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Curriculum Field in the Making: Influences That Led to Social Efficiency as Dominant Curriculum Ideology in Progressive Era in the U.S.

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Abstract
This article problematizes the development of curriculum field in the United States at the turn of the 20th century. During the time, the curriculum field was – and to some extent still is - far from a clearly defined, unified, well-established theory of education or education programme. The present article addresses the development of curriculum field in the United States through a historical lens. Specifically, it initially briefly discusses the four widely-recognized competing curriculum ideologies or approaches, namely humanists, developmentalists, social reconstruction, and social efficiency, as well as European influences on these approaches. In the second part, it discusses how social efficiency model became the prevailing education ideology throughout the 20th century to date in the U.S. context. It is concluded that prevailing interests and needs of the U.S. at the turn of 20th century aligned well with promises of social efficiency education ideology, thus, paving the way for it to become the dominant curriculum approach that we know today, while the other ideologies remained part of U.S. mainstream education to lesser extent, and never ceased to exist completely.

Keywords: Curriculum; Humanistic approach; Developmentalist approach; Social reconstruction; Social efficiency.

Introduction
The end of 19th century and beginning of 20th century marked the initiation of mass schooling in the U.S. Branded as the progressive era, the period was truly revolutionary in many respects and opened up opportunities for children of all backgrounds to benefit from access to public schooling. At the same time, it was also a period of competing ideas about what curriculum schoolchildren should experience. This article addresses the influences that shaped competing ideas on curriculum matters during the progressive era, roughly covering the timeline from 1890s to 1930s, focusing at the end on what ideas enabled social efficiency curriculum ideology to become the most dominant one.

Curriculum scholars have long been at work to dissect curriculum tradition. The notions vary as to what the tradition can be categorized into – some scholars refer to sub-components of curriculum tradition as ideologies (Schubert, 1986; Schubert, 1996; Schiro, 2013), others refer to them as models (Ellis, 2004), traditions of practice (Zeichner, 1993) and orientations (Eisner & Vallance, 1974) among else. Schiro (2013, p. 8) defined ideology as a “[...] collection of ideas, a comprehensive vision, a way of looking at things, a worldview that embodies the way a person or a group of people believes the world should be organized and function”. In line with numerous curriculum scholars who used varied notions of how to refer to seemingly
same education processes and problems, the present article uses ideologies, theories, frameworks, orientations and models interchangeably to refer to curriculum sub-components as well as curriculum more broadly, recognizing that there are inherent differences in these theoretical concepts. Table 1 provides a summary of varied ideologies that curriculum has been classified into by a number of key curriculum scholars.

### Table 1. Classification schemes of curriculum tradition

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<tr>
<td>academic rationalism</td>
<td>intellectual traditionalist</td>
<td>intellectual traditionalist</td>
<td>academic</td>
<td>knowledge centred</td>
<td>humanist</td>
<td>scholar academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology &amp; cognitive processes</td>
<td>social behaviorist</td>
<td>social behaviorist</td>
<td>social efficiency</td>
<td>social efficiency</td>
<td>social efficiency</td>
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<tr>
<td>self actualization</td>
<td>experientialist</td>
<td>experiencialist</td>
<td>developmentalist</td>
<td>progressive &amp; learner centred society centred</td>
<td>child study</td>
<td>learner centred</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>social reconstructivism</td>
<td>critical reconstructivism</td>
<td>social reconstructivism</td>
<td>socio-cultural</td>
<td>Social meliorist</td>
<td>social reconstruction</td>
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Source: Adapted from Schiro (2013).

