that underlay the fear of “un-American” ideas, the embracing of the individual and rejection of the social, and the nostalgia for imagined traditional ways and values. In this sense the attack on progressive education can be seen as the expression of the anxieties created by the rapid social transformations of the postwar period. These desires were clearly present in the calls for traditional or fundamental education that marked Cold War criticisms of the schools. But there is no doubt that the struggles over the schools were deeply political. As Helen Heffernan wrote in 1951, as the anti-Communist campaign against the public schools gained momentum: “So long as the school remains a place where children and youth are taught to accept their own subordination, where they are not taught to analyze the conditions of life about them, where they are not taught how to think, education constitutes no threat to those who fear social mobility or resist social change.”⁹ It was statements like this that drew the wrath of traditionalists and conservatives. Heffernan and Seeds never wavered from their belief that a critical education for all children was vital for a democratic society.

A ROADMAP

This book is organized chronologically and thematically. It provides the details of the lives of these two powerful women in the context of broader social and political developments, in education and in the broader society.

The first chapter examines the experiences of their families in the American West and the origins of their later politics in turn-of-the-century progressive and labor movements. Their generation of women born between 1880 and 1900 lived through rapid social and cultural changes that created a kind of discursive dissonance, as the imagined woman of the feminist and suffrage movement—independent, capable, deserving of citizenship—coexisted with the patriarchal representations of the domestic and maternal woman and later the sexualized housewife of the mid-twentieth century. Throughout their lives, Helen Heffernan and Corinne Seeds saw themselves as new women, an identity shaped by the legacy of progressive social reform and the militant labor movement of their formative years. In the second chapter, their educational paths are outlined as typical of the careers of talented young working-class women who went into teaching in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Their educational ideas are placed in the context of the development of child-centered progressive schools and theorists of the 1920s. In these years Heffernan and Seeds were converted to the educational vision of John Dewey and William Kilpatrick, both of whom taught at Teachers College, Columbia University, and who were considered to be at the center of the progressive education movement.

Chapters 3 and 4 turn to Heffernan and Seeds's activities and ideas in the 1930s. Chapter 3 explores the impact of the Depression on California and the growth of the network of educators, most of them women, who became followers of Heffernan and Seeds. The 1930s also saw the development of a much more radical stance among progressive educators centered on the group called the social reconstructionists at Teachers College. Although this group of men made few alliances with classroom teachers and showed little concern with the gendered structure of schools, both Heffernan and Seeds were influenced by their call that the schools should "build a new social order." Chapter 4 examines Heffernan and Seeds's pedagogical and political ideas in this period. Like other progressive educators of the time, both of them claimed the language of democracy, but their conception of democratic schools needs to be examined closely to consider which students they imagined as the democratic-minded citizens of the future and who they saw as the educators and experts who would guide these students. Heffernan and Seeds embraced diagnostic testing, extensive observation and record keeping on all children, and centralized state power at the same time that they championed a critical education as the foundation for democracy. This chapter considers the tension between the goals of equality and democracy on the one hand and the disciplining power of the school as an institution on the other.

Chapters five and six explore the dynamics of gender and race. In chapter 5, Heffernan and Seeds's intimate relationship is illuminated through a reading of Seeds's letters to Heffernan. They were both political allies and romantic partners, part of a network of women educators in intense same-sex relationships. As was true of other middle-class women in same-sex relationships, Heffernan and Seeds did not identify themselves privately as lesbians. Nor was there a public political movement with which they could identify

as women who loved women. Chapter 6 moves to chronicle the impact of the Second World War on California education and, in particular, changing understandings of race and racism in response to Nazi claims of racial superiority, the Japanese internment, the Zoot Suit riots, and the heightened awareness of American racism that the war called forth. Seeds and Heffernan had failed to engage the issue of racism until the late 1930s. It was only with the war that they became concerned with prejudice and discrimination against minority ethnic groups, although they still did not build alliances with communities of color. Nor did they question the cultural content of the curriculum or their own right to advise parents about what was proper for their children.

In chapters 7 and 8 the story of Heffernan and Seeds becomes intertwined with the rise of the Right in the postwar world. The fight to save Corinne Seeds's school, Heffernan's year in Japan on MacArthur's staff trying to introduce democratic practices in Japanese elementary schools, and the beginnings of the attack on "subversive" textbooks and teachers in California schools all took place in the years between 1945 and 1949. Chapters 9 and 10, the last two chapters, follow the growth of the Right and the continued assault on progressive schools, most dramatically in the investigations of the Tenney and Dilworth Committees of the California legislature. The Dilworth Committee in particular made Heffernan one of its major targets. After Seeds retired in 1957, Heffernan continued to defend the ideals she had held from the beginning in the face of an ongoing campaign against her. The concerted attack on Heffernan and the ideas of progressive education culminated in the election of the conservative Max Rafferty as State Superintendent of Public Instruction in 1962. Heffernan retired in 1965, her network of supporters in disarray, her programs disbanded. But the three years between Rafferty's election and Heffernan's retirement saw the passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts and the Free Speech movement at the University of California, Berkeley, harbingers of the social movements of the 1960s, and the rise of a new generation seeking education for democracy and social justice.