

Curriculum Struggles in Late 19th and Early 20th Century

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The Industrial Revolution changed the structure of society, which then prompted a change in education. During the late nineteenth-century and the early twentieth century, new technologies shifted societal structure from smaller communities to urban and industrial cities. Family roles changed, immigration increased dramatically, and employment was factory directed (Kliebard, 2004). In this era of rapid and visible change, education became the focus of power and control. Kliebard discusses four interest groups who vie for control of the twentieth-century American curriculum (Kliebard, 2004).

An early nineteenth-century group is the humanists or mental disciplinarians. Based upon the eighteenth-century teachings of German psychologist Christian Wolff that the mind was comprised of a “carefully detailed hierarchy of faculties” (Kliebard, 2004, p. 4), the humanists espoused that the mind was a muscle requiring holistic exercise to avoid atrophy. This concept was vigorously promoted by the 1828 report of the Yale faculty, with Yale President Jeremiah Day and Professor James Kingsley as chief authors (Kliebard, 2004). The report touted the classics of Greek, Latin, mathematics, and the general curriculum already taught at Yale. The humanists emphasized Western cultural heritage and reason and saw education as a means for transmitting the traditional values and ideologies of Western civilization (Kliebard, 2004). However, the concept as the mind as a muscle led to lower-level skills such as recitation and repetition. Because of the increase in awareness of the transformation of society and a surge in secondary school enrollment, three other approaches emerged as a reform to the mental disciplinarians (Kliebard, 2004).

Secondary school principals, now dealing with a higher number of college-bound

students, complained of inconsistent college entrance requirements; this led to the National Education Association's (NEA) involvement in the curriculum dispute (Kliebard, 2004). The NEA created a "Committee of Ten" in 1892 to address entrance requirements. Charles W. Eliot, President of Harvard University and leader in the mental disciplinarian movement, was appointed chair of the NEA's Committee of Ten (pp. 8-9). According to Kliebard, Eliot did not seek to maintain the inflexible humanist approach but instead championed "the systematic development of reasoning power" (p. 9), which he thought should be at the core of curriculum.

G. Stanley Hall led the child-study movement, the developmentalists, which posited that data based on children's development and the nature of learning should drive curriculum. The child-centered curriculum would design not only to match the abilities of children at each stage but also to engage and excite their interest (Kliebard, 2004). Hall rejected the Committee of Ten's recommendations characterizing them as fallacious and had three major contentions: a universal curriculum was unworkable because of the diversity of students; all subjects were not equal even if equally taught; and, finally, preparation for life and preparation for college were not equivalent (Kliebard, 2004). Even under scrutiny and social progression, the Committee of Ten maintained the humanist principle of liberal education for all students. (Kliebard, 2004). Amidst the controversy of the Committee of Ten's report, the Committee of Fifteen prepared their report on elementary education curriculum during which William Torrey Harris, the United States Commissioner of Education, worked to remove himself from the mental discipline movement while asserting a new argument for a humanist curriculum (Kliebard, 2004). Harris was considered a conservative because of his reluctance towards manual training and child-study, and opposition to vocational training, even though he promoted access to higher education for women (Kliebard, 2004). At the NEA's 1895 meeting in Cleveland, Ohio, the National

Herbart Society infamously confronted Harris, taking umbrage at Harris's misuse of Harbartian terms (Kliebard, 2004). This confrontation between Harris and the Herbartians signaled the realignment and transformation of forces that were to fight for control of the American curriculum (Kliebard, 2004). Joseph Mayer Rice was present for that confrontation and became a significant player in the curriculum battle (Kliebard, 2004).

Just before the NEA meeting, in 1892 and 1893, Rice published a series of nine articles conveying his outrage at the conditions of elementary school system. He eventually focused his efforts on "standardization and efficiency in the curriculum" (Kliebard, 2004, p. 20). Through the scientific management technique Rice espoused in his 1912 book *Scientific Management in Education*, Rice became the leader of the third major interest group vying for curricular power: social efficiency (Kliebard, 2004). Social efficiency educators emphasized that curricula should hold direct correlation to future employment and adult roles to produce better citizens and a better society (Kliebard, 2004). Neither humanist nor child-centered, social efficiency touted a third, unique approach.

A few years before the Herbartian-Harris NEA confrontation, sociologist Lester Frank Ward published *Psychic Factors of Civilization* in 1892, which shows "Ward's commitment to egalitarianism was unequivocal" (Kliebard, 2004, p. 22). Ward becomes the leader of the social meliorists: the fourth group vying for control of the American curriculum. Ward argued social justice and a "new social vision" (Kliebard, 2004, p. 25) could be addressed through school and curriculum rather than efficiency or child psychology (Kliebard, 2004).

These four oppositional movements evolved through public discourse, possible because of new technologies, as a reaction to social change. Kliebard states there was no decisive winner, and the current American curriculum is a messy compromise.

References

- Kliebard, H. M. (2004). Curriculum ferment in the 1890's. *The struggle for the American curriculum, 1893-1958* (pp. 1-24). New York, NY: Routledge.