As Table 1 indicates, there is broad consensus on primarily four distinct curriculum ideologies - humanists/scholar academic, child study/learner centred, social meliorists/social reconstruction, and social efficiency – within the curriculum tradition, and even when different labels are used to describe them, the underlying positions and assumptions are the same. Schiro (2013) noted that when considering Learner Centred ideology in the US, for example, it has been labelled as “…child study (1890s), progressive education (1910-1950), open education (1965-1980), developmentalist (1970-1990), and constructivist (1990-present)” (p.10). To further elaborate these four curriculum ideologies, first an extended discussion is provided on how they came to be established as such in the U.S. at the turn of the 20th century, and what influences played significant roles on proponents of each of them. Other scholars, such as Tyack and Cuban (1995) for example, have elaborated on education developments during the progressive era by distinguishing between ‘pedagogical progressives’ and ‘administrative progressives’. The present article adopts classifications of curriculum field by Schiro (2013) and Kliebard (2004), where the following four competing groups were the ones that pushed their visions forward to influence the American curriculum field, namely:

1. **Humanists/scholar academic** (for example, Charles W. Eliot, William Torey Harris)
2. **Child study/learner centred** (for example, G. Stanley Hall, William Heard Kilpatrick)
3. **Social meliorists/social reconstruction** (George Counts, Harold Rugg, Lester Frank Ward, etc.), and
4. **Social efficiency** (for example, John Franklin Bobbitt, Charles Ellwood, Ross Finney, David Snedden).

Progressive era cannot be discussed without considering John Dewey’s role in shaping curriculum thinking and developments of the time, and the article
highlights the influences that shaped Dewey’s ideas and philosophical positions regarding education. Dewey’s work in designing school practices in his Laboratory School at University of Chicago as well as his theoretical insights over educational issues in the U.S. at the turn of the 20th century contributed largely to educational developments that took place in the U.S. for nearly half of the century. However, as a prominent figure, he did not fully side with any of the four groups, but shared more in his ideals and principles with child study/learner centered group and reconstructionists or social meliorists.

In particular, the article asks the question whether and to what extent the proponents/representatives of the four identified groups were influenced from local national forces and developments (such as incoming emigrants, industrial revolution, etc.) and external forces (primarily through European education developments and theorists). Granted, identifying forces influencing curriculum is always problematic since curriculum is under constant social, political and economic influences (McNeil, 1969), an analysis of those influential forces over initial making of the curriculum field in the U.S. clarifies why social efficiency as an innovative idea became the dominant ideology and occupied the field for a long time and is still present. In the paper, Schiro’s and Kliebard’s categorization along four groups of educationists serves as a framework for identifying influences that shaped ideas and actions of representatives of each group.

Next, the influential forces over the four groups are discussed by looking at the literature regarding curriculum developments during the progressive era, and then focus is placed on what national and international (mainly European) ideas and influences led to social efficiency to become the dominant curriculum ideology. Both primary and secondary sources are reviewed to investigate the topic, including primary work written by Franklin Bobbitt, George Counts, William Kilpatrick, John Dewey and others. I also draw from secondary sources that addressed progressive era through historical lenses. The main research question is: What ideas/influences led to social efficiency ideology of curriculum field to emerge as dominant ideology during progressive era in the U.S.? In this regard, the article does not touch upon later developments in the curriculum field – such as Ralph Tyler’s (1949) rationale as an extension of social efficiency thinking and references to Tyler as the ‘giant’ (Pacheco, 2012) and ‘father’ (Jackson, 1992) of the curriculum field – and contributions of numerous scholars and authors who problematize historical aspects of the curriculum field and address the perennial complexity of curriculum as a historically-conditioned product (for examples, see Autio, 2006; Baker, 2013; 2009; Fallace & Fantozzi, 2013; Pinar, 2013).

Four Main Interest Ideologies Competing for Curriculum Field

The following sections discuss the four main interest groups that competed to take a dominant place in curriculum field during the progressive era in the U.S., and in later sections, a lengthier discussion over social efficiency ideology and influences that brought its dominance are presented.

Humanists

Humanists promoted a curriculum model that pushed for liberal education or a more general academic curriculum that focused on reading, writing, and
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arithmetic, but also required taking other courses such history, geography, arts, Greek and Latin classes in high school (Ravitch, 2001). Humanistic curriculum was dominant throughout 19th century, but by the end of it, around 1890s, proponents like Charles Eliot and William Torrey Harris, felt the mounting pressure of other developments in the country, and started to talk about ‘new education’. However, as Ravitch (2001) noted, what they meant by ‘new education’ was introduction of science into the academic curriculum. At the heart of humanistic approach was the belief that the role of the curriculum was to improve society by advancing academic achievement of individuals.

