Curriculum Struggles in the Late 19th & 20th Century

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As we encounter struggles in education and curriculum development, we must have an understanding of the history, conflicts, and changes along the way that shapes education and our curriculum today. The shaping of curriculum from 1893-1958 was not a smooth process, but rather a process that went through a series of conflicts from four interest groups that strived to define and determine what they believed should be taught in school. These groups had their own vision and strongly competed with one another for control of the American curriculum.

The first group known as the humanists, such as Robert Maynard Hutchins, Charles W. Eliot and William Torey Harris who wore the mantle on the humanists’ positon, were known as the mental disciplinarians who valued traditional curriculum and sought to preserve traditional values in a society that was rapidly changing.

William Heard Kilpatrick and G. Stanley Hall, known as developmentalists; focused on child-development and argued that instruction should be centered on the various learning abilities of children at the various stages of the growth process to excite their interests.

Ross L. Finney, Charles C. Peters, John Franklin Bobbit, Leonard Ayres, David Snedden, and Charles Ellwood, known as social efficiency educators had a vision that schools should be preparing students for their adult lives and occupational roles to promote successful contributions to society. They believed that the only differentiation in the curriculum should be according to the role that the individual child would eventually play in their adult lives.

Social Reconstructionists such as Lester Frank Ward, George S. Counts, and Harold Rugg, viewed education as a way to promote social change. For them, the purpose of instruction was to teach students a vision of justice and equality in order to prepare them with the skills necessary to balance society when they encounter injustice and inequality.

While these four groups had different interests, they all valued the importance of education and they each played a vital role in the progressive education movement. Throughout the years, each group had its shining moment in history and played a role in shaping the American curriculum. As society changed, curriculum changed and took a different form to reflect the society of the times. Although each group had their own interests, through every moment in history they reflected traits of their competing groups. After the Great Depression in the 1940’s curriculum eventually took a new form, which actually became a combination of the tendencies of all of the groups.

Overall, the interest of one group was not more effective than the other, which is why education and curriculum continues to undergo changes until this day. Just as history repeats itself, curriculum changes as society changes and it will always be a combination of new vision with best practices. As new leadership enters a school, district, or government; the vision and direction of educational initiatives changes. I cannot say that one vision is better than the other, but rather a combination of these visions develop students to succeed in the continuous ever-changing society. As educational leaders, we must learn from history and the approaches of the past, but we must also maintain the flexibility and adaptability to move with the time for the best interests of our future; the students.

*“Education is not preparation for life, Education is life itself”. - John Dewey*