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Historical Implications on Educational Reform

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In his Farewell Address to Congress, George Washington advised that the country should, "Promote then as an object of primary importance, Institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge. In proportion as the structure of a government gives force to public opinion, it is essential that public opinion should be enlightened" (Brown, p. 582). As implied through his rhetoric, Washington desired for the nation to link education, civic responsibility, and virtue in an attempt to ensure nationhood and national stability. The Washington administration's achievements with regards to stabilizing the national economy and unifying the military were not mirrored in the realm of educational reform. At that time, public education was categorized as a reserved power, leaving matters of education and instruction to the jurisdiction of state governments. While Washington upheld education as a means to enlighten the citizenry, he did not chart a clear path for how to enlighten the public. As the nation has evolved, each generation has had to wrestle with the questions: who should be enlightened, to what degree, in what manner, and at whose expense?

Historically, educational reform movements have coincided with dramatic periods of social, political, and economic change within the broader American experience. The earliest documented establishment of public education in the United States occurred during a time when colonial leaders were leading a reawakening and refinement of Protestant religious pedagogy. Educational instruction, goals, and materials reflected this colonial religious fervor. During the national period of the early 1800s, Thomas Jefferson was promoting a renewed sense of national pride and the newly formed United States was examining its place in the world. Mirroring this emphasis on national pride, Horace Mann championed uniform curriculum and a national public education system which promoted civics, patriotism, and character. During the Populist movement, John Dewey began to formulate his philosophical and educational tenets of social education and individual determination, in reaction to the changing ideas of the Progressive Era of the early 1900s and societal changes propagated by the Industrial Revolution. It is difficult, therefore, to appreciate periods of educational reform without an understanding of the historical movements of the time. Indeed, it is the role of the "historian to arrive at a fuller understanding of the actions of people by examining their history" (Gilderhus, 1987, p. 6).

During the colonial period, national movement, and Progressive Era educational reformers looked to the prevailing social, economic, and political reality to frame their platforms on educational re-organization. While it would be possible, and engaging, to evaluate other periods and many of those unanswered questions in depth (who should have an education, at who's expense, to what degree), this paper will focus on those three historical periods and will answer the question of what should we teach in our schools. Through the use of documentation, primary sources, and platform statements, this paper will demonstrate that in each instance educator answers to the before mentioned question were influenced and determined by the political and social conditions of the time period.

Colonial Period

Before winning independence, the English people in America were a collection of independent, and often factious, colonies. Different colonial regions had different social, economic, political, and religious institutions. Despite these differences, education, much like the English heritage of the colonists, had a common unifying theme throughout the colonies. At its heart, education in the colonial period was seen as an opportunity to improve the religious and moral standing of young men. Despite some who disapproved of education because it encouraged dissidence and disobedience (Hawke, 1988) most settlers in the Americas ". . . emerged

from a Protestant nation which held that the ability to read God's word directly from the Bible was essential to a godly life" (Hawke, 1988, p. 69). In 1647, the Massachusetts Bay Colony passed the Old Deluder Act which mandated that all towns provide for the education of its youth so that Satan could not "keep men from the knowledge of the Scriptures" (http://personal.pitnet.net/primarysources/deluder.html). The New England Primer, the primary text for much of the colonial period, taught the three R's through religious stories and exercises. Admittedly, New England was the most religiously motivated area of colonial settlement and there were differences between different colonial regions in educational practices. Even so, most felt that "the major purpose of school was to teach children to read the Scriptures and notices of civil affairs" (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2004, p. 62). In an early brochure, Harvard University proclaimed that it would "advance Learning and perpetuate it to Posterity; dreading to leave an illiterate Ministry to the Churches." (www.hno.harvard.edu/guide/intro/index.html).