Influences on Humanists

Humanists were heavily influenced by European philosophical and psychological developments. They were strong supporters of the doctrine based on mental discipline that derived from the work of German psychologist Christian Wolf. Mental disciplinarians believed that “certain subjects of study had the power to strengthen faculties such as memory, reasoning, will, and imagination” (Kliebard, 2004, p. 4). In this regard, the curriculum in the U.S. during 19th century adopted heavily from the didaktik theory of teaching and learning in Germany, and most continental Europe, that was based on idealism of German philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Wilhelm von Humboldt (Reid, 1997). Even though didaktik as a teacher-centred system of education was in place in the U.S. it did not entirely operate as didaktik practices in German speaking world where teachers enjoyed much more autonomy on curriculum making and implementation as opposed to the locally-controlled teachers in the U.S. (Westbury, Hopmann, & Riquarts, 2000). For more, both key proponents of humanistic education, Eliot and Harris, were considered to be America’s leading Hegelians, who contributed in educational developments during the 1890s as part of the Committee of Ten, amongst else, since Eliot was also president of Harvard University, while Harris was the U.S. Commissioner of Education (Kliebard, 2004). Both Eliot and Harris studied educational thought developed in Europe, where Eliot even spent years in visiting France and Germany studying their educational systems to detail, interviewing policy-makers as well as school leaders and teachers in school settings. Nevertheless, the 19th century curriculum dominated by humanistic approaches started to be viewed as outdated and traditional, and three other ideologies lined up to challenge it, starting with developmentalists, and followed by social efficiency, and social reconstructionists.

Developmentalists

Developmentalists came into American curriculum debate with the initiation of child study movement in 1880s by G. Stanley Hall (1844-1924), a movement that “encouraged educators to study children as they were – to watch them carefully, to listen to them intently, and to collect data about them so that instruction could be designed based on observations of children’s nature, needs and interests” (Schiro, 2008, p. 113). The movement gave birth to what is widely known to date as child- or learner-centred instruction, a concept strongly associated with the work and teachings of American philosopher and educator
John Dewey. Kliefard (2004) discussed John Dewey as separate from the four interest groups, but other authors associate him primarily with two of the four groups, namely, developmentalists and social reconstructionists (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery and Taubman, 1995; Ravitch, 2001; Schiro, 2008). The movement promoted some aspects of Herbartian curriculum, which focused on subjects being taught, with emphasis on history and literature and later science, instruction methods, and steps that would make curriculum to be taught accessible to learners (Pinar et al., 1995). In addition to Dewey, G. Stanley Hall, Francis Parker, and William Heard Kilpatrick are referred to as developmentalists in their approaches to curriculum.

**Influences on Developmentalists**

The heaviest influence on developmentalists was German pedagogue Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776-1841), who himself was influenced by Kant, Hegel and Pestalozzi, (Pinar et al., 1995). In addition, many American educators and psychologists travelled to Europe to study Herbartians, Froebelians and Pestalozzians (Schubert, 1986). Again, as in humanists’ case, there was a presence of German philosophers and educators on American educational leaders and experimenters thinking, but drawing from Herbartianism, developmentalists tried to break away from ‘mental discipline’ into building educational experiences that have the learner at its core. Reportedly, Dewey, a student of Hall at Johns Hopkins University was advised to turn to German idealists and disregard British empiricism, which led to Dewey writing his dissertation on "Psychology of Kant" in 1884 (Schubert, 1986).

In addition to Herbart, four more European philosophers and educators influenced developmentalists or learner-centred instruction movement in the U.S., including: Johan Amos Comenius (1592-1670) who viewed education as developmental, progressing from concrete experience to abstract thought; Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), French philosopher, who viewed children as naturally good and society as corrupt and contended that the role of education should be to maintain children’s goodness free from corruptions of the society, and to create environments in which they live their childhood fully and involve in rich experiences that facilitate their growth; Johann Hein Pestalozzi (1746-1827), Swiss educator, who is credited with putting Rousseau’s ideas into practice, supported the idea that children should be enabled to explore their interests in spontaneity and play-based learning. Dewey seems to have adopted his ideas for learning by doing approaches he promoted in the U.S.; Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852), a German educator and student of Pestalozzi, invented kindergarten and pushed for play-based learning, in which children can use toys and other materials to shape and manipulate them as they desire (Schiro, 2008).

