

Historical Roots of Curriculum

Veronica O'Neill

New Jersey City University

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From the late 1800's through the early 20th Century, there were many changing forces in society that influenced public education and curriculum. The United States was rapidly moving from a collection of relatively self-contained communities to an industrial nation connected by railroads and high circulation newspapers and magazines. The population of the United States was also experiencing unprecedented growth, especially through immigration. These societal changes threatened the existing curriculum, which was based on mental discipline. Teaching was focused on rote memorization and recitation. Educational theorists of that time believed that this approach would strengthen the mind like exercise strengthens muscles (Kliebard, 2004, p. 5).

Humanism

The first major shift in the curriculum during the period occurred as a result of the formation in 1892 of the National Education Association's Committee of Ten. This group was charged with examining the varying requirements of colleges for admission, which caused great difficulties for secondary educators. The chairman of the committee, Harvard's Charles W. Eliot, believed that an elective model was appropriate for undergraduate education, rather than a prescribed series of courses. He also believed that students in elementary and secondary schools would benefit from studying many different disciplines, not just the prescribed few in the existing curriculum model. The Committee of Ten's ultimate recommendation was to adopt four different learning tracks for high school students, rather than Eliot's elective system (Kliebard, 2004, p. 10). These programs included Classical, Latin-Scientific, Modern Languages and English, all of which were designed to allow for admission to college (Nelson, 1992, p. 260).

Eliot believed in "Education for Power and Service", that by permitting students to choose their own educational program, they would become happier, and would go forth and

serve the world. Critics such as Babbitt countered that just because a person was happy, they do not necessarily become altruistic, and that it was difficult to draw a conclusion about service to the world (Smilie, 2012, p. 63).

Developmentalism

Many felt that the humanism movement did not take America's changing population into consideration sufficiently. The next major curriculum reform came out of the child-study movement. G. Stanley Hall led this group of developmentalists, who determined the curriculum based on the development of the child's mind. Hall found in his research that teachers assumed children had fundamental knowledge about the world, that they did not in fact have. For example, children who lived in the city may have never seen a cow, but teachers would often use the word without explanation. Hall disagreed with Eliot's position that all subjects were equally valuable, and felt it was reasonable to tailor the curriculum to the students' ultimate goal of attending college or not (Kliebard, 2004, p. 13).

Scientific Management and Social Efficiency

Although the various movements are presented in a linear fashion in this paper, it should be noted that sentiments drifted back toward humanism and mental discipline theories during these years. There was no sense of unification in curriculum at the time, and many continued to promote their own ideas. One thought leader in this era was Joseph M. Rice, who studied school children in thirty-six cities, finding a system still based in rote memorization and recitation. In a later survey, Rice focused on comparing the achievement of third graders around the country in arithmetic and reading, trying to discern the reasons some schools were more successful than others (Kliebard, 2004, p. 24).

Rice's work led to the recommendation that teachers must be told what to teach and how to teach it. This position evolved into the adoption of a social efficiency model, which was inspired by Taylor's work in the industrial sector. Taylor's influences over education included advising on how to use building and classroom space most efficiently, and how to increase production from the janitorial staff (Rees, 2001).

Social Meliorists

The last of the major curriculum reform groups in the period is the social meliorists, who believe that education is the key to social change and progress. Meliorism is defined as "the view that the world is neither completely good nor completely bad, and that incremental progress or regress depend on human actions" (Audi, 1995, p. 553). One of the thought leaders in this movement was Lester Frank Ward, who thought that education resources must be distributed among all social and economic classes. Ward argued that lower classes were not by nature inferior to the upper classes. He noted that there were many people in the slums who were as smart as students at Harvard, but they did not have the economic advantages to receive a proper education (Kliebard, 2004, p. 23).

Conclusion

At the turn of the twentieth century, four major theories of curriculum arose to challenge the established mental discipline approach. These included the humanist theory, which considered all disciplines worthy of study, and the developmentalists, who focused on the mind of the child. Other movements included the scientific management approach of the social efficiency movement, and the social meliorist theory, which held that providing educational opportunities to all classes would result in a better world. Each of these theories had strong proponents and detractors, and none was accepted as the ultimate theory at the time.

In the twentieth century, these four visions of curriculum continued to be discussed and debated. There were elements of each that had great merit, and can still be seen in current day curriculum. Each of the thought leaders discussed above have influenced education today with their fervor and ideologies.

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