CURRICULUM TRACKING: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE
1893-1983
MASTER'S PROJECT

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by
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Purpose for the Study

The Civil Rights movement in the 1960s brought a reform movement in education. Prior to this decade, excellence in education was at the top of the national education agenda. Excellence in education was replaced by the need for equality in education. To meet the needs of the expanding and changing student population, curriculum improvements were made for the masses with concentration on the vocational and general tracks. Higher track courses were added at the secondary level, and to meet the diversity in the elementary population and to make it administratively easier for the elementary teachers, ability grouping within the class was becoming more common. The 1970s saw the educators handling the problem of bilingual students because of Hispanics and other minorities attending our public schools.

From the 1970s to the present educational reformers have continued to grapple with the equality issues. Inherent in these issues is the question of whether to track or untrack our classes at the secondary level. Tracking, according to research, contributes to the separation of students from different racial, ethnic, and social backgrounds. The Report of the National Education Association [NEA] Executive Committee: Subcommittee on Academic Tracking defines tracking, generally used in high schools, as program divisions that separate students for all academic subjects (NEA Report 1990). According to the NEA report, school performance is related to social inequality outside the school, so we find lower socioeconomic status students tracked into the average and low-ability courses while high socioeconomic status students are
customizing education opportunities yet allowing for equity. To understand, then, where tracking fits into this challenge, one must first understand the historical roots of tracking in the development of the curriculum. By looking at the history of curriculum reform and restructuring from 1893 to 1983, one will find educators struggling to develop a curriculum that addresses the needs of the child and the needs of society, and in this struggle excellence in education, as seen in the Committee of Ten report in 1893, became secondary to achieving unity and democracy.
CHAPTER II

REINFORCING ACADEMICS

The roots of the reforms that were to take place in the American educational system began with the Committee of Ten report in 1893. The Committee of Ten was a panel formed by the National Education Association (NEA) to try to deal with the worries that were generated by public educators. Public education began to see more and more students entering school. The reasons for this increase had to do with technological changes at the end of the 19th century which affected the ability of these children to get jobs, and the fact that many of the better paying jobs required higher levels of training. Another contributing factor was the influx of the population into the cities which made attendance in public high schools more convenient. Therefore, the social changes brought attention to the institution of schooling. The Yale Report of 1828, which advocated a curriculum consisting of the traditional classical courses of Greek, Latin, philosophy, and ancient history, was no longer serving the needs of society. There was a new population of students and, in essence, a new society.

Charles Eliot was chairman of the Committee of Ten and a mental disciplinarian. Mental disciplinarians believed that certain subjects had the ability to strengthen mental faculties such as memory and reasoning, and certain teaching methods could further exercise these faculties. Where Eliot differed from the mental disciplinarians who comprised the committee for the Yale report published in 1828 was in his support of the system of electives. Eliot felt that any subject as long as it was studied over a sustained period of time, could “exercise” the mind and, therefore, could be a disciplinary subject.
was a developmentalist in his approach toward educating the child. The developmentalists believed that the best way to educate the child was to first understand the natural order of development in the child. Influenced by the scientific movement and the research involved in observing and recording children's behavior, Hall and others developmentalists believed educators assumed too much about the contents of children's minds and to develop an appropriate curriculum, one must first understand what it is children already know. This idea about the nature of the child's mind was in contrast to the mental disciplinarians who believed that the form of the subject was what was important, not the content of a child's mind. So, Hall was advocating a variety of subjects to address the natural spontaneity of children, but the mental disciplinarians wanted to maintain excellence in the courses of study.

Hall saw three basic problems with the Committee of Ten's recommendations. The first fallacy was that students from all walks of life should be taught in the same manner. The second point of disagreement was the assertion of the Committee that all subjects had equal educational value if taught equally well. Lastly, Hall thought ridiculous the notion purported by Eliot that "fitting for college is essentially the same as fitting for life" (qtd. in Kliebard 15). Overall, Hall's opposition was that schools should adapt the curriculum to "the great majority who begin the high school [and] do not finish, instead of focusing our energies on the few who get to college" (qtd. in Powell 242). His argument with Eliot was that with the curriculum proposed by Eliot's Committee, students would become "disenchanted" with the difficulty of the subjects and, thus, grow more restless looking for more interesting avenues that would more adequately fulfill their needs (Powell 242). Hall, then, wanted a more unified curriculum, rather than the excellence that Eliot and the Committee advocated.
Hall’s position prevailed and in the next thirty years, public high school enrollment had skyrocketed where by 1930 over 51 percent of adolescents were enrolled in secondary schools, and the cultural diversity of the enrollees became the next pressing issue (Kliebarg 9). The new enrollees came from lower-class homes, and the elementary schools in the burgeoning cities were crowded with European immigrants. Intellectual assumptions were made by educational reformers about these European immigrants. The assumptions were that these immigrants were intellectually inferior because they came from racially poorer stock. Backing up this pessimistic assumption were educational psychologists who devised intelligence tests to assess a student’s capacity to learn. These tests showed that, on an average, immigrant students scored lower than native white American children. Thus, psychologists predicted, immigrant children would not do as well as white American children; therefore, a child’s ability to succeed in school became a racial factor. The groundwork was being laid to achieve unity in the curriculum with excellence taking a lower priority.