The educational ideas generated in Europe influenced the thinking of developmentalists such as Hall, Francis, Dewey, Kilpatrick and others. These influences were obvious in the work these educators engaged with in the U.S. in directly implementing those ideas into different contexts and projects. For example, developmentalists reiterated that children and not content should be the focus of teaching, teachers should create an experiential environment that encourages learners to create personal meaning, and school subjects should be integrated through project learning (Dewey & Dewey, 1915). Dewey together with
his wife established Laboratory School at the University of Chicago, which was entirely based on child-centred model of education (Ravitch, 2000). In addition, Kilpatrick’s work on project method was an actual implementation of borrowed ideas from Europe. He concluded that children are naturally social and that they require a skilful teacher to guide their purpose, who in turn engages in ‘projects’ to stimulate and guide learners’ learning and character building (Kilpatrick, 1918).

Social Reconstructionists

Social reconstructionists (or social meliorists) were another group of enthusiasts who challenged the traditional curriculum of 19th century by putting forward a vision of education that saw schools as principal force for social change and social justice (Kliebard, 2004). Pinar et al. (1995) viewed social reconstruction as the best reform movement during the progressive era, and associated, as most other historians, Lester Frank Ward, John Dewey, Harold Rugg and George Counts, as most prominent proponents of the movement. The reconstructionists view “human experience, education, truth, and knowledge as socially defined” (Schiro, 2008, p. 143), and they did not believe that there could be a good individual apart from a good society (Counts, 1932). All these educators considered education as an engine that will resolve all social ills and believed in the power of education to renew and transform society. “The continuity of any experience through renewing of the social group is a literal fact. Education, in its broadest sense, is the means of this social continuity of life (Dewey, 1916, p. 3). In other words, Dewey considered that education could be a catalyst for ensuring continuity of life through renewing social structures. Commenting on Dewey’s vision for education with regard to social reconstructionist movement, Kliebard (2004) noted that implementing such a vision required sweeping changes not only in curriculum but in the way the schools were run. Dewey’s conceptualization of education asked for changing not only the elements of education, such as curriculum and instructional methods, but also the process under which those elements made their way into the classroom affecting learners’ experiences and lives.

Influences on Social Reconstructionists

Influences over social reconstructionists were more diverse. Schiro (2008) argued that ideas of social reconstruction were as old as establishment of American nation when Americans started to reject British rule and worked on building their own economic, political and social system. These deep-rooted ideas were first voiced by Lester Frank Ward during 1880s, when he opposed social Darwinism, which asserted that “the best” of the race would rise to the top in line with Darwin’s theory of survival of the fittest (Pinar et al., 1995). Ward believed that “status quo of the human affairs was not ‘natural’ and thus changeable” (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 104). Ward’s ideas were further developed by Dewey, Rugg and Counts. Dewey and Counts were also heavily influenced by European philosophers, primarily Marxist ideas, as a result of visits they took to Western Europe and Russia. Naively, both Dewey and Counts believed that Russian education system was the best in the world and saw it as a model to be adopted in the U.S. (Ravitch, 2000). Rugg, on the other hand, had a background
in engineering and believed that a new social order would have to eliminate subject-centred schooling with more child-centred practices supported by technology integration (Ravitch, 2000).