Throughout the colonial period, the emphasis on religion, and in many cases obedience, was always at the forefront of the educational experience. In addressing the child, famed New England preacher Cotton Mather advocated that it is "Folly for them [children] to pretend unto any Witt and Will of their own; they must resign all to me, who will be sure to do what is best; my word must be their Law" (Kennedy & Bailey, 2002, p. 82). The Great Awakening of the mid-eighteenth century diminished such obedience and blind obligation to figures of authority as well as provided some alternatives to the very strict religious training most had previously experienced. The Awakening was a period of intense religious revival in which colonists perceived a moral decline in the American colonies. Even though the period began as an attempt by religious revivalists to reawaken the religious fervor of the early colonial experience, it ended up disrupting and leveling the social structure of the colonial period. (Bonomi, 1986) At the center of that disruption was a willingness to challenge traditional forms of authority (i.e. traditional clergy) because the "spectacle [of warring clergy] that ensued, the loss of proportion and professional decorum, contributed to the demystification of the clergy, and overset traditional attitudes about deference and leadership in colonial America" (Bonomi, 1986, p. 113). The revivalists attacked almost all social institutions including education. Bonomi (1986) argued that the leaders of the Awakening recognized that an educated clergy was necessary but that "Harvard and Yale were being guided . . . by men of rationalist leanings who simply did not provide the type of training wanted by the revivalists" (p. 115). In breaking down those bonds of social cohesion, the Awakening elevated the individual. Indeed, "in exhorting their followers to make personal decisions for God, and then to act on those decisions, regardless of their effect on the larger society, the revivalists gave sanction to a new dynamic in human relationships" (Bonomi, 1986, p. 117).

Part of that new relationship would be the role of education. As the Awakening broke down some of those social barriers, education began to shift subtly from the preeminence of religious training to that of the individual in society. Ben Franklin proposed a set of studies for an Academy in Philadelphia. In his proposal he maintained that "The good Education of Youth has been esteemed by wise Men in all Ages, as the surest Foundation of the Happiness both of private Families and of Common-wealths. Almost all Governments have therefore made it a principal Object of their Attention, to establish and endow with proper Revenues, such Seminaries of Learning, as might supply the succeeding Age with Men qualified to serve the Publick with Honour to themselves, and to their Country (sic)." (http://www.archives.upenn.edu/primdocs/1749proposals.html) In Franklin's proposal there certainly was a modicum of religious training of the pupils but the majority of the curriculum now focused on training which would allow the individual to participate in the increasingly important role of democratic citizen. That focus on citizenship would play an important role in education during the early years of the United States. Education was shifting as the experience and values of colonial Americans changed during the 17th and 18th centuries.

National Period

Between the American Revolution and the beginning of the Civil War, the American people were in the process of creating a national self-identity. It was through, in part, this search for a cohesive voice that the American consciousness was established. Upon winning independence from Great Britain, the American people emphasized the uniqueness of being American and believed that the hand of God was laid on America. The American Revolution and Enlightenment ideas of the 19th century led most Americans to dedicate themselves to the ideas of, "personal liberty, the security of constitutionalism, the rightness of democracy, the wrongness of class distinctions, the virtue of private property, the moral necessity of hard work, the certainity of progress, and above all the uniqueness, superiority, and high destiny of the United States" (Rossiter, 1971, p. 17).

Alexis de Tocqueville observed that, "Christian morality…influenced American mores (Levy, 1993, p. 293)." Tocqueville wrote that Christianity and liberty were intermingled in the United States and served as a form of solidarity, defining the American people as a Christian nation. Tocqueville's observation was confirmed by Rossiter (1971) who found that most Americans, "between 1815 and 1850… [believed] the more perfect Union was a new kind of nation in which membership bestowed a range of rights, privileges, immunities, opportunities, and protections that no sensible man would wish to surrender" (Rossiter, 1971 p. 16). Based on the social and political currents of the time, the question can be asked, what curriculum was used in schools? Did the curriculum reflect the social, political, and economic climate, or was it based on a more traditional and European based background of writing, reading, religion, and arithmetic?

Education between 1800 and 1892 was primarily based on religious content (Johnson, Dupuis, Musial, Hall & Gollnick, 1996). Similar to the colonial period, there were no universal public schools in the United States. The New England states were the first to create universal or common elementary schools. The standard curriculum for most schools, during the 1800s, was the McGuffey's Reader. Commonly used until 1900, the reader replaced the colonial New England Primer and Webster's Blue-backed Speller as the approved curriculum for grammar school students in Northern and Middle American states. The reader was specifically geared to instill in children, "a respect for hard work, thrift, self help, and honesty" (Johnson, et al., p. 331). The foreword of the 1836 edition of the reader stated, "The Christian religion is the religion of our country. From it are derived our prevalent notions of the Character of God, the great moral governor of the universe (Dunn & Woodard, 1996, p. 135)." Horace Mann, argued that public schools should equip students with, "the principles of piety, justice, and a sacred regard to truth, love to their country, humanity and universal benevolence, sobriety, industry, and frugality" (Solomon, 1999, p. 1). Mann stated, "We should have no sectarianism in the schools-we should all read the same Bible. We should all say the same prayers; we should use those religious ideas that are common to us all" (Mondale & Patton, 2001, p.33). As seen through the primary sources and documents, the focus of elementary education in public schools was religious based and framed to instill nationalism and character, consistent with the commonly held beliefs of the general populace.