By 1910 reformers in education proposed changes which steered away from the curriculum advocated by the Committee of Ten. They argued that high school studies should be differentiated and courses offered for those students who were not bound for college. The new impetus to study life needs and student needs was now the focus of the curriculum struggle and reforms were firmly in place in secondary schools. The reformers were anxious to now adapt new methods, at the expense of excellence, to cope with this new breed of students, and were certainly optimistic that they could turn this new breed of students into ones who were socially productive.
CHAPTER III

THE SOCIAL EFFICIENCY MOVEMENT

The reformers in education, spear-headed by the National Education Association (NEA), recognized the need for a reorganization of the secondary curriculum, so in 1918 the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education was developed. The commission justified this reorganization of the secondary curriculum based on three factors: changes in society, changes in secondary school population, and changes in educational theory.

The changes in society certainly affected the focus of how this reorganized curriculum needed to address the student as a citizen, as a worker, and as an individual. As a citizen, the student must be able to cope with community life and understand national and international issues. The student as a future worker must be able to deal with a society that was becoming more economically complex. Finally, as an individual, the student would have more leisure time; thus, the committee felt the scope of the secondary curriculum needed to be broadened to meet the changes that were occurring.

The secondary school population had changed dramatically since the Committee of Ten developed the traditional, classical curriculum. As previously mentioned, the increase in the secondary student population was a result of the influx of European immigrants into the cities. These immigrants entered the public schools with diverse backgrounds and ability levels. What became alarming to the committee, though, was that a significant number of the students were not finishing high school. In fact, of those who entered the four year high school, "one-third [left] before the beginning of the second year . . . one half [were] gone [by] the third year and fewer than one-third . . . graduated" (Willis 156).

Probably one of the most significant factors the committee considered
were the changes that had occurred in educational theory. The research in educational psychology was led by Edward Lee Thorndike who concluded after conducting research and testing that "those who have the most to begin with gain the most during the year" (Kliebard 107). His conclusions were rather broad generalizations, but it was all the committee needed to substantiate their call for reform toward a more unified curriculum rather than a curriculum which advocated excellence. It was the differences that existed in the capacities and attitudes of the secondary school population on which the most prominent interest group, the social efficiency advocates, focused.

The social efficiency movement during the first quarter of the twentieth century was led by Franklin Bobbitt. Bobbitt based his principles for an efficient school on a scientific management philosophy. In essence, what Bobbitt believed was that "human life, however varied, consists in the performance of specific activities. Education that prepares for life is one that prepares definitely and adequately . . ."(Bobbitt 42). In his adherence to this philosophy Bobbitt listed four principles on which an efficient school should be based. The first three concerned administrative matters and the fourth principle addressed the idea of a differentiated curriculum.

Bobbitt defined the job of the curriculum-maker as two fold: an analysis of the entire range of experiences of the student and a development of the "directed" training experiences that would benefit students. It is in the formulation of these "directed" experiences that the curriculum-designer would first consider "the total range of habits, skills, abilities, forms of thought, valuations, [and] ambitions . . ." (Bobbitt 43). In other words, once the student's needs were ascertained, then the curriculum should be adapted to the abilities and needs of each type of student. What he was advocating was curriculum
tracking and it was "socially efficient" to track students because it would be inefficient to teach students what they would never use.

