Introduction

Persistent Dilemmas of Curriculum Improvement

It Was An Interesting time. As a child of the fifties, my recollections of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, and of the time I spent in schools remain strong. The drama and turmoil of the period remain vivid in my memory: the assassinations, the riots, the marches and civil rights actions, the war, and the antiwar movement, all viewed through the media but mediated by friends, family, location, and personal experience. However, the strands of social studies reform detailed in this volume were largely missing from my own schooling. We seldom studied or discussed the issues of the time. Nor did we examine disciplinary knowledge through the lens of “doing” what historians and social scientists did. Mostly, the classes I had in history and the social sciences were taught in a traditional manner, dominated by teacher and text. As we shall see, despite an unprecedented attempt to improve teaching and learning in social studies, most children of the period had an experience similar to my own. In part, I have written this volume in an attempt to understand what I missed, and why I missed it.

The school reforms of the 1960s were far from the first attempt to transform schools. The efforts of the progressive era, and subsequent side-tracks, had tried and largely failed in their quest to transform the school from an institution of traditional learning to a dynamic center of interest and growth for all children. For our story, the important note is that the progressive era reforms were created and funded largely from outside the matrix of government, and were directed primarily by scholars in schools of education along with school administrators and teachers. The story of efforts to reform the American school began to change and emerge into its
present form during the 1950s and 1960s, driven by collaboration among big science, government, business, and prestigious universities, with little attention to the history or social context of schooling. Though the seeds of reform were present prior to the cold war era, it was during that period that fears over Soviet manpower development led our government, via the National Science Foundation and other agencies, to fund large-scale school reform efforts for the first time, motivated by the highest purposes of science and learning, but funded and driven largely by a perceived threat to our national security and the goal of maintaining technological superiority. This occurred, it is important to point out, during a period when the United States enjoyed unprecedented global prestige and respect: the United States was the world’s first superpower and held a nuclear monopoly, then strategic dominance, during much of the era. So, the reforms were partially guided by a vision of omnipotence inspired by the period of U.S. nuclear and technological hegemony following World War II.¹

Ironically, this effort at American education reform was beset by specific problems stemming, in part, from its origins. Though the reformers faced what were likely to be insurmountable obstacles, in their self-assurance and general ignorance of the history and social context of schooling, they largely ignored those obstacles and proceeded as if the schools would naturally welcome their efforts for change. Despite this flaw, the curricular materials created during the period remain among the most interesting and educational in existence, a treasure trove for teachers who are willing to mine it.²

The school reforms that emerged in math and science gradually broadened to include the social sciences, the humanities, and other areas. Though the reforms were well intended, their fate was determined partly by their origins in cold war conflict, by the seeds of their growth within the context of the military-industrial-academic complex, and by the general failure of the reformers to situate their initiatives within what had long been an effort among educators to develop a vision of school and society that would further the ends of democracy. Instead, education for democratic purposes was largely submerged in a reform initiated by insiders in science, government, and academia who sought to reform the schools in their own image, bereft of a compelling social vision. They focused on meeting a perceived threat without full consideration of alternative possibilities and purposes, and without due consideration of how the reforms they envisioned might best be institutionalized in schools. What resulted led to efforts to makeover the classroom into something like a minor league extension of the research university, much as more recent reform efforts have sought to transform schools into an extension of the business world.