Competing Histories of Elementary School Instruction: The Example of Alabama in 1920

Author's Detail:

[(1)]**Jerry Aldridge**, Ed.D., Professor Emeritus University of Alabama at Birmingham
[(2)]**Jennifer L. Kilgo**, Ed.D.,University Professor University of Alabama at Birmingham
[(3)]**Grace Jepkemboi**, Ph.D., Assistant Professor University of Alabama at Birmingham
[(4)]**Rose Rutto-Korir,** Ph.D., Senior Lecturer and Graduate School Coordinator Moi University of Kenya

Abstract
The vast majority of historical documents concerning Elementary School Instruction are written from a myopic, linear, and singular dimensional perspective. Few histories describe simultaneously competing models of teaching. This article provides a background of five competing philosophies of elementary school instruction during the early 1900s as a prelude for describing two disparate examples of elementary school education in the Southeastern United States during the first quarter of the 20th century. The two schools discussed include a pioneering progressive pedagogy known as the School of Organic Education in south Alabama and a traditional one room school experience at Iron Mountain School in north Alabama. Instructional strategies used by the teachers are reported for each school. The article concludes with a discussion of three things that can be learned by studying the School of Organic Education and Iron Mountain School.

Key words: instructional histories, disparate educational methods, Southeastern United States, twentieth century

INTRODUCTION

Numerous documents have reported the history of education during the early part of the 20th century (Altenbaugh, 1992; Bode, 1997; Cremin, 1961; Graham, 1967; James, 1995; Kliebard, 1992, 1995; Lascareides & Hinitz,2000; Ravitch, 2001; Tyack & Cuban, 1997). Other reports have discussed the educational leaders during that time (Aldridge & Christensen, 2013; Generals, 2013; Hinitz, 2013; Reynolds & Schramm,2002; Sadovnik & Semel, 2002; Wolfe, 2000). There are also studies that have described a particular school or group of schools with similar teaching methods (Dewey & Dewey, 1915; Nearing, 1915; Pratt, 1948; Semel & Sadovnik, 2005). Finally, there are professional organizations such as the History of Education Society, the Association for Childhood Education International, and the National Association for the Education of Young Children that have history committees with the expressed purpose of preserving their own history, promoting dialogue about the organization, and informing members of their proud heritage. However, few attempts have been made to report disparate histories of elementary school instruction that include differences in the teaching methods between the schools.

The purpose of this article is threefold. The first is to describe five philosophies of teaching that were in operation during the first part of the 20th century. The second goal is to contrast two schools in the Southeastern United States during the early part of the 20th century which implemented differing instructional models. The third objective is to discuss what can be learned by studying the history of individual schools in the early part of the 20th century.

FIVE PHILOSOPHIES OF TEACHING IN THE EARLY 20th CENTURY

At the beginning of the 20th century there were five competing philosophies of education. These included the *mental discipline* adherents associated with the theory of faculty psychology. A second model was the *child study* movement based on the emerging science of the late 19th century. Competing during this same time frame were *social efficiency* educators who based their philosophy on the principles of successful industry. The *social meliorists* were also operational. They believed the purpose of schooling should be promotion of social change and justice. Finally, the *progressive* educators were a loosely knit organization of varying philosophies, many of which were expressed in the other four viewpoints (Kliebard, 1992, 1995).

Mental Discipline

The mental discipline curriculum can be traced to Christian Wolff, a German psychologist who believed that the human mind was composed of specific faculties (Wolff, 1740). Mental disciplinarians believed that the

mind was like any muscle. If the mind was exercised, it would develop, while "certain subjects had the power to strengthen faculties such as memory, reasoning, will and imagination" (Kliebart, 1995, p. 4). The education that resulted from mental discipline was one of "monotonous drill, harsh discipline and mindless verbatim recitation" (p. 5). While researchers such as William James (1890) and Edward Thorndike (1925) found that a mental discipline approach was not effective, it still continued to influence educational practice well into the 20th century (Cremin, 1961).