**Social Efficiency**

From here on, the article turns to social efficiency interest group, or as often referred to, scientific curriculum making in the U.S. that came to life at the turn of the 20th century. Kliebard (2004) elaborated that ideas outside the realm of education gained much attention within educational community – in particular ideas of Frederick Taylor, an engineer from scientific management, that gave birth to social efficiency as a social ideal and educational doctrine, and ideas of Edward Thorndike from psychology, who introduced educational or “intelligence” measurement into American education. Indeed, Taylor’s concept of scientific management “swept not only industry but education as well” (Cremin, 1971, p. 213). Drawing from the work of Edward Ross, Frederick Taylor, Franklin Bobbitt, Edward Thorndike, and David Snedden, Kliebard (2004) interpreted the arguments that lead to social efficiency ideology within the U.S. education, an ideology that shaped to a large extent the U.S. education curriculum and educational thinking and practice to present days (Tahirsylaj, Niebert, & Duschl, 2015; Pinar, 2012; 2011; Deng & Luke, 2008, Luke, 2004). Social efficiency ideology suggested that students would learn in schools only what they needed to know in order to perform as an adult member of social order, and “To go beyond what someone had to know in order to perform that role successfully was simply wasteful” (Kliebard, 2004, p. 77). Kliebard further argued that social efficiency educational ideology came into being, on one hand as a response to the flourishing of industrialism, and as antithesis of Dewey’s ideas on the other.

To see the contrast with regard to the vision of education between social efficiency ideology and the other three competing ideologies, one has to examine the work of Franklin Bobbitt, who is credited for establishing the curriculum field with his publication *The Curriculum* in 1918 (Pinar et al., 1995). Arguing in favour of scientific management and against tradition model of curriculum, Bobbitt wrote:

> The old education, except as it conferred the tools of knowledge, was mainly devoted to filling the memory with facts. The new age is more in need of facts than the old; and of more facts; and it must find more effective methods of teaching. (Bobbitt, 1918, pp. 10-11).

The quote shows that the goal of scientific management model was not to change the content of old education as much as to make such a model more efficient by putting more facts into learners’ minds in shorter period of time.

Social efficiency not only rejected other educational ideologies, but brought to light the idea of curriculum differentiation, an idea attributed to sociologist David Snedden (Ravitch, 2000). Curricular differentiation marked the beginning of implementation of vocational education in the U.S. education system, which was to lead to tracking of students shortly after. Ideas from industrial revolution transformed into ideas for industrial education so that learners’ skills at the end of schooling met the needs of employers in factory assembly lines.
Influences that Led to Social Efficiency as Dominant Ideology

To facilitate the line of argument for the influences that led to social efficiency to become the dominant curriculum ideology, two sources of influences are presented here: internal and external. Here, internal influences are meant forces that shaped decision-making in a larger scale of how the country is run in general, and how education is organized in particular. These forces included increasing number of incoming emigrants, mass education, and industrial revolution. The second source included external influences that primarily related to European philosophical, psychological and pedagogical influences that directly or indirectly contributed to emergence of social efficiency model in the U.S. curriculum.

Internal (domestic) Influences

Schiro (2008), paraphrasing Callahan (1962), emphasized that social efficiency model had its origin in four movements, namely, social reform, utilitarian education, behavioural psychology, and scientific methodology, which according to Schiro, are still active to date. Social reform was fired up by journalism during first two decades of 20th century, which helped create a reform-conscious population “that put social needs above all else” (Schiro, 2008, p. 72). The idea behind utilitarian education was to emphasize the relevance of making schools useful for the life of individuals and the nation, while behavioural psychology enabled social efficiency model to frame its endeavours into a psychological context. John Watson, Edward Thorndike, and later B. F. Skinner created that psychological base for the social efficiency (Schiro, 2008). Finally, scientific methodology with its techniques and methods for accurate measurement and eliminating waste gave social efficiency the tools to overcome the inefficiency its proponents had identified in old education model (Schiro, 2008).

Oakes (1985) listed millions of incoming immigrants, initiation of mass public schooling at high school that suddenly at the turn of 20th century had to educate far more children as before, as well as growing needs of industry for better skilled workforce as problems that needed to be addressed by the nation, and that enabled social efficiency ideology to emerge as best tool to fix the problems effectively and efficiently. In her own words:

Social Darwinism had provided the “scientific” justification for the schools to treat the children of various groups differently. The Americanization movement provided much of the content of the schooling to be offered the children of the poor and immigrant. It was left to American industry to provide the form this new kind of education would take. (Oakes, 1985, p. 27, emphasis in the original).

