Historical Roots of American Curriculum

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Revised

  In the last four decades of the 19th century, 14 million immigrants came to America. Schools were under increased pressure to provide a meaningful education. Schools ‘focus shifted from teacher to curriculum.  Kliebard ‘s  *Struggle for the American Curriculum* spans two centuries and several decades by providing a chronology key people, tensions and relationships between movements. Societal forces had transformed cities, moving from an agrarian to industrial society. The expansion of railroads, the advent of magazines, all affected the development of American Curriculum. The term struggle in his title aptly describes the decades that begins with the workings of Report of the Committee of the Ten (which was set up to provide standards for college admissions but provided a framework for this discussion) and spans the decades to the enactment of the Nationalist Defense Education Act. Though the history is laid out in some semblance of order I believe these movements emerged, were promoted by the educational community, met with competition or resistance, waned and re- emerged with no one movement being dominate and elements of them all still remaining today.

Four movements would emerge:

1. Humanists- guardians of the classical tradition (dominated the late 19th century In 1890s the curriculum centered on Mental Discipline which had it s roots in Plato believing all subject strengthened the mind (Elliot, Harris, Maynard, Hutchins) Relied on proven subjects such as Latin, and Greek, used in Normal Schools and centered on the mind as a muscle to be exercised with mindless drills and repetition. Student surveys showed they preferred factories to schools

2. Developmists – child theory focused on what and how a child learns (1920”s) Hall, Kilpatrick).

3. Social efficiency-looks on society as a whole, a scientific view, promoted vocational schools (Ayres, Bobbit, Ellwood, Finney, Peters, Snedden) thru 1920’s

4. Social Reconstructionists - meliorists, Social Darwinism Rugg and Ward - schools should be used for social change (1930’s) Dewey

Many of the movement’s elements co-existed drawing from one another and reacting to the social climate around the schools whose roles changed and developed in response to emerging visions of what students should learn and be prepared for. In the 1890s mental discipline started to crack and couldn’t meet the needs of the new industrial society.

James and Thorndike 1901, describe the changing social order. There was no agreement; mental discipline unravels due to social transformation and rising interest groups such as secondary education up from 6-7% in 1890’s to 51% in 1930’s. Common school growth resulted from technological changes. Adolescents didn’t have jobs so they went to secondary school. The question became “could the curriculum serve the new society”.

To answer that question the National Education Association commissioned a Committee of Ten (1892) chaired by Elliot, Harvard to establish uniform college requirements but there work ended up influencing the high school curriculum. 50% of high school graduates went on to college but there were no uniform criteria. Leroy said to prepare for college was to prepare for life, and there was no distinction in the high school level of curriculum needed. Elliot was a humanist. He believed in electivism for colleges while he was a mental disciplinarian. He believed in the systematic development of reasoning and central functions of schools was expressed through thoughts clearly and concisely (p4). Any subject could perform this function this concept was not as restrictive as a true mental disciplinarian.

A second group emerged. G. Stanley Hall believed in the Child Study Movement. He believed in the natural development of the child’s mind and in late 19th century focused on observation of the contents of child’s minds (1883) Other committees were examining these issues. William Maxwell divided 15 members into 3 committees. Harris wrote *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* separated him from mental disciplinarians and set curriculum around western civilization. He believed there were five windows to the soul:  Grammar, literature and art, math, geography and history. He believed in woman’s access to education but was vs. vocational training. Herbartism emerged to study education and concentrations. Although Herbartism declined in 1905 it still would influence Charles de Garno (p.16) Harris attacked Hebartism. The debate between Harris and Herbartism would continue into the 20th century led by Frank and Charles M Murray and Colonel Francis Parker.(Arnst, p 178) Harris critic Joseph Rice left and went to Germany he in turn influenced Hill, Parker and Dewey. Rice returned to survey 36 school systems (1892). He had a sense of urgency, looked for success such as Indianapolis system and blamed unqualified teachers and lack of accountability. He wrote *The Public School System in the US* and undertook a second survey in 1893*.*  Rice was the Father of Comparative Methodology of Educational Research. His colleague Leonard Ayers in 1918 surveyed 16,000 students for spelling methods .Using scientific methods in education Rice wanted to make teachers and systems do the right thing. A sharp divide from developmist p 20 Rice started as humanists but applied the scientific management theory applied to industry for a just society to education. Equalitarism, forerunner for third group - Social Efficient group led by Lester Ward who wrote Dynamic Sociology.  Small 1892 looked for curriculum to lead the way. John Dewey believed dedication leads to social change.  The tension between teacher focus in the 1890’s to curriculum focused is still going on today. The search for a new American curriculum which serves its students continues also. Rice touted the scientific management in education theory. He wanted efficiency in education. He wanted clear standards to measure results with fixed standards. The tension was from the child process. Child capital is time, the results are judged by the time expended.  Rice went from outraged humanitarian to a zealot looking for elimination of waste using scientific management techniques applied to industry. He was the forerunner of social efficiency. Rice was vs. Harris and Elliot. Social efficiency was vs. the humanists. At this time Frank Ward wrote Dynamic Sociology 1883. Darwin's theory was an opposite view to Spencer’s, Popular Science Monthly, and Social Darwinism. Darwin believed in natural selection. Survival of the fittest foreshadowed Dewey who believed not forces of nature but power of intelligence to change things for better. An egilitarism Ward wanted a fairly distributed system of education. Ward and Elliot believed in optimism to the power of human intelligence. They saw education as a potential instrument for social progress. Education can correct social ills and lead to social justice. In another part of the America’s Friere would have approved. While the social efficiency movement seem to dominate in educational testing today each of these groups have a presence in today’s curriculum, and the debate continues. The question remains “can the curriculum serve the new society”?

  References

Kliebard, H. M. (2004) The struggle for the American curriculum 1893-1958 (3rd ed.). New York, NY: RoutledgeFalmer