Child Study

G. Stanley Hall was the leader of the Child Study Movement (Hall, 1883, 1901, 1904). The followers of this approach were often known as developmentalists. "The child-study movement was one outgrowth of the new status accorded science in the latter part of the nineteenth century and consisted, to a large extent, of research that involved the careful observation and recording of children's behavior at various stages of development" (Kliebard, 1995, p. 11). The child study advocates believed that the scientific study of child development should be the basis for curriculum and instruction. Supporters of the movement advocated more rigorous, scientific study of children by qualified scientists and the formation of experimental schools. However, educators found it difficult to translate findings of the child study movement into classroom instruction and practices. Not only educators, but several leading psychologists of the early 20th century did not believe it was possible to directly translate psychological findings of the child study movement into actual classroom experiences (James, 1899).

Social Efficiency

The goal of the social efficiency advocates was to create "a coolly efficient, smoothly running society" (Kliebard, 1995, p. 24). They sought to apply the efficiency of industry to the business of education. Under the leadership of Joseph Mayer Rice (1912), Edward Ross (1901) and Frederick Taylor (1911), social efficiency became one of the leading models of instruction in the early 20th century. "By 1918, social efficiency as a curriculum theory was almost at its zenith, and attention to curriculum reform had reached the point where curriculum was being recognized as a vital subspecialty within the broader spectrum of education" (Kliebard, 1995, p. 99). How social efficiency specifically influenced classroom instruction had to do with breaking down a task into its component parts, teaching those parts, and making the process as efficient as possible. Critics of social efficiency education believed schools using this approach had been turned into factories, without sufficiently considering the needs of individual students. Remnants of social efficiency still exist today in the mandates of the U. S. Department of Education's *No Child Left Behind* (U. S. Department of Education, 2002).

Social Meliorists

The social meliorists were not concerned with exercising the mind, studying the child, or social efficiency. Their goal was the transformation of society through education (Counts, 1922, 1930). The major success of the meliorists' work was a profound influence on school districts to begin implementing programs of transformation and social justice. At the classroom level, the teaching of social studies changed through the use of new materials and books introduced by George Counts (1922, 1930) and Harold Rugg (1921). The focus of these resources was on the transformation of society through social change (Kliebard, 1995).

Progressive Educators

Progressive education is often reported as if it had a unified philosophy (Kliebard, 1992). However, there were many different forms of progressive education and some of these overlapped with the four philosophies previously mentioned (Johnson, 1929). There were progressives who focused on the child, like the child study movement, and others who were interested in societal change similar to the meliorists (Staring, 2013). Thus, some progressives were loosely aligned with the child study movement while others agreed with and supported a focus on social change and transformational justice (Kliebard, 1995). Few progressives, however, associated themselves with mental disciplinarians or social efficiency supporters.

The following examples of two schools from Alabama in 1920 represented two vastly different philosophies of classroom instruction. The School of Organic Education was a progressive school that focused on the development of the child (Johnson, 1929, 1974). The Iron Mountain School was considerably more traditional and included instruction that came from mental discipline and what was later identified as social efficiency models (Aldridge, 2000).

THE SCHOOL OF ORGANIC EDUCATION

In 1907, Marietta Johnson started a progressive school known as The School of Organic Education. The school soon became one of the leading models of progressive education in the early 1900s. Although the school is still in operation today, the teaching methods are considerably different than the innovations developed by Ms. Johnson. Teaching and learning at the School of Organic Education were truly remarkable for their time. At the school, no tests were ever administered, no grades were given, and folk dance and crafts were encouraged (Cowles, 1996; Johnson, 1929, 1974). Further, students were encouraged to study what they were interested in using what was called the project method (Kilpatrick, 1917, 1918). This section will describe each of these briefly.

No Tests

No tests were given at The Organic School. In fact, children were not taught to read and write until the age of ten. Ms. Johnson believed that children should not try to keep up with other children and be judged by tests. She also found that all children were mentally hungry and that the proper teaching methods of play, nature study, and following children's own interests would satisfy this mental hunger. Therefore, there was no need to test children (Johnson, 1929).

No Grades

Ms. Johnson also instituted the policy that no grades would ever be given in her school. Instead of external rewards and punishment through grades, Marietta Johnson believed the education "standard is an inner, human one. If the work is suitable and wholesome and the children delight in it, there is growth, which is the essence of education" (Johnson, 1929, p. 60). She also believed that a "child always has a redeeming idea until his elders direct, instruct, and thwart his efforts until the inner impulse is destroyed" (Johnson, 1929, pp. 60-61). According to her, even children who have problems will make progress if grades and all external pressures are removed (Johnson, 1974).