Tracking was socially efficient because it was tied to preparation for work. Students who were to attend college and later assume leadership roles in various professions would enroll in an academic track, and areas of subject concentration would be literature, languages, and science. On the other hand, those who would go on to lower management jobs or office work would enroll in a commercial curriculum, while students seeking jobs in the labor market or manufacturing would be in the vocational track, taking courses such as industrial arts. Those who had no immediate destiny enrolled in a general program that offered a variety of subjects in different fields. So four tracks were in place by the 1930s. Because of the industrialization of our society at that time, the enrollment in the commercial and vocational tracks increased dramatically. Schools had tied their reforms to the new developments in modern society, and educators were meeting the needs of the changing conditions of modern society. Interestingly enough, educators and administrators felt that this was truly a more democratic approach because with these curriculum tracks, schools were meeting the needs of the various abilities and needs of the students. Whereas the aristocratic schools of the traditional humanists provided equal opportunity for all students to study one classical curriculum, the new schools would provide "opportunity for all to receive such education as will fit them equally well for their particular life work" (qtd. in Powell 248).

These assumptions were not made without scientific authority. Intelligence tests and their results, recently devised to screen recruits for the armies in World War I, reinforced the notion that those who were meant for
professional occupations had higher IQ's than those in the manual trades. Educators, then, seized this idea to support "the notion that the top track in school would prepare students for the fast track in life; other tracks would fit the less able for less demanding work" (Powell 249). Consequently, curriculum tracking was firmly in place by the 1930s at the secondary level and eventually trickled down to the elementary level, although the terminology changed somewhat and at the elementary level was referred to as ability grouping. The assumptions being made were that excellence could not be attained by all students, so the watering-down of the curriculum would better address the needs of all students.
"The schools of America, if they are true to their purpose, are indeed the mirror of society, responding . . . to the changing needs of our civilization" (Washburne 353). It was with this in mind that David Snedden and Charles Prosser developed their versions of the social efficiency movement. The differentiated curriculum that the social efficiency advocates had been proposing had been achieved to a certain extent, but certainly not to the extent that the more extreme social efficiency reformers demanded. Traditional subjects such as English, math, science, and foreign language, had not been thrown out of the curriculum, but were gradually being transformed into a more utilitarian curricula.

David Snedden, an educational sociologist, was philosophically in line with the social efficiency reformers, but he saw a broader vision for the curriculum. Snedden was a driving force in the promotion of vocational education. He had taken the lead in arguing for the efficacy of federal legislation and in 1917 the direction of vocational education was sealed with the passage of the Smith-Hughes Act (Kliebard 142). Job skill training was part of the curriculum of public schools and financially supported by the federal government.

Vocational education was not just a new curriculum that was introduced to satisfy the objective of a practical curriculum designed for the various abilities and future occupations of students. The traditional courses of English, math, science, and language were still a part of the secondary curriculum in high schools, but what made vocational education so significant in its success was that other courses were being added that were infused with criteria drawn from vocational education. For example, by 1917 there was an increase in the
popularity of such courses as business English and business math which became legitimate substitutes for the traditional subjects. The differentiated curriculum ideal of the social efficiency advocates was being realized with vocational education.

So by the end of the 1930s educators had a new direction for the curriculum. The comprehensive high school maintained the traditional “college preparatory” courses for that select group going on to pursue a college education and vocational education fulfilled the need for those students who would pursue skilled labor jobs. The problem was that only “20 percent of the high school population was college bound . . . and another 20 percent was . . . supported by vocational education . . .” which left 60 percent of the high school population needing a curriculum that would help them in adjusting to society more generally (Willis 271).

It was with this in mind that the report, prepared in 1940 by the Special Committee on the Secondary School Curriculum, titled “What the High Schools Ought to Teach,” attempted to address the needs of the majority of high school students who were not going on to white-collar professions or skilled trades. A prominent member of that committee was Charles Prosser, a protege of David Snedden. What Prosser and others proposed was a curriculum that addressed the various ability and interest levels of all students. The committee was aware that students learn at different rates which, they believed, was not necessarily attributable to intelligence, but to lack of interest in a particular subject or lack of motivation. The committee, therefore, believed it was the right of every student to have a general education which was adapted to his/her needs and intellectual ability. It was to be a “life adjustment” curriculum. Although life adjustment education had no clear-cut definition, clearly it was based on the
idea of a general education for all students which implied that the curriculum must meet the needs of the majority of students who were not going on to college. A life adjustment curriculum would focus on the areas most students would face in their lives: dating, marriage, work experience, vocations, and social issues (Kliebard 250). The objective here was democracy in education at the expense of excellence in education.

In conjunction with the committee's philosophy of a program of general education, the committee believed "young people need to work . . . [and] the ability to work steadily for eight hours is not a natural possession; it has to be acquired" (qtd. in Willis 276). Schools, they stated, were taking an active role in helping young people get started in careers, but more emphasis needed to be on manual work rather than offering courses that describe occupations.

