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The Second World War's impact on the progressive educational movement: Assessing its role

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ABSTRACT

Evidence found in *The New York Times* from 1939 to 1945 and corroborating sources are used to demonstrate the impact of the Second World War on the progressive educational movement. We posit that December 7, 1941 initiated the waning of the progressive education movement in the secondary social studies curriculum. Progressive education emphasized a child-centered, experiential curriculum, an issues-centered approach to learning, and a critical analysis of society. Our findings indicate that the educational climate during the Second World War initiated a shift from questioning American institutions to celebrating them. Education became more centralized and many educational organizations were mobilized to support the war effort. Specifically, the secondary social studies curriculum became one of several propaganda vehicles in support of the war. In addition, colleges and universities became training grounds for teachers, defense workers, and soldiers. A war on the home front ensued. The progressive secondary social studies curriculum itself was viewed as placing the nation at risk. While other factors such as the Back-to-Basics movement and the Cold War contributed to the waning of the secondary progressive educational movement, World War Two (WWII) set the decline in motion.

Introduction

As the smoke rose above the ashes of Pearl Harbor, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt addressed the American people with a celebrated speech that began, "December 7, 1941, a date which will live in infamy." He continued his speech by describing the "unprovoked" and "dastardly" attack by Japan on the United States. The United States Congress immediately declared war. And in that same moment, the political, social, and economic climate in America changed. December 7, 1941 should be remembered not only because of its immediate effect, the U.S. entrance into World War Two (WWII), but also because of its enduring effect on American education. While the Great Depression opened the door for educational reform and critical analyses of American society, both the nation's reaction to the Second World War and the Second Red Scare ultimately silenced these efforts.

We begin our article by providing a brief review of the progressive educational movement at its peak in the 1930s. The goal of our article, however, is to analyze the impact of the Second World War on the progressive educational movement.

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Relying on articles from the *New York Times* from 1939 to 1941 and several primary and secondary sources, we demonstrate the integral role WWII played in initiating the decline of the progressive educational movement. We selected the *New York Times* because it was not only the leading newspaper in wartime America, but also the most widespread source of national news during the war; moreover, its articles reflect the nation's reaction to the war and its impact on education. Secondary sources such as Altenbaugh (2003), Kliebard (1995), Urban (2010), and Urban and Wagoner (2004) provide the historical context of the progressive education movement from the 1930s through the 1950s, while Evans (2004, 2007, 2010) and Halvorsen (2012) depict the status of the social studies curriculum in secondary schools and postsecondary institutions. Moreau (2003) offers a thorough account of the social studies textbooks used before, during, and after the war. While these secondary sources provide a foundation for our analysis, the addition of *The New York Times* articles and corroborating primary sources demonstrate how the war itself influenced both educational rhetoric and practice in secondary and postsecondary institutions. We offer unique insight into the role the Second World War played in initiating the decline of the progressive educational movement—specifically in the secondary social studies curriculum. We conclude with an analysis of the aftermath of the war on the secondary progressive educational movement in post-war America.

Before Pearl Harbor the progressive education movement reached its zenith. The movement itself developed in the early twentieth century out of the broader "culture of protest … against the prevailing ideology of big business … cultural uniformity", and citizenship transmission (Krug, 1972, 178–179). John Dewey is considered the father of the progressive education movement as he advocated teaching for democracy—allowing students to participate in democracy through education. According to Dewey, school was a place to learn content and also a place to learn how to participate in a democratic society (Dewey, 1907, 1916). To foster democratic schools, Dewey challenged traditional methods of teaching because they were static, emphasized rule following and discipline, and failed to incorporate experiential learning. He believed education and learning were interactive processes and students should not only interact with their environment, but also play an active role in their learning. The teacher's role was as a guide or facilitator who built on children's interests and prior experiences through hands-on or experiential education. Throughout the early progressive era, different types of progressive educators emerged. Evans (2004) argues there were at least four kinds of progressives: the mainstream, the reconstructionist, the administrative, and the Rousseauist progressive. The reconstructionists, viewed as the most radical of the progressives, called for schools to create a new social order by using schools to reform society.

Beginning with the stock market crash of 1929, the educational climate, like the broader political climate, shifted in favor of the progressives—who were oriented toward social reconstructionism. As over 15 million people were unemployed, school enrollments reached unprecedented levels. Moreover, the need for social reform was obvious to the majority of Americans impacted by the Depression. Thus, using public disillusionment as leverage, social reconstructionists advocated for social studies courses emphasizing social problems and a critique of the status quo.

The influence of the progressive movement on Depression-era social studies curriculum is apparent in the writings that emerged from the Commission on the Social Studies of the American Historical Association (AHA). According to the Committee's *Conclusions and Recommendations* (1934), the AHA supported an integration approach to social studies while maintaining separate disciplines. Charles Beard (1932), in an article entitled "A Charter for the Social Studies in the Schools" supported an integrated social studies curriculum. While history still remained central, regimentation was abandoned in favor of personal, cultural, and individual freedom (Evans, 2004, 55). The Commission recommended several textbooks (including works written by George Counts and Charles Beard) that reflected the reconstructionist tradition of advocating for social change through collectivism. In sum, the Commission on the Social Studies of the AHA (1934) clearly advocated the movement towards innovation in curriculum planning and integration or at the very least, a willingness to compromise.

As the progressive movement gained momentum, Teachers College became the center of the progressive education crusade. Social reconstructionists such as George Counts, William Kilpatrick, Harold Rugg, R. Bruce Ramp, Jesse Newlon, John Childs, Thomas Biggs, and others emerged from Teachers College at Columbia University (Horowitz, 1971). George Counts, a professor at Teachers College and a member of the Commission on the Social Studies of the AHA, become a leading spokesperson for the social resconstructionist movement when he gave a radical speech to the Progressive Education Association (PEA) in 1932 entitled "Dare Progressive Education Be Progressive?" In this speech he not only challenged the status quo, but he also advocated the use of schools to reform society. He challenged educators "to face squarely and courageously every social issue, come to grips with life in all of its stark reality" and with students, "critically examine our [nation's] social institutions and practices … " (Counts, 1932, 1933, 9, 87).

Also at Teachers College, Harold Rugg married the philosophies of Dewey and Counts by advocating for a child-centered, issues-oriented curriculum. Rugg supported the "cooperative commonwealth" and conjectured that "all units of work shall be … in problem solving form" focusing on "alternate proposals" about "current affairs" (Rugg, 1921, 252). According to Rugg, social studies courses were to be relevant, interesting, and meaningful. He proposed a new high school course entitled Problems of Democracy and created a series of textbooks to be used in elementary and junior high classrooms. Both the new course and his textbooks identified social problems and asked students to critically examine their own society and social institutions. Problems in Democracy became the fastest growing course in high schools and his texts became the most widely read textbooks in social sciences classrooms (Moreau, 2003).

Before the 1930s, social science textbooks often steered clear of controversial issues. In his book *Schoolbook Nation: Conflicts over American Textbooks from the Civil War to the Present* Joseph Moreau (2003) demonstrates that concerns of social class were largely ignored in social studies textbooks prior to the rise of the progressive educational movement. When discussing social class at all, texts infused the Horatio Alger rags to riches theme to emphasize that social mobility was