The first public high school was established in Boston, Massachusetts in 1821 with a curriculum that focused on three years of study in English, mathematics, science, and American history (Johnson et al., 1996). The high school was created in response to concerns that elementary school curriculum was inadequate for the needs of the day. This school would lay the groundwork for the first junior high schools and modern secondary education. However, this change would not occur until 1910. Except for the establishment of the Boston high school, public education was limited to elementary, sometimes called grammar, education. As evidenced through the documents, the curriculum reflected the religious values of the early Americans, the desire to instill nation hood values and character, and the civil morality. The focus on a broad and diverse curriculum would not be witnessed until the onset of the Progressive era.

Progressive Era

At the beginning of the 20th century, the advancements of the scientific revolution were vital to the social, and therefore educational, emphasis at that time. Americans were optimistic about their future as the Industrial Revolution appeared to improve the quality of life for many. It seemed as though America was indeed entering a golden age ushered in by "scientific and technological revolutions [which] had begun to fulfill age-old dreams of human mastery over nature" (Fink, 2001, p. 10). Many schools began to adopt the factory approach to education since that model seemed so effective in the industrial arena. Several committees, in most cases comprised of representatives of higher education (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2004), met around the turn of the century to reaffirm the traditional curriculum that had become established during the National Period. The Committee of Fifteen and the Committee of Ten met between 1893 and 1895 and rejected notions of interdisciplinary study, children's needs, and pragmatic education in favor of the curriculum that would continue to support the needs of a collegiate education. At the same time, they established a "college preparatory program . .. that promoted academics and ignored the majority of students, who were not college bound." (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2004, p. 78) This sense of infallibility and optimism would shortly change as the Industrial Revolution altered the face of America with increasing immigration, obvious social inequalities, environmental destruction, and the demands for an increasing democratic political system.

Following thinkers and writers such as Rousseau, Emerson, and Whitman (Aeschliman, 2006), the Progressive Era, characterized by the centrality of the individual, was a reaction against the formal, structured, and elitist machine of the early years of the Industrial Revolution. As a result, waves of reform to various social institutions became a dominant feature of the American landscape. Moreover, the meteoric changes of the Industrial Revolution caused many to reject notions of the permanency and predictability of the future that had comforted Americans for most of its history. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, "the airplane had proven itself as a weapon of war . . . 'wireless technology' was now transmitting the sound of the human voice . . . . Automobile manufacturing had mushroomed into one of the nation's biggest businesses . . . Discoveries in electromagnetism and radiation . . . were unlocking the basic secrets of matter and energy" (Fink, 2001, p.8). It is easy to see why John Dewey, a leader of educational transformation during the Progressive Era, might respond to the pace of change during the Industrial Revolution by proclaiming in the beginning of his Pedagogical Creed that "it is impossible to foretell definitely just what civilization will be twenty years from now. Hence it is impossible to prepare the child for any precise set of conditions." Dewey continued by establishing one of the fundamental precepts of his educational philosophy, and in many ways that of the Progressive Era. He believed that education did not adequately serve what a student would need in the new industrial future by simply transmitting cultural values and old, sometimes antiquated, ideas. Instead, he argued to "prepare him for the future life means to give him command of himself; it means so to train him that he will have the full and ready use of all his capacities" (Pedagogical Creed). In that way, an education would provide an adult and citizen the ability to interact within a dynamic world.

Darwin's ideas on the differences between species were ubiquitous to Progressive changes as Americans searched for ways to explain social distinctions and inequalities. Moreover, Darwin's concepts had a profound impact on thinkers and educators because of "the importance of change rather than permanence, the emphasis on consequences rather than absolute Truths, and the celebration of process rather than the search for final ends" (Kadlec, 2006, Science and Reconstruction). This emphasis on process became another essential element to Dewey's Pedagogical Creed exemplified by his declaration "I believe that education is a process of living and not a preparation for future living." Accordingly, the days of memorization of catechisms and of history were being pushed out the door in favor of more practical educational experiences which allowed

students to participate in the world during a period of rapid changed and transformation.