Along similar line of argument, Spring (2015) listed Americanization of immigrants, training labour force for industrialization, reforming urban areas as well as family life and childcare as crucial education goals of public schools in the U.S. during the period covering 1880s to 1920s. Katz (1987) criticized the educational policy reform from a historical perspective and concluded that systemic wide reforms that attempt to change the quality of schooling almost always fail. However, the success of social efficiency model and its institutionalization in a nation-wide scale seem to prove his conclusion invalid.
Still, Katz built his argument around the notion that out-of-school societal order and developments are the true forces that shape educational experiences as those forces are more powerful than any educational planning or policy. It seems, in the case of social efficiency, efforts of policy makers to change educational system matched with the vision of U.S. societal forces. Arguably, here lies the core argument why social efficiency ideology was successful.

**External (European) Influences**

Although social efficiency ideology was the most American-made curriculum idea, it still was influenced by three major developments in Europe. First, as noted above, social Darwinism ideas justified curricular differentiation into general and vocational tracks. Second, the very idea of tracking/curriculum differentiation through vocational education was borrowed from Germany, which had already put in place such a model of education. Third, the idea of intelligence quotient (IQ) testing was borrowed from French psychologist Alfred Binet (Ravitch, 2000).

**Discussion and Conclusion**

One of the ways to understand why social efficiency ideology of curriculum field turned out to be most influential over American curriculum against three other competing ideologies – humanists, developmentalists, and social reconstructionists – is to ask the question: What problems did educators have to address and attempt to resolve in the U.S. at the end of 19th and beginning of 20th century? As indicated above, education system was under a trifold pressure, including increased numbers of incoming immigrants, mass schooling, and industrial revolution. While humanists seemed to have been outsiders in shaping curriculum field from the very beginning as all three other groups were challenging them at the core, it is still less clear why developmentalists and social reconstructionists, who shared some similar ideas and principles, and indeed, united through the figure of John Dewey, failed to occupy a more prominent place in American curriculum field. Kliebard (2004) provided some insight as to why social efficiency ideology emerged as most influential:

And, insofar as the effect on actual school practice is concerned, the prominence and persistence of the basic ideas of the scientific curriculum-makers indicates that someone like relatively obscure Bobbitt may have been far more in touch with the true temper of his times than the world-renowned Dewey (p. 104).

On a more positive note about Dewey’s contribution, Hlebowitsh and Wraga (1995) concluded that Dewey was celebrated more as a theorist and philosopher of education but had less success in implementing his ideas into practice because he did not side with class and cultural struggle by ignoring the ‘strong’ and siding with vulnerable groups, i.e. children and marginalized communities. Alternatively, proponents of social efficiency curriculum ideology proved to be influential, thus making it persist throughout the 20th century to present days, as evidenced by both curriculum scholars as well as historians of education (Kliebard, 2004; Ellis, 2004; Labaree, 2005; Pinar, 2012, 2011; Ravitch, 2001). Nevertheless, the resistance and critique of such ideology has also been voiced, labeling it as a business-driven approach to education. More
recently, as a result, the criticism against social efficiency-based educational policies in the U.S. have mounted to such heights where it is argued that “the common school became first a factory, then a corporation, now a cram school, but always a business” (Pinar, 2012, p. 15).

A few conclusions can be drawn from arguments and evidence provided in the preceding sections:

- Social efficiency ideology become dominant curriculum ideology due to its better alignment with national agendas, and not necessarily because it best suited educational needs of children/learners.
- During the progressive era, education was seen by wider public both as a source of evils and panacea to solve larger social issues.
- When interests of the country are weighted against interests of the individual, the pendulum will swing towards country interests, therefore, social efficiency ideology, deemed as best model to meet the country needs and interests, had to succeed.
- Despite some external European forces that influenced social efficiency, it was the most ‘American’ model of education and therefore might have been more appealing for policy-makers and general public.

In the U.S. context, the direction of education and its accompanying goals are politically-determined by local, state, and federal governments (Spring, 2015). Still, large-scale educational change has never been easy. It turns out when interests of general public, local and national political leaders, and policy-makers converge, there is enabling circumstances for educational ideas and practices to take shape. Social efficiency came about in times of converging interests at the early part of 20th century in the U.S. to claim the dominance over curriculum field to present days.

References


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