Folk Dance and Crafts

Another major part of organic education was the encouragement of folk dance and crafts. According to M. Johnson, children in the school who were eight years old experienced a "program of arts and crafts, wood-working, singing, folk dancing, and nature" (Johnson, 1929, p. 61). She explained, "much time is given to singing the old folk songs, and the children now delight in learning the folk dances…we believe the folk dance is the fundamental, elemental unself-conscious expression of the folk and belongs especially to the young and the old whose spirit is still young" (p. 63). Unlike most schools in the early 20th century as well as schools of today, the curriculum was much richer and broader, including folk dancing and crafts beyond the traditional subjects of reading, writing, and arithmetic (Cowles, 1996).

The Project Method

Finally, students were allowed to study their own interests through the project method (Johnson, 1974). According to Johnson (1929), "projects may be undertaken for the pure joy of the experience" (p. 63). One projects students chose was Japan. Although by today's standards this project would be considered stereotyping, it was quite innovative in 1920. Ms. Johnson reported the following about the culmination of the project. "Everyone dressed as Japanese. Fans, screens, kites, and even jinrikishas to carry people to the little shire on the hillside, were made in the shop" (p. 63).

During the past 100 years, many articles, books, and dissertations have been written about the School of Organic Education and its founder, Marietta Johnson (Aldridge & Christensen, 2013; Cowles, 1996; Dewey & Dewey, 1915; McCorquodale, 2002; Newman, 2002; Semel & Sadovnik, 2005; Staring, 2013; Wolfe, 2000). The instruction provided by the teachers at the School of Organic Education was anything but traditional. This was in stark contrast to what was happening in the majority of other elementary schools in 1920, including The Iron Mountain School.

THE IRON MOUNTAIN SCHOOL

In the early 1900s The Iron Mountain School was a one room school in north Alabama. While the school was unknown beyond its immediate community, the instruction that occurred at Iron Mountain was more representative of schooling in Alabama at that time than The School of Organic Education. The instruction at Iron Mountain was based on the mental discipline paradigm. According to historians of education, the mental disciplinarians were all but obsolete in 1900 (Bode, 1927; Kliebard, 1995). However, this was not the case in many parts of the southern United States nor was it true at the Iron Mountain School.

Titus Aldridge who attended the school, described it in the following ways. "Iron Mountain

School was a one room schoolhouse used during the week for school and on Sundays it was used as a church" (Aldridge & Aldridge, 2000, p. 54). He explained that "the school had between 30 and 40 students with grades from the primer (kindergarten) to the sixth grade. There was only one teacher and this teacher was a man" (p. 54). The Iron Mountain School involved instruction in the basic reading, writing, and arithmetic. Memorization and recitation were required at every grade level. Every Friday the curriculum was different. During that day, lessons included a history story or a spelling bee. This section will describe each of these methods briefly.

Instruction in Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic

Instead of desks, the Iron Mountain School had benches. At the beginning of each day, the primer or kindergarten class sat on the front rows while each higher grade sat further back. After the kindergarten children recited, the first graders took the front benches and the kindergarteners moved to the back. Reading and spelling were taught through phonics. Children learned to spell by slowly pronouncing each syllable in a word. Since there was very little paper in the school, each student had an individual slate, which was a small blackboard. The children learned arithmetic by working math problems on the slate. Writing was also taught but it involved the mechanics of writing such as letter formation and penmanship with very little opportunities for students to actually write their own compositions.

Memorization and Recitation

Memorizing passages and reciting were required of all students at the Iron Mountain School. A student who attended Iron Mountain described how this worked. "At school, the teacher required us to memorize passages. Some of what we memorized came from the Psalms" (Aldridge & Aldridge, 2000, p. 55). Memorization was required for all aspects of the school, including special events. Titus Aldridge explained, "We had special programs at Christmas. Each class would do a skit or say a poem that we had memorized" (Aldridge & Aldridge, 2000, p. 57).

Reciting had two meanings. One meaning was repeating what was memorized. The other meaning referred to answering factual questions about what one had read. As a student at the school explained, "the term 'reciting' means the teacher would ask us questions on a lesson and we would answer them. However, there were no higher level questions. They were all factual. If we didn't know the answer we might be asked to stay after school and learn it. Sometimes we might get a spanking or have to stay in at recess because we didn't know the lesson" (Aldridge & Aldridge, 2000, p. 53).

