Essay #3: Curriculum Changes in the Progressive Era and Great Depression

The story of curriculum in the twentieth century starts with the National Education Association's Committee of Ten in 1893. Chaired by Charles W. Eliot, president of Harvard University, the Committee grappled with issues of curriculum, and came to the conclusion that "[t]here would be no curricular distinction between those students who were preparing for college and those who were preparing for 'life'" and that "the subjects should not be taught differently to different population groups. All students, the Committee reasoned, regardless of destination, were entitled to the best ways of teaching the various subjects."[1] The Committee's recommendations, however, were supplanted by the advent of John Dewey and the Progressive Movement in Education.

Dewey's new educational ideas were centered around a classroom in which children would be active participants, exploring the world around them, guided by a teacher, rather than the traditional schooling where they were required to memorize facts given by the teacher. Unlike traditional schooling, which was set up to teach a large group of children the same information, Dewey's ideal school would individualize instruction, and students would learn at their own rates. In short, the traditional method

[1] Herbert M. Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum: 1893-1958* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 10-11

of schooling was centered on the teacher and the textbook, whereas Dewey's method focused on the individual student.[2]

Educational progressives took John Dewey's ideas in directions he hadn't imagined, taking his theories of student-centered instruction to mean that traditional high schools were "'inequitable' because they offered the same curriculum to all students and ignored obvious differences that children had in talents and interests."[3] They believed that "the schools should better prepare students for the tasks they would face in life. To them the old idea that a common school grounding in the three R's would suffice for any career and that public education could train any boy to be President of the United States was clearly absurd."[4]

Black Tuesday, and the Great Depression which followed, had a large effect on education. The disappearance of the adolescent labor market and the rise of compensatory education laws increased the number of children remaining in school through high school. Educators introduced four tracks – college predatory, commercial, vocational and general. Most of the students who in earlier times would have left school to join the work force ended up shunted into the general track, where classes were watered down in order to keep these children in school.

In 1918, the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education formulated The Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education. These principles emphasized life skills, and are as follows:

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[2] John Dewey, *The School and Society and The Child and the Curriculum* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 32-34.
[3] Jeffrey Mirel, *The Rise and Fall of an Urban School System* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), p. 70.
[4] David Tyack, *The One Best System A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 188.

1. Health
2. Command of fundamental processes
3. Worthy home membership
4. Vocation
5. Civic education
6. Worthy use of leisure
7. Ethical character[5]

Only one of these principles, command of fundamental processes, is related to the traditional academic subjects. The rest dovetailed with progressive ideals of preparation for life for those whose life trajectories are not likely to include college or a white collar professional career.

In the middle of the 1940s, a new idea came to the forefront, a program called Life Adjustment. It was intended for students enrolled in neither academic nor vocational tracks (sixty percent of students), and would prepare those students for life, not for academic careers. Although the Life Adjustment Curriculum was intended to replace general education in subject areas to "functional areas of living," the subject-based curriculum proved resilient; Life Adjustment tended to be incorporated into existing subjects rather than replacing them.[6] In Detroit, for example, following a study on dropouts, the head of guidance and placement proposed expanding the district's Life Adjustment-type programs in order to interest students are reduce the dropout rate.[7]

There were vocal critics of Life Adjustment, notably Arthur E. Bestor, author of Educational Wastelands, who critiqued the idea that sixty percent of students should be relegated to this type of education, saying that it was anti-democratic in its assumption that a majority of students were unable to benefit from intellectual training.[8] Bestor had

[5] Jeffrey Mirel, Educ 741 class lecture, November 5, 2007.
[6] Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum,* p. 220.
[7] Mirel, *The Rise and Fall*, p. 236.
[8] Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum*, p. 222-223.

help in convincing the American people that his antipathy towards Life Adjustment Education: the successful launching of Sputnik in October of 1957. Thus, in September of 1958, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act, which stated that ". . . The defense of this Nation depends upon the mastery of modern techniques developed from complex scientific principles."[9] Historian Herbert Kliebard notes that the government's intervention in educational reform led to three important changes: directors of major curriculum projects were drawn from academic departments in major universities, academic subjects were brought back to the forefront of education, and "longstanding emphasis on local efforts at curriculum change was replaced by a pattern of centrally controlled curriculum revision."[10] Despite the many years of wrangling, therefore, the American curriculum was brought back to the academic curriculum that had been prevalent prior to the 1890's, at least in name.

In recent years, standards based education has become a watchword, and the *No Child Left Behind Act* (at the federal level) and graduation requirements (at state and local levels), attempt to mandate a level of competence in the academic areas. Unfortunately, however, there is evidence that although graduation requirements lead to additional coursetaking in those subjects, they do not necessarily lead to increased achievement, indicating that courses are watered down.[11] On the other hand, the existence of these standards repudiates the differentiated curriculum, and represents a (small) step towards providing an academically rigorous education that would benefit all students.

[9] Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum*, p, 227
[10] *Ibid.*,, p. 229.
[11] Daniel Berebitsky, personal communication about his ongoing research which is finding such patterns in a large, nationally representative data set.