Another area in serious need of reform was social studies. Social studies needed to expand their program to provide an effective education for citizenship in a democracy. In order to meet this need, the committee believed that schools should find a way of preparing "young people for citizenship, for intelligent social attitudes, and for effective participation in community life" (qtd. in Willis 279).

Finally, the committee strongly urged that more courses dealing with personal problems (physical/mental health and family life) needed to be a part of the general curriculum. They recognized that attempts at this were being made, but more emphasis in these crucial areas was imperative.

As for the conventional subjects, the committee recommended a reexamination in hopes that a more liberal restructuring would take place. For instance, English should move away from the emphasis on verbal drills and inane composition assignments, and tie composition to reading assignments
that are adapted to students' mental and reading abilities. Mathematics was greatly in need of restructuring. Algebra and geometry, which students were taking as freshmen and sophomores, became courses with high failure rates. By restructuring mathematics courses to concentrate on the principles of understanding graphs, functional relations, and equations, students would have the precise thinking skills so important to a general education.

The 1940s was the decade of curriculum reform which focused on the needs of the student and which attempted, in part, to stem the flow of students who were dropping out of high school because their needs were not being met at the secondary level. What vocational education and life adjustment education attempted to do was demonstrate the direct social value of a secondary education. These interest groups were attempting to reach the majority of students who were not college-bound but, again, it was at the expense of excellence in education. What we had was a diluted curriculum to stem the flow of dropouts and, overall, a lowering of standards to achieve unity.

The magnitude of the proposals which called for installing a new and functional general education was overwhelming and because of the overwhelming nature of these proposed changes, the intellectual community's cries were heard loudly and clearly, and by the 1950s the American public gave a sympathetic ear to the idea that the road to prosperity was tied "not to adjustment to existing conditions but to intelligent action" (Kliebard 264).
CHAPTER V
EQUITY AND EQUALITY

With Russia's launching of Sputnik on Oct. 5, 1957, the outcry from the intellectual community reverberated through the educational community. America was beat in this technological race, critics stated, because the Soviet system of education was superior to the American system. While American students were studying a "life adjustment" curriculum, Soviet students were concentrating their academic endeavors in the areas of science and mathematics, or so the critics believed.

These criticisms of the American educational system were fueled by speeches by Admiral Hyman Rickover who charged that a misconceived notion of democracy in the American educational system had led to the downfall of American schools (Rickover 51). Rickover and other academicians were arguing the earlier points made by the mental disciplinarians and the Committee of Ten to develop the intellect by emphasizing the traditional academic subjects of mathematics, science, and foreign language. In order to achieve this, though, curriculum revision in mathematics and science was necessary and with money provided by Congress with the passage of the National Defense Education Act, many projects were undertaken to revise the curriculum in the areas of science and math. What was a blow to professional educators, though, was that the responsibility of revising the curriculum was given to specialists from academic departments in major universities. Professional educators, who had fought long and hard to reconstruct or make more functional the academic subjects, saw the federal government enter the battleground for the American curriculum by funneling large sums of money into changing the way subjects were taught by focusing on the intellect of the child and particular emphasis was given to guidance services to identify those
students who were particularly gifted or talented. So, even though the emphasis had shifted from life adjustment education, curriculum tracks were still in place and, once again, excellence in education was at the top of the agenda during the decade of the 1950s.

The rationale for the curriculum reform movement of the 1960s was based on Jerome Bruner’s book *The Process of Education*. A psychologist, Bruner emphasized the importance of the mind in processing information and emphasized the basic similarities in how people think. Bruner advocated that a common academic curriculum would be appropriate for all students which was a throw-back to Charles Eliot’s theme in the Committee of Ten report 70 years earlier. In addition, Bruner sounded the theme of G. Stanley Hall in Hall’s reaction to the Committee of Ten report in 1893 by stating, “if one respects the ways of thought of the growing child . . . then it is possible to introduce him . . . to the ideas and styles that in later life make an educated man” (qtd. in Willis 360). Bruner’s book *The Process of Education* was influential in bringing experts on human development and learning into collaboration with university professors and secondary teachers on the curriculum reform efforts. The central focus was to develop new materials that would aid teachers in their jobs. Consequently, teachers were brought into inservice workshops to learn how to use the learning materials. Unfortunately, with the passage of time, attendance at these workshops declined, and the reform movement never focused their efforts toward the institutions that prepared and certified teachers (Goodlad 293).

