

Running Head: CURRICULUM STRUGGLES

CURRICULUM STRUGGLES IN LATE 19<sup>TH</sup> & EARLY 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

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From the late 1800's through the early 1900's America, a nation at odds struggling with central issues swirling around the education curriculum and its' system were undergoing many growing pains and changes. During that time, there were four major forces or movements and each believed that they possessed the best philosophy for the American education system. The movements were: (1) Humanist-led by Charles W. Eliot, (2) Developmentalist-led by G. Stanley Hall, (3) Social Efficiency-led by Joseph Mayer Rice, and (4) Social Meliorist-led by Lester Frank Ward (Kliebard, 2004, pp. 9-23). Each movement's vision(s) for the America's education curriculum took shape based on the interest groups philosophy and the changes that faced the nation's student population.

Changes in the American curriculum struggle started in the late 1890's with the country's population growing by expansion and industrialization of cities; advancements in the transportation system plus family life reflecting the complex and technological world (Kleibard, 2004, p. 1). Growing pains in curriculum appeared with the onset of the social role of the school whereas the "teaching" impacted the directives of a movement (Kleibard, 2004, p. 2). Also, in the 1800's a major shift rocked the education field based on the national standardization of textbooks that crisscrossed states and invaded the infrastructure. Classroom textbooks formulated the standardization and nationalization of the classroom-based curriculum. Between 1856 and 1864 an important school system structure developed by William Harvey Wells, Chicago's Superintendent of Schools, divided the schools according to the child's grade by specific subject matter. The classroom textbooks established the standard blueprint and script for the poorly trained teachers to use in teaching the curriculum (Kliebard, 2004, p. 2).

From trains to textbooks, magazines to newspapers, word spread and altercations were on the horizon. In the 19th century, American curriculum struggled with the ideas based on Christian Wolff that the “mind is muscle that needed to be exercised and expanded, but if left alone would weaken” (Kliebard, 2004, p. 4). Words are powerful, as noted by document passionately written by Yale faculty in 1828 that clearly emphasized and positioned education as “the discipline and furniture of the mind” to be feed knowledge in order to expand and grow (Kliebard, 2004, p. 5). Masked by that ideology, classrooms were filled with unskilled teachers; lessons were memorization, drills and reciting of information to keep all areas of the brain active (Kliebard, 2004, p. 5).

Additional changes were clearly noted; enrollment increased at the secondary and higher education levels. The “Committee of Ten” and “Humanist” movement led by Charles W. Eliot tackled this challenge stating that the right education could raise all students to meet their own proficiencies and to apply their knowledge to the real world (Kliebard, 2004, p. 9). The “humanists” worked toward the development of general intellectual skills based on academic subjects such as science literature, history and arts (Merickel, n.d.). Eliot, with his background as a scientist, invoked the belief that the stimulation of the mind with reasoning powers and being able to use that knowledge in all curriculum areas and real-world issues. In 1893, the “Committee of Ten” in conjunction with Eliot, determined four courses of study that laid the ground work for all students that the skills needed for college were the same as life (Kliebard, 2004, pp. 10-11).

In 1895, William Torrey Harris, Commissioner of Education, humanist with a twist, announced “windows of the soul” were grammar, literature/art, mathematics, geography, and history (Kliebard, 2004, p. 15). An ongoing clash between Harris and Charles DeGarmo, head of

the National Herbart Society, challenged the “windows of the soul” concept citing lack of significance of the subjects (Kliebard, 2004, p. 16). John Dewey, member of the Herbarts, advocated for knowledge and skills acquired in “context” for the learner (Kliebard, 2004, pp. 15-16). A battle ignited and confrontations set, three distinct curriculum movements, each challenged the “Humanitarians” in different concepts.

First, the “developmentalists”, a major curriculum movement group in America. This group led by G. Stanley Hall perceived that curriculum taught in harmony with the learner’s individual psychological developmental stages. Three focal points are: (1) differentiate-not all students to be taught in the same way, (2) all subjects are not as equally important, and (3) preparation for college and real life are not the same (Kliebard, 2004, pp. 11-12). The curriculum struggle intensified and the education system shifted with a twist.

Right before the 20<sup>th</sup> century started, Joseph Mayer Rice, another prominent figure in the struggle, responsible for the “social efficiency” ideology turned the responsibility of the poor education system onto the teachers in the classroom (Kliebard, 2004, p. 18). He concurred with the “developmentalists” that the child development stages were important focus but in 1912, but after his book, *Scientific Management in Education* were published, his findings converted to the standardization and effectiveness of the curriculum in the classroom (Kliebard, 2004, p. 20).

Hence, the set of standards were created to measure the success or failure in the curriculum.

More change and another group fighting for curriculum dominance, Lester Frank Ward and the “social melorists” conceived that the curriculum and education system directly focuses on social change and justice in society. The social Darwinism, survival of the fittest mentality was incorrect for humans, in that, humans have the ability and intelligence to make changes as

see fit in society (Kliebard, 2004, pp. 21-22). Curriculum that is taught in school directly relates to and fixes social issues that are driving American society.

Relatively, no one specific movement won the battle of curriculum dominance. Each major movement struggled with the issues and brought to the field what they believed and felt was the best solution to turn around the education system and curriculum to better suit their mission. The “humanists”, “developmentalist”, “social efficacy” group and “social meliorists” all succumbed to the field of compromise in the era of American curriculum struggles, in turn, derived as what we perceive as today’s education system. True then and now and within the American curriculum system, Eliot (2004) stated: “we, Americans habitually underestimate the capacity of pupils at almost every stage of education from the primary through the university” (p. 10).

## References

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