Many of the educators during the Progressive Era rejected the traditional curriculum and instead favored a pragmatic approach to educate the child. As mandatory school attendance laws swept the states, educators responded by abandoning the notion that only "academic" disciplines were important for students. In 1916 Abraham Flexner presented an essay in which he outlined his ideas for what a "modern curriculum" might entail. Flexner argued that the trappings of the classical curriculum forced "the bulk of the time and energy of our children at school is devoted to formal work developed by schoolmasters without close or constant reference to genuine individual or social need." (http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4995/). Flexner further contended that the only legitimate goals of education are that ". . . he can read and write; he can spell the words he is in the habit of using; he can express himself clearly orally or in writing; he can figure correctly and with moderate facility within the limits of practical need; he knows something about the globe on which he lives." Accordingly, Flexner believed that the study of history, for example, is important only insomuch as it represents a genuine interest of the student or a legitimate need of a citizen. The Seven Cardinal Principles of Education published in 1918 by the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Schools reiterated Flexner's ideas when they advocated teaching subjects such as health, worthy home membership, and worthy use of leisure (http://eiu.edu/~cfrnb/cardprin.html) as opposed to the Committee of Fifteen and Ten's emphasis on classical mathematics and languages.

Educators during the Progressive Era also rejected the idea that schools were places for students to listen and accumulate knowledge that was to be passed down from instructors. Instead schools, much like society during the period, were supposed to be lively places of interchange between individuals with divergent backgrounds and ideas. In searching for materials for his Laboratory School, Dewey found that nothing matched what he wanted because "'You [Dewey] want something at which the children may work; these are all for listening'" (Fink, 2001, p. 356). More importantly, perhaps, schools had a fundamental role to play in creating the conditions for future social change instead of perpetuating old, and sometimes antiquated, values. In his seminal work Democracy and Education (1916), for example, Dewey argued that "the purpose of school education is to insure the continuance of education by organizing the powers that insure growth. The inclination to learn from life itself and to make the conditions of life such that all will learn in the process of living is the finest product of schooling" (p. 51). The Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education published in 1918 echoed this sentiment emphasizing that civic education was paramount to the future health of the individual and nation. To acquire such an education the Cardinal Principles echoed the changing dynamics of society in the admonition that the "Democratic organization of the school and classroom as well as group problem solving are the methods that this principle [civic education] should be taught through." (http://www.nd.edu/~rbarger/www7/cardprin.html)

Conclusion

In response to the question, "What should we teach," the historical documentation, primary sources, and research indicate that social, political, and economic forces influenced, and in some cases directly dictated, the curriculum for public schools. As Washington articulated, "it is essential that public opinion should be enlightened" (Brown, p.582). The history of public education from the colonial period through the Progressive era tends to juxtapose Washington's vision in that public opinion enlightened education rather than education enlightening public opinion. It was the social and political forces of society that drove educational reform and defined the curriculum of the day. While there were exceptions to this phenomenon, particularly the Boston public high school of 1821, the pre-eminent influence of social trends and norms impacted the curriculum of public schools. Educational reformers such as Mann, Flexner, and Dewey were products of the dynamic events of their time periods. Their reform proposals represented a focused synthesis of the social forces, economic realities, and political arguments of their day. For

the modern educator and educational leader, the question is not so much, what did they teach, but how does this knowledge of history help impact educational practices and policies?

In order to be able to anticipate changes brought on by the public and policymakers, it is important for educators to monitor and be cognizant of the social, political, and economic changes and arguments occurring in society. In that way they can not only respond more adroitly to changing dynamics but they can also communicate effectively to their constituents about the direction of education. Despite Gilderhus' (1987) argument that it is a "truism that different peoples in different times and different places literally saw and experienced the world differently" (p. 4), educators might be able to influence policies and curriculum development by better articulating the goals and values they adhere to in the profession. During the colonial and national period, very few educators were quoted as advocates for specific curriculum changes or as key players in the discussion of what should be taught. Their absence from the discussion allowed social forces to drive their professional reality. Educators must be willing to enter the national, state, and local conversation about education and provide the rationale for curriculum and educational practices. Public education can serve as the greatest enlightenment agent in society; however, as witnessed through history, without educator participation in the development of public policy and curriculum, public opinion will enlighten educational practices rather than education enlightening the public.

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