The Friday Curriculum

The instruction that occurred on Fridays was modified considerably from the rest of the week. A student who attended the school in 1920 explained how Friday was different. "Every Friday after lunch we either had a good history story told by the teacher or we would have a spelling bee. Sometimes we would have both. Sometimes we would get out early which would give us more time to play on the way home" (Aldridge & Aldridge, 2000, p. 57).

Despite the differences between the School of Organic Education and the Iron Mountain School, many of the students who attended both schools went on to become successful lawyers, doctors, teachers, and professionals in many other disciplines. There is much that can be learned from both schools. The discussion section considers why it is important to study the history of elementary school instruction, not just at a philosophical or theoretical perspective, but from examples of actual schools that were in operation 100 years ago

.

DISCUSSION

What can be learned by studying the School of Organic Education and the Iron Mountain School? There are many answers to this question. Three of the most salient include the need to study instruction that has been useful and successful during the past, the importance of understanding how specific schools reflected existing philosophies and theories during their time, and the need to consider other variables besides instruction and curriculum for why schools succeed or fail.

The Study of Successful Instruction

According to Tanner and Tanner (1995), "History can be useful to contemporary curriculum developers—teachers, supervisors and administrators" (p. 4). Instructional frameworks, approaches, and models that have failed in the past often appear again if educators are not familiar with the history and consequences of past. "This happens when the history is incomplete; it happens when the history is not considered as a source for contemporary educational problems; it happens when history is inaccurate or distorted for ideological or political reasons" (General, 2013, p. 6).

The Study of Exemplars of Educational Theories

Studying specific schools also highlights exemplars of educational theories and philosophies that informed practice during the schools' existence. At the turn of the 20th century, at least five educational philosophies were operational (Kliebard, 1995). The School of Organic Education was a model of progressive education in 1920. The Iron Mountain School was representative of the mental discipline approach. Still, both schools were successful in developing leaders and professionals who made significant contributions during their lifetimes. There had to be something more than how and what was taught at each school. What was it?

Variables Beyond Curriculum and Instruction

The two disparate histories of elementary school instruction represented should teach us that something beyond curriculum and how it is implemented can contribute to the success or failure of students. Since numerous students who attended both schools became productive citizens, something beyond curriculum and instruction must have been happening. Other variables must be considered since the teaching methods at both schools were vastly different. For example, the personality of the teacher can make a difference. According to Jung (1954), a teacher influences a child more through personality than curriculum or instruction. He goes on to say that the teacher who believes in a student will have a greater influence than the use of particular methods or materials. Did the teachers make a difference at the School of Organic Education and the Iron Mountain School? While this question cannot be answered, the examples of the two schools represented here should raise questions like this along with many others.

REFERENCES

Aldridge, J. (2000)(ed.). *Night blooming jasmine: The early life and times of Titus and Winnie Aldridge.* Birmingham, AL: Seacoast Publishing.

Aldridge, J., & Christensen, L. (2013). *Stealing from the mother: The marginalization of women in education and psychology from 1900-2010.* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Aldridge, T., & Aldridge, W. (2000). Getting an education. In J. Aldridge (ed.), *Night blooming jasmine: The early life and times of Titus and Winnie Aldridge* (pp. 52-68).

Altenbaugh, R. (1992)(ed.). *The teacher's voice: A social history of teaching in twentieth century America.* London, UK: The Falmer Press.

Bode, B. (1927). *Modern educational theories.* New York, NY: Macmillan Company.

Counts, G. (1922). *The selective character of American secondary education.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Counts, G. (1930). *The American road to culture: A social interpretation of education in the United States.* New York, NY: John Day.

Cowles, M. (1996)(ed.). *Organic education: Teaching without failure.* Fairhope, AL: Marietta Johnson Museum.

Cremin, L. (1961). *The transformation of the school: Progressivism in American education.* New York, NY: Alfred Knopf.

Dewey, J., & Dewey, E. (1915). *Schools of to-morrow.* New York, NY: E. P. Dutton & Company.

