Short Paper: Historical Roots

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Chapter one of Herbert Kliebard's book, *The struggle for the American curriculum, 1893-1958,* (2004) examines the changing school curriculum in the 1890s. Four major movements that took place in the late 19th and early 20th century that sought to reform the curriculum and education at the time. Initially, the focus of education was on the poorly trained, underpaid, even immature teacher who was expected to educate and discipline the youth (p. 1). America soon began to experience a social change and, in response, America's education would change, too. The population increased and cities grew as a new industrial society in America emerged. A traditional family life was no longer sufficient to prepare youngsters for this new world. In response, education had to change and the new focus was now on curriculum.

Some of the first changes saw courses being broken down into units, the use of textbooks to drive instruction, and the division of students into grades with specific courses of study for each grade level (p. 2). Americans started to become more aware of their society at this time due to a growth in journalism with magazines and newspapers becoming increasingly popular. The rapid growth of the railroad system provided cheap, reliable transportation and connected parts of the U.S. that hadn't been before (p. 3). American society was no longer isolated.

Curriculum in the 1890s was characterized by mental discipline, which was initially based on the work of Christian Wolff (p. 4). Mental disciplinarians believed that the mind was a muscle that could be strengthened through exercise or mental gymnastics. This educational philosophy was supported by a report produced by Yale faculty, president Jeremiah Day and Professor James K. Kingsley (p. 5). They believed in traditional education and humanistic values and felt that an ideal education included courses in Greek, Latin, mathematics, and writing. Unfortunately, this thinking led to drill, mindless recitation, and harsh discipline. Child laborers admitted they would rather work in the factories than go to school (p. 6).

Around 1890 more students began to attend secondary school looking for higher levels of training for better-paying jobs, making education a worthwhile investment (pp. 7-8). The demand for a secondary school education increased, but colleges each had different entrance requirements. In response to this, the National Education Association created the Committee of Ten. Harvard president and chairman of the Committee of Ten, Charles W. Eliot, was a key player in the humanist interest group (p. 9). He believed that any subject could be considered disciplinary if it could be studied over a continuous period. Though a mental disciplinarian, Eliot wasn't as strict (p. 10). He supported the idea of electivism and felt that a combination of the right courses and teaching could develop all citizens in accordance with the humanist ideal. Ultimately, students would end up being prepared for both college and life through a choice of four different courses of study. Most importantly to note, is that all the subjects would be taught the same way to all students regardless of being part of different population groups.

Eliot's report received criticism with special regard to the fact that this educational plan did not mesh with a changing school population (p. 11). One of the most powerful critics was G. Stanley Hall, who related to the child study movement and was also a developmentalist. He believed the natural development of the child could shape what should be taught. Hall conducted a study trying to discover what children already knew. According to Hall, the uniformity found in the Yale curriculum did not address the natural spontaneity found in adolescents.

In 1895 the National Herbart Society confronted U.S. Commissioner of Education, William Torrey Harris (p. 15). Harris had worked to create a new version of the humanist curriculum which focused on a curriculum of grammar, literature and art, mathematics, geography, and history. Harris had many opponents, but one notable critic, somewhat associated with Herbartianism, was Joseph Mayer Rice (p. 17). Rice conducted a survey of American

elementary education in 1892. He released his findings and shared his observations that some school systems were better than others, superintendents lacked knowledge of pedagogy and were unaware of what was going on in classrooms, and that school boards were made up of unqualified people (p. 18). There was a violent response to the articles (p. 19). In a second study, Rice found that drill on spelling was unrelated to student achievement. His research lead to a shift away from memorization and mindlessness of school to standardization and efficiency, and he ultimately became known as the forerunner of the social efficiency educators (p. 20).

The final interest group in American curriculum at this time were the social meliorists. Lester Frank Ward took the position that education could be used as an instrument of social progress that could correct social evils and promote social justice (p. 21). He argued that social progress did not adhere to Social Darwinism since humans were smart enough to change things for the better. Ward was an egalitarianist and supported this notion in his book, *The Psychic Factors of Civilization* when he wrote, "The denizens of the slums are not inferior in talent to the graduates of Harvard College….Criminals are the geniuses of the slums. Society has forced them into this field, and they are making the best use they can of their native abilities" (p. 22).

Humanists, developmentalists, social efficiency educators, and social meliorists each sought to reform the American curriculum and made good arguments as to why they believed their views should be followed. They also showed how trends change especially in response to a changing America. Views that didn't reflect a changing country and population became detested. While all four groups vied for control over American curriculum, but not any one succeeded. Ultimately, each group would end up having an impact on what American curriculum and education would become through compromise (p. 25).

References

Kliebard, H. (2004). *The struggle for the American curriculum, 1893-1958*. New York, NY: Routledge.