In regards to curriculum tracking during this decade, it is interesting to see the shift in focus. Between 1920 and 1940 the emphasis was on efficiency; therefore, educators sought to bring the low ability students up to a uniform
standard by using various drill exercises. The high ability groups were left to fend for themselves. The post-Sputnik years, on the other hand, had educators taking another look at the high ability students. Educators became convinced that able students could progress faster if given more attention and stimulation to achieve (Findley 13-14). The attention, then, during the 1960s was still on tracking despite educational policies that proposed a general education for all students.

Equality in education was the concern for schools in the 1970s and 1980s. Equality meant equal opportunity for all students, and the federal government founded the National Institute of Education in 1972 to support, on a national level, educational research and development and to provide direction for "federal efforts to fund and to regulate school programs" (Willis 385). The recommendations of the NIE Curriculum Development Task Force in 1976 focused on the need for an increased role of educators in curriculum development and for the federal government to direct their funding to improve curricula at the local level. What all this was leading to was a national effort to boost the success of public education which was being blamed for Russia's technological dominance in the 1960s and 1970s and Japan's economic dominance in the 1980s. This also signified the attempt at unifying the curriculum while trying to get back to the idea of excellence.

The culmination of the call for reform and restructuring can be seen in the 1983 publication of *A Nation At Risk*. Equity was a part of the attempt at democratic reform, and the Commission clearly believed and recommended all students should study the same basic academic subjects, and all students should be held to the same standards. The committee acknowledged that students had different goals and abilities; therefore, attention must be given to
“both the nature of the content available and . . . the needs of particular learners” (A Nation... 23). Moreover, the report emphasized the core curriculum, which was referred to as the New Basics and would incorporate English, mathematics, science, social studies, and foreign language. The report also stressed the importance of a high school curriculum which would complement the New Basics. These were programs such as the fine and performing arts and vocational education.

What was interesting in this report was the position on placement and grouping of students. “Placement and grouping of students should be guided by the academic progress of students and their instructional needs . . .” as well as by standardized tests of achievement (A Nation ... 33). What this report advocated was still the idea of curriculum tracking. Efficiency was still at the heart of restructuring education some fifty years later. Even though on the surface it seemed educators were attempting to return to excellence, unity was the focus.

Summary

In viewing the history of curriculum and curriculum tracking over the last ninety years, one can see the debate has centered over which three competing factors to give primacy: the individual (child), the society, or the subject matter (Beane 15). The goal of all the groups involved in the reform and restructuring of education has been to do what is in the best interests of the child as well as the society. Schools responded to the change from an agrarian society to an industrial society and rather than providing education for just an elite segment, schools attempted to implement the Jeffersonian ideal of providing an education for all members of society. In this attempt at a differentiated curriculum, though, educators believed that the needs of both students and
society were being served. In order to serve the needs of both, efficiency was the operative word for several decades, and the idea of excellence in education was the sacrifice. Embedded in this idea of efficiency was curricular tracking. Charles Eliot and the Committee of Ten did not advocate tracking, rather a classic curriculum for all students. Eliot said that he did not believe "the American public intends to have its children sorted before their teens . . . and treated differently in their schools according to those prophecies of their appropriate life careers" (qtd. in Kliebard 15). At the turn of the century with increased enrollment in schools and the secondary population in particular, the move from a rural to an urban society, and an industrialized economy, educators were restructuring the curriculum to create tracks for students based on their abilities and needs. Unity was the theme and excellence, as recommended by the Committee of Ten, became a secondary consideration.

Tracking is still in place in the majority of the secondary schools in the U.S., but the 1990s call for educational reform lists tracking near the top of the agenda in achieving democratic reform in today's schools. Jeannie Oakes, professor and researcher on curriculum tracking, comments:

Educators, parents and policy makers also need to understand research about learning and intelligence that supports the belief that all children can learn; that classroom instruction can be altered to provide ample opportunities for groups of students that are very different; and that when the curriculum is rich and meaningful, all children can have access to rigorous--and not watered down--knowledge. They also need to agree that school practice can not waiver from fundamental democratic values. (Oakes 14).

Over one hundred years later and educational reformers are back to the
thinking of Charles Eliot and the Committee of Ten. If educators and policy makers were to look more closely at the realities of the past, they might view the present from a new perspective. If excellence in education is what our society wants, then we must not lower expectations and, in the process, water down the curriculum to try to meet the needs of all students. Excellence means setting high standards that all students will meet.