Generals, D. (2013). *Booker T. Washington: The architect of progressive education.* Houston, TX: Strategic Book Publishing and Rights Co.

Graham, P. (1967). *Progressive education: From arcady to academe: A history of the Progressive Education Association.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Hall, G. (1883). The content of children's minds. *Princeton Review, 11,* 249-72.

Hall, G. (1901). Ideal school based on child study. *Journal of Proceedings and Addresses of the Fortieth Annual Meeting of the National Education Association,* 474-88.

Hall, G. (1904). The natural activities of children as determining the industries in early education, II. *Journal of Proceedings and Addresses of the Forty-Third Annual Meeting of the National Education Association,* 443-7.

Hinitz, B. (2013)(ed). *The hidden history of early childhood education.* New York: NY: Routledge.

James, M. E. (1995)(ed). *Social reconstruction through education: The philosophy, history, and curricula of a radical idea.* Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

James, W. (1890). *The principles of psychology, Vol. 1*. New York, NY: H. Holt.

James, W. (1899). *Talks to teachers on psychology, and to students on some of life's ideals.* New York, NY: H. Holt.

Johnson, M. (1974). *Thirty years with an idea.* Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press.

Johnson, M. (1929). *Youth in a world of men.* New York, NY: John Day.

Jung, C. (1954). *The development of personality: Papers on child psychology, education, and related subjects.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Kilpatrick, W. (1917). Project teaching. *General Science Quarterly, 1,* 67-72.

Kilpatrick, W. (1918). The project method. *Teachers College Record, 19,* 319-35.

Kliebard, H. (1992). *Forging the American curriculum: Essays in curriculum history and theory.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Kliebard, H. (1995). *The struggle for the American curriculum: 1893-1958.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Lascarides, V., & Hinitz, B. (2000). *History of early childhood education.* New York, NY: The Falmer Press.

McCorquodale, G. (2002). *Progressive views on literacy instruction at the Marietta Johnson School of Organic Education in Fairhope, Alabama: Echoes of the past heard in the present* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Alabama at Birmingham, Birmingham, AL.

Nearing, S. (1915). *The new education: A review of progressive educational movements of the day*. New York, NY: Row, Peterson & Company.

Newman, J. (2002). Marietta Johnson and the Organic School. In A. Sadovnik & S. Semmel (eds.), *Founding mothers and others: Women educational leaders during the progressive era* (pp. 19-36).

Pratt, C. (1948). *I learn from children.* New York, NY: Harper & Row.

Ravitch, D. (2001). *Left back: A century of battles over school reform.* New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Rice, J. (1912). *Scientific management in education.* New York, NY: Hinds, Noble & Elredge.

Reynolds, K., & Schramm, S. (2002). *Separate sisterhood: Women who shaped southern education in the progressive era.* New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Ross, E. (1901). *Social control: A survey of the foundations of order.* New York, NY: Macmillan.

Rugg, H. (1921). Needed changes in the committee procedure of reconstructing the social studies. *The Elementary School Journal, 21,* 688-702.

Sadovnik, A., & Semel, S. (2002)(eds.). *Founding mothers and others: Women educational leaders during the progressive era.* New York, NY: Palgrave.

Semel, S., & Sadovnik, A. (2005)(eds.). *'Schools of tomorrow' Schools of today: What happened to progressive education.* New York: Peter Lang.

Staring, J. (2013). *Midwives of progressive education*: *The Bureau of Educational Experiments 1916-1919* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

Tanner, D., & Tanner, L. (1995). *Curriculum development: Theory into practice* (3rd ed.).

Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Macmillan.

Taylor, (1911). *Principles of scientific management.* New York, NY: Harper & Brothers.

Thorndike, E. (1924). Mental discipline in high school studies. *The Journal of Educational Psychology, 15,* 1-22, 83-98.

Tyack, D., & Cuban, L. (1997). *Tinkering toward utopia: A century of public school reform.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

U. S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (2002). *No Child Left Behind: A desktop reference.* Washington, DC: Author.

Wolfe, J. (2000). *Learning from the past: Historical voices in early childhood education.* Mayerthorpe, Alberta, CA: Piney Branch Press.

Wolff, C. (1740). *Psychologia rationalis: Methodo scientific pertractata cognitionem profutura proponuntur.* Frankfurt, Germany: Lipsiae.